

**An Examination of the Triune God:**

**An Augustinian Perspective**

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## **Introduction**

The Trinitarian debate has caused division in the church for centuries. Many theological writings have been produced tackling the issue of the Triune Identity; a fundamental doctrine in Theology. During the church's infancy Apologists, both Arians and the Cappadocian Fathers have influenced the way triune theology has been understood. In the fourth century however, Augustine of Hippo reignited the debate raising the issue of God's Threeness incorporated in a unified substance. Augustine's view of the Triune God is a defense of the equality of the persons; recognizing that the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit demonstrates that neither of them are less than the Father who does the sending. Rather, the persons are in all things equal, working indivisibly in each sending or appearance through the Holy Spirit.

## **Augustine's Early Years**

Augustine was born in AD 354 as the youngest son to Monica and Patricius in northern Africa, part of the Roman empire. His mother, a devout Christian woman wanted her son to have the best private Christian education money could afford. He enjoyed the philosophers of his day including Virgil and passionately disagreed with others like Homer.<sup>1</sup> "Monica was keen on it because she was anxious about her son's moral welfare and felt sure that study would help him to become a true Christian."<sup>2</sup> Political unrest from AD 371 to 374 forced him to move on to Carthage where he eventually began his studies. Despite being educated in the school of Cicero and his desire for knowledge, he lived a life full of worldly passions, driving him to the lowest point in his life. At his weakest hour, Augustine encountered the transformative work of the Holy Spirit in the study of the Holy Scriptures. He read Paul's words in Romans 14:1, "accept him whose faith is

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<sup>1</sup> David Bentley-Taylor, *Augustine Wayward Genius*: (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker BooknHouse, 1980) 12-22.

<sup>2</sup> David Bentley-Taylor, *Augustine Wayward Genius*, 17.

weak’’ and Augustine immediately felt as though Paul was writing about him. David Bentley-Taylor comments, “There and then the wayward proud immoral Augustine, unhappy, and full of doubts was gone. A new Augustine was born in that instant.”’<sup>3</sup>

### **Early Church Controversy**

Earlier in the fourth century, the Council of Nicaea convened to finalize the church’s understanding of the Son’s same essence with the Father. Arians had lost their fight to convince church bishops that, according to their view, the Son is a lower being than the Father. They argued that the Son is a created Being who had a beginning. Arius was expelled from the church by the council and twice declared a heretic, once in his lifetime and once thereafter. Throughout history the teaching of Arius and his disciples have stood in steep contrast with the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

Later, as Augustine returned to northern Africa from his studies, Arianism had become a non-issue for him. Furthermore, Augustine, a bishop in Hippo, began searching the scriptures to define a clearer biblical understanding on the Trinity. He recognized that comprehending this important teaching on the Triune identity can only occur when a right view of the Son is adopted. Augustine’s influence helped develop the Athanasian Creed. It reads in part that in “the true Christian faith, we worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God without confusing the persons or dividing the divine substance.”<sup>4</sup> Vernon Burke writes that “whatever may be his other interests; Augustine’s chief concern is about God. That is why Augustine is no longer a philosopher, but a philosophical-minded theologian.”

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<sup>3</sup> David Bentley-Taylor, *Augustine Wayward Genius*, 40.

<sup>4</sup> John Johnson, *Speaking of the Triune God: Augustine, Aquinas, and the Language of Analogy*, (<http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/1480>).

