

Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary

Appreciating the Mystery of “Three Persons” and “One Substance”:

A Study of Tertullian’s Legacy Concerning

The Historical Development of

The Doctrine of the Trinity

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## Abbreviations

<i>Ad Autol.</i>	<i>Ad Autolyicum</i>
<i>Ad Gr.</i>	<i>Oratio ad Graecos</i>
<i>Adv. haer.</i>	<i>Adversus haereses</i>
<i>Adv. Herm.</i>	<i>Adversus Hermogenem</i>
<i>Adv. Marc.</i>	<i>Adversus Marcionem</i>
<i>Adv. Prax.</i>	<i>Adversus Praxean</i>
<i>Apol.</i>	<i>Apologeticum</i>
<i>August.</i>	<i>Augustine</i>
<i>Comm. in Matth.</i>	<i>Commentarii in Matthaeum</i>
<i>C. Noet.</i>	<i>Contra Noetum</i>
<i>De bapt.</i>	<i>De baptismo</i>
<i>De carn. Chr.</i>	<i>De carne Christi</i>
<i>De cor.</i>	<i>De corona</i>
<i>De haer.</i>	<i>De haeresibus</i>
<i>De monog.</i>	<i>De monogamia</i>
<i>De orat.</i>	<i>De oratione</i>
<i>De praescr. haeret.</i>	<i>De praescriptione haereticorum</i>
<i>De pud.</i>	<i>De pudicitia</i>
<i>De res. carn.</i>	<i>De resurrectione carnis</i>
<i>De Sp. sancto</i>	<i>De Spiritu sancto</i>
<i>De test. an.</i>	<i>De testimonio animae</i>

<i>De trin.</i>	<i>De trinitate</i>
<i>De vir. ill.</i>	<i>De viris illustribus</i>
<i>De virg. vel.</i>	<i>De virginibus velandis</i>
<i>Div. inst.</i>	<i>Divinae institutiones</i>
Euseb.	Eusebius
<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Refutatio omnium haeresium</i>
Hippol.	Hippolytus
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	<i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
Jer.	Jerome
Lactant.	Lactantius
<i>Leg. pro Christ.</i>	<i>Legatio pro Christianis</i>
Tert.	Tertullian
Theoph.	Theophilus
<i>Trypho</i>	<i>Dialogus cum Tryphone Iudaeo</i>

## Introduction

In the estimation of Adolf von Harnack, only Augustine had a theological impact upon the West that was as monumental and as enduring as the impression left by Tertullian.<sup>1</sup> However, relatively little is known about Tertullian's life apart from what he disclosed about himself in his writings. He is traditionally remembered as having been born into an affluent pagan family between AD 155 and 160, and he received an excellent Roman education in law, rhetoric, classical history, and literature before returning to his native Carthage.<sup>2</sup> From his remarks in his treatise *Ad uxorem* it appears that he was married to a Christian wife. There are few extant details of his conversion to Christianity, but it is clear that he was converted as an adult, probably sometime prior to AD 196.<sup>3</sup>

Jerome remembered him as a presbyter in the church at Carthage, but aside from Jerome's testimony there is no additional corroborative evidence, and in fact Timothy Barnes determines that it is unclear what sources (if any) Jerome had used in addition to Eusebius and Tertullian's own writings.<sup>4</sup> Neither Cyprian nor Augustine ever confirmed that Tertullian was ordained into a position of church leadership, and Tertullian himself never admits to it.<sup>5</sup> It is nonetheless for his activity as an apologist, theologian, and Latin rhetorician that Tertullian is most celebrated. Thirty-one of his treatises have survived, and they address a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, ed. A. B. Bruce, trans. James Millar (London: Williams and Norgate, 1898), 5:14.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Early Libyan Christianity: Uncovering a North African Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 107; Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, trans. Edward L. Smither (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Bray, "Tertullian," in *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy: Engaging with Early and Medieval Theologians*, ed. Bradley G. Green (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 64.

<sup>4</sup> Jer., *De vir. ill.* 53; Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 10-11 and 238-39. See also Bray, "Tertullian," 64.

<sup>5</sup> Decret, *Christianity in North Africa*, 34.

philosophical, theological, pastoral, and polemical topics. His writings constitute a remarkable contribution to Christian literature in the Western tradition.<sup>6</sup>

His most impressive theological contributions dealt with Trinitarianism and Christology, and many have recognized that his defense of these two issues mirrors orthodox doctrinal statements from the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>7</sup> Older scholars, such as Adolf von Harnack and B. B. Warfield, believed the West to have had a tremendous impact upon Nicene theology, and since they recognized Tertullian's importance within Western Trinitarianism, they surmised that Tertullian must have had an indirect but very significant influence in the East.<sup>8</sup> In more recent years, other scholars, such as Christopher Stead, Jörg Ulrich, and R. P. C. Hanson, have argued that since Tertullian's influence was primarily Western, many of these older scholars may have overestimated the extent to which the East was familiar with Tertullian or his ideas.<sup>9</sup>

Tertullian continues to be among the most frequently studied and discussed of all the early Western Christian writers.<sup>10</sup> Many early church historians, such as J. N. D. Kelly, Franz Dünzl, and Michel René Barnes, survey the development of Trinitarian orthodoxy with a more panoramic perspective and condense the major achievements of individual writers such as Tertullian.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, Timothy Barnes, Eric Osborn, and Geoffrey Dunn have all produced

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<sup>6</sup> Decret, *Christianity in North Africa*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Bray, "Tertullian," 70.

<sup>8</sup> Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 4:50-53 and 4:121-22; Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine* (1930; repr., Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1970), 100-103.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 250; Jörg Ulrich, "Nicaea and the West," *Vigiliae Christianae* 51, no. 1 (March 1997): 13-16; Richard Patrick Crosland Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 696-97.

<sup>10</sup> Decret, *Christianity in North Africa*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> See John Norman Davidson Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1978), 109-15; Franz Dünzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church* (London: T & T Clark,

scholarly works of outstanding quality and depth that attempt to interpret Tertullian's life and thought, including his position on the Trinity.<sup>12</sup> Others, such as Jaroslav Pelikan, Gerald Bray, and Andrew McGowan, have investigated the charge that Tertullian's attraction to Montanism may have informed (or corrupted) his Trinitarianism and pneumatology.<sup>13</sup>

Ernest Evans has written an indispensable commentary on Tertullian's treatise *Adversus Praxean* in which Evans seeks to interpret precisely how Tertullian intended his ideas and language in the treatise to be understood in light of its original occasion.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Jean Daniélou, William Rusch, Bertrand de Margerie, and Michel René Barnes acknowledge that Tertullian bridged important stages in the historical development of Trinitarian doctrine.<sup>15</sup> However, comparatively fewer attempts have been made to trace precisely why he should have this recognition while also venturing to interpret his influence in light of the development of Eastern-Western tensions and his controversial interest in Montanism.

Such a study is profitable, first of all, because it helps to explain why the path to orthodoxy required the cooperative effort of numerous Christian writers and theologians from all across the ancient world. Similarly, Tertullian's fervent defense of the Trinity is demonstrative of

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2007), 30-34; Michel René Barnes, "Latin Trinitarian Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 70-77.

<sup>12</sup> For these authors' comments on Tertullian's appreciation of the Trinity, see T. D. Barnes, *Historical and Literary Study*, 141-42; Eric Francis Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 116-43; Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Tertullian* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, "Montanism and Its Trinitarian Significance," *Church History* 25, no. 2 (June 1, 1956): 99-109; Gerald Lewis Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 32-41 and 54-64; Andrew McGowan, "Tertullian and the 'Heretical' Origins of the 'Orthodox' Trinity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 437-57.

<sup>14</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas: The Text Edited, with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 6-23, 38-75, and 183-331.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see Jean Daniélou, *The Origins of Latin Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977), 365-66; William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 11; Bertrand de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 78-80; and M. R. Barnes, "Latin Trinitarian Theology," 76-77.

the tremendous importance that the early church as a whole attributed to this theological concept.<sup>16</sup> Finally, a study of Tertullian's schematization of the Trinity (and factors that informed it) confirms that the issue of the Trinity could not really be settled apart from a responsible consideration of Christology and pneumatology.

Although Tertullian's direct influence was almost entirely Western, his consideration of the Trinity nonetheless indicated that theological attention was shifting beyond earlier cosmological expressions of the Trinity toward a more balanced and precise clarification of the nature of their internal relations. Chapter one of this thesis recognizes how Tertullian borrowed from and extended the arguments of earlier apologists and theologians. Chapter two discusses Tertullian's own innovative contributions to the Trinitarian discussion, particularly those which he introduced in his treatise *Adversus Praxean*. Chapter three analyzes how subsequent Trinitarian theologians profited from Tertullian's contributions, notably his interest in the inner life of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Finally, chapter four evaluates how Tertullian's impact was limited by factors such as the alleged questionability of his orthodoxy, the relational difficulties between the East and West, and his position within the larger scheme of doctrinal development.

Early theologians like Tertullian are entitled to a degree of professional respect because their efforts helped the church to better understand and articulate its theological identity and doctrinal values. Although it was not their primary objective to simply polish existing arguments, the great minds of the early church nonetheless appreciated the contributions of apologists and theologians who preceded them. Today's apologists and theologians can be both encouraged and challenged by the example of the church fathers because they have inherited the same responsibility: they are stewards of theological truth, and they are obligated to exert the same diligence and devotion in protecting it.

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<sup>16</sup> Warfield, *Studies*, 103.

## Chapter 1

### Ascertainment of Tertullian's Entrance into the Trinitarian Discussion

Like many other aspects of Christian theology, the church's understanding of the Trinity did not develop overnight, nor did it develop in a vacuum. To the contrary, the church developed a thorough understanding of this concept only after many decades of laborious reflection. As Christian apologists and theologians sought to distinguish Christianity as more than just an offshoot of Judaism and an alternative to the manifold forms of pagan religious expression that existed in the ancient world, theological confrontations from within the church as well as from without served as a sort of anvil upon which early Christian doctrine was forged. As the early church responded to the challenges of skeptics and vast and sundry forms of heresy, the early church's Trinitarian consciousness took shape, and in due course early confessions and creeds were constructed.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, the post-apostolic writers, early apologists, and early theologians wrote in response to their immediate historical and theological situations, and so it was not their concern to provide a complete untangling of Trinitarian doctrine.<sup>18</sup> Answering their critics instead prompted them to focus their attention to a great extent on the unity of God and the preexistence of Christ. As a result, they acknowledged the reality of a triune God, but their reflections on the Trinity tended to be predominately cosmological. These cosmological arguments, including applications of the Logos philosophy, focused especially on the Son's activity at creation and redemption because the generation of the Son evidenced his distinction from the Father. Accordingly, in order to

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<sup>17</sup> Gregg R. Allison, "Denials of Orthodoxy: Heretical Views of the Doctrine of the Trinity," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 16, no. 1 (March 2012): 18.

<sup>18</sup> Robert M. Grant, *Gods and the One God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 156; Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 20.

address his own immediate concerns, Tertullian expanded the arguments of his predecessors and extrapolated many of their implications.

### Synopsis of the Contributions of Tertullian's Predecessors

Christianity was born out of monotheistic Judaism, but the early church recognized that even their most basic truth claims necessitated a defense if the Christian faith was to be distinguished on the basis of its own merit. It was vital that every one of its truth claims should be sustained if the credibility of the Christian faith were to be maintained, and so Trinitarianism and Christology were of monumental importance. Due to the close relationship between these two branches of theology, it was these two issues that largely preoccupied Christianity's earliest defenders, because the defense of plurality within the Godhead began with the defense of the divinity of the Son. Early apologists and theologians needed to establish why it was proper for both God the Father and Christ the Son to receive worship, and they needed to demonstrate why this did not constitute a compromise of God's divine unity.

Since its inception, the early church had acknowledged the concept of plurality within the Godhead. Triadic statements are found throughout the New Testament epistles, such as in epistolary greetings (e.g. 1 Pet 1:2), benedictions of blessing (e.g. 2 Cor 13:14), simple creedal statements (e.g. Eph 4:4-6), and various didactic passages (e.g. 1 Cor 12:4-6; Eph 2:18; Titus 3:4-6; 1 John 4:13-14). Triadic confessions are also found in the writings of post-apostolic writers. For example, as Polycarp of Smyrna prepared for his martyrdom, he offered a prayer in which he praised God with a simple but discernable triadic confession.<sup>19</sup> Clement of Rome recognized the cooperation of the Father, Son, and Spirit and acknowledged their involvement in

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<sup>19</sup> Polycarp, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14.

the ministry of the apostles.<sup>20</sup> Ignatius of Antioch acknowledged the cooperation of the three in his description of the Ephesian church as “the building of God the Father, and drawn up on high by the instrument of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, making use of the Holy Spirit as a rope.”<sup>21</sup>

These early triadic confessions and illustrations were not designed to be dogmatic statements addressing concepts such as divine nature, plurality of persons, and singleness of substance.<sup>22</sup> As a result, these early allusions to the Trinity are simple and undeveloped in comparison to the statements of later Trinitarian writers, but the common appearance of triadic confessions in these early witnesses suggests that there was at least a general awareness of the threefold membership of the Godhead.<sup>23</sup> Although these early triadic confessions lack a precise definition of the nature of the Trinity, they should still be appreciated because they are clearly rooted in New Testament teaching.<sup>24</sup> Other Christian writers, such as the early apologists, were required to reflect more deeply on the matter of the Trinity in order to offer a balanced defense of divine unity and the Son’s preexistence.

## **Early Apologists**

In comparison to the post-apostolic writers, and due to the nature of the task before them, the early apologists considered Trinitarian issues in more detail, although they commonly began with many of the same basic Scripture passages that contain strong Trinitarian implications, such

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<sup>20</sup> Clement of Rome, *1 Clement* 22, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 9.

<sup>22</sup> Mary T. Clark, “The Trinity in Latin Christianity,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 276.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 56.

<sup>24</sup> John Anthony McGuckin, “The Trinity in the Greek Fathers,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 51.

as the baptismal formula (Matt 28:19).<sup>25</sup> Their primary concern was the relationship between the Father and Son, but at this early stage of doctrinal development, the role of the Spirit did not receive considerable attention, but his distinct identity was acknowledged. There was also some uncertainty regarding the differentiation between the Son and the Spirit, and early writers of this period tended to subordinate the Son to the Father.<sup>26</sup> As Christian theology matured in later centuries, such issues as the individual personal roles within the Trinity and the nature of their inner life were understood and articulated more clearly, but nevertheless it was during these early centuries that a number of significant Trinitarian issues were initially recognized.<sup>27</sup>

The Hellenization of the ancient world had spread Greek culture widely, and this included Greek philosophy, which remained deeply embedded in the intellectual and religious systems of the ancient world even well into the second and third centuries after the institution of the church. On one hand, this created a host of problems for early Christian theologians, but on the other hand, this situation afforded unique opportunities for Greek-speaking defenders of the Christian faith to apply popular ideas to their own advantage.<sup>28</sup> Athenagoras, for example, as well as many other early Christian writers, borrowed from Greek philosophy in order to demonstrate the notion of plurality within the Godhead.<sup>29</sup>

The early apologists used Greek philosophical ideas to prove that Christianity was not inferior to Greek philosophy, and in fact they affirmed Christianity as the fuller truth for which

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<sup>25</sup> For example, see Justin, *Apologia* 1.13, 1.61, 1.65; Athenagoras, *Leg. pro Christ.* 7.

<sup>26</sup> Grant, *One God*, 109. Theophilus of Antioch, for instance, identified the Spirit with the Logos. See Theoph., *Ad Autol.* 1.3.

<sup>27</sup> Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 20; Holmes, *The Quest*, 62.

<sup>28</sup> Holmes, *The Quest*, 59.

<sup>29</sup> Grant, *One God*, 158.

Greek philosophy was searching.<sup>30</sup> The principle of the Logos, for instance, became immensely important for later Trinitarian formulations, especially concerning the preexistence of Christ.<sup>31</sup> By framing their apologetic arguments around a principle that was already well accepted both by Jews and by those who spoke Greek, the apologists made for themselves a platform from which to advance their own agenda.<sup>32</sup> The use of the Logos principle enabled Justin to provide an intellectually coherent apologetic of Christian theology while also supplying a satisfying response to the great issue which troubled Platonic philosophers of his day—the problem of mediation between the divine and the material.<sup>33</sup>

The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria had maintained that the divine Logos was the operative agent in the Old Testament theophanies and the one who inspired the Old Testament prophets.<sup>34</sup> Early Christian apologists such as Justin and Theophilus of Antioch also connected the Logos to Old Testament theophanies.<sup>35</sup> Yet, they identified the Logos with Christ and asserted that the pre-incarnate Christ existed eternally in the Father’s mind as his “reason.”<sup>36</sup>

Justin and his pupil Tatian were thus able to associate Christ’s activity at creation and at redemption with the expression of the Father’s mind. In doing so, they illustrated the nature of

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<sup>30</sup> Johannes Quasten, *The Beginnings of Patristic Literature*, vol. 1, *Patrology* (1950; repr., Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, Inc., 1984), 207-9. Justin, for example, was obviously well acquainted with Platonic philosophy. See Justin, *Apologia* 1.8, 1.20, 1.59-60, 2.13; and Justin, *Trypho* 2-7.

<sup>31</sup> Everett Ferguson, *From Christ to Pre-Reformation: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context*, vol. 1, *Church History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 75.

<sup>32</sup> McGuckin, “Greek Fathers,” 54-55.

<sup>33</sup> Bryan M. Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 65-67; Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 77. See also Quasten, *Beginnings*, 207-8.

<sup>34</sup> Grant, *One God*, 109; McGuckin, “Greek Fathers,” 55.

<sup>35</sup> Theoph., *Ad Autol.* 2.22; Justin, *Trypho* 60, 127-28.

