

Introduction to the Doctrine of Trinitarian Unity

THE DOCTRINE OF THE Trinity, the belief that there is one God who is in some sense three, is perhaps the most distinctive doctrine of Christianity. This belief quickly found doxological expression in the worship of the early church and theological expression in the summary that God was one essence (*ousia/substantial/natura/essentia*) and three persons (*hypostaseis/persona*), a formula which grounded both the unity and diversity of God throughout the Middle Ages.¹ While interest in the doctrine of the Trinity waned during the Enlightenment, recent theology, beginning with the work of Karl Barth, has experienced renewed interest in this doctrine, as several authors have noted.²

This renewed interest has caused numerous authors to criticize the classical form of the doctrine, in large part because the Christian metaphysical consensus which gave support to the ancient trinitarian formula no longer exists.³ This leads to a difficulty for contemporary Christians which Millard Erickson characterizes aptly:

The formula was worked out quite definitely in the fourth century. God is one substance or essence, existing in three persons. The difficulty is that we do not know exactly what these terms mean. We know that the doctrine states that God is three in some respect

1. Such language is seen as early as Tertullian, *Adversus Praxeum* 2, 25 (ANF 3:598, 621). On the Greek side, the Cappadocians are usually credited with first consistently distinguishing three *hypostaseis* and one *ousia*. See Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 21 (NPNF2 7:279), where he equates *hypostasis* with the Latin *persona*.

2. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1/1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*. This trend is noted in Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 13; Fox, *God as Communion*, 25–26; Schwöbel, *Persons, Divine and Human*, 10–11.

3. Peters, “Trinity Talk: Part 1,” 44; Peters, *God as Trinity*, 30–33; Wilks, “The Trinitarian Ontology of John Zizioulas,” 83; Badcock, *Light of Truth and Fire of Love*, 1997, 175–77; Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 211.

THE ONE GOD

and one in some other respect, but we do not know precisely what those two different respects are.⁴

Recent theologians have therefore attempted to gain an understanding of the respects in which God is one and three.

Such efforts have two related sides. They must develop an understanding of what is three about God to provide a meaning, or an alternative, for the term “person” in trinitarian discourse, and must also do the same thing for what is one about God and the term “essence.” This text will examine the work of four selected theologians in regard to the latter task, that of defining the unity of the trinitarian God, and will attempt to draw from them elements for a successful evangelical doctrine of trinitarian unity.⁵ Then, it will offer a proposal for how evangelical Christians ought to understand the Triune God to be one.

Each of the four theologians selected, Karl Rahner, Millard Erickson, John Zizioulas, and Wolfhart Pannenberg, represents a distinct tradition within contemporary Christendom and has contributed to the doctrine of the Trinity.⁶ Rahner’s rule for contemplating the Trinity, “*The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity*,”⁷ has influenced the discussion of the Trinity since its publication. Gregory Havrilak notes Rahner’s contribution to Roman Catholic theology in general and the doctrine of the Trinity in particular, stating “Karl Rahner is without question one of the most important and influential Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century. . . . Following Barth,

4. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 19; cf. 132. Note that Erickson recognizes the relationship between language and reality. The question of the meaning of essence is not a different question than the question of how God is one.

5. Obviously, these two aspects cannot be severed. However, the primary focus of this text is on trinitarian unity, and the question of persons will be touched on only as it relates to unity.

6. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, for example, notes that all four of these theologians have contributed to the doctrine of the Trinity in his *Doctrine of God*. Major contributions by these authors include Rahner, *Trinity*; Rahner, “Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise ‘De Trinitate’” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4; Erickson, *God in Three Persons*; Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*; Zizioulas, “On Being a Person”; Zizioulas, “Communion and Otherness,” 347–61; Zizioulas, “Human Capacity and Human Incapacity,” 401–48; and Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*; Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*.

