



The Trinity

Saturday 16th March 2024 — Tom O'Toole

How has the doctrine of the Trinity been understood historically?

Three Biblical Truths



Click here for a session from last year's School of Theology, looking at what we learn about the Trinity from John's gospel.

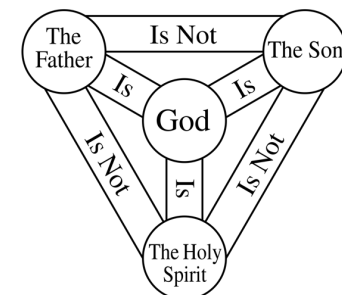
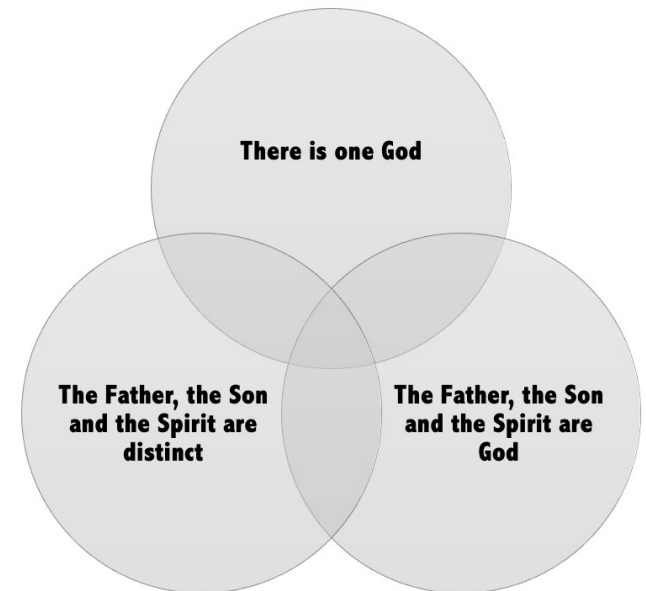
Historical theology serves as both a fortress and a launching pad. As a fortress, historical theology is there to protect the church from error. We study the past theologians and church history to ensure that the heresies of the past do not influence the church today. . . Likewise, historical theology also serves as a launching pad. As a launching pad, historical theology serves to promote our present theology and new theological ideas. We study the theologians of the past as a fresh way to do theology in our present context.

David Kaywood

There is one God

The Father is God, the Son is God and the Spirit is God

The Father, the Son and the Spirit are distinct from each other



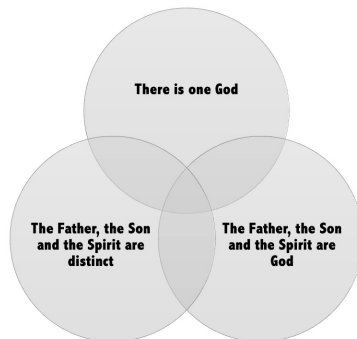
Early Church Fathers

In the first and second centuries, there was much more focus on the **economy of God** (how God relates to his creation) than on what he is like in his own being.

You may come across the phrases '**economic trinity**' and '**immanent trinity**' to refer to this distinction.

Eventually, when theologians did begin to consider what God is like in his being, they started with the idea that there is one supreme God, and that he is *indivisible*. This became known as **Monarchianism**.

The challenge is what you do with Jesus, and there were two very different approaches. Some say that Jesus is *not* this one God, but is a special human who got 'adopted' or 'promoted' into divinity at his baptism, his resurrection, or his birth. This is known as **Dynamic Monarchianism** or **Adoptionism**, and is associated with **Paul of Samosata**. It was condemned as heresy in 269AD.



Some Early Triadic Statements

Matt 28:19 (NIVUK) - Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. . .

2 Corinthians 13:14 (NIVUK) - May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Didache 7:1 (around 100AD) - After the foregoing instructions, baptise in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living (running) water. . .

Ignatius: Epistle to the Magnesians ch.13 (around 110AD) - Study, therefore, to be established in the doctrines of the Lord and the apostles, that so all things, whatsoever ye do, may prosper both in the flesh and spirit; in faith and love; in the Son, and in the Father, and in the Spirit

Martyrdom of Polycarp 14:3 (155AD) - For this cause, yea and for all things, I praise Thee, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, through the eternal and heavenly High-priest, Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, through whom with Him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now [and ever] and for the ages to come. Amen.

Baptismal Liturgy - early form of what we now call the Apostles Creed (215AD) - Let the candidates stand in the water, undressed, a deacon going with them in the same way. "Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?" "I believe." He shall baptise him once. "Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again on the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?" "I believe." He is baptised again. "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit; in the holy church, and in the resurrection of the flesh?" "I believe." He is baptised a third time.