### **Greek vs. Latin approaches**

During this period of church academia, language was a barrier in the Trinitarian debate. Having been written in koine Greek, the New Testament produced certain theological terms grappling with God's essence and substance which could not be translated into a Latin context. Problems arose as theologians on both sides of the debate used same or similar sounding terminology, though referring to different ideas. Burke continues saying that "Augustine plainly says that he was unable to read Greek works on the Trinity well enough to understand them. He adds that he has no doubt that all these questions pertaining to the Trinity have been considered in the Greek treatises."<sup>5</sup> As a faithful catholic, he relied heavily on biblical sources, rather than patristic ones. Augustine believed that faithful scholars have spoken in unison, saying "all those catholic interpreters of the Holy Scriptures, Old and New, whom I have been able to read, and who have written before me about the Trinity, have agreed in the teaching of the Scriptures."<sup>6</sup>

His Christology within the Triune God is comprehensive in its make-up and addresses the issue of the sending of the Son. Eugene Teselle writes, "Augustine affirmed that Christ is both Word and man and that the man consists of mind and soul and body. The question was how to affirm complete humanity and complete divinity without speaking of two persons, two Sons of God."<sup>7</sup> Augustine was influenced by Gregory Nazianzus who wrestled with trinitarian questions years earlier, he on the other hand, had been inspired by Origen. Additionally, he explained that unity in the Godhead is shaped by a unique bond of love that continually dwells in their midst. Christ declared "I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father who sent me"

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<sup>5</sup> Vernon Burke, *Augustine's Quest of Wisdom*: (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing Company, 1945), 203.

<sup>6</sup> Vernon Burke, *Augustine's Quest of Wisdom*, 206.

<sup>7</sup> Vernon Burke, *Augustine's Quest of Wisdom*, 204.

(John 8:18).<sup>8</sup> He stripped himself of all glory and majesty, adopting full human nature to accomplish the mission of salvation. Critics of Augustine, especially the Stoics, questioned how an immaterial soul could interact with a material body. He responded, using a metaphor of two substances interpenetrating each other without losing their own true character. It is even more obvious that two immaterial things such as the divine nature and the human mind can unite, just as the sun penetrating the atmosphere.<sup>9</sup> Since the Son came ‘from’ the Father, Augustine concluded in his brief book, *Concerning the Nature of God*, that:

‘From Him’ does not mean the same as ‘of Him’. From Him are heaven and earth, because he made them; but not of Him because they are not of His substance. As in the case of a man who begets a son and makes a house, from himself is the son, from himself is the house, but the son is of Him, the house is of earth and wood...God of whom are all the things, through whom are all the things, in whom are all things, had no need of any material which he had not made to assist his omnipotence.<sup>10</sup>

According to Augustine, there could not have been a separation between the Father and the Son like there is in the material world, that would lead him to Tritheism, a rejected heresy. The Logos, an equal part of the Triune identity is the One sent to restore the relationship between humanity and Himself. The Godhead reveals all its attributes in its nature through the son’s ministry.

God alone is Being, everything else has being. God’s essence is identical to his existence and it is therefore of His essence to exist.<sup>11</sup> Augustine strived to establish throughout his writings that the Son does not hold a separate existence from the Father or the Spirit and neither is the Son made up of different substantia. He wrote that, “they are not three Gods, but one God; although

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<sup>8</sup> Eugene Teselle, *Augustine*: (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 57.

<sup>9</sup> Teselle, *Augustine*, 57.

<sup>10</sup> Teselle, *Augustine*, 57

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *Concerning the Nature of Good, Against the Manichaeans*. ed. Philip Schaff (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000, 442).

the Father has generated the Son, and so He, who is Father, is not the Son. And the Son is generated by the Father, and so He, who is the Son, is not the Father.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Threeness vs. Oneness**

The greatest distinction between Augustine and the Cappadocian Fathers is something that became known as the Filioque Controversy. This issue dealt with the third person of the Godhead. He is the communion between the three persons, allowing the Son to have an equal part in the sending of the Spirit. Roy Battenhouse writes, “To the west the double procession was a way of expressing the equality of Father and Son, and in particular the bond of union that united the Father and the Son.”<sup>13</sup> The Cappadocians argued that the Father was the sending force of both Son and Spirit. But to highlight the bond of Father and Son, Augustine argued that both were the sending agents of the Spirit. He never grasped the Cappadocian term hypostasis, referring to God’s substance; it is an absolute term. The Cappadocians were trying to communicate the relationship of the Godhead, not their essence. Battenhouse continues, “it is not really right to say ‘subsists,’ for this would imply that ‘God is a subject in relation to His own goodness.’”<sup>14</sup> Augustine favored ousia over hypostasis as the highest ontological principle. From this point onwards, the chasm between East and West became clear and the importance of substance over person established two schools of thought. Augustine wrote “The Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but the