7. Rahner, *Trinity*, 22.

Introduction to the Doctrine of Trinitarian Unity

Rahner's classic work *The Trinity* appeared as the most innovative contribution to trinitarian theology until the advent of Moltmann."⁸

Erickson, a former student of Pannenberg's, has written extensively about theology proper and the doctrine of the Trinity from the evangelical perspective. In addition to a well-used text on systematic theology, Erickson has recently written three volumes presenting contemporary interpretations of the Trinity, Christology, and the divine attributes.⁹

Zizioulas is concerned in his writings primarily with ecclesiology. However, he sees the basis for ecclesiology, and indeed all of Christian life, in the Trinity. As he puts it, "Orthodoxy concerning the being of God is not a luxury for the Church and for man: it is an existential necessity."¹⁰ As a Greek Orthodox, he seeks to draw heavily from the Eastern tradition, and his work on the Trinity is seen by some to epitomize the contemporary form of that tradition.¹¹

Pannenberg has sought to restore a strong metaphysical basis for theology, and has both criticized the classical metaphysics of the Fathers and developed one of his own.¹² He interacts critically with a wide variety of theologians, both ancient and contemporary. He makes a unique contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity by drawing on modern physics and the concept of a field in discussing the one essence of the Triune God.¹³

There is much to be commended in the work of these authors, and indeed, in the work of the many authors who have furthered trinitarian studies in the recent past. However, these four authors, along with all of the scholarship they represent, present a problem to the Christian believer, because they show considerable disagreement as to how the God of the Bible, while Triune, is, in fact, one. This text attempts to help settle that disagreement by determining which, if any, of the four positions presented within are acceptable and, if none are,

8. Havrilak, "Karl Rahner and the Greek Trinity," 61.

9. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*; Erickson, *Word Became Flesh*; Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*.

10. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 15.

11. See, for example, Collins, *Trinitarian Theology: West and East*; Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, 143.

12. Pannenberg, *Metaphysics*, 3–6; Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:128; Schwöbel, "Rational Theology in Trinitarian Perspective," 526.

13. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:382–83.

what positive elements can be taken from them to help construct an evangelical doctrine of the Trinity.

The position of each of these theologians will be examined in two stages. First, each author's understanding of divine unity will be presented. Where it is relevant, information regarding methodology and presuppositions will also be included. Then, that understanding of divine unity will be subjected to several critiques, some original to this text and some from other sources.

Historical critiques will be offered in light of the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity, particularly when the author in question claims to draw upon a particular author or tradition for support. For example, Zizioulas consistently associates his position with that of the Cappadocians.¹⁴ Thus, the question of whether he accurately portrays and develops the Cappadocian understanding of divine unity is a valid one. While no historical position will be afforded normativity, positions at variance with such historical milestones as the Council of Nicaea, the writings of Athanasius, and the work of the Cappadocians will be seen as having the burden of proof.¹⁵

Philosophical critiques will consider the coherence and consistency of each position. As much as is possible, these critiques will be made from within the system in question. Therefore Pannenberg's futurist ontology will not be critiqued from the perspective of a Platonic idealism.

Theological critiques will question whether a position is biblically adequate and whether it can be integrated into a full doctrine of God. The first aspect is warranted because biblical faithfulness is the *sine qua non* of an evangelical theology. The second aspect is necessary because, as Gerald Bray has noted, many contemporary theologies, in breaking with classical

14. For example, Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 17–18, 35–40, 88; Zizioulas, "Church as Communion," 7–8; Zizioulas, "On Being a Person," 40.

15. These writings, and the Nicene Creed in particular, are generally viewed as authentic expressions of the Christian teaching about God. Timothy Bartel, who believes he breaks with Augustine and Aquinas, believes agreement with Nicaea is sufficient historical validation of a doctrine of the Trinity. Bartel, "Plight of the Relative Trinitarian," 151–53. Thompson cites the British Council of Churches, which stated, "There was remarkable unanimity in the Study Commission in looking for resources to the three Cappadocian Fathers." British Council of Churches, *The Forgotten Trinity*, vol. 1, Report of the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today, 21; quoted in Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, 126.

