AGAINST PRAXEAS – HOW FAR DID TERTULLIAN ADVANCE THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY?

Harold F. Carl, Ph.D.

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus was born between 150 and 160, believed to be the son of a centurion.[1] Whether or not he was in fact a jurist, his logical argumentation and piercing rhetoric is evident in all of his 31 surviving works.[2] Tertullian flourished in Carthage and Rome where he aligned himself with the Montanist sect. He died between 222 and 225.

Tertullian's importance as an apologist and theologian cannot be overestimated. Sellers calls him the "Origen of the West." He coined the word *Trinity*, and solidified the technical terminology that became the standard way of speaking about the being of God in the Trinity and the person of Christ for the Latin church after him.[3]

But how far did Tertullian advance the doctrine of the Trinity? Does he cover what would be considered the main areas of concern? Are there problem areas? In this study, we will show that Tertullian does teach that (1) there is one God only; (2) God exists in three distinct persons (whether or not eternally is yet to be seen); (3) aside from some functional and economic considerations these three persons are equal in being and attributes.

TERMINOLOGY

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[1] Williston Walker accepts Tertullian's traditional parentage and legal vocation as fact. Eric Osborn believes both to have been disproved. Williston Walker, <u>Great Men of the Christian Church</u>, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1934), 28; Eric Osborn, *Tertullian,* in <u>The First Christian Theologians</u>, ed. G. R. Evans (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004), 143.

[2] Walker comments that after his conversion some time near 185-195, he "manifested at once a Puritan severity." Walker, <u>Great Men</u>, 29. One of the best examples of his rhetoric can be found in *Against Marcion*, where Marcion claims that Jesus did not have a body. Tertullian retorts, "You may, I assure you, more easily find a man born without a heart or without brains, like Marcion himself, than without a body, like Marcion's Christ." Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, trans. Peter Holmes, in <u>Latin Christianity: Its Founder Tertullian</u>, vol. 3, <u>The Anti-Nicene Fathers</u>, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 4.10.

[3] R. V. Sellers, <u>The Council of Chalcedon: A Historical and Doctrinal Survey</u>, (London: SPCK, 1953), 187; Eric Osborn, <u>Tertullian, First Theologian of the West</u>, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Virtual Publishing) for and on Behalf of the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2001), 116.

Before looking in depth at Tertullian's theology, it is important to define briefly several terms.

Substantia. Substance may be the key concept for understanding Tertullian's doctrine of the Trinity. For Tertullian, substance is "the constitutive material of a thing."[4] Substance is that which brings unity to the Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may be distinct persons, but they share a common divine substance. Phrases communicating the "unity of substance" among the members of the Trinity are very common in *Against Praxeas*.[5] Son and Holy Spirit are "joined with the Father in His substance" and "members of the Father's own substance."[6] The Son is derived "from no other source but from the substance of the Father."[7] For Tertullian, the phrase "I and my Father are One" refers to a unity of substance, not a singularity of number.[8] In the incarnation, Jesus consists of two substances [natures], divine and human, not mixed but joined in one person.[9]

Oikonomia. A collateral term that helps explain the sharing of substance within the godhead is economy (*oikonomia*). G. L. Prestige believes that the term is "literally untranslatable," but that it can be understood to mean that the substance of the godhead is relayed to each person of the Trinity. Other uses of *oikonomia* in Tertullian show that it also implies a constructive order and system within the one God.[10] It is sometimes used in a more broad sense to describe the whole doctrine or dogma of Trinitarian theology, as the subject

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[4] Osborn, Tertullian, First Theologian, 131.

[5] "*unius autem substantiae,*" Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, trans. Peter Holmes, in Latin Christianity: Its Founder Tertullian, vol. 3, The Anti-Nicene Fathers, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), chap. 2, 13, 19, 25. Subsequent notes on *Against Praxeas* will reference chapter numbers followed by page numbers. The term "substance" occurs some 49 times in *Against Praxeas*. Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean*, in *CORPUS CHRISTIANORUM, SERIES LATINA,* vol. 2 (Turnholt, Belgium: *Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii,* 1954), 2.34-35, 1161.

[6] Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 3.599.

[7] Ibid, 4.599.

[8] Ibid, 25.621.

[9] Ibid, 27.624.