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<sup>12</sup> John Johnson, *Speaking of the Triune God: Augustine, Aquinas, and the language of Analogy*. Online resource. (<http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/1480>), 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Vernon Burke, *Augustine’s Quest of Wisdom* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing Company, 1945), 204.

<sup>14</sup> Roy Battenhouse, *A Companion to the Study of Augustine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), 1955, 245.

Spirit of the Father and the Son, yet Himself co-equal with the Father and Son and belonging to the unity of the Trinity.’’<sup>15</sup>

Having added the term ‘and from the Son’ to the debate gave rise to the Doctrine of Appropriations. This doctrine’s role is to assign different attributes to the different persons of the Godhead. Augustine’s goal was to first and foremost focus on the single divine substance, and then secondly pass it on to the persons. Catherine Lacugna points out that Augustine’s way of thinking boils down to ontological subordination and an impersonal nature in the economy of salvation.<sup>16</sup> The distinction between the Eastern and Western approaches to the Trinity were gulfed in misunderstanding. The Eastern approach formed by the Cappadocians began with the ‘Threeness’ and treated unity considering a personalism that favors hypostasis as the governing ontological category. The Western approach on the other hand is said to have begun with unity of divine substance and treat Threeness considering the common nature.<sup>17</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus’s account for triune action had great similarities with Augustine’s western emphasis on ad extra.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, critics have argued for centuries for the consolidating between Greek and Latin trinitarian methods.

Augustine’s concept of Faith seeking Understanding had a profound impact on him and His Trinitarian views. For him faith had more content and weight in this debate than any form of rational articulation; he desired people to believe in order to understand and would speak out boldly against those who would worship reason and allow it to rule their lives of faith.

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<sup>15</sup> Roy Battenhouse, *A Companion to the Study of Augustine*, 245.

<sup>16</sup> Vernon Burke, *Augustine’s Quest of Wisdom*, 204.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Lacugna, *God For Us* (Chicago, IL: Claretian Publications, 1991), 81.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Gardner, *Three what? Augustine and the Trinity Part One*. Online resource. (<http://houseoftheinklings.blogspot.com/2007/06/three-what-augustine-and-trinity-part-i.html>), 2007.



He points to the scriptures when proposing that all of God's attributes in creation would make man and everything in creation common with God's divine nature.

Thus, by natural reason, unaided by the revelation in Scripture of the economy, one cannot cognitively reach the truly Trinitarian nature of God, existing in Threeness. Augustine seems to hold that taking a metaphysical foundation of divine unity as one's starting point cannot truly reach the proper and orthodox account of the tri-unity. Rather, a true treatment of such divine Threeness, one that is not merely a parody of the true God, can only be reached according to a faith that seeks understanding.<sup>19</sup>

The nature of God is too magnificent for the human mind to comprehend and thus needs faith as its driving force. His strong emphasis on ousia versus the distinctiveness affirmed his approach rooted in faith seeking understanding.