<sup>36</sup> For example, see Athenagoras, *Leg. pro Christ.* 10.

the relationship between the Father and Son in a manner that upheld the transcendence of the Father and that also demonstrated that it was Christ, the Logos, who was the one about whom the Old Testament ultimately bore witness.<sup>37</sup> Justin and Tatian were therefore able to point to the Son's creative and redemptive activity in order to defend the seemingly paradoxical claims that Christ was both united with and personally distinct from the Father.<sup>38</sup> Although the apologists used the Logos principle primarily to illustrate the relationship between the Father and Son, their efforts nevertheless reveal that they were ultimately wrestling with basic Trinitarian questions.<sup>39</sup>

The Logos principle obtained phenomenal apologetic value as the apologists balanced Christ's preexistence with his incarnation and his individuality with his unity with God the Father. Justin's arguments in his *Dialogus cum Tryphone Iudaeo* are fairly representative of the early apologists in their attempts to do so. Justin, whose thinking was largely patterned after John's opening statements in John 1:1-18, identified the Logos as the agent responsible for creation and the governing of creation.<sup>40</sup>

While the apologists found the Logos principle to be useful for their purposes, they used it only as it was necessary for them to defend the credibility of Christian theology; by no means did it represent the entirety of their views on any one theological topic.<sup>41</sup> Even so, applications of the philosophy of the Logos were commonly woven into their arguments, especially as they sought to balance divine unity with the Son's preexistence. However, their apologetic arguments often began with the unity of God. Athenagoras, for instance, contends, "We are not atheists,

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<sup>37</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 4-5; Dünzl, *Brief History*, 16; cf. Tatian, *Ad Gr.* 4-5.

<sup>38</sup> Tatian, *Ad Gr.* 5, 7, 13; Justin, *Apologia* 1.5, 1.46, 1.59, 1.64.

<sup>39</sup> Holmes, *The Quest*, 62.

<sup>40</sup> Justin, *Apologia* 1.59, 1.65, 2.5-6; and Justin, *Trypho* 61, 129. See also Litfin, *Getting to Know*, 65-66; and Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Grant, *One God*, 109; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 109.

therefore, seeing that we acknowledge one God, uncreated, eternal, invisible, impassible, incomprehensible, illimitable, who is apprehended by the understanding only and the reason.”<sup>42</sup>

The early apologists borrowed the Stoic terms *logos endiathetos* (the immanent word) and *logos prophorikos* (the expressed word).<sup>43</sup> The first to do so was Theophilus of Antioch, who used these terms to illustrate the relationship of the Father and Son as well as their differentiation.<sup>44</sup> Just as in Greek philosophy there was thought to be continuity between rational thought and verbalized speech, so also the immanent word became the expressed word, and thus Christ the Logos distinguished himself from God the Father by his activity at creation and redemption.<sup>45</sup> Justin, Tatian, Athenagoras, and Theophilus illustrated this balance of distinction and unity with analogies of human speech and of fire kindling another fire.<sup>46</sup> It was tremendously significant that the apologists recognized Christ’s creative and redemptive activity as a means by which to distinguish the Son from the Father.<sup>47</sup> The two could be distinguished, but at the same time the apologists recognized that the expression of the Logos did not constitute a destruction of the Father and Son’s essential unity.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Athenagoras, *Leg. pro Christ.* 10.

<sup>43</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 4; Dünzl, *Brief History*, 23; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 96.

<sup>44</sup> Quasten, *Beginnings*, 239-40; McGuckin, “Greek Fathers,” 55-56; cf. Theoph., *Ad Autol.* 2.10, 2.22.

<sup>45</sup> Ferguson, *Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 76.

<sup>46</sup> Justin, *Trypho* 61, 128; Tatian, *Ad Gr.* 5; Athenagoras, *Leg. pro Christ.* 10ff; Theoph., *Ad Autol.* 2.10, 2.22.

<sup>47</sup> G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (1936; repr., London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1952), 125; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 100.

<sup>48</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 5; cf. Justin, *Trypho* 62; and Justin, *Apologia* 1.21.

The Trinitarianism of the early apologists has at times been minimized because of its lack of complexity and refinement.<sup>49</sup> However, even though they did not have a precise technical vocabulary, they clearly distinguished the plurality within the Godhead as well as the eternity of all three members, concepts which became central issues in later Trinitarian and Christological debates.<sup>50</sup> They also discerned the implications and obvious objections brought about by affirming the divinity of Christ. Justin, for instance, recognized that additional questions needed to be answered regarding how Christianity could be defended as monotheistic and how the Father, Son, and Spirit could be specifically distinguished from one another.<sup>51</sup>

For this reason, although Trinitarian reflections during this period were in large part cosmological expressions, the contributions of the apologists (especially Justin) were invaluable. Much of their language and thought was reiterated by later writers, including Tertullian. For example, Theophilus was the earliest Christian writer to refer to God as a “triad” (τριάδος), a noteworthy contribution that perhaps prompted the introduction of similar terms into the church’s theological vocabulary, such as Tertullian’s Latin term *trinitas* (Trinity).<sup>52</sup> It was Justin who first compared the Father and Son with the sun and a ray of sunlight: “[The Word] is indivisible and inseparable from the Father, just as they say that the light of the sun on earth is indivisible and inseparable from the sun in the heavens. . . . [Yet when the Son] was begotten from the Father, by His power and will, [it was] not by abscission, as if the essence of the Father

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<sup>49</sup> McGuckin, “Greek Fathers,” 52.

<sup>50</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 6.

<sup>51</sup> Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 2004), 90. Theophilus referred to the first three days of God’s creative activity (Gen 1:1-13) as “types of the triad [τριάδος], of God and his Logos and his Sophia [Wisdom].” Theoph., *Ad Autol.* 2.15. The Greek text and English translation used here are taken from Robert M. Grant’s edition of *Ad Autolyicum*. See Robert M. Grant, *Theophilus of Antioch: Ad Autolyicum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 52-53. Tertullian’s first application of the term *trinitas* occurs in chapter two of *Adversus Praxean*.

were divided.”<sup>53</sup> The Father and Son’s consubstantiality was an issue of much debate in the fourth century, although Justin apparently anticipated the question long before his illustration of “Light of Light” was later included in the Nicene Creed.<sup>54</sup>

### **Irenæus of Lyons**

The early apologists sought to defend the credibility of the Christian faith. The earliest theologians, however, were concerned more directly with putting Christian theology into clear order. The doctrine of the Trinity was a primary case in point. Clement of Alexandria offered numerous contextual references and allusions to the Trinity in two of his primary writings, the *Paidagogos* and the *Stromateis*.<sup>55</sup> One of the most important early theologians who dealt extensively with the matter of the Trinity was Irenæus of Lyons, and so it is to be expected that Tertullian demonstrated great familiarity with his writings.

Like his predecessors, Irenæus affirmed the triadic faith of the church.<sup>56</sup> At the core of Irenæus’s Trinitarianism was his affirmation that although the different activities and roles of the individual members of the Godhead may be distinguished, these distinctions do not violate their essential unity, and therefore Christianity’s claim to monotheism remains credible and consistent.<sup>57</sup> Whereas most other early Christian writers in that period equated the personified

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<sup>53</sup> Justin, *Trypho* 128.

<sup>54</sup> Gerald O’Collins, *The Tripersonal God* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 89; cf. “The Creed of Nicaea,” in *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Henry Scowcroft Bettenson and Chris Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26-27.

<sup>55</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 127.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, see Irenæus, *Adv. haer.* 4.33.3-11, 5.20.1-2.

<sup>57</sup> W. Brian Shelton, “Irenæus,” in *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy: Engaging with Early and Medieval Theologians*, ed. Bradley G. Green (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 42.

“wisdom” of God (Prov 8:22ff) with the Son, Irenæus associated it with the Spirit.<sup>58</sup> Irenæus’s discussion of the Spirit was comparatively more thorough than that of the apologists, which indicates some development in the consideration of the Spirit and his place within the Trinity. He also discussed the relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit from the perspective of their particular activity in God’s redemptive program, an approach that other second- and third-century Christian writers also found useful because it enabled them to balance divine unity with individual distinction within the Trinity.<sup>59</sup>

Although the early apologists had first applied the Logos principle to Christian theology, Irenæus developed it further as he combated Gnosticism. He was especially interested in clarifying ambiguities and possible misconceptions found in the arguments of earlier Christian writers.<sup>60</sup> For example, Theophilus and others had distinguished between the immanent word and the expressed word in order to defend the distinction between the Father and Son, but Irenæus did not want to be misunderstood to be suggesting that the Son’s incarnation constituted the beginning of his existence. Irenæus thus put special emphasis on the shared eternity of the Father and Son.<sup>61</sup> This was not unrelated to his affirmation of the unity of God against Gnostic speculations.<sup>62</sup>

Gnostic tradition also propounded speculations of spiritual emanations and radical dualism existing between the spiritual and material realms. Irenæus recognized that such claims are incompatible with the biblical testimony regarding God’s immanence and Christ’s

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<sup>58</sup> Irenæus, *Adv. haer.* 4.20.3.

<sup>59</sup> Dünzl, *Brief History*, 18; cf. Irenæus, *Adv. haer.* 4.20.5.

<sup>60</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian’s Treatise against Praxeas*, 37.

<sup>61</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 7; Irenæus, *Adv. haer.* 2.30.9, 3.17.4.

<sup>62</sup> Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 27-28; McGuckin, “Greek Fathers,” 58-59.

incarnation.<sup>63</sup> In fact, such conclusions are altogether unnecessary: “For God did not stand in need of these [beings], in order to [bring about] the accomplishing of what He had Himself determined with Himself beforehand should be done, as if He did not possess His own hands. For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things.”<sup>64</sup> To Irenæus, the activity of God’s “hands” (i.e. the Son and the Spirit) confirms God’s active participation in creation and redemption, his continuous involvement with his creation, and the perfect cooperation of the three divine persons as they carry out what they have planned together.<sup>65</sup>

Another immensely important contribution of Irenæus was his discussion of the “rule of faith,” which he equated with the apostolic teaching received by the church. For Irenæus, the rule of faith was significant because it affirmed that the church shared a common faith.<sup>66</sup> The rule of faith was not necessarily identical to a “creed,” however, because since the rule of faith was essentially a collection of fundamental ideas, it was intended more so for initial catechetical instruction rather than to gauge a catechumen’s readiness for baptism, and so some verbal flexibility was permissible.<sup>67</sup>

Other writers repeated the rule of faith and emphasized the same basic concepts, most of which were Christological, and this indicates that these basic ideas had become accepted Christian teaching. Irenæus admits as much in his work entitled *Adversus haereses*, and he

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<sup>63</sup> Eric Francis Osborn, *Irenæus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 262; Holmes, *The Quest*, 65-66.

<sup>64</sup> Irenæus, *Adv. haer.* 4.20.1; cf. 2.30.9, 5.1.3, 5.5.1, 5.16.1.

<sup>65</sup> Osborn, *Irenæus of Lyons*, 91-93; Quasten, *Beginnings*, 294-95.

<sup>66</sup> Litfin, *Getting to Know*, 90-91. See also Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 44-45.

<sup>67</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian’s Treatise against Praxeas*, 189; Ferguson, *Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 110.

affirms that the faith tradition received by the early church includes the acknowledgement of one God consisting of Father, Son, and Spirit:

The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, . . . has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, . . . in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, . . . and in the Holy Spirit . . .

As I have already observed, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth.<sup>68</sup>

#### Assessment of How Tertullian Amended Conventional Arguments

Like the Christian writers who preceded him, Tertullian's writings were prompted by the circumstances of his day. He profited from the achievements of earlier writers, and although his writing reflects his own personality and rhetorical facility, he applied and expanded existing theological arguments so as to make a more satisfactory case for traditional Christian teaching, especially with regard to the Trinity.<sup>69</sup> He demonstrated an awareness of several of the early apologists, but he was deeply indebted to Justin and Irenæus, with whose writings he was quite obviously familiar. In particular, due to his desire to defend the concept of the divine "monarchy" (μοναρχία), the character and content of his writing (particularly in his treatise *Adversus Praxean*) reveals his acquaintance with his predecessors and with the implications of the Logos doctrine. Tertullian repeated a number of their choice phrases and rhetorical approaches, but he also drew out important implications of the Logos principle as he confronted Modalistic Monarchianism in his own district of North Africa.

The early apologists had found the Logos principle to be of enormous apologetic value. However, by the third century, speculations about the Logos theology had provoked the rise of a

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<sup>68</sup> Irenæus, *Adv. haer.* 1.10.1-2; cf. 3.4.2.

<sup>69</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 31.

new movement—Monarchianism—whose basic position was that God’s singular rule of the universe required that God could only be a monad. Monarchianism developed as a genuine attempt to protect God’s absolute unity, but in that movement the concept of divine unity was so heavily emphasized that there were no allowances for any distinction within that essential unity.<sup>70</sup> That is, in some circles, it was believed that contemplating the divine “economy” required the compromise of the divine “monarchy” and therefore inevitably led to ditheism.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, Monarchianism constituted the first major threat against the early church’s comprehension of the triune God.<sup>72</sup> Eventually two basic varieties of Monarchianism (Dynamic and Economic) evolved, each of which enjoyed some popularity, especially in the West.

It was the particular strain of Monarchianism later known as Modalism (or Economic Monarchianism) that so disturbed Tertullian and his contemporary Hippolytus that they produced important treatises in response to it. In fact, William Rusch notes that it is essential to acknowledge the development and threat of this movement if one wishes to appreciate the teaching of Tertullian and Hippolytus on the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>73</sup> According to Modalism, God the Father and Christ the Son (and, by implication, the Holy Spirit) were one and the same, and so the names “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” were all references to the same identical being, because it was thought that to assign these names to separate entities was to necessitate God’s division. Modalism, then, developed as an attempt to harmonize the deity of Christ with

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<sup>70</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 8. See also Daniélou, *Origins of Latin Christianity*, 362; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 119; and Kevin B. McCrudden, “Monarchy and Economy in Tertullian’s *Adversus Praxeam*,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 3 (2002): 325.

<sup>71</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 109; Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 86.

<sup>72</sup> Allison, “Denials of Orthodoxy,” 18.

<sup>73</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 9. Chapters twenty to twenty-six of Tertullian’s treatise *Adversus Praxeam* are an excellent example of how Logos theologians typically responded to Monarchian assertions. Furthermore, according to Michel René Barnes, Tertullian’s response to the Monarchian position virtually became the standard pattern followed by subsequent Trinitarian theologians in the West. M. R. Barnes, “Latin Trinitarian Theology,” 71.

the oneness of God. It was popular for proponents of this school to use Christ's statements in the Gospels (especially John 10:30, 38; 14:8-10) as proof texts to support their position, because they interpreted such statements as Christ's admission to being identical with the Father.<sup>74</sup>

What Tertullian found disturbing about Modalistic Monarchianism were its implications. The Modalists may have preserved God's unity, but they had done so at the expense of rejecting the personal individuality of the Father and Son. Perhaps the most troubling implication was that to make the Father identical with the Son was to suggest that it was the Father himself who was crucified (Patripassianism). This was precisely the offense of which Tertullian charged his opponent Praxeas, who "managed two pieces of the devil's business: he drove out prophecy and introduced heresy; he put to flight the Paraclete and crucified the Father."<sup>75</sup> Tertullian was compelled to defend the virtues of the Logos theology because he perceived that Monarchianism was contending that the Logos theology should be set aside altogether.<sup>76</sup>

Tertullian granted that God is one, as he affirmed in his response to Marcion: "God is the great Supreme existing in eternity, unbegotten, unmade without beginning, without end," and so "our Christian verity has rightly declared, 'God is not if he is not one.'"<sup>77</sup> Yet, Tertullian defended the oneness of God in such a way that he responded to the flaws implicit in the Monarchian position, and in doing so, he borrowed significantly from his predecessors, principally Justin and Irenæus. Like his predecessors, Tertullian recognized that there does exist plurality within the Godhead, however puzzling that concept may be, but by comparison he

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<sup>74</sup> Dünzl, *Brief History*, 27.

<sup>75</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 1. All subsequent quotations from Tertullian's treatise *Adversus Praxean* are taken from the translation by Ernest Evans.

<sup>76</sup> Warfield, *Studies*, 23; cf. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 120-21; and McCrudden, "Monarchy and Economy," 327.

<sup>77</sup> Tert., *Adv. Marc.* 1.3. See also Tert., *De test. an.* 1-2; and Tert., *Adv. Herm.* 4, 16.

brought the individuality of the Son (the Word) to the forefront to a much greater extent. He went beyond the arguments of his predecessors, however, by focusing also upon what the three divine persons have in common—singleness of substance, which according to Tertullian is precisely what guarantees the essential unity of the one God.<sup>78</sup>

He affirmed that the concept of plurality within the Godhead was not his invention, and in fact he pointed out that God's "threeness" was implicit in the church's "rule of faith." Three of Tertullian's writings recapitulate the rule of faith earlier highlighted by Irenæus. Tertullian's restatements of the rule of faith are primarily Christological in content, although their implications are essentially Trinitarian.<sup>79</sup>

Both Tertullian and Irenæus began with the oneness of God and acknowledged the Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>80</sup> In contrast to Tertullian, however, Irenæus discussed the involvement of the Spirit in greater detail.<sup>81</sup> Of Tertullian's three rehearsals of the rule of faith, the most developed is the account given in the second chapter of *Adversus Praxean*, which concludes with Tertullian's observation that the authority of the rule of faith is confirmed by its antiquity: "That this Rule has come down from the beginning of the Gospel, even before all former heretics, not to speak of Praxeas of yesterday, will be proved as well by the comparative lateness of all heretics as by the very novelty of Praxeas of yesterday."<sup>82</sup>

Yet, Tertullian was not ignorant of the objections that his opponents could have made in response to him. He began the eighth chapter of his treatise *Adversus Praxean* with the

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<sup>78</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 10-11; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 114.

<sup>79</sup> John Norman Davidson Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Longman House, 1972), 85.

<sup>80</sup> Irenæus, *Adv. haer.* 1.10.1-2, 3.4.2; Tert., *De praescr. haeret.* 13; Tert., *De virg. vel.* 1; and Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2.

<sup>81</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 191.

<sup>82</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2.

anticipation that some of his readers would suspect his exposition of the Logos principle to be suggestive of Gnosticism. However, his reply to that anticipated charge is indicative of Tertullian's familiarity with the teaching of Irenæus. For example, he contends, "Valentinus secludes and separates his 'projections' from their originator, and places them so far from him that an æon is ignorant of its father. . . . But with us the Son alone knows the Father, and himself has declared the bosom of the Father, and has both heard and seen all things in the Father's presence."<sup>83</sup>

Ernest Evans observes that since Tertullian's immediate concern in *Adversus Praxean* was to offer an answer to Monarchianism, Tertullian qualified his remarks in the eighth chapter of *Adversus Praxean* in such a way as to remove any implication that the Logos is merely an aspect of the Father's own being or an expression of the Father's own activity.<sup>84</sup> However, Tertullian also understood that he could not defend the concept of personal distinction within the Godhead, particularly that of the Son, without first affirming the essential unity of substance shared by the Father, Son, and Spirit. Accordingly, like his predecessors, Tertullian started his defense of personal distinctions within the Trinity with the notion of divine unity.<sup>85</sup>

Consequently, other early Christian writers had found the appeal to Old Testament theophanies to be a useful strategy. Like a number of his predecessors, Tertullian identified the Son with Old Testament theophanies, such as those described in Genesis 32 and Exodus 33.<sup>86</sup> Yet, among Western writers he was the first to utilize the theophanies (including Christ's

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<sup>83</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 8.

