

Westminster Seminary California  
**Enemies or Friends: Simplicity and Trinity**

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The doctrine of divine simplicity is a largely neglected and even denied doctrine today. Often this doctrine is regarded as abstract, impractical, and speculative. In particular, many assert that simplicity is incompatible with the doctrine of Trinity.<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on the doctrinal intersection of the simplicity and Trinity. The thesis of this paper is that the doctrine of divine simplicity is not an obstacle but a safeguard of the doctrine of Trinity.

Before entering into the argument, the basic definitions of the doctrines are needed. By simplicity, it means that there is no composition in God. As Francis Turretin affirmed, God is not only free from all composition and division, but also incapable of composition and divisibility.<sup>2</sup> By Trinity, it means that in the one only and most simple essence of God there are three distinct persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so distinguished from each other by incommunicable properties while remain and exist in each other mutually.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God: An Investigation in Aquinas' Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 240; Jay W. Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity and Immutability* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 229–30.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1 (P & R Pub., 1992), 191 Third Topic Q.VII.III.

The Father is God, Son is God, and Holy Spirit is God, yet not three Gods, but one God.

***Simplicity & Homoousios (consubstantiation)***

Contrary to the belief of many, the doctrine of simplicity shields the equality and deity of three divine persons. Since the divine essence is simple and undividable, it is incapable of multiplication or division, thus must be communicated to three persons in its totality; Therefore, each person of the Godhead equally possesses the fullness of divine essence. Each person contains the entirety of the Godhead.<sup>3</sup> The Father is the entire God; the Son is the entire God; the Holy Spirit is entire God. The Athanasian Creed (6<sup>th</sup> century) indicates: as the Father is uncreated, incomprehensible, and eternal, so are the Son and the Holy Spirit. All the divine attributes are to be ascribed to all three persons. All three persons are *homoousioi*, consubstantial, having the same essence.

Simplicity also requires that there is no composition of species and individuals in God. Some anti-Trinitarians claim that *homoousios* refers to “specific” not “numerical” unity. In such understanding, Peter and John may be said to be *homoousioi*, in the sense that they are partakers of the same specific essence (i.e. humanity). If this were the case, then Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three individuals in species of “god”. This would introduce undoubtedly Tritheism. But the simplicity holds back this error. Simplicity affirms that the divine essence is not a species which is composed by diverse individuals.

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<sup>3</sup> Gavin Ortlund, “Divine Simplicity in Historical Perspective: Resourcing a Contemporary Discussion,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 4 (2014): 451.

Turretin argued against “specific essence” invoking the simplicity of the essence,

[S]ince human nature is *divisible*, it can indeed remain the same *in species* when propagated by generation, although it is not the same in number because it detaches a certain part of its substance, which passes over to the begotten. This is not so with the divine, which is *indivisible*. For either it cannot be communicated or the same numerically can be communicated [emphases added].<sup>4</sup>

Cornelius Plantinga Jr. criticizes the classic Trinitarian view as heavily monist and Neo-platonic.<sup>5</sup> But he correctly identifies the difficulty lies in the doctrine of simplicity.

If God is only “a name for generic divine nature,” as Plantinga asserts, there is no difficulty whatsoever to hold that there are three persons but one God. The problem is that divine simplicity requires that each person is identical with the whole divine essence.<sup>6</sup> For Plantinga, Trinity is a community, or better in his own language, a family.

Appealing to the analogies found in the Scriptures, he claims that the persons are “members of the same family.”<sup>7</sup> But the divine simplicity is the obstacle for him to make sense of Trinity, for taking his analogy, simplicity seems to assert that each member of the family is identical to the whole family. Here the rationalistic nature of social trinitarianism is revealed. However, his critique nevertheless reveals the guarding function of the simplicity in the formulation of the doctrine of Trinity. Simplicity demands that there is no part in God. The persons are not individual members composing a family of Godhead. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not respectively 1/3 God. Put it in a

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<sup>4</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:256 Third Topic Q.XXIII.XI.

<sup>5</sup> Cornelius Jr Plantinga, “The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 23, no. 1 (1988): 45–46.

<sup>6</sup> Plantinga, “The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity,” 48.