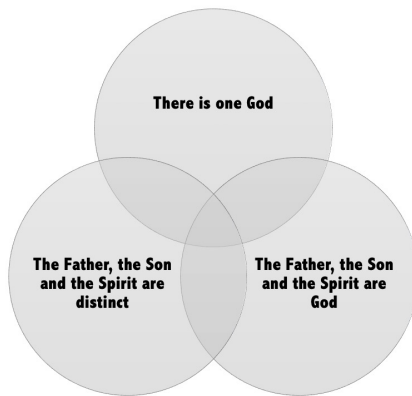
(adoptionists believe) that God exalted Jesus to be his Son by raising him from the dead, thereby raising him to divine status.

Bart Ehrman



Third Century - Sabellianism

The other form of Monarchianism is to say that Jesus *is* the one supreme indivisible God, meaning that when we speak of the Father, when we speak of the Son and when we speak of the Holy Spirit, we are speaking of the same person. It is like he appears in different *modes* or wears different masks. This view is known as **Modalism**, or **Modalistic Monarchianism**.



Key Figure: Sabellius

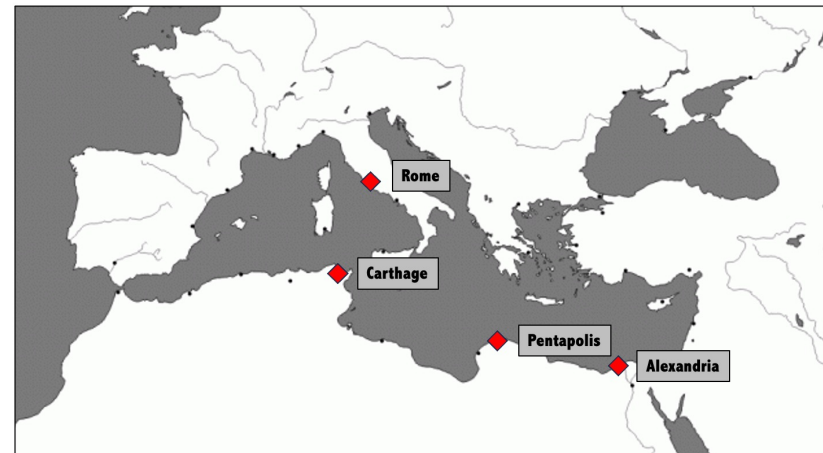
- The most prominent teacher of modalism was Sabellius, and so the view came to be known as **Sabellianism**.
- We don't have loads of biographical detail about Sabellius, but it is believed that he was born in Pentapolis, Libya, and primarily taught in Rome.

Opponents of Sabellianism

Tertullian (155-240AD) – Tertullian was the son of Roman centurion, born in Carthage in modern Tunisia. He was an opinionated theological firebrand. Tertullian spoke of God as 'one substance' and 'three persons', and he was the first to use the word 'trinity' (Latin *Trinitas*).

Origen (185-254AD) - Origen was the son of a martyr and was from Alexandria in Egypt. He was a controversial figure, who was later excommunicated for some of his other teaching. But on the Trinity, he made a big contribution. He insisted that 'threeness' was not just how God presents himself to the world but is part of his eternal being. He taught the eternal generation of the Son by the Father.

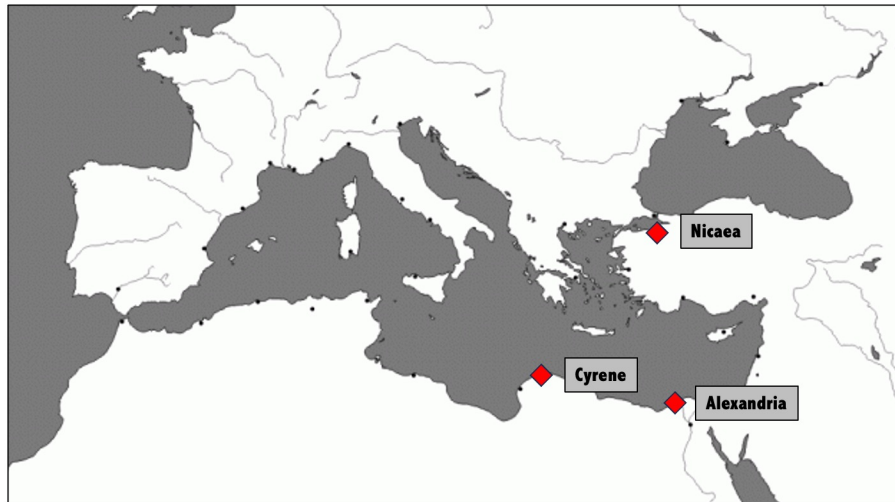
Whilst both Tertullian and Origen effectively argued against Sabellianism, their theology was not yet fully rounded on the topic. Tertullian hadn't quite grasped the eternal relationships, and Origen saw the Son as subordinate to the Father.