<sup>84</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 37.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>86</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 14, 16; cf. Justin, *Trypho* 56ff, 127; and Irenæus, *Adv. haer.* 4.34.7-8.

incarnation) in order to discredit Monarchianism.<sup>87</sup> However, Ernest Evans suggests that in comparison to his predecessors, Tertullian's motivation was slightly different; Evans determines that while Justin, for instance, discussed theophanies in order to emphasize the Son's preexistence and the Father's transcendence, Tertullian discussed theophanies in order to sustain that the Son was not just an expression of the Father's own existence.<sup>88</sup>

Early Christian writers granted that the three members of the Trinity worked in cooperation with one another in carrying out God's creative, revelatory, and redemptive programs.<sup>89</sup> However, the cooperation of the three was not a suggestion of oneness of identity, but rather it indicated that the activity of each of the divine persons demonstrated their individuality. Proverbs 8:22-31, in which is described the personification of wisdom, was a popular passage that a number of early Christian writers applied to members of the Trinity, although some (such as Justin and Tertullian) identified this "wisdom" with the Son, while others (such as Theophilus and Irenæus) associated it with the Spirit.<sup>90</sup>

According to Ernest Evans, Tertullian's allusions to Proverbs 8:22-31, in chapters six and seven of *Adversus Praxean*, were uncommonly thorough in comparison to how earlier writers used the passage.<sup>91</sup> His echoing the significance of this passage indicates the importance that early Trinitarian writers attributed to balancing the cooperation of the three divine persons with their basic unity, and he confirms that they considered cosmology a useful mechanism with

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<sup>87</sup> M. R. Barnes, "Latin Trinitarian Theology," 72.

<sup>88</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 272.

<sup>89</sup> A notable example is Irenæus's metaphor of the Son and Spirit as "the hands of God." See Irenæus, *Adv. haer.* 4.20.1; 5.1.3, 5.5.1, 5.16.1.

<sup>90</sup> Compare Justin, *Trypho* 61; Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 6-7, 11; Theoph., *Ad Autol.* 1.7, 1.15, 1.18; and Irenæus, *Adv. haer.* 4.20.1, 4.20.3, 5.24.1.

<sup>91</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 218.

which to prove this relationship. Like the apologists before him, Tertullian pointed to the record of creation as a means of distinguishing the Son as “another beside the Father.”<sup>92</sup>

Tertullian elaborated upon other concepts as well that earlier writers had introduced. According to Elmore Leske, the Stoic and Philonic character of Tertullian’s consideration of the preexistence (*ratio*) and generation (*sermo*) of the Logos is reminiscent of the manner in which Theophilus commented on those concepts.<sup>93</sup> He also rejected the notion that personal distinctions within the Trinity constituted their separation. He affirmed “not however that the Son is other than the Father by diversity, but by distribution, not by division, but by distinction, because the Father is not identical with the Son, they even being numerically one and another.”<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, Tertullian repeated analogies introduced by earlier writers as he sought to portray the nature of the relationship between the Father and Son, but he also expanded those illustrations to show that the same logic allowing for two members within the Trinity also allows for a third. Like Justin and Tatian, he compared the Father and Son’s relationship with a fire kindling another fire without diminishing the parent fire.<sup>95</sup> He amplified Justin’s illustration of a sunbeam projected from the sun (representing the Son’s being sent forth by the Father) by adding that the Spirit could be likened to the “illumination point of the beam,” and in each case the three members are distinguishable, yet they retain common attributes.<sup>96</sup> He introduced two similar illustrations involving a spring-fed river that empties into a canal and a root that develops into a fruit-bearing plant, and so he determines, “In this way the Trinity, proceeding by intermingled

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<sup>92</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 7.

<sup>93</sup> Elmore Leske, “Tertullian and Origen on the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 9, no. 2 (August 1, 1975): 43; cf. Theoph., *Ad Autol.* 2.10, 2.22; and Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 5, 7.

<sup>94</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 9; cf. 8.

<sup>95</sup> Compare Justin, *Trypho* 61, 128; Tatian, *Ad Gr.* 5; and Tertullian, Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 8.

<sup>96</sup> Compare Justin, *Trypho* 128; Tert., *Apol.* 21; and Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 8.

and connected degrees from the Father, in no respect challenges the monarchy, while it conserves the quality of the economy.”<sup>97</sup>

The circumstances that confronted the earliest Christian writers required that if they were to credibly substantiate basic Christian truth claims, they needed to balance the deity of Christ with the oneness of God. As a result, early apologists had found the Logos principle to be immediately useful, because it provided a way to construct an intellectually sound defense of the Son’s divinity while also protecting divine unity. However, since Monarchianism developed essentially in response to the Logos theology, and since Modalistic Monarchianism was the stimulus that prompted Tertullian as an early Trinitarian writer, it was necessary that Tertullian had to begin his response by defending what he considered the virtues of the Logos theology.

In doing so, he reiterated and further advanced basic arguments established by his predecessors, predominantly Justin and Irenæus. In many ways Tertullian had based his arguments on the unity of God and the preexistence of Christ, just as earlier writers had done, and so Tertullian in large part inherited the traditional arguments established by his predecessors, including their tendency to rely upon cosmological expressions of the Trinity. Thus, he naturally repeated a number of their basic ideas, proof texts, and rhetorical devices. However, due to the theological circumstances in the Western church and due to Tertullian’s interest in the inner life of the Trinity, he also contributed fresh ideas of his own (especially in his treatise *Adversus Praxean*), and the significance of his advancements are evident in their endurance within Western theology.

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<sup>97</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 8.

## Chapter 2

### Exploration of Tertullian's Advancement of the Trinitarian Discussion

Early apologists and theologians had made attempts to explain the relationship between God the Father and Christ the Son, and so the Father and Son's shared unity and the Son's preexistence were not peripheral issues. These earlier writers had found cosmological arguments to be extremely useful for illustrating how the Son could be one with the Father and yet also distinct from him. These cosmological arguments, including applications of the Logos philosophy, especially highlighted the divine activities of creation and redemption because it was in these activities that the Son's generation and independent existence could be clearly perceived.

Tertullian's replication of established logic indicates his appreciation for his predecessors' achievements. In his reply to Modalistic Monarchianism, he aspired to provide the balance and completeness that was apparently lacking in the Logos theology. However, in the course of making his own defense of the Trinity, he introduced new technical terminology and new illustrations. Although divine unity was still a fundamental component of his thought, his response to Modalistic Monarchianism also required him to reflect considerably upon the notion of plurality within the Trinity, including how the three relate to and cooperate with one another. His treatise *Adversus Praxean* was an immensely important contribution to the ongoing Trinitarian discussion because its content clearly indicated a movement toward a more balanced and precise clarification of the internal relations of the three.

#### Contextual References to the Trinity in Tertullian's Writings

Tertullian's Trinitarianism is detailed most extensively in his treatise *Adversus Praxean*, although a number of his other writings as well contain references to the Trinity. The majority of these minor references, however, seem to have been contextually driven, and so in those

situations Tertullian's understanding of the Trinity is not delineated completely. Yet, perhaps one reason why Tertullian did not provide extended comments in those contexts is because he was indicating what was already well-accepted Christian teaching.

As an example, his treatise entitled *De corona* contains an allusion to the baptismal formula in which he explains the observance of the sacrament of baptism in the African church. He states that according to their custom, "We solemnly profess that we disown the devil, and his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel."<sup>98</sup> Tertullian's allusion here to the baptismal formula helps him to explain the baptismal custom of immersing a person three times, which was apparently the typical practice in African churches in Tertullian's day.<sup>99</sup> Everett Ferguson contends that Tertullian was the first to provide clear evidence of this custom of threefold immersion.<sup>100</sup>

In the same way, many of Tertullian's minor, contextual references to the Trinity were given for practical purposes rather than to teach doctrine, and so a more detailed explanation of the Trinity was not necessary in those contexts. That is, Tertullian recognized that the issue of the Trinity is relevant to Christian practice and worship. Accordingly, Tertullian briefly alluded to the Trinity in several of his practical treatises, which were intended less so for those outside the church than for those who already belonged to the church.

In his practical treatises he proposed that the perfect cooperation of the Father, Son, and Spirit helps to shape the church's spiritual identity, its redemptive confidence, and the character of its worship. In his treatise *De baptismo* he refers to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as

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<sup>98</sup> Tert., *De cor.* 3; cf. Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 26.

<sup>99</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 315; cf. Tert., *De cor.* 4.

<sup>100</sup> Ferguson, *Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 149. See also Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 341.

“witnesses of our faith” and “sureties of our salvation,” and he contends that “wherever there are three [that is, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit], there is the Church, which is a body of three.”<sup>101</sup> A similar statement appears in his treatise *De pudicitia*: “For the very Church itself is, properly and principally, the Spirit Himself, in whom is the Trinity of the One Divinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. [The Spirit] combines that Church which the Lord has made to consist in ‘three.’”<sup>102</sup> Moreover, in the treatise *De oratione* he suggests that just as various biblical characters structured their prayer times throughout the day, Christians likewise should “pray at least not less than thrice in the day, debtors as we are to Three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>103</sup> For Tertullian the Trinity has immediate practical significance; however, this did not lessen his appreciation for the Trinity as a matter of immense doctrinal priority.

#### *Adversus Praxean: A Substantial, Systematic Defense of the Trinity*

Parts of Tertullian’s *Apologeticum*, written about AD 197, are very similar in content and expression to his treatise *Adversus Praxean*, written roughly AD 213, but the treatise *Adversus Praxean* undoubtedly represents his most thorough exposition of his views on the Trinity.<sup>104</sup> The treatise *Adversus Praxean* was tremendously important for the historical development of Christian doctrine, but even so, it must be recognized for what it was—an occasional polemic written to allay theological misunderstandings about the relationship between the triune members of the Godhead. In particular, Tertullian was determined to overturn the false premises underlying Modalistic Monarchianism. He was prompted to write it because he perceived that

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<sup>101</sup> Tert., *De bapt.* 6.

<sup>102</sup> Tert., *De pud.* 21.

<sup>103</sup> Tert., *De orat.* 25.

<sup>104</sup> McGowan, “‘Heretical’ Origins,” 197. Chapter twenty-one of Tertullian’s *Apologeticum* is remarkably similar to *Adversus Praxean*. In both writings Tertullian underscores the shared unity of the Father and Son, as well as their individual distinctions.

the threat of this heresy was serious enough in Africa that it required his immediate refutation.<sup>105</sup> Nonetheless, although the language of the treatise is an expression of Tertullian's own personality and literary technique, it is reasonable to conclude, as Ernest Evans does, that the Trinitarian and Christological positions propounded in the treatise are fairly representative of what African churches in his region believed.<sup>106</sup>

This tract is notable for a number of reasons, not the least of which are Tertullian's awareness of the doctrinal seriousness of the threat posed by Modalism, his recognition that the three divine persons are equally codependent, and his observation that their personal distinctions are vital to the overall schematization of the divine economy.<sup>107</sup> Although significant attention is given to the Spirit, this treatise is primarily concerned with the Father and the Son, and in making his case for the personal distinctions of the Father and Son, he develops two very important corresponding themes. First of all, the Father and the Son are necessary to one another within the divine economy, because the Father's invisibility requires that it had to be the Son who became incarnate, a fact which in itself immediately invalidates Patripassianism.<sup>108</sup> In the same way, it is the works (*operae*) of the Son that indicate the Son's divinity and the separate existence of the Father and the Son—a principle which was integral to how the West interpreted Trinitarian theology, including the decisions made at the Council of Nicaea.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Warfield, *Studies*, 6.

<sup>106</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 5 and 19.

<sup>107</sup> Osborn, *First Theologian*, 134.

<sup>108</sup> McCrudden, "Monarchy and Economy," 334. The basic reasoning behind Tertullian's argument of this point resembles that which Irenæus used to support his illustration of the Son and Spirit as the "hands of God," although Tertullian does not use this designation. Compare Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 14; and Irenæus, *Adv. haer.* 4.20.1, 5.1.3, 5.5.1, 5.16.1.

<sup>109</sup> M. R. Barnes, "Latin Trinitarian Theology," 73 and 82.

As Tertullian demonstrated in this treatise, the codependence and cooperation of the three can be clearly recognized through the missions of the Son and the Spirit.<sup>110</sup> Much of this treatise was thus concerned with the internal relations within the Trinity, which soon preoccupied many theologians of subsequent decades as they tried to bring further balance and clarity to orthodox Trinitarian theology. The treatise *Adversus Praxean* had a profound influence within the church and for many years was especially esteemed in the West as an exceptional defense of orthodoxy.

Later theological discussions regarding the Trinity benefited from Tertullian's technical vocabulary, and his attention to the deity of the Spirit foreshadowed later pneumatological discussions.<sup>111</sup> In the West, Trinitarian theology through the time of Augustine was essentially a replication of Tertullian's logic in *Adversus Praxean* as he carefully balanced the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit with their personal distinctions, all the while affirming that the identity of each of the three could be neither confused nor exchanged.<sup>112</sup> Consequently, early Western Trinitarian theology was rooted to a great extent in anti-Modalistic thought, since this treatise itself was initially written as an answer to Modalistic Monarchianism.

### ***Adversus Praxean* as a Refutation of Modalistic Monarchianism**

The treatise is written against an individual referred to as "Praxeas" (literally translated as "busybody") who was apparently someone of influence in Rome, but it is intriguing that this individual is not mentioned by Tertullian's contemporaries, especially Hippolytus, who was himself familiar with circumstances in Rome.<sup>113</sup> As a result, the name "Praxeas" may have been intended as an epithet directed toward Modalist teachers in general, or it may have been used as a

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<sup>110</sup> de Margerie, *Christian Trinity in History*, 78 and 85.

<sup>111</sup> Allison, "Denials of Orthodoxy," 19.

<sup>112</sup> M. R. Barnes, "Latin Trinitarian Theology," 71-72.

<sup>113</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 184; cf. Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 1.

pseudonym for some familiar personality such as Callistus or Zephyrinus, whom some have suggested. Thomas Oden implies that Tertullian's opponent may have been an associate of the popular teacher Sabellius, whose influence began to take root even in North Africa as early as AD 195.<sup>114</sup> In any case, Tertullian never states that Praxeas either lived or personally taught in Africa, although his ideas nevertheless grew popular there.<sup>115</sup>

In order to refute the assertions of the Modalists, Tertullian's task in *Adversus Praxean* was to prove "how [the Father, Son, and Spirit] admit of plurality without division."<sup>116</sup> His argument needed to maintain a delicate balance: he had to account for why the distinction of the three is not an abandonment of monotheism, and at the same time he had to provide a coherent explanation for why each of the three must be recognized as equally divine. As it has been demonstrated, Tertullian was the heir of a theological tradition which had underscored the significance of the Son's activity in the scheme of creation, and so Tertullian corroborated the reality and nature of the Trinity partly by relying upon established cosmological reasoning.

However, as he sought to balance individual distinction and divine unity in his reply to the Modalists, he advanced beyond these earlier cosmological formulas by bringing the inner life of the Trinity more directly into the foreground of discussion. He does so as early as chapter two, wherein is contained his first suggestion that the Father, Son, and Spirit are all mutually dependent upon one another.<sup>117</sup> In doing so, he was one of the pivotal figures who helped to marshal the efforts of the early church toward the eventual settlement of Trinitarian orthodoxy in

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<sup>114</sup> Oden, *North African Tradition*, 125. See also Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 108.

<sup>115</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 184-86. See also Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 121.

<sup>116</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2.

<sup>117</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 195; cf. Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2.

the fourth century, by which time cosmology had been moved to a more marginal position in Trinitarian arguments.<sup>118</sup>

To support their position, the Monarchians relied upon a number of biblical passages as proof texts, the most important of which were from the Gospel of John (i.e. John 10:30, 38; 14:8-10). Beginning in chapter ten, Tertullian investigated these passages and others where Christ's statements signify that Christ and God the Father cannot be made identical. Chapters twenty-one to twenty-five of this treatise are in essence a careful and focused examination of the Gospel of John, although corresponding statements from Matthew and Luke are also included when appropriate. Tertullian affirmed, for instance, that the Old Testament required the testimony of two witnesses in order for there to be a valid charge against a person (cf. Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; 19:15), which Christ himself notes in John 8:14-19 as he identifies himself and God the Father as two sufficient witnesses to Christ's testimony about himself. Tertullian pointed out that this twofold testimony by the Father and the Son is sufficient evidence that the two cannot be identical.<sup>119</sup>

In chapter twenty-two, Tertullian examined Christ's statement, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30 ESV),<sup>120</sup> which the Modalists had interpreted to be Christ's own admission of being identical with God the Father. However, Tertullian demonstrated that the grammar in that verse cannot be used to support Modalism. He notes, "I and the Father' is an indication of two," and he points out that the verb "are" (ἐσμεν) is plural in number and that the Greek noun translated

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<sup>118</sup> Daniélou, *Origins of Latin Christianity*, 366.

<sup>119</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 22.

<sup>120</sup> All subsequent Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.

“one” (ἓν) is neuter—all of which suggest the Father and Son’s common unity rather than their singular identity.<sup>121</sup>

Moreover, he argues that John 14:9 must be interpreted in the same sense as John 10:30, because the assertion “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9) is akin to Christ’s claim to have come from God (John 16:27) and his attestation, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).<sup>122</sup> Tertullian’s point is that to have knowledge of the Son is to also have knowledge of the Father, not because the two are identical as Modalism suggested, but because it is the Son who makes the Father known, and as the “deputy of the Father,” the Son carries out all of the Father’s directions.<sup>123</sup> This further indicates Tertullian’s interest in the Trinity’s inner life.

In the same way, Tertullian anticipated the possible misconstruction of Christ’s declaration that “the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself” (John 13:31-32). Tertullian attempted here to forestall a potential deduction on the part of the Monarchians. He supposed that they might misinterpret these statements as being an indication that the Father became incarnate not only to be crucified but also to ultimately bring himself glory.<sup>124</sup> This was not necessarily one of his opponents’ proof texts, but he nonetheless examined it because he wanted to make use of an opportunity to prevent them from gaining any additional speculative ground.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 22.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>125</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian’s Treatise against Praxeas*, 305-306.