<sup>7</sup> Plantinga, “The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity,” 51.

negative way, if God were not simple, each individual person in the Godhead would be less than the entirety of the Godhead. And each person becomes a part of the whole Godhead. This is precisely the direction where the social Trinitarianism goes. Since the divine nature is not composed of parts, union of the persons is accomplished by partaking of the whole. Herman Bavinck stated clearly, “the term simple is not an antonym of ‘twofold’ or ‘threefold’ but of ‘composite.’ God is not composed of three persons...but the one uncompounded (simple) being of God exists in three persons.”<sup>8</sup> As the Son and the Holy Spirit possess all properties from the Father, with the exception of personal properties, perfection is ascribed to each person. And since compound can arise solely from imperfect elements, from perfect subsistences no compound can arise.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the appellation, operation, and reception of worship, the divine attributes is one of the main focuses in the discussion of the deity of the second and third persons. As à Brakel said, “[w]hoever is eternal, omnipotent, and omniscient, is the only true God.”<sup>10</sup> The Father is the only true God, so is the Son and is the Spirit. For instance, the attribute of eternity is ascribed to the Son who is *in the beginning* with God and who is God (John 1:1; cf Gen.1:1). The Son is also called “Alpha and Omega” (Rev.1:8; 22:13).

Likewise, the Spirit is called the *eternal* Spirit (Heb. 1:14) who was in the presence at

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<sup>8</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 177.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen R Holmes, “‘Something Much Too Plain to Say’: Towards a Defence of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity,” *Neue Zeitschrift Für Systematische Theologie Und Religionsphilosophie* 43, no. 1 (2001): 148–49.

<sup>10</sup> Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, vol. 1 (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1992), 144.

creation hovering over the waters (Gen.1:2). With respect to immutability, the author of the book of Hebrews quoted Psalm 102 to ascribe immutability to the Son (Heb. 1:12; cf. Ps. 102:27). It is not incompatible with the incarnation, since incarnation is not a change of divinity into humanity, but the assumption of a human nature to a fully divine person. This attribute is also ascribed to the Holy Spirit. Ursinus pointed out by citing Act. 1:16 that the fact what the Spirit speaks must be fulfilled is evidence to prove the immutability of the Spirit.<sup>11</sup> Even the attribute of aseity is ascribed to the Son and the Spirit. Calvin called the Son and the Spirit *autotheos* to defend their divinity.<sup>12</sup> Francis Turretin refined such language:

[H]e [i.e. the Son] may be called God-of-himself (*autotheos*), not with respect to his person, but essence; not relatively as Son (for thus he is from the Father), but absolutely as God inasmuch as he has the divine essence existing from itself and not divided or produced from another essence.<sup>13</sup>

Since the essence is simple, viz. undividable, each person contains the full essence of the Godhead, that is, all the attributes are to be ascribed to all three persons. Thus, the simplicity guards the equality of the divine persons and prevents the essential subordination.

### ***Simplicity & Eternal generation and procession***

This leads to the issue of eternal generation of the Son and eternal procession of the Holy

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<sup>11</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Cincinnati: T.P. Bucher, 1851), 274; Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 365.

<sup>12</sup> Muller, *PRRD*, 4:324. Although not everyone agree with Calvin on this point.

<sup>13</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:291 Third Topic Q.XXVIII.XL.

Spirit. As the doctrine of simplicity indicates, there is no composition of potency and act in God.<sup>14</sup> The creature is a composition of the potency of existence and the act of existence. It indicates that: first, a creature may have potency of existence but without actual existence; second, a creature can have actual existence with the potency of change or annihilation in his existence. In created order, existence is necessity of the essence. To predicate the essence of one thing is not to say it exists and *vice versa*. However, in God, because of simplicity, to be *is* to exist. “The latent potential...is to be found in creatures only.”<sup>15</sup> God by his essence cannot be inexistent. There is no potentiality in God. God is fully actuality. Neither the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit is composite of the potency and act of existence. The act of begetting or proceeding must be considered eternally without duration. There was not such moment that the Son or the Spirit was not.

Furthermore, though there is order in the Godhead, it does not bring any priority or posteriority of nature or causality. The eternal generation of the Son and eternal procession of the Spirit does not imply any immanent subordination or hierarchy. As Herman Witsius indicated, by the proper definition of a cause as giving existence to something else, such causality “cannot take place among the divine persons whose essence is one and the same.”<sup>16</sup> Precisely because essence of the divine persons is one,

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<sup>14</sup> àBrakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 1:98.

<sup>15</sup> àBrakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 1:98.

<sup>16</sup> Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations: On What Is Commonly Called the Apostles’ Creed*, vol. 1 (Khull, Blackie, 1823), 148 VII.IV.

“it is wrong to entertain any conception of priority or posteriority of nature.”<sup>17</sup> As the Father is eternal, the Son is though begotten, eternal.