Fourth Century - Arianism

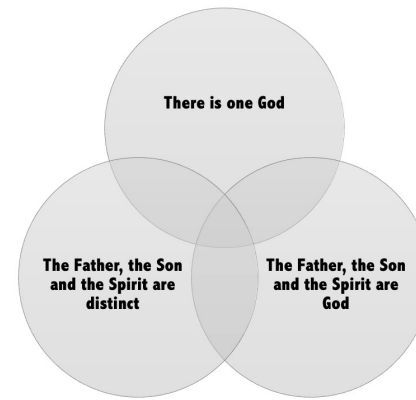
Key Figure: Arius (256-336AD)

- From Cyrene in Libya.
- Became a priest in the oldest and most prestigious church in Alexandria in 313AD.
- Was a candidate for the position of bishop of Alexandria, but the role was given to **Alexander** instead.
- The relationship between Arius and Alexander was a difficult one. In part this was political, but there was also a theological component to it.



In 318 AD, **Arius** accused **Alexander** of “carelessness, blurring the distinction of nature between the Father and the Son by his emphasis on eternal generation.”

Arius goes on to explain his own position: “If the Father begat the Son he that was begotten had a beginning of existence... **There was a time when the Son was not.**”



What Would be At Stake If Arius Was Right?

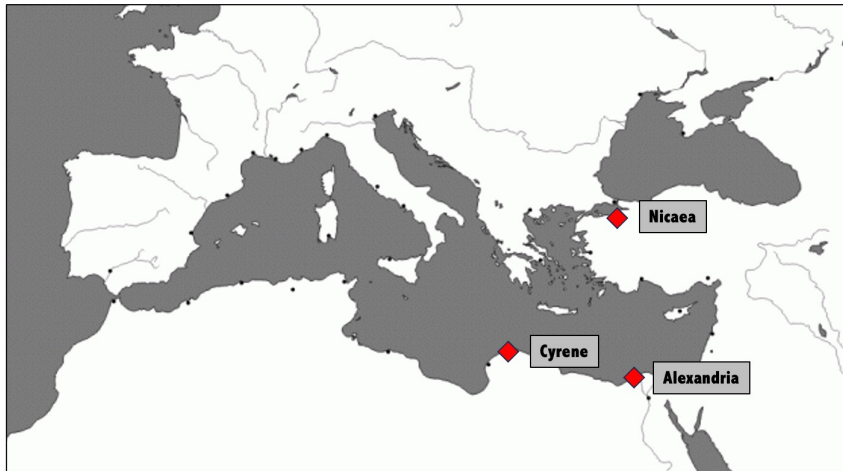
Arius won a lot of support for his views, including from some prominent bishops, such as Eusebius of Nicomedia. In 321AD, Alexander called a council, which condemned Arius and excommunicated him. This only intensified the conflict.



Council of Nicaea

The Arian controversy reached the ears of the Emperor Constantine, who wanted the matter resolved once and for all (likely out of a desire for peace and unity more than a particular theological conviction).

Constantine invited all 1,800 bishops in the Empire to his summer palace for the **Council of Nicaea**. 318 of these bishops attended, plus their priests and deacons supporting them.



The council decided against Arius and in favour of the orthodox position of Alexander. This ruling was formalised into the Nicene Creed, which 313 of the 318 bishops present signed up to.

The key word is the Greek **homo-ousios**, saying that Jesus is of one 'essence' (the deepest, innermost reality) with the Father.

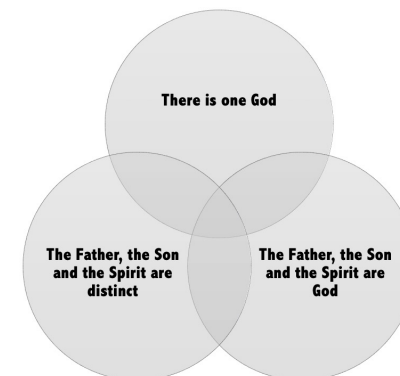
The Nicene Creed

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

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

And in the Holy Spirit.