## ***Adversus Praxean* as Support for the Orthodox Trinitarian Position**

The development of Trinitarian theology in the Western tradition was inevitably tied to the refutation of Modalism,<sup>126</sup> and so as Tertullian countered the Modalists he concurrently detailed supportive arguments for the orthodox Trinitarian position. Tertullian himself asserts rather tongue-in-cheek that “there had to be kites, and heretics, and the Father had to be crucified.”<sup>127</sup> Ernest Evans concludes that by this statement Tertullian is suggesting that even though Patripassianism was a heresy to be rejected, the church still profited from its refutation, because doing so caused orthodoxy to be defined more clearly and methodically.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, even though this treatise was designed to refute a form of Monarchianism, it is important to note that Tertullian never disclaimed the term “monarchy,” which to the Monarchians represented the absolute, singular rule of God the Father and thus could by no means be compromised. What Tertullian did do, however, was propose a redefinition of the term which he determined to be more fitting based on his conclusions regarding the divine “economy.”<sup>129</sup>

Franz Dünzl observes that it was Tertullian who first submitted a structured postulation of the functions of each member of the Godhead as they cooperate within the “economic” scheme of salvation.<sup>130</sup> The following statement from chapter two of *Adversus Praxean* summarizes well Tertullian’s position on the Trinity:

They [i.e. Father, Son and Spirit] are all of the one, namely by unity of substance, while none the less is guarded the mystery of that economy which disposes the unity into a trinity, setting forth Father and Son and Spirit as three, three however not in quality but in sequence, not in substance but in aspect, not in power but in [its] manifestation, yet of

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<sup>126</sup> M. R. Barnes, “Latin Trinitarian Theology,” 82.

<sup>127</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 10.

<sup>128</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian’s Treatise against Praxeas*, 252.

<sup>129</sup> McCrudden, “Monarchy and Economy,” 329-30.

<sup>130</sup> Dünzl, *Brief History*, 32.

one substance and one quality and one power, seeing it is one God from whom those sequences and aspects and manifestations are reckoned out in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>131</sup>

Since Tertullian's opponents were not apt to admit the separate identities of the Father and Son, his comments in chapters five to eight lay stress upon the real existence and deity of the Son and his relationship to God the Father, and Tertullian apparently found established cosmological arguments to be a worthwhile place to begin. In order to affirm the real existence of the Son, Tertullian reasoned that the Son must himself be substantial because everything that exists was made by the Son (John 1:3). Prior to the moment of creation, God alone existed, although "he had with him that reason which he had in himself,"<sup>132</sup> and since at creation the Son proceeded from the Father as the "Discourse" proceeding from the Father's mind (cf. Ps 33:6), the Son must necessarily be of the same substance as the Father.<sup>133</sup>

One of Tertullian's most recognized achievements in *Adversus Praxean* is the technical Trinitarian vocabulary that he coined for the Western church. Although in the late second century Theophilus had described God as a "triad" (τριάδος), Tertullian was the first to describe God as a "Trinity" (*trinitas*), which incorporates not just the reality of three members but also their common divine essence, which unites them.<sup>134</sup> Two of the terms he introduced, *persona* (person) and *substantia* (substance), are descriptive of the inner life of the Trinity: *persona* characterizes their individuality, whereas *substantia* represents their fundamental unity.

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<sup>131</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 5; cf. Athenagoras, *Leg. pro Christ.* 10; Tatian, *Ad Gr.* 5.

<sup>133</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 7.

<sup>134</sup> de Margerie, *Christian Trinity in History*, 126-27; cf. Theoph., *Ad Autol.* 2.15; and Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2-4, 8, 11-12.

However, although Tertullian's application of these technical terms is innovative in Western theology, there actually exists much philosophical ambiguity in Tertullian's usage of them.<sup>135</sup>

It is in chapter eleven of *Adversus Praxean* that Tertullian first applies the term *persona* to indicate the distinctive existence of each divine person, or that which each person "is." Thus, it is at this point that the term "person" is first defined in the manner that was to be continued in later Trinitarian formulas.<sup>136</sup> Due to the philosophical ambiguity of *persona* in Tertullian's usage, it is quite difficult to prove that Tertullian's conception of *persona* must have served as the philosophical rationale for the development of a corresponding idea in the Eastern church.<sup>137</sup>

Nevertheless, it is clear that for Tertullian *persona* represented individual personal existence, and he distinguished the Son as "a second Person" and the Spirit as "a third Person."<sup>138</sup> He described the three as "numerically one and another,"<sup>139</sup> and so each of the three has "his own name and person and location."<sup>140</sup> Yet, although "each several one [of them] is God" and although each of the three is just as much divine as the other two,<sup>141</sup> at no time are any two divine persons to be considered identical, even when Christ declares, "I am in the Father" and "the Father is in me" (e.g. John 10:38; 14:10-11).<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Lawrence B. Porter, "On Keeping 'Persons' in the Trinity: A Linguistic Approach to Trinitarian Thought," *Theological Studies* 41, no. 3 (September 1, 1980): 530; Osborn, *First Theologian*, 136-37.

<sup>136</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 257.

<sup>137</sup> Osborn, *First Theologian*, 138.

<sup>138</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 12.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>142</sup> M. R. Barnes, "Latin Trinitarian Theology," 82.

Even to refer to God as “the Father” and to Christ as “the Son” implies the real existence of two separate persons, for “a father must have a son so as to be a father, and a son must have a father so as to be a son,” and a father cannot also be his own son just as a son cannot also be his own father.<sup>143</sup> Additionally, numerous statements recorded in Scripture are clearly made by one of the divine persons to another or with reference to another. Tertullian supplies a sampling of these statements, which are “made sometimes by the Father concerning the Son or to the Son” (e.g. Pss 2:7; 45:1; Isa 42:1; 49:6), “sometimes by the Son concerning the Father or to the Father” (e.g. Matt 27:46; Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isa 61:1; Pss 3:1; 22:1; 71:18), and “sometimes by the Spirit” concerning the Father and the Son (e.g. Ps 110:1; Isa 53:1), all of which are statements adequate to “establish each several Person as being himself and none other.”<sup>144</sup>

Despite their not being identical, the three share “one substance,” a common divine nature which unites them.<sup>145</sup> In *Adversus Praxean* Tertullian’s use the term *substantia* is flexible and therefore somewhat inconstant, but in general *substantia* appears to refer in this treatise to that particular composition which is shared uniquely and collectively by the Trinity, rather than the material of which any created matter is composed.<sup>146</sup> The “substance” of the three therefore refers to that which is held in common by the three and which is possessed only by the three.

Each of the three, however, possesses the fullness of this divine essence, and so there exists no inferiority between them. Tertullian contends, “The Father is the whole substance,

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<sup>143</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 10.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>145</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 115.

<sup>146</sup> Christopher Stead, “Divine Substance in Tertullian,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 14, no. 1 (April 1, 1963): 56 and 62. See also Holmes, *The Quest*, 71. For some examples of the flexibility with which Tertullian uses the term *substantia*, compare chapters two and six of *Adversus Praxean*.

while the Son is an outflow and assignment of the whole.”<sup>147</sup> However, in saying that “the Son is an outflow and assignment of the whole” (*filius vero derivatio totius et portio*), he is not suggesting division or separation. Rather, his point is that even though the Son was sent forth from the Father, the Son possesses the complete substance of deity, and this to no degree reduces the complete substance of deity possessed by the Father.<sup>148</sup> In other words, the substance of deity possessed by the Son is not a partitive portion of the Father’s divine substance, and so the divine substance possessed by the Son is neither inferior nor fundamentally unequal to the divine substance retained by the Father.<sup>149</sup> Accordingly, “Father and Son and Spirit [are set forth] as three, three however, not in quality but in sequence,” for the three are “yet of one substance and one quality and one power.”<sup>150</sup> Each of the three persons possesses all of the divine attributes in full measure.<sup>151</sup>

Therefore, in saying that the Son and Spirit respectively “occupy second and third place,”<sup>152</sup> Tertullian is not ranking their status or importance. His intention is to illustrate the order of their procession, not to imply any measure of inequality or inferiority.<sup>153</sup> Tertullian is concerned with demonstrating that the divine substance refers to that which the three have in common, but this does not require that they be identical, as Tertullian illustrates with his

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<sup>147</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 9.

<sup>148</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian’s Treatise against Praxeas*, 246-47.

<sup>149</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 114.

<sup>150</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2; cf. 19.

<sup>151</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian’s Treatise against Praxeas*, 52.

<sup>152</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 3; cf. 8.

<sup>153</sup> Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 101.

analogies of the sunbeam, the root, and the spring.<sup>154</sup> Conversely, each of the three is entitled to be called God because they are all equally divine, but by no means does this require their separation into a plurality of Gods.<sup>155</sup>

The technical vocabulary coined by Tertullian had great import for the Western church, and the Trinitarian formula of “one substance in three persons” (*una substantia in tribus personis*) is recognized as Tertullian’s invention.<sup>156</sup> Even so, although the concepts of “one substance” and “three persons” are both present in the treatise *Adversus Praxean*, nowhere in the treatise do these two concepts appear side by side in a single, pithy, formulaic statement. Of Tertullian’s own assertions, the one that most closely resembles the phrase “one substance in three persons” is his contention, “I always maintain one substance in three who cohere.”<sup>157</sup>

The three divine persons are personally distinct yet mutually dependent upon one another, but at the same time, their individual operations do not subvert the principle of the divine monarchy, the singular rule of one God. The operations of the Son and the Spirit, Tertullian claims, may be likened to the activities of an emperor’s deputies. Just as the authority extended to an emperor’s deputy officials is actually representative of the higher authority of the emperor himself, so also the agency of the Son and the Spirit can never be in contradiction to or in competition with the authority of God the Father, and so the divine monarchy remains intact even though plurality is distinguished.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 8.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>156</sup> O’Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 105; Porter, “On Keeping,” 530; Ernest Evans, *Tertullian’s Treatise against Praxeas*, 38.

<sup>157</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 12.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4. See also Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 98-99.

In the same way, Christ will be shown upon his return to be supreme over all things (1 Cor 15:24-26; cf. Pss 8:6; 110:1), at which time the kingdom will be restored to the Father (1 Cor 15:24) and “the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:27-28). That the kingdom is ruled by one person at a time, notes Tertullian, further confirms the preservation of the divine monarchy, and it also supports Tertullian’s defense of the individuality of the Father and Son, because “he who has delivered the kingdom and he to whom he has delivered it, as also he who has subjected it and he to whom he has subjected it, must of necessity be two.”<sup>159</sup>

### **The Overlapping Christological and Pneumatological Significance of *Adversus Praxean***

In addition to its being a refutation of Modalistic Monarchianism and its offering support for the orthodox Trinitarian position, this treatise is also important because of its significant Christological and pneumatological implications, which are noteworthy for at least two reasons. First of all, these important concepts are inevitable byproducts of Tertullian’s Trinitarian reasoning, and this relationship demonstrates that just as one may expect the Father, Son, and Spirit to each receive attention in an “economic” examination of the Trinity, so also Trinitarianism is not divorced from Christology and pneumatology.<sup>160</sup> Due to Tertullian’s interest in the divine economy and the inner life of the Trinity, it follows that his conclusions specifically regarding the Son and the Spirit are pertinent to the present discussion. In addition, the Christological and pneumatological implications of Tertullian’s Trinitarian logic are significant because they anticipate the Christological and pneumatological debates of later

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<sup>159</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 4.

<sup>160</sup> Pelikan, “Montanism,” 107-8.

generations, many of whose emphases mirror the issues raised and conclusions made by Tertullian in his treatise *Adversus Praxean*.

Chapter twenty-seven of the treatise contains some of Tertullian's most important Christological conclusions. Evidently some within the Monarchian camp had attempted to draw a distinction between a human Jesus and a divine Christ, the latter of whom they equated with God the Father.<sup>161</sup> Tertullian noted that such a suggestion was exceedingly problematic for the Monarchian position. Such an idea was patently inconsistent with even their most basic claims, because "these who contend that the Father and the Son are one and the same, now begin to divide them rather than to call them one," which Tertullian perceived to be more evocative of Gnosticism than Monarchianism.<sup>162</sup>

In response, he sought to clarify what precisely did take place at Christ's incarnation. He concludes that Christ's taking on human flesh did not constitute a "transformation or mutation of substance," as if he were "one substance [composed] of two, flesh and spirit, a kind of mixture," nor was he changed into "some third thing, a confusion of both [substances]."<sup>163</sup> On the contrary, "we observe a double quality, not confused but combined, Jesus in one Person God and Man," and so Christ is properly called both the Son of Man and the Son of God because his complete divinity was neither destroyed nor reduced by his becoming fully human.<sup>164</sup>

Yet, as Tertullian observes in chapter twenty-nine, even though "in Christ Jesus there are assessed two substances, a divine and a human," there was only one person who was crucified.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 14 and 316.

<sup>162</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 27.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 27; cf. 29.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

He had used the technical terms *substantia* (substance) and *persona* (person) in earlier chapters with reference to the Trinity, but his Christological application of the terms is quite different. Whereas previously he had argued for three persons who share one substance, he contends in chapters twenty-seven and twenty-nine that Christ was one person in possession of two substances (divine and human), retaining all the attributes associated with both substances.<sup>166</sup> Incidentally, Tertullian was the earliest Christian writer to apply a similar technical vocabulary to Trinitarian and Christological formulas,<sup>167</sup> and his Christological observations in *Adversus Praxean* plainly forecasted the great fifth-century Christological statements of Pope Leo I and the Council of Chalcedon.<sup>168</sup>

The pneumatological insights expressed in the treatise *Adversus Praxean* are important as well, especially in light of what topics were controversial in and after Tertullian's time. In the late second and early third centuries, the defense of plurality within the Godhead was very closely attached to the defense of the divinity of the Son, and so since early Trinitarian arguments focused tremendously on the Father and Son, there was comparatively little early exploration of pneumatology.<sup>169</sup> Even by the time of the Council of Nicaea pneumatology had not yet become a principal topic of controversy and theological reflection.<sup>170</sup> This was partly because theological attention had been immensely preoccupied with Christology, but it was also because there were some perceptions of ambiguity in some New Testament passages concerning

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<sup>166</sup> Tertullian applies the term *persona* in chapters 11, 12, 15, 18, 21-24, and 26, and he applies the term *substantia* to the Trinity in chapters 2-5, 7, 12-13, 19, and 25.

<sup>167</sup> Osborn, *First Theologian*, 142.

<sup>168</sup> Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 92.

<sup>169</sup> Ferguson, *Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 145.

<sup>170</sup> Dünzl, *Brief History*, 118.

the divinity of the Spirit, and these ambiguities required some reflection before the divinity of the Spirit received full recognition throughout the early church.<sup>171</sup>

Even early in his literary career Tertullian reflected a great deal on the Spirit's involvement in the church and in personal sanctification.<sup>172</sup> In his treatise *Adversus Praxean*, Tertullian considered the Spirit's participation especially in creation and sanctification. However, there is noticeable development in Tertullian's pneumatological emphasis in comparison to his earlier writings. In *Adversus Praxean*, the defense of the Spirit's divinity is clearly a priority issue for him, and Basil Studer deduces that this is due to Tertullian's interest in Montanism.<sup>173</sup> On the other hand, Andrew McGowan determines that it may be stretching the evidence too far to conclude that Tertullian's interest in Montanism is wholly responsible for his resolve to define the Spirit's position in the divine economy, but the development is still appreciable enough that the possible influence of Montanism to some degree cannot be totally discounted.<sup>174</sup> After all, Tertullian had identified the Spirit as "the preacher of one monarchy and also the interpreter of the economy for those who admit the words of his new prophecy."<sup>175</sup>

Notwithstanding his interest in Montanism, throughout the treatise he is nonetheless determined to corroborate the Spirit as "the third name of the deity and the third sequence of the majesty."<sup>176</sup> His treatise *Adversus Praxean* is especially valuable for pneumatology because he verifies that the same logical arguments allowing for a second person within the Godhead also

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<sup>171</sup> de Margerie, *Christian Trinity in History*, 100.

<sup>172</sup> Tert., *De praescr. haeret.* 13, 28; Tert., *De bapt.* 6, 19.

<sup>173</sup> Basil Studer and Andrew Louth, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 72-73. See also Holmes, *The Quest*, 73.

<sup>174</sup> McGowan, "'Heretical' Origins," 445.

<sup>175</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 30.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. 3-4, 8-9, 11-13.

allow for a third.<sup>177</sup> For example, he includes the Spirit in his metaphorical illustrations in chapter eight as he affirms that the Spirit possesses equal divinity with the Father and Son.<sup>178</sup>

Yet, it was appropriate for Tertullian and other early theologians to recognize the divinity of the Spirit because to do so is warranted by the testimony of Scripture. As Stephen Holmes identifies, although early theologians found it proper to acknowledge three divine persons, they also had to recognize that there cannot a fourth or a fifth because there is no biblical justification for such a conclusion.<sup>179</sup> Otherwise, the argument for plurality within the Godhead would only invite interpretations resembling the Gnostic teaching of countless divine emanations. It was appropriate to affirm the divinity of the Spirit, but Tertullian and other early theologians did so because the parameters of their theology were ultimately based not on logic but on the witness of Scripture.

In the same way, Tertullian showed that the titles “God” and “Lord” are as equally applicable to the Spirit as they are to the Father and Son, and Tertullian made this association in *Adversus Praxean* long before there was permanent and widespread acceptance regarding the propriety of applying both of these titles to the Spirit.<sup>180</sup> Even so, Tertullian perceived the Spirit to be derived “from nowhere else than from the Father through the Son.”<sup>181</sup> This understanding remained fairly typical of Western Trinitarian theology until the time of Augustine, when the Spirit’s relationship to the Father received more thorough consideration.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> McGowan, “‘Heretical’ Origins,” 444.

<sup>178</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 8.

<sup>179</sup> Holmes, *The Quest*, 73.

<sup>180</sup> Dünzl, *Brief History*, 33-34; cf. Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 13.

<sup>181</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 4.

<sup>182</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 358. See also Leske, “Tertullian and Origen,” 43.

The impact of Tertullian's treatise *Adversus Praxean* upon Western Trinitarianism (and Christology) cannot be overemphasized. His formulas and reasoning became paradigmatic for how the West interpreted the doctrine of the Trinity prior to Nicaea. His technical vocabulary enabled Western theologians to balance divine unity and personal distinctions, although in somewhat concrete terms. His consideration of the inner life of the three advanced beyond the earlier expressions upon which his predecessors had relied, and his exploration of fundamental Christological and pneumatological issues foreshadowed theological discussions of later generations. However, as Trinitarian doctrine verged on its fuller maturation, Tertullian's influence seems eventually to have dwindled, but his contributions had nevertheless helped to chart the course for the settlement of Trinitarian orthodoxy, or at least the Western interpretation of it.