[10] G. L. Prestige, God in Patristic Thought, (London: SPCK, 1952), 99-102.

heading of Chapter 2 suggests: "The catholic doctrine of the Trinity and unity, sometimes called the divine economy, or dispensation of the personal relations of the Godhead." [11] Often, in *Against Praxeas*, it is contrasted with the term monarchy to show the diversity in the oneness of God. God is both one in his "monarchy" and three in his "economy."[12] Tertullian's doctrine of the trinity is an "economic Trinity" in that almost every formulation is made in the context of the work of God in creation and redemption. Tertullian is almost always thinking practically and functionally, in terms of role and action, and rarely abstractly.[13]

  Persona. Those who share the one substance of the Godhead exist in three *persona*. While *substantia* refers to what joins and unifies the inner life of the Godhead, *persona* points to what characterizes and distinguishes it.[14] The Son acknowledges the Father "speaking in his own person under the name of Wisdom." When God said, "Let *us* make man in *our* own image," He spoke in this way because "He had already His Son close at His side, as a second person, His own Word, and a third person also, the Spirit in the Word."[15]

ONE GOD

  Even though Tertullian is the man who coined the phrase "Trinity,"[16] he takes great pains to assert the oneness of God. This makes sense, since it appears that Praxeas, who is a modalist, contends that the doctrines of the oneness of God and the Trinity are mutually exclusive. Tertullian argues that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in condition, substance, and power (*status, substantia, potestas*).[17] Son and Holy Spirit are "members of the Father's own

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[11] Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 2.598.
[12] Ibid, 8, 9, 30. The term *oikonomia* occurs 12 times in *Against Praxeas*.
[13] R. Kearsley, *Tertullian,* in New Dictionary of Theology, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 1988), 676-677.
[14] Osborn, Tertullian, First Theologian, 137.
[15] Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 7.602, 12.606. The term *persona* appears 72 times in *Against Praxeas*.
[16] There are16 usages of the word "trinity" in *Against Praxeas*.
[17]Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 2.598.

substance, pledges of His love, instruments of His might."[18] The Son proceeds from the Father.

The Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son. But this point of differentiation is also a

point of unity. The Word's procession from the Father is that which makes him equal to the

Father.

> "He proceeds forth from God, and in that procession He is generated; so that He is the Son of God, and is called God from unity of substance with God . . . that which has come forth out of God is at once God and the Son of God, and the two are one . . .He is made second in manner of existence – in position, not in nature." [19]

While it was the person of the Son who acted on earth, it was "uniformly one God" who at all

times acted through the agency of the Son.[20] Divine names, such as Almighty God and Lord of

Hosts, are equally applicable to both the Father and the Son.[21] The three persons are "susceptible

of number without division" because the Son is undivided and inseparable from the Father.[22]

The Son is distinct in degree, not in state. He is entitled to be called God from His union with

the Father. The Son shares a unity with the Father in Creation of all things.[23] The Word is God,

but He is "God regarded as the Son of God, not as the Father."[24]

THREE PERSONS

Contrary to the teaching of Praxeas, those who follow the Paraclete, instead of human

teachers, teach that "*Two* Beings are God, the Father and the Son, and with the addition of the

Holy Spirit, even *Three* . . . the Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God,

and each is God."[25] While the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one in condition, substance and

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[18] Ibid, 3.599.

[19] Tertullian, *The Apology*, trans. S. Thelwall , in <u>Latin Christianity: Its Founder Tertullian</u>, vol. 3, <u>The Anti-Nicene Fathers,</u> ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), chap. 21, p. 34; See also *Against Praxeas*, 4.599-600.

[20] Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 16.

[21] Ibid, 16.612. The names "God" and "Lord" are applicable to all three. Ibid, 17.612-613, 13.607-608.

[22] Ibid, 2.598, 18.613.

[23] Ibid, 19.614-615. The term "unity" occurs 25 times in *Against Praxeas*.

[24] Ibid, 21.615.

[25] Ibid, 13.608.

power, they are three in degree, form and aspect (***gradus, forma, species***).[26] Tertullian describes

the Son and the Holy Spirit as those "who have the second and the third places assigned to

them," but in the same sentence adds, "and who are so closely joined with the Father in His

substance."[27] Here we get Tertullian's clear sense of the equality of, and also the distinction

between, the persons of the Trinity. It is because They proceed from the Father that the Word

and Holy Spirit are equal to the Father. "Thus does He make Him [the Word] equal to Him [the

Father]: for by proceeding from Himself He became His first-begotten Son."[28] Tertullian also

makes a clear functional differentiation between the persons. The Son (the Word) is He who is

incarnate. The Son functions as the Revealer of God on earth in both the Old and New

Testaments.[29]

 The earliest language of the Scriptures speaks of the three persons of the Trinity. In

chapter twelve, Tertullian questions how it is possible for a Being who is merely and absolutely

one and singular to speak in the plural of Himself when He says, "Let us make man in our own

image, and after our own likeness," and "Behold the man is become as one of us." Tertullian

proposes several solutions:

> He is either deceiving or amusing us in speaking plurally, if He is One only and singular.
> Or was it to the angels that He spoke, as the Jews interpret the passage, because these
> also acknowledge not the Son? Or was it because He was at once the Father, the Son and
> the Spirit, that He spoke to Himself in plural terms, making Himself plural on that very
> account? Nay, it was because He had already His Son close at His side, as a second
> Person, His own Word, and a third, Person also, the Spirit in the Word, that He purposely
> adopted the plural phrase . . . For with whom did He make man? And to whom did He
> make him like? (The answer must be), the Son on the one hand, who was one day to put
> on human nature and the Spirit on the other, who was to sanctify man. With these did He
> then speak, in the unity of the Trinity.[30]