[But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'— they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.]



Post-Nicaea

The Council of Nicaea did not resolve the Arian crisis, and for the most of the fourth century the debate raged back and forth as orthodoxy and Arianism gained and lost favour with church leaders and emperors.

Key Figure: Athanasius (296-373AD)

- Succeeded Alexander as Bishop of Alexandria in 326AD
- Vociferous defender of Nicene orthodoxy.
- Exiled on five separate occasions. *Athanasius contra mundum*

Key Figures: Cappadocians

- **Macrina** (327-379) - After her fiancé died, she committed herself to a life of prayer and study. A huge influence on her brothers and their friend:
- **Basil the Great** (330-379), **Gregory of Nyssa** (335-395) & **Gregory of Nazianzus** (329-389).
- Argues against the compromise solutions of 'homoiousis' (similar substance)
- Developed theology of Holy Spirit.

The Niceo-Constantinopolitan Creed (381AD)

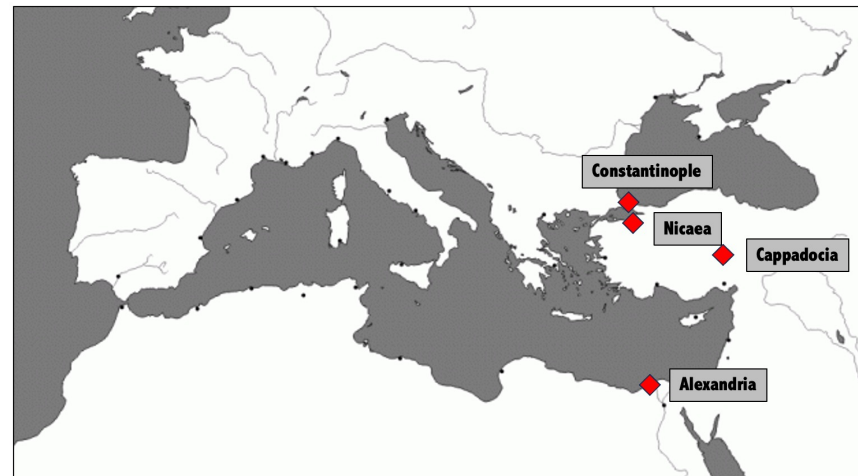
We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, **Maker of heaven and earth**, and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, Begotten of the Father **before all ages**, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father; by whom all things were made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate **of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary**, and was made man; And **was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate**, and suffered and **was buried**;

And the third day He rose again, **according to the Scriptures**; And ascended into heaven, **and sits at the right hand of the Father**; And He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, **Whose kingdom shall have no end.**

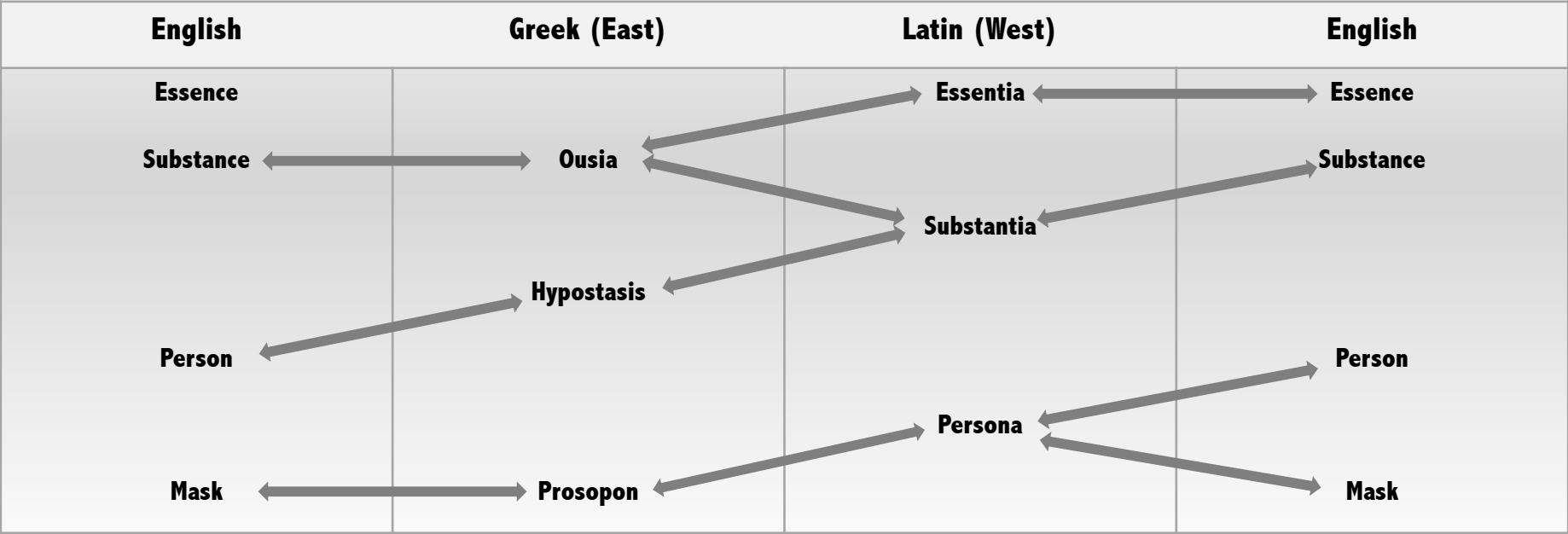
And we believe in the Holy Spirit, **the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke by the Prophets**;