Introduction to the Doctrine of Trinitarian Unity

trinitarian metaphysics, have failed to consider the implications of this breach for the rest of their theology.¹⁶

The final potential area of critique will be Christological. The trinitarian and Christological questions are intimately related.¹⁷ The church Fathers, beginning with Tertullian, have used similar language and reasoning to settle the trinitarian and Christological difficulties of unity and diversity, so Christological critiques will examine whether an understanding of divine unity can coherently be translated into Christological diversity.¹⁸ The Christology officially sanctioned by the Council of Chalcedon will serve as a generally recognized benchmark in this regard.¹⁹ As Erickson states, “The council affirmed the Nicene Creed, and issued a statement that was to become the standard for all of Christendom.”²⁰

This process, executed upon the position of each of the four selected authors, will attempt to winnow the wheat from the chaff. It will be found that none of the understandings of trinitarian unity presented here can be accepted as-is, but that positive elements found in each system, which survive the critical process, can serve as a foundation for developing an evangelical understanding of trinitarian unity which is historically based, biblically and theologically adequate, philosophically coherent, and Christologically orthodox. The final chapter will set forth such an understanding.

CRITICAL BACKGROUND

This text is a critical study, and as such requires criteria against which positions can be evaluated. This section will serve to set forth those criteria. It will begin with an historical survey of the doctrine of trinitarian unity. Special attention will be given to teachings of the Council of Nicaea and

16.. Bray, *Doctrine of God*, 61.

17. Welch, *In This Name*, 240–41.

18. Tertullian, *Prax.* 25 (ANF 3:624); Porter, “On Keeping ‘Persons’ in the Trinity,” 532n4; van Inwagen, “And Yet They Are Not Three Gods But One God,” 248; Hill, *Three-Personed God*, 271; Hopko, “Trinity in the Cappadocians,” 267.

19. For an excellent brief presentation of both the key documents behind and the text of the Definition of Chalcedon, see Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 46–48.

20. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 746. See also Erickson, “Evangelical Christology and Soteriology Today,” 256. The definition carries particular authority among Catholics. See Doud, “Rahner’s Christology,” 144.

the Nicene Creed. Next, it will present background for the theological critique by examining the biblical teaching on the unity of God and the traditional connection between the nature of God and the divine attributes. Finally, it will present the Christological teaching of the Council of Chalcedon, so that the Christological implications of the views of trinitarian unity presented may be compared against this standard. Because no external philosophical standard will be imposed upon the positions, aside from standard considerations of coherence and consistency, no background information for the philosophical critiques will be presented.²¹

Historical Background

Key figures in the historical development of the doctrine of the unity of God will now be surveyed.²² Several conclusions will arise from this study. First, the doctrine of divine unity was believed to be one of biblical necessity and not a conclusion of external philosophy. Second, Christian tradition generally trended towards stronger expressions of divine unity over time. Third, theologians generally sought to express the unity of God in several ways; the true unity of God was not an isolated aspect of the deity. Fourth, authors were not always consistent, either with themselves or with one another, in their referent for the phrase “The One God.” The final conclusion will be that the dominant historical view, seen in Tertullian and traced through Nicaea and into the Cappadocians, Augustine, Aquinas, and Barth, is that the one essence of God is a genuine *res*, an actuality of which there is only one for the three persons of the Godhead.

Before Nicaea

The Apostolic Fathers are generally content to express their understanding of divine unity with biblical trinitarian formulae.²³ Geoffrey Bromiley notes that, “Only at isolated points do these authors engage in anything approaching technical theology.”²⁴ Without giving much in the way of explanation, they insist that God is one, and that it is appropri-

21. For arguments for the need for theology to be rationally consistent, see Clark, *Trinity*, 88–89; Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 43–44.

22. For other recent surveys, see Olson and Hall, *Trinity*; Hill, *Three-Personed God*.

23. For example, *1 Clement* 42 (ANF 1:16); Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 12 (ANF 1:35); Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* 13 (ANF 1:65).

24. Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, 3.