Moreover, Augustine's psychological analogies have become a crucial part in the development of his Trinitarian theology. He began with love as his driving concept. The reason we can know the existence of God is because our minds can love itself, echoing that God is love. Augustine understood "let us make man in our image" (Gen. 1:26), is a pronouncement of being created in the image of the Godhead. Augustine's analogy of the mind in itself is no evidence for the Trinity, however, he says, "closer examination reveals that the mind cannot love itself, without knowing itself, and so we find these three, 'the mind itself, the love of it, and the knowledge of it.'"<sup>20</sup> The Trinity could not equally contain each other in its ad intra community if each person were not equal to the other. Further analogies that Augustine mentions, deal with the faculties of human memory, understanding and the will; he fights for the power to imagine without exhausting the description of the mind. He writes, "for I remember I have memory, will and understanding; and I understand that I understand and will and remember; and I will my whole memory and

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<sup>19</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *On the Trinity and the Knowledge of God*, ed. Christopher A. Beeley (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 442.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Gardner, *Three what? Augustine and the Trinity Part One*. Online resource.

understanding will.’’<sup>21</sup> Other analogies such as the analogy of the human family seem to have endangered Augustine’s argument for the unity of the Godhead and it restrained him from outright explaining the concept of three persons in one. The love the Father and son shared which is the substance of their unity is the Spirit who is the bond of this union; he later wrote that the Spirit is “a kind of consubstantial communion of Father and Son.”’<sup>22</sup>

### **Procession of the Spirit**

Towards the end of Augustine’s life, he returned to the discussion of the begetting of the Son and the procession of the Spirit. Augustine stresses God’s begetting of the Word compared to our begetting of a word. He is not dependent on anything but Himself, unlike man who is dependent on Him alone. “He does not know His creatures because they are; they are because He knows them.”’<sup>23</sup> Augustine knew that the inquiry he had begun had many shortcomings in it, yet he also knew that this inquiry could never be fully grasped in this finite existence. At the end of his book, ‘On the Trinity’ (De Trinitate), he makes clear in a prayer that it is better than an argument, concluding:

I have sought Thee, and have desired, to see with my understanding what I believed; and I have argued and labored much. O Lord, the one God, God the Trinity, whatever I have said in these books that is of thine, may they acknowledge who are thine; if anything of my own, may it be pardoned both by Thee and by those who are Thine.<sup>24</sup>

Augustine’s legacy has been the foremost foundation of the Trinity in the western church. Though the discussions between Eastern and Western understanding about ‘Personhood’ and ‘Substance’ continue, Augustine laid the foundations for classical formulations in the philosophical and

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<sup>21</sup> Roy Battenhouse, *A Companion to the Study of Augustine*, 249.

<sup>22</sup> Roy Battenhouse, *A Companion to the Study of Augustine*, 250

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 96.

<sup>24</sup> Roy Battenhouse, *A Companion to the Study of Augustine*, 254.

psychological realm of the coherence of the Trinity and the understanding of the Spirit as a bond that keeps the unity.<sup>25</sup>

### Conclusion

The church has come closer to understanding the various facets of the Trinity because of Augustine's work. He recognized that no metaphor or psychological analogy will suffice in understanding the nature of God. The Western approach to the son's role in sending the Spirit has centralized the doctrine of justification. Augustine concluded Book Thirteen of His Confessions, writing,

The three things are existence, knowledge, and will, for I can say that I am, I know and I will. I am a being which knows and will; I know both that I am and that I will; and I will both that I am and that I will; and I will both to be and to know. In these three-being, knowledge and will-there is one inseparable life, one life, one mind, one essence; and therefore, although they are distinct from one another, the distinction does not separate them.<sup>26</sup>

God is an inseparable Being who has shown humanity grace in revealing a part of His mystery. God sent His son in the form of a servant to die on a cross. He in turn promised that the Holy Spirit would come as a Counselor and Christ through Him, would dwell amongst His people. Augustine's legacy survives in a world that has rejected faith for the supremacy of human reason. His work has allowed the church to be affirmed in its Trinitarian teaching of God who though shrouded in divine mystery came to dwell amongst us. Augustine was right as he concluded "this is a mystery that none can explain, and which of us would presume to assert that he can?"<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 44.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Confessions of a Sinner* (London, England: Penguin Press, 2004), 111.

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