## Chapter 3

### Identification of Tertullian's Influence in the Trinitarian Discussion

Tertullian left his deepest theological impression on Trinitarianism and Christology.<sup>183</sup> Later statements of Christian orthodoxy, including those made at church councils and those contained in doctrinal treatises, are strongly redolent of his theological definitions and reasoning, even if only indirectly. The treatise *Adversus Praxeian* was especially celebrated in the Western tradition, and that subsequent Christian writers profited from his arguments (especially his refutation of Modalism) is evident from their repetition of his general outline and main ideas.<sup>184</sup>

It is surprising, however, to note where his influence appears to be absent. For example, many of the prominent Trinitarian theologians in the East, such as the Cappadocians, were unfamiliar with him. The three Cappadocians were invaluable contributors to the settlement of Trinitarian doctrine because of their defense and clarification of the statement set forth at Nicaea, and the phrase “one essence [οὐσία], three persons [ὑποστάσεις]” is often considered a summary statement of their position on the Trinity.<sup>185</sup> Tertullian's recognition of “three persons” sharing “one substance” does resemble the Cappadocians' formula of “one essence, three persons,” but R. P. C. Hanson declares that contrary to what was assumed by older scholars such as Adolf von Harnack, there exists no evidence to indicate that the Cappadocians had any acquaintance at all with Tertullian, whether directly or indirectly.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Johannes Quasten, *The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus*, vol. 2, *Patrology* (1950; repr., Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, Inc., 1983), 324-25.

<sup>184</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 18-19.

<sup>185</sup> G. R. Evans, *The First Christian Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 168 and 177.

<sup>186</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 697n77.

Nevertheless, the degree to which the Cappadocians explored the internal relations of the Trinity does indicate that after Tertullian's time there was indeed a general crescendo of theological interest in the inner life of the Trinity. The theological interests of the Cappadocians and their contemporaries indicated the progression of the trend which had first been signaled by earlier theologians such as Tertullian (although he was in the West). In fact, it was necessary for the matter of internal relations to become more central in Trinitarian discussions in order for theologians to settle on an orthodox position that was as balanced and precise as it could be.

For example, during the period in which theologians were mostly concerned with the divinity of Christ and his relationship to the Father, Tertullian reflected considerably on the divinity of the Spirit in his treatise *Adversus Praxean*, and this foreshadowed later pneumatological discussions.<sup>187</sup> The Cappadocians, although unfamiliar with Tertullian's writings, did substantially defend the divinity of the Spirit as they sought to bring further clarification to issues such as the individual distinctions within the Trinity, their internal relations, and their communal activity.<sup>188</sup> The Cappadocians argued that the three function in perfect cooperation, sharing a common will and common power, all of which are linked to their essential unity.<sup>189</sup>

Basil of Caesarea, for instance, affirmed the codependence and cooperation of the three in terms of their individual operations. He asserted that although none of the three is insufficient or inferior to the others, they nonetheless work in conjunction with each other to carry out their

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<sup>187</sup> Regarding the divinity of the Spirit, Athanasius's correspondence with Serapion laid an important foundation for the achievements of Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea, whose opponents (the *Pneumatomachi*) denied the divinity of the Spirit. The Council of Constantinople also discussed the issue at length and incorporated an important clause into the creed that they formulated. See Athanasius, *Epistulae ad Serapionum* 27; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Orations* 5.4-5; Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit* 9.22, 10.30, 16.37-38, 18.44-45, 19.48; and "Constantinopolitan Creed," in Bettenson and Maunder, *Documents*, 27-28.

<sup>188</sup> Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 164-65.

<sup>189</sup> Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 36.

common will: the Father is the “first principle” who exercises his will through the Son, just as the Son’s will is actualized and completed by the Spirit.<sup>190</sup> This is the same order of relations implied in the creed that was approved at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381.<sup>191</sup> The Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed affirms that the three share a common divine substance, although they individually possess the fullness of deity.<sup>192</sup>

Tertullian’s direct theological impact was most substantial prior to the Council of Nicaea, and so fewer direct allusions to his writings appear in post-Nicene literature. Nevertheless, his thoughts on the Trinity marked an important advancement in Trinitarian thought, especially among Western writers, because after his time subsequent theological attention became significantly more concerned with reflection upon the inner life of the Trinity. Tertullian may not have prompted that progression so much as he merely signaled that it was taking place, because while he did rely upon accepted cosmological arguments, he was among the earliest Trinitarian theologians to reflect considerably on the internal relations of the Trinity, which after his time became a progressively more central aspect of theological attention.

#### The Echoing of Tertullian’s Reasoning by Subsequent Ante-Nicene Trinitarian Writers

The Western understanding of the Trinity was shaped considerably in the early third century, and Western Trinitarianism was driven to a great extent by the priority of the divine monarchy, which represented divine unity.<sup>193</sup> This Western emphasis on the divine monarchy is clearly observed in the correspondence that took place in the mid third century between

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<sup>190</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit* 16.38, 26.64. See also Rowan Williams, “Baptism and the Arian Controversy,” in *Arianism after Arius: Essays on the Development of the Fourth Century Trinitarian Conflicts*, ed. Michel René Barnes and Daniel H. Williams (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 157.

<sup>191</sup> Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 179.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>193</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 123.

Dionysius of Rome and Dionysius of Alexandria. The latter, who was a pupil of Origen, had written a letter to churches in Libya in which he condemned Modalism and stressed the personal distinctions of the Father and Son.<sup>194</sup> In reply, Dionysius of Rome produced a tract which reflected Novatian's influence and strongly argued for the preservation of the divine monarchy.<sup>195</sup> B. B. Warfield suggests that the case put forward by Dionysius of Rome suggests Tertullian's influence as well, although perhaps only indirectly.<sup>196</sup> Ernest Evans, however, asserts that Dionysius of Rome communicated little in that particular correspondence that was not already generally accepted in the Western church.<sup>197</sup>

Incidentally, the priority of the divine monarchy was an important component of Trinitarianism within the Western tradition. Lewis Ayres argues that no precise, sweeping statement can be made about Western Christological and Trinitarian theology in the late third and early fourth centuries, because extant Western literature produced during that span of years is comparatively scant in regard to what was believed in the Western tradition as a whole during those years.<sup>198</sup> Justo González, however, notes that Western theologians during that period were occupied mostly with practical issues, but even so, Western Trinitarian reflections during that time were little more than rehearsals of arguments put forward by Tertullian.<sup>199</sup>

Cyprian is a prime example of a third-century Western writer who dealt primarily with practical concerns but who was nevertheless familiar with Tertullian's theology. Although it is

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<sup>194</sup> Dünzl, *Brief History*, 39; cf. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 133.

<sup>195</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 134.

<sup>196</sup> Warfield, *Studies*, 100-101; cf. Quasten, *Ante-Nicene Literature*, 285.

<sup>197</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 20.

<sup>198</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 70.

<sup>199</sup> Justo L. González, *From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*, vol. 1, *A History of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 252.

unlikely that Cyprian had ever met Tertullian personally, Cyprian obviously held him in very high esteem.<sup>200</sup> Since Cyprian's letters and treatises are concerned predominately with practical and disciplinary issues, the subject of the Trinity is not one that he discussed considerably, and so it is difficult to precisely ascertain his position on it.<sup>201</sup> However, as a result of Cyprian's ministry in Carthage and in light of his high estimation of Tertullian's writings, it is reasonable to conclude that Tertullian had a tremendous influence on Cyprian's Trinitarianism.<sup>202</sup> After all, the early church historian Jerome reported through secondhand knowledge that toward the end of his life "Cyprian was accustomed never to pass a day without reading Tertullian, and that he frequently said to [his secretary], 'Give me the master,' meaning by this, Tertullian."<sup>203</sup>

On the whole, Western Trinitarianism prior to the Council of Nicaea was largely a rehearsal of Tertullian's conclusions. Of course, other ante-Nicene Western writers contemplated the Trinity, but none left an impact that eclipsed Tertullian's.<sup>204</sup> Although only a few subsequent writers (including prominent Africans) felt comfortable mentioning Tertullian by name due to the controversial status surrounding his orthodoxy, his theological influence cannot be denied.<sup>205</sup>

## **Hippolytus**

Tertullian's theological impact was virtually immediate, which is evident from his impact upon his contemporaries, such as Hippolytus. Like Tertullian, Hippolytus also recognized the danger posed by Modalism, and although Hippolytus wrote in Greek, he repeated much of

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<sup>200</sup> Decret, *Christianity in North Africa*, 45.

<sup>201</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 84n22.

<sup>202</sup> González, *Beginnings*, 245.

<sup>203</sup> Jer., *De vir. ill.* 53.

<sup>204</sup> Ulrich, "Nicaea and the West," 11.

<sup>205</sup> T. D. Barnes, *Historical and Literary Study*, 194.

Tertullian's technical terminology as well as the general arrangement of his argument.<sup>206</sup> Ernest Evans argues that an indirect familiarity with Tertullian (through Hippolytus) is strongly implied in a letter written to Paul of Samosata from the synod that convened at Antioch in AD 265, and this suggests that an awareness of the work of either Tertullian or Hippolytus had evidently traveled to the East.<sup>207</sup> Like Tertullian, Hippolytus underscored the issue of personal individuality within the Trinity. However, his aversion to the Modalism of Noetus prompted him to underscore the concept of personal distinction so heavily in the treatise *Contra Noetum* that his defense of the unity of God was not as thoroughly articulated.<sup>208</sup>

Yet, although Tertullian and his contemporary Hippolytus did emphasize some of the same concepts and although the arrangement of their thought is relatively similar, in some ways Hippolytus represents a regression from Tertullian's thought. By comparison, Tertullian's discussion of the Trinity is somewhat more advanced, and he is more determined to analyze the matter with exactness and attention to detail.<sup>209</sup> Tertullian's perceptions concerning the Spirit, for instance, are considerably more elaborate. Tertullian was particularly interested in affirming the personhood of the Spirit, while in contrast the vagueness with which Hippolytus spoke of the individuality of the Spirit suggests that he did not wish to imply that the Spirit is a person.<sup>210</sup>

Like Tertullian, Hippolytus affirmed the eternity of the Godhead, but Hippolytus did not attempt to demonstrate precisely how the eternal, preexistent Logos was to be distinguished

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<sup>206</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 19.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>208</sup> González, *Beginnings*, 239.

<sup>209</sup> Studer and Louth, *Trinity and Incarnation*, 74; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 110.

<sup>210</sup> Warfield, *Studies*, 90; cf. Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 12; and Hippol., *C. Noet.* 14.

as being separate from the Father.<sup>211</sup> Like many of the early apologists, he preferred to apply the principle of the *logos endiathetos* (the immanent word) as a description of the inner Logos of God.<sup>212</sup> Hippolytus also repeated some of Tertullian's illustrations, such as the analogy of the sun and a sunbeam and the illustration of a river fed by a spring.<sup>213</sup> He also borrowed the metaphor of how the divine monarchy, just like a secular monarchy, is maintained even if deputy agents (viz. the Son and Spirit) operate in conjunction with the Father, because the authority extended to them does not require the resignation of the Father's own authority.<sup>214</sup> Hippolytus's Christological reflections resemble Tertullian's as well, in that Hippolytus also concluded that Christ possessed a divine and a human nature and preserved all the attributes of both natures.<sup>215</sup>

## **Novatian**

Novatian seems to have depended heavily upon Tertullian's treatise *Adversus Praxean* as he wrote his treatise entitled *De trinitate*, especially the final two chapters.<sup>216</sup> According to Jerome, Novatian's treatise *De trinitate* was "a sort of epitome of the work of Tertullian," although what Jerome may have intended is that Tertullian's conclusions on the matter of the Trinity (from *Adversus Praxean* as well as from his *Apologeticum*) were compiled into a single volume in Novatian's treatise *De trinitate*.<sup>217</sup> For example, Novatian examines many of the same biblical passages used by Tertullian (such as those taken from the Gospel of John) and repeats

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<sup>211</sup> Warfield, *Studies*, 90-91; González, *Beginnings*, 239-40.

<sup>212</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 111; cf. Hippol., *Haer.* 7.10.

<sup>213</sup> Hippol., *C. Noet.* 11.

<sup>214</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 113; cf. Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 3; Hippol., *C. Noet.* 6, 7.

<sup>215</sup> Hippol., *Against Beron and Helix* 1; cf. Hippol., *C. Noet.* 17-18. See also González, *Beginnings*, 240.

<sup>216</sup> Grant, *One God*, 159.

<sup>217</sup> Jer., *De vir. ill.* 70; Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 25-26.

Tertullian's general interpretations of them. However, although both Tertullian and Novatian wrote in Latin, Tertullian's impact upon the development of Western Trinitarian theology was far more impressive.<sup>218</sup> Novatian restated much of Tertullian's reasoning but omitted aspects of his thought which were suggestive of Stoic and Montanist influence.<sup>219</sup> He was especially interested in defending the deity of Christ, and so many of his Christological conclusions resemble those of Tertullian, such as his explanation of how Christ possessed two natures.<sup>220</sup>

Novatian largely summarized the main ideas of Tertullian's treatise *Adversus Praxean*, and this is an indication of Tertullian's immediate influence upon Western Trinitarian theology.<sup>221</sup> Nevertheless, portions of Novatian's reasoning are less developed in comparison to that of Tertullian.<sup>222</sup> For example, rather than elaborating on the Son's generation at creation, Novatian merely reasoned that if the Father is eternally immutable, then the Son must have always been "in substance before foundation of the world," because there can never have been a time when the Father "became" the Father.<sup>223</sup> Also, while Tertullian interpreted the concept of divine unity in terms of substance, Novatian appealed primarily to the moral unity of the three.<sup>224</sup>

Moreover, in contrast to Tertullian, Novatian does not elaborate extensively on the Spirit.<sup>225</sup> He recognizes the Father and Son as a "distinction of persons."<sup>226</sup> However, he does not

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<sup>218</sup> T. D. Barnes, *Historical and Literary Study*, 193.

<sup>219</sup> Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 90.

<sup>220</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 74; Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 90; cf. Novatian, *De trin.* 27, 29.

<sup>221</sup> González, *Beginnings*, 243-44.

<sup>222</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 12; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 125.

<sup>223</sup> Novatian, *De trin.* 16; cf. 31.

<sup>224</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 125.

<sup>225</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 12; Quasten, *Ante-Nicene Literature*, 230.

describe the Spirit as a “third person,” although Tertullian did.<sup>227</sup> The lack of detail and precision with which Novatian discusses the Spirit is perhaps the reason why the term “Trinity” (*trinitas*) never appears in his treatise. Johannes Quasten reasons that Novatian avoids the term due to his fear that it may suggest ditheism, even if only remotely, and this is also why Novatian so strongly subordinates the Son to the Father, even to the point of making him inferior.<sup>228</sup> On the other hand, J. N. D. Kelly concludes that Novatian omitted the word *trinitas* because he seems to have completely overlooked that the plurality within the Trinity consisted of three members rather than just two.<sup>229</sup>

### **Lactantius**

It is clear that Lactantius had read at least some of Tertullian’s work, but he apparently found him somewhat difficult to understand: “Septimius Tertullianus also was skilled in literature of every kind, but in eloquence [Tertullian] had little readiness, and was not sufficiently polished, and [was] very obscure.”<sup>230</sup> This is Lactantius’s only explicit mention of Tertullian, although his consideration of the Son’s incarnation, generation, and unity with the Father does suggest that he was acquainted with Tertullian’s writings. For instance, he employed similar illustrations (e.g. the Son as the Father’s expressed speech; the sun and a sunbeam; a river fed by a spring) and similar biblical texts (e.g. Prov 8:22-27; John 1:1; 10:30), and the general

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<sup>226</sup> Novatian, *De trin.* 27.

<sup>227</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 12.

<sup>228</sup> Quasten, *Ante-Nicene Literature*, 228; cf. Novatian, *De trin.* 18, 27, 31. See also González, *Beginnings*, 243-44.

<sup>229</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 126.

<sup>230</sup> Lactant., *Div. inst.* 5.1.

arrangement of his arguments concerning the Son's incarnation, generation, and unity with the Father resembles the arrangement of corresponding passages in Tertullian's writings.<sup>231</sup>

#### Evidence of Tertullian's Influence in Post-Nicene Literature

In the Western church, Tertullian was the great Trinitarian authority prior to Nicaea, and his direct influence is most apparent in pre-Nicene Western writers. However, Western Trinitarian discussions even well into the latter half of the fourth century were still very reminiscent of Tertullian's theology.<sup>232</sup> Allusions to his writings appear, for example, in the *Tome* of Damasus, which was produced in AD 378 at a council that convened in Rome under the oversight of Pope Damasus of Rome and that condemned the teachings of Sabellius, Arius, Eunomius, and Apollinarius. The list of canons outlined in the *Tome* of Damasus emphasizes that the Father, Son, and Spirit are coeternal as well as consubstantial, and the repeated emphasis on the oneness of God strongly suggests that the content of the *Tome* was derived entirely from the Western tradition, in which Tertullian's theology was still fairly standard.<sup>233</sup>

Tertullian's technical vocabulary was an important theological contribution to the Western tradition, but some subsequent Western writers (especially in the fourth century) were apprehensive about using his terminology.<sup>234</sup> For instance, Tertullian had found the Latin term *persona* to be useful for his immediate purposes in *Adversus Praxean*, but surprisingly only a few fourth-century Western writers preferred to use it. Marius Victorinus adamantly refused to include the word *persona* as part of his Trinitarian vocabulary, perhaps because he thought the

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<sup>231</sup> Compare Lactant., *Div. inst.* 4.8, 4.29; Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 7-8; and Tert., *Apol.* 21.

<sup>232</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 529.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 758-59.

<sup>234</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 84n30.

term insufficient, and in fact he rejected most of Tertullian's vocabulary.<sup>235</sup> Those Western writers in the fourth century who did use the term *persona* did so only with reluctance, probably because they had developed something of a distaste for the word *persona* since some had equated it to the Greek term πρόσωπον (*prosopon*), which to many Western theologians suggested Sabellianism.<sup>236</sup>

Granted, Tertullian's definitions were grounded in the traditional Logos doctrine, and some of his conclusions are suggestive of subordinationism. Nevertheless, his thought represents an important step forward because he insisted that there was no inferiority of deity among any of the three persons of the Trinity.<sup>237</sup> To Tertullian, the divine substance shared by the three denotes that they are equally divine, so none of the three possesses a divine nature that is fundamentally different from that of the other two.<sup>238</sup> However, he does imply that the Son and Spirit are subordinate in terms of their procession,<sup>239</sup> but this is not a total surprise because the theological community in Tertullian's day had not yet developed the concepts that were needed to advance beyond this way of thinking.<sup>240</sup> Eventually, the nature of the Trinitarian and Christological controversies in the fourth century thrust the subject of the inner life of the Trinity into the center of discussion, and so following the Council of Nicaea the consideration of cosmology within Trinitarian discussions moved accordingly to the periphery.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 544-45.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>237</sup> Warfield, *Studies*, 108-9.