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[26] Ibid, 2.598.
[27] Ibid, 3.599.
[28] Ibid, 7.601
[29] Ibid, 14, 15, 16, 21, 27. (More on this in a later section.)
[30] Ibid, 12.606-607.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PERSONS

It is when one looks deeper at the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that one gets to the heart of what Tertullian is doing, albeit in an apologetical and rhetorical fashion, in *Against Praxeas*. He is seeking to explain how God can be "one substance in three persons." The trinity of metaphors Tertullian regularly employs to describe the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is that of the root-tree-fruit, the sun-ray-apex, and the fountain-river-stream. God sent forth the Word as a root puts forth the tree, and the fountain the river and the sun the ray. These are "`probolai,` or *emanations*, of the substances from which they proceed."[31] Each of these sources is a parent and the emanations are their offspring. Yet the tree is not severed from the root, nor the river from the fountain, nor the ray from the sun. None of the emanations are alien from their source. Each derives its properties from the source.

The Father and the Word are called "two," as in the metaphors, two things, but correlatively joined, two forms, but indivisible and coherent. The Son is "second" as each thing in the metaphors (tree, river, ray) which proceeds is "second" from the source. The Holy Spirit is a third from the Father and the Son.

In *Against Praxeas* chapter 13, Tertullian uses the metaphors in a slightly different way. One may call both the sun itself and the sunbeam "sun," without making two suns, because they are of the same substance. One may also call both the Father and the Son "God," without creating two gods, because they are one undivided substance.[32] In *The Apology*, he further explains, using the same analogy, that when the ray is shot from the sun, it is still part of the

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[31] Ibid, 8.603. "*Nam et istae species* `probolai` *sunt earum substantiarum ex quibus prodeunt.*" Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean*, 8.28-29, 1167-1168.

[32] "*Nam et soles duos faciam. Tamen et solem et radium eius tam / duas res et duas species unius et indiuisae substantia numerabo, quam Deum et sermonem eius, quam Patrem et Filium.*" Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean*, 13.74-77, 1176.

parent mass. The sun will still be in the ray because it is a ray of the sun. There is no division of substance, only an extension. In the same way, Christ is God because He comes from the Father.

> Thus Christ is Spirit of Spirit, and God of God, as light of light is kindled. The material matrix remains entire and unimpaired . . . that which has come forth out of God is at once God and the Son of God, and the two are one. In this way also, He is Spirit of Spirit and God of God, He is made a second in manner of existence - - in position, not in nature; and He did not withdraw from the original source, but went forth.[33]

These metaphors are also used to show distinctions between the persons of the Trinity. Tertullian's main point in chapter 29 is that it was the second person of the Trinity who suffered, not the Father. Praxean modalism would teach that God the Father, who is the divinity (the Christ) in Jesus, is the one who suffered. Tertullian argues that the Father is separate from the Son. But He is not separate as God. Then he employs the metaphor. A river may be soiled with mud and mire. Even though it flows from a fountain of identical nature, the fountain up stream is not soiled. Both contain the same water, but only one is dirtied. Likewise, the Spirit of God may be and is completely capable of suffering "in the Son," yet He could not suffer in the Father, "the fountain of the Godhead."[34] Modern readers may not be too impressed by these analogies, at least not the sun and the sunbeam analogy. But the root / tree and fountain / river analogies at least convey the idea of "same substance" which Tertullian is usually trying to communicate. What Tertullian fails to do is speak of what is communicated through the shared divine substance. Augustine also uses the metaphors of the fountain and river and the root and the trunk. After Tertullian, he argues that although Father and Son are of the same substance (water / wood), they are not the same person (fountain / river; root / trunk).[35]

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[33] Tertullian, *The Apology*, 21.

[34] Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 29.626. This language referring to the Father as the "fountain of the Godhead" is very common among later Trinitarian authors.

[35] Augustine, *A Treatise on Faith and the Creed*, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, in <u>Augustine: On the Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises</u>, vol. 3, <u>The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church</u>, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), chap. 9, sect. 17, p. 328.