Introduction to the Doctrine of Trinitarian Unity

ate to worship Christ.²⁵ It is clear that they generally think of “God” as referring to the Father, as *2 Clement* illustrates well, praising, “the only God invisible, the Father of truth, who sent forth to us the Saviour and Prince of incorruption.”²⁶ Yet, like the rest of the Apostolic Fathers, he can juxtapose against this that “it is fitting that you should think of Jesus Christ as of God.”²⁷

It is in the Apologists that reasonable explanations for monotheists worshiping Christ begin to emerge. Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho* is an example. Justin begins with wholehearted agreement with Old Testament monotheism, stating, “There will be no other God, O Trypho, nor was there from eternity any other existing . . . but He who made and disposed all this universe.”²⁸ However, he goes on to demonstrate, still relying on the Old Testament, that “He who is said to have appeared to Abraham, and to Jacob, and to Moses, and who is called God, is distinct from Him who made all things,—numerically, I mean, not [distinct] in will.”²⁹ For Justin, then, God is one because the Son only does what the Father wills, even though he is “another God.”³⁰ Justin also introduces analogies for the begetting of the Son. As a word spoken does not deprive the mind of thought, or fire kindled deprive its source of fire, so the Son is begotten without diminution of the Father.³¹ While Justin is not successful in developing a clear doctrine of the unity of God, he fervently attempts to do so from the Bible.³²

Like Justin, Irenaeus approaches the trinitarian question believing “in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God.”³³ There is one God because there is the Father. Irenaeus sees several elements,

25. Olson and Hall, *Trinity*, 20; Kärkkäinen, *Doctrine of God*, 70.

26. *2 Clement* 20 (ANF 7:523).

27. *2 Clement* 1 (ANF 7:517).

28. Justin, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 11 (ANF 1:199).

29. *Ibid.*, 56 (ANF 1:223). Unity of will here means obedience.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, 61 (ANF 1:227). This is also used and explained in Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 5 (ANF 2:67).

32. This is also the conclusion of Bromiley. Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, 16–17.

33. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.10.1 (ANF 1:330).

however, that assure the unity of the Son and Spirit with the Father, and therefore of God. He notes the extensive Old Testament references by the Holy Spirit to the One God.³⁴ Like Justin, he believes that, because the Son is the instrument of the Father's will and God does not need tools, there is unity.³⁵ Irenaeus also argues that, because of God's simplicity, which means he is entirely thinking, and his immensity, which means he contains all things, God's expressed Word cannot go elsewhere than God, so that the Word remains in the Father, and therefore one with God.³⁶ He expresses the same thought elsewhere, stating that "God being all Mind, and all Logos, both speaks exactly what He thinks, and thinks exactly what He speaks. For His thought is Logos, and Logos is Mind, and Mind comprehending all things is the Father Himself."³⁷ Thus, while Justin had difficulty maintaining unity in light of diversity, Irenaeus seems in danger of uniting the Son with the Father by reducing the Son to a faculty or property of the Father.

Clement of Alexandria seems to present a more balanced view of the divine unity, though it may not be coherent. He remains grounded in the Bible; his works in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* cite 31 books of the Old Testament and every book of the New Testament save Philemon, 2 John, and 3 John.³⁸ He makes clear that the unity of God is not a bare philosophical solitude, writing, "God is one, and beyond the one and above the Monad itself."³⁹ At times, he refers to the Father as the one God, writing about the ascending nature of beings that "the nature of the Son, which is nearest to Him who is alone the Almighty One, is the most perfect."⁴⁰ At other times he calls the Son God, referring to him as "the holy God Jesus" and "the God who, before the foundation of the world, was the counsellor of the Father."⁴¹ Yet he also occasionally seems to suggest that it is not either one alone who is God, but the two of them together. He writes, "So that it is veritably clear that the God of all is only one good, just Creator,

34. Ibid., 3.6 (ANF 1:418–20); Robert Letham also notes Irenaeus's biblical emphasis on unity in *Holy Trinity*.

35. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.2.3–5 (ANF 1:361).

36. Ibid., 2.13.3–6 (ANF 1:374).

37. Ibid., 2.28.5 (ANF 1:400).

38. From the index, ANF 2:623–29.

39. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 1.8 (ANF 2:227).

40. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.2 (ANF 2:524).

41. Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 1.7 (ANF 2:223); *Strom.* 7.2 (ANF 2:524).

and the Son in the Father,” and “the Father of all alone is perfect, for the Son is in Him, and the Father is in the Son.”⁴² Clement also notes the united work of the three.⁴³ Thus, he sees a unity of interpenetration and cooperation, and hints that the presence of the Son is as important to the Father’s deity as the Father is to the Son’s.