<sup>238</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 52.

<sup>239</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 7-8.

<sup>240</sup> Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 101.

<sup>241</sup> Daniélou, *Origins of Latin Christianity*, 365-66.

Tertullian's reflections on the Trinity reiterated important cosmological arguments that were established before his time, but he also was among the earliest Christian writers to reflect deeply on the internal relations within the Trinity. Therefore, while some aspects of his Trinitarian theology are noticeably more primitive than Trinitarian statements formulated after Nicaea, his consideration of the Trinity nevertheless signaled that this important shift was taking place. What is surprising, however, is that despite Tertullian's substantial influence upon Western Trinitarianism, his influence was almost entirely absent from the major theological innovations that developed in the East, whether heretical or orthodox.<sup>242</sup> The advent of Arianism and the ensuing proceedings at Nicaea are cases in point.

Although Arianism appears to have developed apart from any measure of influence from Tertullian,<sup>243</sup> some have suggested that Tertullian's teaching on the Trinity may have contributed indirectly to the decisions made at the Council of Nicaea. B. B. Warfield, for example, contends that Tertullian had an indirect influence on the formulation of the Nicene Creed through Constantine's theological advisor, Hosius of Cordoba, whom Athanasius regarded as the one "who put forth the Nicene Confession."<sup>244</sup> Certainly there are some ideological likenesses between Tertullian's Trinitarian (and Christological) theology and the ideas expressed in the Nicene Creed. After all, the six Western representatives who were present at the Council of Nicaea, including the prominent Hosius of Cordoba, were likely schooled in the theology of Tertullian.<sup>245</sup> Even so, the historical fact of the presence of these six Western bishops does not necessarily guarantee Tertullian's indirect influence, even to a negligible degree, because their

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<sup>242</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 184.

<sup>243</sup> Ulrich, "Nicaea and the West," 12. See also Hanson, *The Search*, 61.

<sup>244</sup> Warfield, *Studies*, 101-3; Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum* 6.42.

<sup>245</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 169. Hanson elects to spell Hosius's name as Ossius, although he is referring to the same individual.

historical presence is not sufficient justification for making judgments concerning the extent of their theological influence there.<sup>246</sup>

Still, Tertullian's argument that the Father, Son, and Spirit share a common substance is sometimes noted for its resemblance to the statement in the Nicene Creed that the Father and Son are consubstantial. However, Tertullian's phrase *una substantia* (one substance) is not perfectly synonymous with the Greek term ὁμοούσιος (*homoousios*), and in fact he uses no term that is perfectly equivalent to it.<sup>247</sup> Christopher Stead makes a very compelling case that if the Greek-speaking representatives at Nicaea had truly wished to find a Greek expression corresponding to Tertullian's Latin phrase *una substantia*, they would have chosen either μία οὐσία (*mia ousia*) or μία ὑπόστασις (*mia hypostasis*), not the word ὁμοούσιος (*homoousios*).<sup>248</sup>

Similarly, Jörg Ulrich confirms that the Latin equivalent of *homoousios* is the term *consubstantialis*, not Tertullian's phrase *una substantia*.<sup>249</sup> It is thus extremely unlikely that it was the Western representatives at the council who took initiative in suggesting the selection of the term *homoousios*. While in his polemic *Adversus Hermogenem* Tertullian does in fact use the term *consubstantialis*, in that context he was commenting on a hypothetical relationship between God and matter, and even there his meaning was entirely different from the concept of consubstantiality expressed in the Nicene Creed.<sup>250</sup>

Quite simply, there is nothing to indicate that the six Western bishops present at Nicaea were eager to press Western theology at a church council addressing a primarily Eastern

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<sup>246</sup> Ulrich, "Nicaea and the West," 16.

<sup>247</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 190.

<sup>248</sup> Stead, "Divine Substance in Tertullian," 253.

<sup>249</sup> Ulrich, "Nicaea and the West," 13-14.

<sup>250</sup> Tert., *Adv. Herm.* 44.

problem.<sup>251</sup> Even after the council concluded their deliberations and formulated the Nicene Creed, Arianism failed to cause more than a nominal problem in the West.<sup>252</sup> It is well recognized, for example, that it was only after Hilary's exile in Phrygia that he gained any real acquaintance with the controversy surrounding Arianism.<sup>253</sup> It seems that prior to Hilary's return to the West, most Western theologians were fairly ignorant of Nicene theology as well as the circumstances that prompted the council in the first place.<sup>254</sup> Nevertheless, Gerald Bray suggests that perhaps one reason why Arianism (and Nestorianism) failed to have more than a very modest effect in the West could be because teachers in the West were adequately versed in Tertullian's Trinitarianism and Christology, in spite of whether or not Tertullian was considered an early authority at the fourth- and fifth-century debates in the East.<sup>255</sup>

In any event, Tertullian was still quite familiar to Trinitarian Western theologians after Nicaea. Furthermore, from their interaction with his theology, it is clear that Western writers, not unlike Eastern writers, were developing a greater interest in the inner life of the Trinity. This had been foreshadowed in the previous century as Tertullian began to explore the matter, although his efforts were certainly not exhaustive. The repercussions of Arianism and the decisions made at Nicaea necessarily caused Western theologians to channel their attention toward issues such as the internal relations within the Trinity.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 170.

<sup>252</sup> Ulrich, "Nicaea and the West," 16.

<sup>253</sup> Clark, "Trinity in Latin Christianity," 280; Hanson, *The Search*, 170.

<sup>254</sup> Ulrich, "Nicaea and the West," 20; Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 184.

<sup>255</sup> Bray, "Tertullian," 70.

<sup>256</sup> Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 213-14.

## Hilary of Poitiers

Athanasius's Western counterpart, Hilary of Poitiers, was quite certainly conversant with Tertullian's theology, even though he did not often mention him in his writings. Hilary evidently profited from Tertullian's treatise *Adversus Praxean* as he wrote in opposition to Sabellianism, but he did attempt to clarify statements which he perceived to be misleading.<sup>257</sup> After Hilary was forced into exile and traveled to the East, he became acquainted with the controversy surrounding Arianism. As a result, it was while he was in the East that he was prompted to write his treatise *De trinitate* in order to repudiate Arianism, Sabellianism, and Photinianism.<sup>258</sup> Hilary was of course deeply indebted to the Western writers who had preceded him, especially Tertullian, whose theological influence is very evident in Hilary's writings.<sup>259</sup>

Many aspects of Hilary's thought resemble Tertullian's. As Hilary defended the Nicene concept of the consubstantiality of the Father, Son, and Spirit, he highlighted the importance of the role of the Father, just as Tertullian (and Origen) had done.<sup>260</sup> Hilary borrowed some of Tertullian's technical terms and phrases, such as the phrase "unity of substance" (*substantiae unitatem*), and Hilary applied it similarly in reference to the relationship of the Father and Son.<sup>261</sup> Like Tertullian, he applied the term *substantia* to the Spirit,<sup>262</sup> and he emphasized the full deity of the Spirit.<sup>263</sup> Furthermore, Hilary offered similar reasons for the incarnation as those offered

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<sup>257</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 21.

<sup>258</sup> Clark, "Trinity in Latin Christianity," 280; Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 41.

<sup>259</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 472.

<sup>260</sup> Clark, "Trinity in Latin Christianity," 280.

<sup>261</sup> Hilary, *Comm. in Matth.* 23.8; cf. Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2.

<sup>262</sup> Hilary, *Comm. in Matth.* 12.17.

<sup>263</sup> Hilary, *De trin.* 2.31-32.

by Tertullian, and in fact much of Hilary's discussion of Christ's incarnation in *De trinitate* is reminiscent of the corresponding discussion in Tertullian's treatise *Adversus Praxean*.<sup>264</sup>

However, Hilary advanced beyond Tertullian's treatment of internal relations. This is most noticeable in Hilary's later writings, perhaps because the importance of the inner life of the three had been reinforced in his mind after learning of the problem of Arianism in the East. For instance, in his earlier writing, Hilary followed Tertullian's example in establishing the Son's preexistence with the Father and the creative, revelatory, and redemptive purposes of the Son's generation.<sup>265</sup> In his later writing, however, probably due to what he learned during his Eastern exile, Hilary defended the Son's eternal generation.<sup>266</sup>

In addition, he also rejected some of Tertullian's terminology and reasoning, such as Tertullian's statement in *Adversus Praxean* that "the Father is the whole substance, while the Son is an outflow and assignment of the whole" (*pater enim tota substantia est, filius vero derivatio totius et portio*). Since Christ had declared his possession of all that belonged to the Father (John 16:15; 17:10), Hilary contended, "There [is no] portion of the Father resident in the Son."<sup>267</sup> Also, Hilary apparently preferred the term *natura* rather than Tertullian's term *persona* to represent the personal distinctions of the Father and Son, and so he used *persona* only sparingly in *De trinitate* and *De synodis* but never once in his *Commentarii in Matthaicum*, which of all his writings reflects his most pronounced dependence upon Tertullian's thought.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> For instance, compare Hilary, *De trin.* 5.18, 9.7; and Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 27, 29.

<sup>265</sup> Hilary, *Comm. in Matth.* 16.4, 31.3.

<sup>266</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 481.

<sup>267</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 9; Hilary, *De trin.* 2.8.

<sup>268</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 486.

## Other Fourth-Century Western Contributions

In addition to Hilary, there were other Western Trinitarian theologians in the fourth century who discussed the matter of the Trinity, but their activity is not necessarily as well known. The testimony of one such individual, Heraclianus, was recorded in AD 366 in a Latin work entitled *Altercatio Heracliani Laici cum Germinio Episcopo Sirmiensi*, which recalls a debate between three laymen (Heraclianus, Firmianus, and Aurelianus) and the Arian bishop Germinius of Sirmium. Evidently this debate was provoked as a result of their disagreement regarding the common divinity of the Father and Son, although the divinity of the Spirit is discussed as well, and the account concludes with a Trinitarian statement submitted by Heraclianus, the chief spokesman for the three pro-Nicene laymen.<sup>269</sup> This Trinitarian statement is significant because it is a nearly verbatim rehearsal of Tertullian's remarks in chapter twenty-one of his *Apologeticum*, repeating even Tertullian's illustration of the sun and its ray.<sup>270</sup>

Not all Western writers in the fourth century evidenced the escalating interest in internal relations as clearly as Hilary did. Even so, many of their concerns reiterate Tertullian's arguments and vocabulary, and this indicates that they nonetheless found Tertullian's reasoning to be generally satisfactory as a starting point for their own arguments. For instance, according to Michel René Barnes, the tendency among fourth-century Trinitarian writers in the West (including Phoebadius of Agen, Zeno of Verona, Lucifer of Cagliari, Niceta of Remesciana, and Pope Damasus of Rome) was to describe divine unity not primarily in terms of divine substance but rather as "one power," a phrase which Tertullian had also used to affirm divine unity.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 528-29.

<sup>270</sup> "Altercatio Heracliani Laici cum Germinio Episcopo Sirmiensi," The Tertullian Project, last modified December 29, 2007, accessed December 28, 2013, [http://www.tertullian.org/articles/caspari\\_altercatio.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/articles/caspari_altercatio.htm); cf. Tert., *Apol.* 21.

<sup>271</sup> M. R. Barnes, "Latin Trinitarian Theology," 74-75.

Although Tertullian did emphasize the notion of divine substance in *Adversus Praxean*, he determines the Father, Son, and Spirit to be “three however not in quality but in sequence, not in substance but in aspect, not in power but in [its] manifestation, yet of one substance and one quality and *one power*.”<sup>272</sup> Nevertheless, some fourth-century writers in the Western tradition, such as Marius Victorinus, Lucifer of Cagliari, and Potamius of Lisbon, still contemplated the meaning of Tertullian’s *substantia* as a description of divine unity and likewise applied the term to the Spirit. This is significant since Eastern theologians in the mid fourth century had not yet accepted that the Spirit shares a common substance with the Father and Son.<sup>273</sup>

In chapter twenty-seven of *Adversus Praxean*, Tertullian defended Christ’s individuality on the basis of his “powers and works and signs,” among which he included Christ’s incarnation.<sup>274</sup> Phoebadius of Agen (who wrote ca. AD 359), Niceta of Remesciana (who wrote in AD 378), and other Western writers after Tertullian’s time repeated his argument that the works (*operae*) of the Son were an indication of the Son’s power. This further demonstrates that the Western theological tradition interpreted both Christ’s incarnation and his equal divinity with the Father by means of applying common logic to both principles.<sup>275</sup>

Phoebadius of Agen produced a Latin tract entitled *Contra Arianos*. His understanding of the Trinity is almost totally dependent on Tertullian’s treatise *Adversus Praxean*, although Phoebadius tried (unsuccessfully) to apply aspects of Tertullian’s refutation of Modalism to the problem of Arianism.<sup>276</sup> Nevertheless, Phoebadius repeated Tertullian’s emphasis on the rule of

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<sup>272</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2; emphasis added.

<sup>273</sup> M. R. Barnes, “Latin Trinitarian Theology,” 75 and 77; cf. Hanson, *The Search*, 514 and 527.

<sup>274</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 27.

<sup>275</sup> M. R. Barnes, “Latin Trinitarian Theology,” 74.

<sup>276</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 516-17. See also Ulrich, “Nicaea and the West,” 19-20.

faith and the balance between economic distinction and common substance within the Trinity:  
“We must hold fast the rule which confesses the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father. This rule, preserving unity of substance in the two Persons, recognizes the economy of the Godhead. . . Yet all in all they [i.e. Father, Son, and Spirit] are one God; the Three are a unity.”<sup>277</sup>

Gregory of Elvira (located on the southwestern Iberian Peninsula) also produced an anti-Arian work which was entitled *De Fide Orthodoxa* (written ca. AD 392). Gregory reflected Tertullian’s usage of *substantia* and *persona* as descriptors of the unity and personal distinctions within the Trinity.<sup>278</sup> Like Tertullian, he also understood Christ’s divinity and humanity as constituting two substances (*substantiae*) resident in a single person (*persona*), and he recognized that the Spirit possesses the same divine substance as that which is shared also by the Father and the Son.<sup>279</sup> Consequently, he concluded his tract *De Fide Orthodoxa* with a statement of faith that identifies the Father, Son, and Spirit as *tres personae unius substantiae* (three persons of one substance), which indicates his obvious acquaintance with Tertullian.<sup>280</sup>

Concerning the Western understanding of pneumatology, Niceta of Remesciana is significant because he serves as a link between Tertullian and Ambrose of Milan. Ambrose’s treatise *De Spiritu sancto* was a notable contribution from the Western tradition regarding the person and role of the Spirit. Yet, Michel René Barnes asserts that Ambrose’s pneumatology actually owes much to the teachings of Niceta of Remesciana (and also Didymus the Blind from

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<sup>277</sup> Phoebadius, *Contra Arianos* 22.

<sup>278</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 521.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 525-26.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 747.

Alexandria), and it was Niceta who made significant advancements to Tertullian's pneumatological insights.<sup>281</sup>

Nevertheless, Tertullian's consideration of the person and role of the Spirit foreshadowed later pneumatological reflections on the personality and deity of the Spirit, including the discussion offered by Ambrose in his treatise *De Spiritu sancto*. Ambrose reasons that "the evident glory of the Godhead is proved both by other arguments, and most especially by these four. God is known by these marks: either that He is without sin; or that He forgives sin; or that He is not a creature but the Creator; or that He does not give but receives worship."<sup>282</sup> His conclusion is that since the Spirit meets all four of these "marks," the deity of the Spirit must be recognized.<sup>283</sup> In a similar fashion, although his treatise *De Fide* deals with a host of different topics (especially regarding Christ the Son), Ambrose affirms the reality of personal distinctions within the Trinity and defends the oneness of the three by calling attention to their common nature, divinity, and will, as well as their cooperative activity.<sup>284</sup>

## Augustine

Tertullian's teachings on the Trinity almost certainly impacted Augustine, whose thoughts on the Trinity represent Western Trinitarianism at full maturity.<sup>285</sup> At several points in his treatise *De trinitate* (written between AD 399 and 419) Augustine rehearses in detail the traditional orthodox position on the consubstantiality, equality, and individual distinctions of the

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<sup>281</sup> M. R. Barnes, "Latin Trinitarian Theology," 77.

<sup>282</sup> Ambrose, *De Sp. sancto* 3.18.132.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.18.143.

<sup>284</sup> Ambrose, *De Fide* 2.1.1-2, 2.1.17-18, 4.3.34, 5.3.42-44.

<sup>285</sup> Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 184; Ferguson, *Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 273; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 271.

three.<sup>286</sup> Elsewhere, he replicated rhetorical illustrations that were common within the Western tradition, such as Tertullian's analogies of the root and the spring, in order to illustrate that plurality within the Godhead does not require a destruction of divine unity.<sup>287</sup> Although such analogies were inadequate to prove the reality of plurality and unity, they were nevertheless sufficient to illustrate their compatibility, which is why they were reused by Augustine and other Western writers after Tertullian.<sup>288</sup> According to Bertrand de Margerie, Augustine was especially adept at using tangible illustrations from the natural world in order to portray the reality of the Trinity, although Tertullian had done so almost in anticipation of Augustine.<sup>289</sup>

In the same way, Tertullian also employed abstract illustrations upon which Augustine elaborated. In *Adversus Praxean*, Tertullian likened the generation of the Son and the internal relations within the Trinity to how the human mind is expressed through discourse and the exercise of reason.<sup>290</sup> Augustine utilized this same basic sequence, and in fact he amplified the illustration considerably in books eight to fifteen of his treatise *De trinitate*.<sup>291</sup> For Augustine, the notion of the internal relations within the Trinity was vitally important for understanding their personal distinctions and individual operations. Even though Augustine did refer to the three as "persons" (*personae*), he did so only with tremendous misgivings, because he determined that

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<sup>286</sup> August., *De trin.* 1.4.7, 5.8.9.

<sup>287</sup> August., *De fide et symbolo* 9.17; cf. Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 8.

<sup>288</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 237.

<sup>289</sup> de Margerie, *Christian Trinity in History*, 80.