In his debate against Socinians, John Owen invokes the doctrine of simplicity to defend the eternal generation, “in the eternal generation of the Son, the *whole* essence of the Father is communicated to the Son as to a *personal existence* in the same essence, without multiplication or division of it, the same essence continuing still one in number.”<sup>18</sup> Because the divine essence is simple, the essence must be communicated *as a whole*. And a simple essence cannot be multiplied or divided, but only communicated. What is generated is not essence, but person. Thus, the Son as God (in essence) is *autotheos*, as Son (in person) is generated by the Father. Owen pointed out that the problem of Socinians was that they thought to understand the infinite divine nature as finite.<sup>19</sup> The generation is not a contingent choice of the will of the Father, but a necessity of nature. And such act does not break the one essence into piece, for the divine essence is infinite. Unlike the human generation which is not of the whole essence, but of a part, the divine eternal generation of the Son is the communication of the “the same numerical essence”, thus the begotten Son, though distinct, is still never divided from the Father.<sup>20</sup> The eternal generation and procession are not composing process of the potency and act of existence, or the process of alienation of part of the essence, as the natural and

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<sup>17</sup> Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on Apostles’ Creed*, 1:148 VII.IV.

<sup>18</sup> John Owen, “Vindiciae Evangelicae,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. XII (Banner of Truth, 1966), 237.

<sup>19</sup> Owen, “Vindiciae Evangelicae,” 237.

<sup>20</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:293 Third Topic Q.XXIX.IV.

human generation. There is no change in divine essence, thus do not indicate any imperfection, but reception of all perfection.

### ***Simplicity & distinction between Essence and Person***

The distinction between essence and person is crucial for the doctrine of Trinity. God is one in essence, not one person; three in person, not three essences. Essence or *ousia* denotes the whatness of a thing.<sup>21</sup> Whereas a person or *hypostasis* is a subsistence in the essence of God by which he is distinguished by an incommunicable property.<sup>22</sup> Essence is absolute, person relative. Essence cannot generate nor be generated. Only the persons can. Persons are not merely relations, for relation cannot generate either. It is not three personalized relations but three persons in relation.<sup>23</sup> Essence is capable of being communicated to many individuals, person is incapable of communication. Thus, essence and person must be distinguished, so also the essential attributes which are communicated to all three persons and the incommunicable personal attributes. Jay Richards attempts to discard divine simplicity by presenting it as incompatible with Trinity. But he fails to make this distinction.<sup>24</sup> The doctrine of simplicity indicates that all the *essential* divine attributes are identical to God's essence, but not the incommunicable

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<sup>21</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:253 Third Topic Q.XXIII.III.

<sup>22</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:255 Third Topic Q.XXIII.VIII.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. James E Dolezal, "Trinity, Simplicity and the Status of God's Personal Relations," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 1 (2014): 90. "[T]he Father is identical with the relation of paternity, the Son with filiation and the Spirit with spiration. As subsistent relations these ordinarily abstract terms are predicated of the persons concretely."

<sup>24</sup> Richards, *The Untamed God*, 228–30.

*personal* attributes of each person. Paternity, filiation and spiration are personal attributes, thus cannot be communicated into other persons. To be God is to be eternal, self-existing, omnipotent, omniscient, good, just and so on; but to be generated is not to be God in essence, but to be the person of the Son in relation to the Father.

The Socinians identified person with essence. In *Racovian Catechism*, it is stated that “a person is nothing else than an individual intelligent essence. Wherever, then, there exist three numerical persons, there must...be reckoned three individual essences.”<sup>25</sup> However, the Reformed orthodoxy affirmed that a person is an independent subsistence but not in a different essence. Turretin explained, “simplicity and triplicity are so mutually opposed...but not simplicity and Trinity because they are said in different respects: simplicity in respect to essence, but Trinity in respect to persons.”<sup>26</sup> Later he clarified that “triplicity” implies a multiplication of essence. God is triune, not triple.<sup>27</sup> In a similar way, àBrakel pointed out the distinction between essence and person based upon the principle of simplicity.

“The same essence in its entirety is present in all three Persons; however, each Person has His own independent personality. As such we can say that the divine essence is communicable to the divine Persons..., whereas the personality of each divine Person is incommunicable. Thus, it is evident that we distinguish between the essence and the Persons, albeit not as if there were an actual and essential difference. Rather, we do so merely in reference to the manner of existence, which is a matter

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<sup>25</sup> *The Racovian Catechism* (London, 1818), 33.

<sup>26</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:193 Third Topic Q.VII.IX.

<sup>27</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:255 Third Topic Q.XXIII.IX.

about which we can only stammer.”<sup>28</sup>

This distinction between essence and person is not a real distinction as if the essence is one thing and each person is another thing, it will be four things in numerical sense; but the essence exists in three persons, for God is a simple and non-composite being. À Brakel indicates that it is beyond finite human logic and language to describe this inner life of the infinite God.