Clement is also important because he provides an early instance of a term that will later become important, *homoousios*, when he writes, “But God has no natural relation to us, as the authors of the heresies will have it . . . unless we shall dare to say that we are a part of Him, and of the same essence as God.”⁴⁴ While Stead groups this usage with that of Irenaeus, and suggests that it carries the meaning “belonging to the same order of being,”⁴⁵ the context, in which Clement argues this would mean that part of God sinned, suggests the last two phrases are in apposition; to be *homoousios* with something means to be part of it.

Clement does not use *homoousios* to describe God, and therefore does not make the Son and Spirit parts of God. Tertullian, however, does exactly that. With language which will become definitive in the future, he confesses belief in “three *Persons* . . . three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God, from whom these degrees and forms and aspects are reckoned, under the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”⁴⁶

Tertullian sees the distinction between the three persons and the *una substantia* reflected in John 10:30, in which John uses the neuter, *unum*, rather than *unus*. What is one is not personal, but impersonal substance.⁴⁷ This substance, which is spirit, is the material of which God is made, and is, in the words of R. P. C. Hanson, “a kind of thinking gas.”⁴⁸ Thus there is a substance, spirit, which God is, of which “the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole.”⁴⁹

42. Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 1.8, 1.7 (ANF 2:228, 222).

43. *Ibid.*, 1.6 (ANF 2:220).

44. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 2.16 (ANF 2:364).

45. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 206–9.

46. Tertullian, *Prax.* 2 (ANF 3:598), emphasis original, as it will be in all quotations.

47. *Ibid.*, 22 (ANF 3:618).

48. *Ibid.*, 7 (ANF 3:602); Hanson, *Search*, 184.

49. Tertullian, *Prax.* 9 (ANF 3:603–4). Immediately after this, the editors add a note pointing out the imprecision, but orthodoxy, of this passage in light of later orthodoxy.

Tertullian is not opposed to the gnostic concept of prolation in the generation of the Son; it is the separation the gnostics taught which he rejects. To counter this implication, he illustrates the generation of the Son with several natural analogies. The Father puts forth the Son as root puts forth tree, fountain produces river, and sun emits ray. In these analogies, as in God, there is source without separation.⁵⁰

In addition to asserting the *una substantia* of God, Tertullian seeks to secure unity with the concept of monarchy. Just as a monarch can have a son without endangering his rule, so the Son of God serves to bolster and support the one rule of God the Father.⁵¹ He also develops the linguistic argument that the Son is essential to the Father, for a Son makes a Father as much as a Father makes a Son.⁵² There is therefore interdependence in God. Tertullian provides terminology for the oneness and threeness of God and adds to the previous unity of operation and interpenetration a clear belief that there is *unum res* that is God, the substance spirit.

No survey of pre-Nicene theology could be complete without an examination of the ideas of Origen. Much that Origen believes about the unity of God has been mentioned before. He shows a clear subordination of the Son and the Spirit to their source, the Father, though the Son and Spirit retain the Father's nature.⁵³ He stresses the coordinated operation of the three, and the fact that the Son, as the Father's wisdom and power, is eternally in the Father.⁵⁴ He also advances the argument that the Father, to be ever Father, must have ever had a Son.⁵⁵

Origen's greatest contribution to the doctrine of God's unity, however, is his emphasis on the radical consequences of the incorporeal nature of God. Far from Tertullian, who granted God a body, Origen hints at, but does not fully accept, the consequences of belief in a God with

50. Ibid., 8 (ANF 3:602–3).

51. Ibid., 3–4 (ANF 3:599–600).

52. Ibid., 10 (ANF 3:604–5).

53. Origen, *De principiis* 1.2.13 (ANF 4:251), *Fragmenta in evangelium Joannis* 2.2 (ANF 9:323). Henri Crouzel denies that Origen is inappropriately subordinationist in *Origen*, 181–204, 268.

54. Origen, *Princ.* 1.2.2, 1.2.10 (ANF 4:246, 250) Wolfson sees Origen teaching unity of genus and of rule. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, 1:322.