<sup>290</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 5.

<sup>291</sup> Quasten, *Ante-Nicene Literature*, 285; Brian E. Daley, "'One Thing and Another': The Persons of God and the Person of Christ in Patristic Theology," *Pro Ecclesia* 15, no. 1 (December 1, 2006): 27.

any description made of them would be inevitably restricted by the limits of human language.<sup>292</sup> Augustine also determined that the Spirit is derived jointly from both the Father and the Son.<sup>293</sup> Although he could not fully explain the Spirit's procession from the Father, his perception of the Spirit did indicate pneumatological advancement since the time of Tertullian, who "reckon[ed] the Spirit from nowhere else than from the Father through the Son."<sup>294</sup>

Just as were others in the Western tradition, Augustine was concerned primarily with divine unity rather than with the individual roles of each of the three, but apparently he was aware of how this relative imbalance weakened his articulation of the Trinity to some extent.<sup>295</sup> However, he emphasized divine unity as he did partly because he was determined to exclude any hint of subordinationism.<sup>296</sup> Consequently, he repeats Tertullian's emphasis on the common substance of the three, but in comparison to Tertullian, Augustine affirms more explicitly that the consubstantiality of the three connotes their full equality:

Wherefore the Holy Spirit also subsists in this same unity and equality of substance. For whether he is the unity between both of them [i.e. the Father and Son], or their holiness, or their love, or whether the unity because he is the holiness, it is obvious that he is not one of the two. . . . Therefore the Holy Spirit, whatever it is, is something common both to the Father and Son. But that communion itself is consubstantial and co-eternal. . . . Therefore also the Holy Spirit is equal; and if equal, equal in all things, on account of the absolute simplicity which is in that substance.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 274; de Margerie, *Christian Trinity in History*, 127; cf. August., *De trin.* 7.4.7-9.

<sup>293</sup> Clark, "Trinity in Latin Christianity," 284; cf. August., *De trin.* 1.4.7, 5.11.12, 15.17.29, 15.25.45.

<sup>294</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 4. See also Ferguson, *Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 274.

<sup>295</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 26.

<sup>296</sup> Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 233.

<sup>297</sup> August., *De trin.* 6.5.7; cf. Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2, 12.

## The *Tome* of Leo and the Definition of Chalcedon

Western Christology was shaped largely (but not finally) by Tertullian's Christological conclusions, especially his discussion of the incarnation and his consideration of Christ's dual natures conjoined in one person, although Western theologians were initially hesitant to accept his conclusions.<sup>298</sup> He developed his Christological formulas concurrently with his defense of the Trinity because he had to reflect deeply on the person of Christ in order to offer his explanation of the divine economy. It is not surprising, therefore, that his Trinitarian and Christological formulas shared similar terminology, although he used it somewhat variably by comparison. Even though he did not express his Christology with the lucidity and exactness observed in more formal Christological statements such as Leo's *Tome* and the Definition of Chalcedon, his Christology is still worthy of attention because of its resemblance to later Christological statements, especially given that Christological issues were settled in the East only as a result of extensive controversy.

For example, in *Adversus Praxean*, Tertullian recognizes that "in Christ Jesus there are assessed two substances [*duae substantiae*], a divine and a human,"<sup>299</sup> and so "we observe a double quality, not confused but combined, Jesus in one Person [*una persona*] God and Man. . . . And to such a degree did there remain the proper being of each substance."<sup>300</sup> Similarly, the Definition of Chalcedon affirms Christ to be

complete in Godhead and complete in manhood. . . . [and therefore] recognized in two natures [*οὐσίαι*], without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the

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<sup>298</sup> González, *Beginnings*, 346.

<sup>299</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 29.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. See also Tert., *De carn. Chr.* 3, 13.

characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person [πρόσωπον] and subsistence [ὑπόστασις].<sup>301</sup>

In spite of such conceptual parallels, it appears that many fifth-century theologians (including those in the West) did not consider Tertullian to have been a credible authority for matters of doctrine, perhaps because questions had arisen by that time concerning his orthodoxy.<sup>302</sup>

Not every aspect of Tertullian's reputation and writing style appealed to subsequent Christian writers and theologians, in spite of whatever shared interests they may have had in the pursuit of settling questions about the Trinity or the individual persons of the Son and Spirit. Despite Tertullian's marginal Eastern influence, his concern for the inner life of the Trinity indicated that theologians throughout the early church were becoming increasingly more interested in this subject. However, in addition to the differences between the East and West, there were other factors involved as well that can perhaps explain why his own influence was not even more extensive and enduring than it was.

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<sup>301</sup> "The Definition of Chalcedon," in Bettenson and Maunder, *Documents*, 54-55.

<sup>302</sup> Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas*, 317.

## Chapter 4

### **Consideration of Factors That Limited Tertullian's Impact on the Trinitarian Discussion**

In terms of his position in the development of Trinitarian doctrine, Tertullian's consideration of the Trinity was an important bridge between the period of the early apologists and the period in which Trinitarian orthodoxy reached its fuller maturity. His influence was most apparent among Western theologians prior to Nicaea, but later Western Trinitarian theologians like Augustine were also heirs of his thought, although they were not as heavily dependent upon him. His analysis of the Trinity had helped to propel the larger discussion forward partly because he had demonstrated a deep interest in the inner life of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Although he had not exhausted the matter of their internal relations, he nonetheless gave it serious enough attention that later writers were able to add balance and clarity to his observations.

Despite the degree to which his formulas do resemble later doctrinal statements, his influence in the East was far less impressive than his impact upon the West, and even among Western writers his influence became less noticeable after Nicaea. This trend was likely the result of several contributing factors, each of which should be examined further. On one hand, many became wary of relying upon his theology because they were unsure whether his attraction to Montanism had corrupted his understanding of the Trinity. On the other hand, the breadth of his influence had inevitably been limited by factors such as the language barrier.

Also, Trinitarian discussions in the mid fourth century had advanced considerably beyond where they had been at the turn of the third century. By that time, however, there was little in Tertullian's writings that could not be found elsewhere. In the case of the internal relations within the Trinity, Tertullian had signified that the inner life of the three was becoming an

increasingly more important concern for theologians, but he represented the beginning of that movement rather than its consummation.

### The Alleged Questionability of Tertullian's Orthodoxy

In AD 207, toward the end of his career, Tertullian began to develop an interest in the “new prophecy” (i.e. Montanism), and his passion for the movement appears to have been at its height around AD 213 or 214.<sup>303</sup> Despite the popularity of his writings, his attraction to Montanism became a stigma upon his reputation, and it caused many in the early church to question his orthodoxy. In spite of his influence upon Western Christianity, only a handful of subsequent patristic writers were willing even to mention his name, and those who did so typically offered only carefully qualified praise. According to Gerald Bray, some scholars presume that the reason why later writers did not often mention Tertullian's name explicitly is because they did not wish to have their own professional reputations ruined by attaching themselves to an alleged heretic.<sup>304</sup>

One wonders whether there is any direct relationship between Tertullian's concern for the person and activity of the “Paraclete” and his interest in the inner life of the Trinity, both of which are significant features of his treatise *Adversus Praxean*, which of all his theological treatises contains some of the strongest evidence of his attraction to Montanism. Given Tertullian's import for the development of Trinitarian doctrine, the question is therefore raised regarding the extent to which Montanism may have informed Tertullian's Trinitarianism (and pneumatology), if at all. Furthermore, an exploration of his interest in Montanism helps to explain why his influence was perhaps not greater in later centuries.

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<sup>303</sup> Decret, *Christianity in North Africa*, 37.

<sup>304</sup> Bray, *Holiness*, 9-10.

After his own literary career came to an end around the year AD 220, his name was not even once recorded explicitly by another Christian writer until Lactantius (who wrote ca. AD 305-6), and even his comments, though brief, were not exactly commendatory.<sup>305</sup> Barring some occasional references by Eusebius, Eastern writers very seldom referred to Tertullian or quoted him directly.<sup>306</sup> Jerome wrote of him in relative depth, and he is one of the few writers who spoke of him fondly, but he does mention that Tertullian “lapsed to the doctrine of Montanus.”<sup>307</sup> Vincent of Lerins praised him for his “marvelous capacity of mind” and his rhetorical style, but he was quick to note that Tertullian was “too little tenacious of Catholic doctrine” and “more eloquent by far than faithful,” proving himself to be “a great trial in the Church.”<sup>308</sup> Augustine indicates that the church remembered Tertullian as a “Cataphrygian” (that is, a Montanist), and it seems that Tertullian’s influence was preserved by the “Tertullianists,” a group which may or may not have even developed during Tertullian’s lifetime.<sup>309</sup>

Yet, the question of whether Tertullian actually became a schismatic has been a subject of much scholarly inquiry. According to Douglas Powell, however, there is a virtual absence of hard evidence to indicate that Tertullian ever abandoned the Catholic Church, and it is certainly not insignificant that Tertullian was praised so highly by Cyprian, for whom the issue of church

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<sup>305</sup> Warfield, *Studies*, 4; cf. Lactant., *Div. inst.* 5.1.

<sup>306</sup> Bray, *Holiness*, 1; cf. Bray, “Tertullian,” 66-67. When Eusebius quoted Tertullian, he typically cited excerpts from Tertullian’s *Apologeticum*. See Euseb., *Hist. eccl.* 2.2.4-6, 3.20.9, 3.33.3, 5.5.5-7.

<sup>307</sup> Jer., *De vir. ill.* 53.

<sup>308</sup> Vincent, *Commonitorium* 18.

<sup>309</sup> August., *De haer.* 86. See also Ferguson, *Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 127; and T. D. Barnes, *Historical and Literary Study*, 258.

unity was immensely important.<sup>310</sup> Geoffrey Dunn likewise affirms that the majority of scholars today are skeptical of the notion that he did separate from the Catholic Church.<sup>311</sup> Actually, according to Gerald Bray, it is doubtful that Tertullian's interest in Montanism can even really be understood as a conversion, because there is no record of his making any attempt to persuade others to join the movement, and in fact he only very rarely mentioned any of its founders (Montanus, Priscilla, and Maximilla).<sup>312</sup>

Tertullian did defend numerous Montanist ideals, such as the proscription against remarriage, the importance of fasting, and the enthusiasm with which martyrdom should be welcomed. Clear indication of his attraction to Montanism is evident in his treatises *De monogamia*, *De pudicitia*, *De anima*, *De ieiunio*, *De exhortatione castitatis*, *De resurrectione carnis*, *De virginibus velandis*, and *De fuga in persecutione*.<sup>313</sup> However, his puritanical enthusiasm was not necessarily something that he inherited from Montanism. Kelly suggests that it may be more correct to say that Tertullian had always been something of a rigorist and that Montanism simply afforded him the opportunity to give that tendency its full expression, which might further explain his attraction to Montanism in the first place.<sup>314</sup>

Furthermore, it is probably not the case that Tertullian had some sudden epiphany of newfound insight that immediately transformed his thought or writing style. It is more likely that

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<sup>310</sup> Douglas L. Powell, "Tertullianists and Cataphrygians," *Vigiliae Christianae* 29, no. 1 (March 1, 1975): 37-38. One needs only to consult Cyprian's treatise *De Unitate Ecclesiae* for evidence of his appreciation for church unity.

<sup>311</sup> Dunn, *Tertullian*, 4-5. See also Bray, "Tertullian," 64-65; and Osborn, *First Theologian*, 176.

<sup>312</sup> Bray, *Holiness*, 56.

<sup>313</sup> Everett Ferguson, "Tertullian," *Expository Times* 120, no. 7 (April 1, 2009): 314.

<sup>314</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 200. See also Dunn, *Tertullian*, 6; and Osborn, *First Theologian*, 210.

his convictions and ideas took shape more gradually.<sup>315</sup> What seems to have inspired Tertullian's attraction to Montanism was not its emphasis on prophecy or eschatology but rather its concern for personal holiness and discipline, which may be why his patronage of Montanist virtues is so much stronger in his practical treatises rather than in those writings concerned primarily with theological problems.<sup>316</sup>

Gerald Bray asserts that it was only due to Tertullian's own enthusiasm concerning practical matters such as personal holiness and discipline that he was inclined to give the Montanists a positive reception and write in their defense.<sup>317</sup> Evidently his opponent Praxeas had ruined the reception of Montanism within the Roman church, and "thus Praxeas at Rome managed two pieces of the devil's business: he drove out prophecy and introduced heresy; he put to flight the Paraclete and crucified the Father."<sup>318</sup> Although Tertullian may never have met Praxeas personally, his tone throughout his treatise *Adversus Praxean* strongly suggests that he took deep personal offense to Praxeas's antagonism toward the Montanist movement.

Nevertheless, Tertullian did understand that an appreciation for prophecy was an important aspect within the movement, and this is indicated by his repeated references to the movement as the "new prophecy."<sup>319</sup> Similarly, although he understood the Paraclete to be "the sanctifier of the faith of those who believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," he also recognized the Paraclete as the "leader into all truth," by which he meant that the Paraclete is the

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<sup>315</sup> Dunn, *Tertullian*, 6.

<sup>316</sup> Bray, "Tertullian," 70.

<sup>317</sup> Bray, *Holiness*, 62.

<sup>318</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 1.

<sup>319</sup> Walter Bauer, Robert A. Kraft, and Gerhard Krodel, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 180; cf. Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 30; Tert., *Adv. Marc.* 3.24; and Tert., *De res. carn.* 63.

agent of spiritual illumination.<sup>320</sup> To Tertullian, the function of the Paraclete was to confirm and preserve doctrinal truth (and discipline) rather than to replace or augment it with some new doctrinal innovation.<sup>321</sup> Thus, Francois Decret submits that Tertullian's perception of the Paraclete was in compliance with Trinitarian orthodoxy, and as a result there were some aspects of the Montanist understanding of the Paraclete which Tertullian simply could not accept.<sup>322</sup>

Michel René Barnes contends that although Tertullian did put much emphasis on the Spirit, the functional activities that he did ascribe to the Spirit were actually more limited than those discussed by earlier patristic writers, such as Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Irenæus.<sup>323</sup> For instance, Tertullian did not explore the generation of the Spirit or the Spirit's participation at creation, both of which were carefully considered by a number of other early church writers both before and after his time.<sup>324</sup> Therefore, Tertullian's interest in Montanism actually seems not to have informed his pneumatology, in spite of his enthusiasm for the Montanist movement.<sup>325</sup>

Moreover, the Montanist movement actually seems to have made little or no direct contribution to the development of Trinitarian doctrine.<sup>326</sup> This is partly because Montanist theology deviated relatively little from Catholic theology on the matter of the Trinity, or perhaps it merely contributed nothing original.<sup>327</sup> This lack of doctrinal influence upon Trinitarianism

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<sup>320</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2; cf. Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 8, 30.

<sup>321</sup> Decret, *Christianity in North Africa*, 38; cf. Tert., *De monog.* 4. See also McGowan, "'Heretical' Origins," 454.

<sup>322</sup> Decret, *Christianity in North Africa*, 40-41.

<sup>323</sup> M. R. Barnes, "Latin Trinitarian Theology," 75.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76.

<sup>325</sup> Osborn, *First Theologian*, 176-77. See also Bray, *Holiness*, 110 and 131.

<sup>326</sup> Pelikan, "Montanism," 103-4.

<sup>327</sup> McGowan, "'Heretical' Origins," 447; cf. Athanasius, *Oratio contra Arianos* 2.18.43.

may also be due to the Montanist preoccupation with moral and ethical issues instead of doctrinal issues. Consequently, if Montanism had informed Tertullian's understanding of the Trinity at all, it probably did so only to a small extent, and it would have succeeded only to make him more thoroughly Trinitarian so that he expressed his position more clearly.<sup>328</sup>

Augustine apparently evaluated Tertullian's writings and found them to be free of heresy,<sup>329</sup> although Augustine provided no formal, explicit report of his findings. The same may be inferred from Cyprian's adulation of him.<sup>330</sup> Geoffrey Dunn contends that Tertullian's extant writings are not to be considered heretical, although Tertullian was somewhat overzealous and puritanical in some of his convictions.<sup>331</sup> Tertullian's reputation began to be controversial just as his writings were at the height of their popularity. The general complaint against him was not that the content of his writings was contrary to orthodoxy but rather that he had depicted the church as insisting that the faith of the church could not thrive apart from the pursuit of extreme austerity, personal discipline, and moral and ethical zeal.<sup>332</sup> Even so, it is not unreasonable to surmise that his controversial reputation may have caused him to lose some credibility in the eyes of some subsequent writers, and this is implied since there were writers such as Augustine who examined Tertullian's writings specifically for the purpose of identifying whether they taught heresy.

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<sup>328</sup> Pelikan, "Montanism," 101 and 107. See also McGowan, "'Heretical' Origins," 439-41; and T. D. Barnes, *Historical and Literary Study*, 142.

<sup>329</sup> Decret, *Christianity in North Africa*, 41.

<sup>330</sup> See Jer., *De vir. ill.* 53.

<sup>331</sup> Dunn, *Tertullian*, 6.

<sup>332</sup> Bray, *Holiness*, 11. See also Decret, *Christianity in North Africa*, 39.

## Escalating Relational Tensions between the East and West

Tertullian's writings have been celebrated because of their theological content but also because of his command of the Latin language. His particular literary style and sarcastic wit make him very entertaining to read. However, his use of the Latin language is one reason why his influence was minimal in the East, and a similar outcome typically befell most anyone whose writings were restricted to Latin.<sup>333</sup> Gerald Bray reports that none of Tertullian's writings were officially translated into Greek, and so with very few exceptions, virtually all the Greek-speaking world was ignorant of Tertullian's contributions.<sup>334</sup> According to Timothy Barnes, even on those isolated occasions when Tertullian did incorporate Greek words or concepts (such as οἰκονομία [*oikonomia*]) into his writings, his writings were intended for his fellow Christians in Carthage.<sup>335</sup> Only those Eastern theologians who were bilingual in both Greek and Latin, such as Athanasius, would have had any opportunity to become acquainted with Tertullian.

The language barrier proved to be a significant factor contributing to the increasing relational rift that was partitioning the East and West. Early symptoms of this division were evident even by AD 259 in the dispute between Dionysius of Rome and Dionysius of Alexandria.<sup>336</sup> The difference in language further complicated relations between the East and the West because it created much semantic confusion regarding how particular theological terms and ideas were to be properly translated from one language to another.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Bray, *Holiness*, 1.

<sup>334</sup> Bray, "Tertullian," 66-67; cf. Jer., *De vir. ill.* 53.

<sup>335</sup> T. D. Barnes, *Historical and Literary Study*, 253; cf. Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2, 8.