On the other hand, simplicity also correlates with the distinction between the persons. The Father is not the Son or the Spirit, the Son is not the Father or the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father or the Son. This distinction is often called “modal” distinction, which is different from the “rational” distinction of the Modalism, and at the same time different from the “real” distinction of the Tritheism. Though the term modal may trigger the alarm of Modalism, it simply is based upon the incommunicable personal properties: *agennesia* to the Father, *gennesia* to the Son is begotten, *ekporeusis* to the Spirit. That is to say the persons are *subsistences*, and there is no composition in the Godhead, only distinction. As Turretin pointed out, the personal property of the Son does not make his essence different from that of the Father, nor does it make the simple essence a compound, because “it only makes the Son distinct from the Father. Distinction is not composition.”<sup>29</sup> Such distinction is further nuanced by Turretin as a “minor real distinction” which is not as strong as the distinction between things and other things. Some use an expression of

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<sup>28</sup> à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 1:146.

<sup>29</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:194 Third Topic Q.VII.XVI.

“really modal” distinction to indicate it is not just a rational distinction.<sup>30</sup>

### *Simplicity and perichoresis*

With the privileging of the social trinitarianism, there is a tendency to override simplicity with *perichoresis*. Although starting with a different concern, Jürgen Moltmann nevertheless holds a similar social Trinitarian view as Plantinga. Both found the unity merely on the doctrine of *perichoresis*. Moltmann describes the unity based on simplicity is “a monadic unity,” but the true divine unity is not a numerical unity, but “lies in the *union* of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.” It lies in their *fellowship*, not in the identity of a single subject.”<sup>31</sup> God is not a single subject, but a group of three individual divine beings. This is nothing less than Tritheism. He placed strong emphasis on *perichoresis*: “the unity of the triunity lies in the eternal *perichoresis* of the Trinitarian persons.”<sup>32</sup> Thus the simplicity of essence is substituted by the *perichoresis* as the basis of unity. However, is *perichoresis* an incompatible alternative of simplicity? *Perichoresis* is not any kind of union, but a divine union existing only in one simple divine essence. It is different from any kind of union from human experience, or even from the mystical union of believers with God.<sup>33</sup> The fellowship of the believers may rightly say *resemble* this divine union, but not in a univocal sense. Nothing can compare with the immanent divine

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<sup>30</sup> Muller, *PRRD*, 4:194.

<sup>31</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Fortress Press, 1981), 95.

<sup>32</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 175; Cornelius Plantinga, ed., “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 39.

<sup>33</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:257 Third Topic Q XXIII.XIII.

union. The Father, the Son and the Spirit do not merely *dwell near* but *indwell* one another. Each one permeates the others. No other being can exist in such a way. Such perichoresic manner of existence is founded only on the basis of numerical unity, for only the divine simplicity binds the three persons, not merely into *each other*, but into the one divine essence. The doctrine of *perichoresis* presupposes and based upon the simple unity of essence. As àBrakel stated,

Since God is a simple Being, there being neither diversity nor composition – that is, neither Essence and Person nor Person and Person constitute a composite entity – the three Persons, though distinguished from each other, are not different [in the essence]. They coexist as one God, *in simplicity of Being* [emphasis added]. The Father exists in the Son, the Son exists in the Father, and the Holy Spirit exists in the Father and in the Son.<sup>34</sup>

*Perichoresis* is not in opposition to the simplicity, rather based on the simplicity. Moltmann's attempt to interpret the doctrine of Trinity as a divine community upon perichoresis is unsuccessful. If the Trinity were indeed just a community composed by individuals, it would be no different from Tritheism. If so, *perichoresis* could be ascribed to any form of pagan polytheism. Simplicity prevents such error. No composition in God is to be conceived. *Perichoresis* is based on simplicity.

## **Conclusion**

The doctrine of simplicity plays an important role in the formulation of the doctrine of Trinity. This paper defends the thesis that the doctrine of simplicity is not an obstacle but

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<sup>34</sup> àBrakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1:145.

an indispensable guard for the formulation of the doctrine of Trinity. It examines several *loci* within the doctrine of Trinity: *homoousios*, eternal generation and procession, distinction between the essence and person (as well as between persons), and *perichoresis*, and interacts with different critiques to divine simplicity and classic Trinitarianism, demonstrating that in each point the doctrine of divine simplicity is actively involved in the formulation of Trinity and guard the process from possible errors.

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