55. Origen, *Princ.* 1.2.3 (ANF 4:246). Behr places great emphasis on this point in Origen. Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 185.

Introduction to the Doctrine of Trinitarian Unity

simple mental existence.⁵⁶ He does suggest the conclusion later trinitarians will draw, however, when he writes, “God is not a part, so neither is He properly the whole, since the whole is composed of parts; and reason will not allow us to believe that the God who is over all is composed of parts, each one of which cannot do what all the other parts can.”⁵⁷ Origen also anticipates further trinitarian thought by his use of *homoousios*, a key term of the Nicene Creed, to which this discussion now turns.⁵⁸

The Nicene Creed

If there is a universally recognized standard for Christian orthodoxy, it is the Nicene Creed, which is “the most universally accepted Christian creed.”⁵⁹ The Council of Nicaea was convened in 325 in response to the Arian controversy, and produced the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign, maker of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, *begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, of the substance of the Father*, God of God, Light of Light, *true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father*, through whom all things were made, *things in heaven and things on the earth*; who for us men and for our salvation *came down* and was made flesh, *and became man*, suffered, and rose on the third day, ascended into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

And those that say ‘There was when he was not,’

and, ‘Before he was begotten he was not,’

and that, ‘He came into being from what-is-not,’

or those that allege, that the son of God is

‘Of another substance or essence’

or ‘created’

or ‘changeable’

or ‘alterable,’

these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.⁶⁰

56. Origen, *Princ.* 1.1.4–9 (ANF 4:243–45).

57. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.23 (ANF 4:406). See also *Princ.* 4.1.32, 4.1.28 (ANF 4:379, 376).

58. For a defense of Origen’s use of the term, see Stead, *Divine Substance*, 211.

59. González, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:165. See also Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:24.

60. Translation and format from Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 25. Italics original, indicating alterations from Eusebius’s proposed creed. For thor-

This creed, though it has been slightly revised, has been consistently respected and affirmed by later ecumenical councils.⁶¹

For centuries, the Nicene Creed, and especially the term *homoousios*, translated “of one substance” above, was viewed by the majority of scholars as asserting a numerical identity of the essence of Father and Son.⁶² Archibald Robertson represents this position when he writes, “The conclusion is that in their original sense the definitions of Nicaea assert not merely the *specific* identity of the Son with the Father . . . but the full unbroken continuation of the Being of the Father in the Son, the inseparable unity of the Son with the Father in the Oneness of the Godhead. . . . The Nicene definition in this sense emphasized the *unity* of the Godhead in Three Persons, against the Arian *division* of the Son from the Father.”⁶³ According to this view, the Nicene Creed, and the term *homoousios* in particular, affirm that there is one object, God, which the Father and Son, and by extension, the Holy Spirit, are.

Despite the prevalence of this view, many contemporary scholars oppose it, effectively denying that Nicaea dealt with the unity of God. J. N. D. Kelly, for example, while acknowledging that *homoousios* in the end requires an interpretation in terms of divine unity, states that “there are the strongest possible reasons for doubting” that this is the meaning in the Nicene Creed.⁶⁴ Stead agrees that it is wrong to impose the received understanding of Nicaea on the creed itself.⁶⁵ Nicaea meant to assert the full equality of the Son with the Father, not their unity.⁶⁶

ough discussions of the Arian controversy, see Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*; Kannengiesser, *Arius and Athanasius*.

61. For example, *The Council of Ephesus: Extracts from the Acts*, Session 1 (NPNF2 14:199); *The Definition of Faith of the Council of Chalcedon*, (NPNF2 14:262–63); For the revised form of the creed, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan, see Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 26; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 28–29.

62. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 234.

63. Robertson, introduction to *Athanasius* (NPNF2 xxxii), emphasis original. See also Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, 335, 352; Augsburg Confession, Art. 1; Clark, *Trinity*, 113; Hill, *Three-Personed God*, 220.

64. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 234.

65. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 251.

66. Bartel, “Relative Trinitarian,” 152; Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*; Wiles, *Making of Christian Doctrine*, 130–31.