<sup>336</sup> Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 114.

<sup>337</sup> Ferguson, *Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 208.

For instance, for some time there was disagreement regarding the etymological correspondence of the Greek term *hypostasis* and the Latin term *substantia*.<sup>338</sup> Eastern theologians understood the Father, Son, and Spirit as three *hypostases*, but since *substantia* was the Latin equivalent of *hypostasis*, Western theologians mistook Greek-speaking Christians to be arguing that God possessed three substances, a notion which Western theologians, whose thought was more materialistic, perceived as tritheism.<sup>339</sup> On one hand, Tertullian's idea of substance was quite different from what fourth-century Eastern theologians envisioned with ideas such as *ousia* or *homoousios*, and so it can hardly be argued that Tertullian had somehow anticipated Nicene orthodoxy.<sup>340</sup> Conversely, to Eastern theologians, the Western preoccupation with divine unity was seen as being dangerously close to Sabellianism, because since Western theologians insisted upon the notion of one substance, Eastern theologians supposed that Christians in the West believed in only one divine person.<sup>341</sup> Eventually, however, the term *hypostasis* did become more universally understood to mean "subsistence" or "person" rather than "substance."<sup>342</sup>

Another reason why Tertullian had such a tremendous impact in the West but only a marginal one in the East is because the East and West emphasized different aspects of Trinitarian theology. Attempts to understand the Trinity from these opposite perspectives stimulated much relational friction between the East and West, especially in the fourth century. Although Tertullian did give some consideration to the issue of the personal distinctions of the three divine

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<sup>338</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 16. See also Dünzl, *Brief History*, 112-13.

<sup>339</sup> Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 48. See also Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 192.

<sup>340</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 184.

<sup>341</sup> Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 114 and 138.

<sup>342</sup> de Margerie, *Christian Trinity in History*, 128.

persons, the notion of the unity of God was a substantial aspect of his theology, just as it was with other Western writers. His treatise *Adversus Praxean*, after all, had been written against Modalism (which stretched the concept of divine unity to an extreme), but he expressed his concern for divine unity by acknowledging that the Father, Son, and Spirit all share a common substance.

However, as a result of their emphasis on divine unity, Western theologians had comparatively more difficulty in contemplating the nature of personal distinctions aside from considering how they are recognized within the divine economy.<sup>343</sup> In fact, Western Trinitarianism did not really reach full maturity before the late fourth century, although the Eastern church had done so much sooner.<sup>344</sup> Prior to the late fourth century, Tertullian had long been the standard Western authority on complex theological issues, including Trinitarianism.

On the other hand, Origen perhaps best represents the Eastern emphasis on the individual distinctions of the three (due to a stronger relationship with Neoplatonism), and since it was easier for Eastern theologians to entertain the concept of plurality within the Godhead, they tended to focus more so on the functional distinctions of the three rather than their unity.<sup>345</sup> These complementary theological emphases indicate that these two traditions simply favored different perspectives. Therefore, Tertullian's impact was greater within the Western church because the issue of divine unity was such a significant component of his thought, whereas for Eastern theologians divine unity was not the chief issue of attention.

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<sup>343</sup> Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversy*, 16.

<sup>344</sup> Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 213.

<sup>345</sup> Ferguson, *Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 144-45.

## Tertullian's Position in the Progression of Theological Understanding

Numerous issues pertaining to the question of the Trinity simply required long, laborious years before they were settled, and so while Tertullian and other early patristic writers did not fully solve many such issues, their contributions nonetheless gave the discussion added momentum. For instance, Tertullian struggled to demonstrate precisely how the distinction of persons within the Trinity related to the basis for the individual existence, and it was only after further reflection, particularly regarding the differentiation between being and substance, that a more satisfactory answer was provided.<sup>346</sup> Yet, even though he was a Western theologian in the early third century, his attempt to offer an explanation for individual distinctions and personal relations within the Trinity nevertheless foreshadowed later discussions that did result in more thorough resolutions concerning those matters.

The same can be said for the earlier reliance upon cosmological arguments in order to explain the Son's unity with and distinction from the Father. Like a number of writers before him as well as some after his time, Tertullian recognized the eternal preexistence of the Son but associated his generation with his activity at creation.<sup>347</sup> However, the doctrine of the Son's eternal generation did not fully eclipse cosmology as a central component of Trinitarian theology until well after the Council of Nicaea.<sup>348</sup> This seems to have been the case even in the West, for Hilary developed a preference for the idea of the Son's eternal generation only later in his career, after his exile.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Daniélou, *Origins of Latin Christianity*, 364.

<sup>347</sup> For instance, see Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 5, 7.

<sup>348</sup> Daniélou, *Origins of Latin Christianity*, 365-66.

<sup>349</sup> Hanson, *The Search*, 481.

Tertullian also had a tendency to incorporate a certain amount of subordinationism into his perception of the Trinity, and this is perhaps another reason why his direct influence was not as substantial after the third century. In spite of Tertullian's recognition that the Father, Son, and Spirit possess equal divinity and power, he determines that the Son and Spirit respectively "occupy second and third place," although they are still "conjoint of the Father's substance."<sup>350</sup> Similarly, he asserts in *Adversus Praxean* that "the Father is the whole substance, while the Son is an outflow and assignment of the whole" (*pater enim tota substantia est, filius vero derivatio totius et portio*).<sup>351</sup> Hilary of Poitiers was apparently displeased with some of the implications of what Tertullian was suggesting and sought to make corrections accordingly.<sup>352</sup>

Ultimately, Tertullian's perception of the Trinity was too absorbed in the principle of the divine economy (as well as the traditional Logos philosophy) for him to have escaped at least some measure of subordinationism.<sup>353</sup> Nevertheless, he ordered the divine persons as he did in an attempt to explain the order of their procession, not to suggest that any inferiority existed between them.<sup>354</sup> He affirmed the equality and substantial unity of the three.<sup>355</sup>

In the end, however, it would be considerably unfair to criticize him for not articulating an aspect of internal Trinitarian relations with the same accuracy with which later theologians were able to do only after decades of extended discussion and painful controversy.<sup>356</sup> Whatever shortcomings Tertullian may have had as a result of the historical period in which he lived and

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<sup>350</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 3; cf. 8.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>352</sup> Hilary, *De trin.* 2.8.

<sup>353</sup> Studer and Louth, *Trinity and Incarnation*, 75. See also Quasten, *Ante-Nicene Literature*, 326.

<sup>354</sup> Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 101.

<sup>355</sup> See Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 2; and Tert., *Adv. Marc.* 4.25.

<sup>356</sup> González, *Beginnings*, 185.

the particular theological climate in which he wrote must not overshadow the immense importance of the theological contributions that he did make, especially in light of their persistence in the West.

## **Conclusion**

Tertullian's consideration of the Trinity involved a resolute defense of divine unity and personal distinctions as well as a serious exploration of the inner life of the three, and even though his direct influence was predominately restricted to the West, his investigation of these issues indicated that theological interest was shifting beyond cosmology and toward the pivotal study of internal relations. He bridged the period of the early apologists with the period in which Trinitarian orthodoxy reached its full maturity, and although he did not escort the early church to the final development of this doctrine, he certainly spurred them in that direction. His contributions were immensely important because it was his reasoning that established the basic framework for Western Trinitarian theology prior to Nicaea.

As the early apologists demonstrated, the defense of the Trinity began with the defense of the deity and preexistence of the Son, and so Trinitarianism and Christology necessarily had to be defended concurrently in order for the credibility of the Christian faith to be maintained. To early theologians, the activities of creation, revelation, and redemption demonstrated the generation of the Son (and the Spirit), and so arguments based on cosmology constituted earnest attempts to balance divine unity with individual distinctions. Much of Tertullian's reasoning, like that of his predecessors, was structured around cosmology, which included applications of the traditional Logos doctrine, although he extended existing arguments and addressed important implications. He showed, for example, that cosmological logic also accommodated a third member of the Trinity (the Spirit). He thus brought a measure of completion to the theological framework that had been established by the Logos theologians (viz. Justin and Irenæus), and he helped the church (especially Western theologians) to begin to seriously consider the person of the Spirit and his relationship to the Father and Son.

Eventually, earlier perceptions yielded to more satisfactory formulas which focused more completely on the inner life and equality of the three. Although Tertullian did not necessarily prompt this larger shift in theological attention (partly due to his sphere of influence), he nevertheless evidenced that this progression was occurring. Tertullian did interpret the creative, revelatory, and redemptive activity of the Son and Spirit through cosmology in order to affirm the existence of the individuality of the three, but he explored their internal relations by also emphasizing their common will, cooperation, and codependence in carrying out their divine operations. The particular missions of the Son and the Spirit were tremendously important components of his investigation of that subject.

Like most Western writers, it was very important to Tertullian that the unity of God should be defended and that the principle of the divine monarchy should be protected, but he understood the necessity of balance. His response to the Modalists became a classic refutation of their position, but his interest in the inner life of the three, or at least his increased attention to it in *Adversus Praxean*, was also driven heavily by his determination to refute Modalistic Monarchianism. His interest in Montanism may have added to his ambition to defend the person and deity of the Spirit, particularly in the treatise *Adversus Praxean*, but Montanism does not appear to have actually informed his theology of the Trinity.

Tertullian's perception of the Trinity was not without its imperfections, however, because he had a propensity to think in terms of the material and a tendency to subordinate the Son and Spirit. However, these features were certain to be present in his thought to some extent. He was too much of a Stoic to have eliminated materialism in his language, and he relied too heavily upon cosmology to have escaped some suggestion of subordinationism. Yet, his successors considered his thought to be reasonably satisfactory, which is evident from their replication of

his main ideas and the general arrangement of his thought. In some ways he was very much ahead of his time, because other third-century writers such as Hippolytus and Novatian actually represented a regression from Tertullian's thought.

He was the first to apply the Latin phrases *trinitas* (Trinity), *una substantia* (one substance), and *tres personae* (three persons) to the mystery of the Trinity, and because there was some flexibility and even ambiguity in his own use of some of his terms, some writers in the fourth and fifth centuries felt more apprehensive than others about repeating his vocabulary. Even so, his terminology established reasonable semantic parameters within which Western theologians could seriously contemplate the mysteries of unity and plurality within the Godhead. Many of his arguments became paradigmatic for how the West understood Nicene theology.

Due to the importance and perpetuity of his influence in the Western tradition, it is difficult to imagine how the path to orthodoxy might have transpired differently if his influence had been absent, but the early church would undoubtedly have still arrived at its orthodox understanding of the Trinity even if he had contributed nothing. He did steer the Western church toward a more lucid, tenable, and balanced Trinitarian formula, but he did not bring Western Trinitarianism to its final consummation. It is possible that the West may have avoided some of the theological turbulence that plagued the East (e.g. regarding Arianism) partly because the West was well schooled in Tertullian's teachings, although his influence was not the primary reason for the different experiences of the East and West.

Although Eastern Trinitarianism underscored individual distinctions more heavily and matured at a faster rate than Western Trinitarianism, Western theologians after Tertullian's time still recognized the necessity of exploring the inner life of the three. Yet, since his influence was predominately Western and since theological innovations (heresies as well as formal statements

of orthodoxy) were usually Eastern in origin, he was not a substantial contributor to the development of Eastern theology. Even so, it is interesting that his Trinitarian and Christological formulas so strongly resemble formal orthodox statements produced in the fourth and fifth centuries, and in spite of whatever degree of recognition his writings may have received at later ecumenical councils, his impact upon Western theologians must have helped to prepare the West for the eventual universalization of orthodoxy.

That a myriad of church fathers labored to defend the Trinity should inspire confidence that Christianity does not necessitate the setting aside of one's intellect, nor do the parallel mysteries of God's oneness and threeness require the veracity of Scripture to be doubted. However, although the precise operation and nature of the Trinity still remain something of a divine mystery, the Trinity can still be acknowledged as true, but there does come a point when understanding must yield to faith. Nevertheless, the mysteriousness of the Trinity does not reduce its practical and apologetic significance.

First of all, the study of this topic helps one to better understand the character of Christian worship and prayer, as well as the divine schemes of creation, revelation, and redemption. In prayer, a person may engage with the Spirit while addressing the Father in the name of the Son. As baffling as this may seem, it is not inconsistent, because all three are, in fact, one God, and although they are separate persons, they are not separated, and no inferiority exists among them. All three divine persons are equally entitled to all of the worship and praise that mankind can convey. Tertullian affirms that "we [worship] and [call] upon the name of the light of the world, one God as also one Lord. . . . We know that the name of God and of Lord is applicable to both Father and Son and Spirit."<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Tert. *Adv. Prax.* 13.

The cooperative activity of the Father, Son, and Spirit in the program of revelation affirms the trustworthiness and authority of the Word of God.<sup>358</sup> The authority of God the Father is extended to Christ the Son (John 7:16-18), through whom the will of the Father is accomplished and declared (John 8:28; 12:44-50; 14:10, 24-25). Yet, the Father also sent the Spirit, who reinforces the truth declared by the Son (John 14:26). The Spirit is the illuminative agent who guides all believers into all truth (John 16:12-15; 1 Cor 2:10-16), including the truths of Scripture, which were recorded as holy men of God “were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:20-21).

Similarly, affirming the doctrine of the Trinity is important because it underpins the doctrines of salvation and sanctification.<sup>359</sup> The Father designed the redemption program and sent the Son (John 3:17; Gal 4:4-5), who obediently took on human flesh (John 1:14) and lived a perfect life totally free from sin (Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22; 1 John 3:5). The sacrificial death of the Son provided the means of reconciliation between God and men (Rom 5:11; Eph 2:11-18), and the Spirit applies the effects of regeneration (Rom 8:9) and sanctification (Rom 8:29-30; 2 Cor 3:18) to the lives of individual believers. A person’s salvation and sanctification are the cooperative achievement of the entire Godhead, and their codependence and collaborative involvement underscores a Christian’s eternal security.

Moreover, the study of the Trinity is important for contemporary apologetics, because even in the modern age, groups exist that do not recognize God as a Trinity. Unitarians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, and Oneness Pentecostals are among these groups. Although their founders were not Marcion, Arius, Sabellius, or Praxeas, these movements have repackaged

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<sup>358</sup> Allison, “Denials of Orthodoxy,” 25.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid. See also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 247.

many of their same basic presuppositions. Much of the Trinitarian logic utilized by Tertullian and other early Christian theologians can be just as useful today as it was in the second, third, and fourth centuries.

For example, the defense of the Son's deity and preexistence, the Spirit's divinity and personality, and the full equality of the three must all be included in an apologetic toward the Unitarian Universalist Church and the Jehovah's Witnesses, both of which reject the eternal deity of Jesus Christ and the personhood of the Holy Spirit.<sup>360</sup> Conversely, the indivisible unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit must be upheld in an apologetic toward the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormonism), which recognizes the Father, Son, and Spirit not as one God in three persons but rather as three separate deities.<sup>361</sup> Furthermore, much of Tertullian's treatise *Adversus Praxean* could constitute an immediate reply to Oneness Pentecostalism, which closely resembles Modalistic Monarchianism because of its extreme underscoring of the unity of God and its rejection of the Father, Son, and Spirit as individual persons.<sup>362</sup>

Apologetic efforts toward the Jewish and Islamic communities are especially difficult because the notion of God as a Trinity becomes a very sensitive issue. At some point in one's conversation with a Jew or a Muslim, the issue of the Trinity will inevitably arise, but a Jew or Muslim must understand its personal importance, not just its doctrinal importance. For example, Jewish hope is concentrated on their messianic expectation, and they rightly understand God to be righteous, merciful, and powerful (cf. Exod 34:6-8).<sup>363</sup> Yet, the cooperate activity of the Father, Son, and Spirit in God's redemptive program is the ultimate demonstration of God's

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<sup>360</sup> Allison, "Denials of Orthodoxy," 23-24.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>363</sup> Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperOne, 1991), 275-76.

character and his concern for humanity, and the three are equally deserving of praise and worship.

Islam is also strictly monotheistic, but Muslims absolutely reject the divinity of Christ because they believe that Christ's incarnation as the Son of God would have violated God's transcendence.<sup>364</sup> As a result, in the minds of Muslims, to affirm the divinity of Christ or God's existence as a Trinity would be an act of blasphemy.<sup>365</sup> However, as Tertullian demonstrates, the Son's incarnation is not a violation of the Father's transcendence but rather a confirmation of it; the Son assumed a human body because the Father could not.<sup>366</sup> It is true that humanity and deity are distinct,<sup>367</sup> but it is also true that humanity and deity are both portrayed perfectly in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>368</sup> As a result, Christianity guarantees the certainty of personal salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, while Islam offers no such assurance.<sup>369</sup>

In the case of all of these movements, upholding theological truth is not just nonnegotiable, it is in fact urgent, because the eternal fate of real people hangs in the balance. The significance of Christ, especially, has always been a divisive issue, even in the earliest years of the church (1 Cor 1:22-24). As early apologists and theologians realized, the defense of the Trinity simply cannot be divorced from the defense of the person and deity of Jesus Christ, but the systematization of Christian theology has by no means absolved modern apologists of their responsibility to faithfully affirm God's character and uniqueness, including the reality of his

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<sup>364</sup> Smith, *The World's Religions*, 236.

<sup>365</sup> Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 89-90.

<sup>366</sup> Tert., *Adv. Prax.* 14, 24.

<sup>367</sup> Smith, *The World's Religions*, 236.

<sup>368</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 752.

<sup>369</sup> Smith, *The World's Religions*, 92. See also Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 553.

oneness and threeness. The unbelieving world today is no less antagonistic toward Christianity than it was in Tertullian's day. The gospel message, the person of Christ, and the character of the triune God will always be cardinal truths that cannot be compromised.

Consequently, like the early apologists, modern apologists are still in the business of introducing God to the world. Although the concept of the Trinity is no more intellectually comprehensible to people today than it was in the days of the early church, modern apologists must continue to affirm it because it is how God has revealed himself in Scripture and in history.<sup>370</sup> In Tertullian's defense of Christ's death and resurrection, he asserted, "The Son of God died; it is immediately credible—because it is silly. He was buried, and rose again; it is certain—because it is impossible."<sup>371</sup> The same might also be said for the reality of the Trinity; a person's obligation is not to be able to perfectly explain it, but simply to believe it. Christ declared himself to be "the door" (John 10:9), and he is just as much the key to knowing the Trinity as he is to appreciating the Trinity, because whoever confesses the Son has the Father and the Spirit also (2 Cor 1:22; 1 John 2:23; 3:24; 4:13).

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<sup>370</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 367.

<sup>371</sup> Tert., *De carn. Chr.* 5.

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