And we believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins. We look for the Resurrection of the dead, And the Life of the age to come. Amen.



East and West

Differences started to emerge between the church in the east and the church in the west. In part this was because they were each dealing with a different heresy – Sabellianism in the west and Arianism in the east. This wasn't helped by language issues, where the Greek and Latin didn't easily map onto each other, and this caused confusion and suspicion.



What words would you choose in Greek and in Latin to express the Trinity?

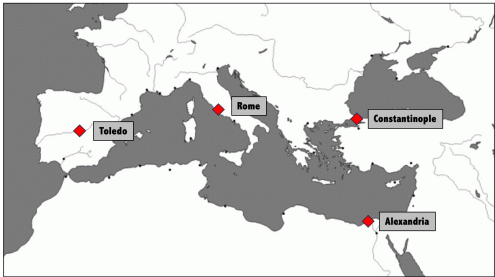
“One _____, Three _____”

How would this be heard when translated into the other language?

The Filioque Clause

The issues between the eastern and western church came to a head in 589AD with the council of Toledo in Seville, Spain. At this council, western bishops inserted the clause “and the Son” into the creed, following “we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father.”

This was heavily opposed by the eastern church, and was one of the factors that led to the great schism between east and west in the eleventh century.



Twentieth Century – Social Trinity

In the Twentieth century, much more emphasis was placed in God as a 'community', 'family', or 'society' of three

"No adequate distinction can be made between the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the economy of salvation." - **Karl Rahner**

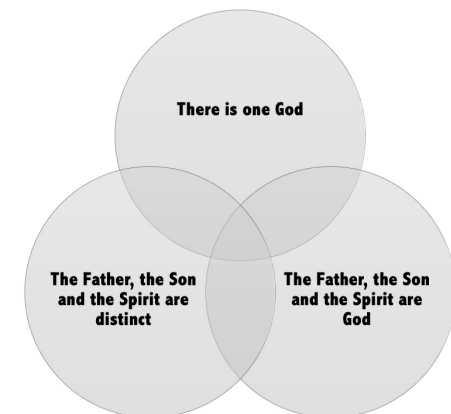
"I have developed a social doctrine of the Trinity, according to which God is a community of Father, Son, and Spirit, whose unity is constituted by mutual indwelling and reciprocal interpenetration." - **Jürgen Moltmann**

This often becomes a basis for ordering human society a particular way to reflect these relationships. There is a wide variety of ways people have tried to this, and these are often contradictory – including liberation theologians, feminist theologians, complementarians, egalitarians, episcopalians, congregationalists, etc.

Eight Marks of Social Trinitarianism (Barrett)

1. Starting point (or at least emphasis) is not simplicity but the three persons; some reject simplicity altogether.
2. Trinity is redefined as a society and community, analogous to human society.
3. Persons are redefined as three centres of consciousness and will.
4. Persons are redefined according to the relationships: focus on mutuality, social interaction.
5. Unity is redefined as interpersonal relationships of love between persons (redefinition of perichoresis).
6. Large overlap (sometimes collapse) of immanent and economic Trinity.
7. Sets east over against west, appealing to Eastern fathers.
8. Social Trinity is a paradigm for social theory (ecclesiology, politics, gender, etc).

Things I Appreciate About Social Trinity	Concerns I Have About Social Trinity



Further Resources



Michael Reeves – The Good God

Top Recommendation



Tim Chester – Delighting In the Trinity



Matthew Barrett – Simply Trinity



Athanasius - On the Incarnation
Good First Step Into Reading a Church Father (Free Online)