Tertullian also uses an argument from the relational language of Scripture to show the distinction between the Father and the Son. When God says, "My heart hath emitted my most excellent Word" (Ps 45:1), "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten Thee" (Ps 2:7), "The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way" (Pr 8:22), to say the one speaking and the one spoken of are one in the same person makes linguistic and logical nonsense of the text of Scripture. Tertullian argues that throughout the prophetic Psalms, one can find evidence of one person of the Trinity conversing with another.[36] When Psalm 45:7 says, "Therefore God, even Thy God, hath anointed Thee," the psalmist affirms that "God is anointed by God." He is either teaching polytheism or multiple persons in the Godhead.[37]

Later, in chapters 21 thru 25, Tertullian works through the Gospel of John to show the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There was "One who was from the beginning, and also One with whom He always was." There was One who revealed another's glory, and One whose glory was revealed, One who gave His only begotten, and an Only Begotten who was given, One who was sent, and One who sent, a Father in heaven and a Son on earth who came in the Father's name. These two cannot be the same person, because there is love between them.[38] Where the law required the testimony of two witnesses, the testimony of the Father and Son are sufficient (John 8:17).

> "I am one who am bearing witness of myself; and the Father (is another) who hath sent me, and beareth witness of me." Now, if He were one [*person*] – being at once both the Son and the Father – He certainly would not have quoted the sanction of the law, which requires not the testimony of one, but of two.[39]

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[36] Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 11.605.
[37] Ibid, 13.607.
[38] Ibid, 21.615-616.
[39] Ibid, 22.617.

The Father gives the Son His sheep and no one can pluck them out of His hand (John 10:28). Even Praxeas's favorite verse, "I and my Father are one," (Jn 10:30) is turned against him. For the passage implies two beings (I and my father), there is a plural predicate (are), and the predicate terminates in an abstract, not a personal noun ("we are one *thing*" *Unum*, not "one person" *Unus*.). *Unum*, argues Tertullian, being neuter, argues unity of essence, not singularity of number.[40]

Finally, Jesus prays to the Father on numerous occasions (Jn 11:41-42; Jn 17) and the Father answers from heaven in an audible voice (Matt 17:5; Mk 9:7; Lk 9:35). "How many persons are there?" Tertullian asks. At least as many as there are voices. How can this be if they are one in the same person?

> If either the Father spake from heaven to the Son when He Himself was the Son on earth, or the Son prayed to the Father when He was Himself the Son in heaven, how happens it that the Son made a request of His own very self, by asking it of the Father, since the Son was the Father? Or, on the other hand, how is it that the Father made a promise to Himself, by making it to the Son, since the Father was the Son?[41]

Even in this context, where one perceives the Son on earth praying to the Father who is in heaven, Tertullian asserts the omnipresence and equality of both.

> We know, however, that God is in the bottomless depths and exists everywhere; but then it is by power and authority. We are also sure that the Son, being indivisible from Him, is everywhere with Him. Nevertheless, in the Economy or Dispensation itself, the Father willed that the Son should be regarded as on earth, and Himself in heaven; whither the Son also Himself looked up and prayed, and made supplication of the Father; whither also He taught us to raise ourselves, and pray, "Our Father which art in heaven," etc., - although, indeed He is everywhere present.[42]

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[40] Ibid, 22.618.
[41] Ibid, 23.618-619.
[42] Ibid.

Tertullian's formulation here clearly predates Calvin's formulation of the *extra calvinisticum.*[43]

Several of the above examples focus on the functional distinction between the Father and the Son. When Tertullian refers to creation, he differentiates between the One who commands and the One who executes the order and creates.

Now if He too is God, according to John, who says, "The Word was God," then you have two Beings--One that commands that the thing be made, and the Other that executes the order and creates. In what sense, however, you ought to understand Him to be another, I have already explained, on the ground of Personality, not of Substance--in the way of distinction, not of division. But although I must everywhere hold one only substance in three coherent and inseparable (Persons), yet I am bound to acknowledge, from the necessity of the case, that He who issues a command is different from Him who executes it. For, indeed, He would not be issuing a command if He were all the while doing the work Himself, while ordering it to be done by the second. But still He did issue the command, although He would not have intended to command Himself if He were only one; or else He must have worked without any command, because He would not have waited to command Himself.[44]

Due to his apologetical task, Tertullian is primarily interested in the relationship between the Father and the Son, but he does not leave the Holy Spirit out of the discussion. Jesus promises to pray to the Father so that the Father will send the Holy Spirit who is "another Comforter . . . even the Spirit of Truth," thus making the *Paraclete* distinct from Himself. The Son is a second decree from God, the *Paraclete*, a third degree.[45] The Holy Spirit is the "Third Name in the Godhead," the "Third Degree of the Divine Majesty," the "Declarer of the One Monarchy of God," "the Leader into all truth," and the "Interpreter of the *Economy*."[46]

One of Tertullian's most interesting concepts is his idea of the Son as the revealer of the Godhead. Tertullian finds in Scripture a paradox. Scripture teaches clearly that no one can see

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[43] John Calvin, <u>Institutes of the Christian Religion</u>, ed. John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, vols. 20 and 21, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), book 2, chapt. 13, section 4, vol. 1, p. 480.

[44] Ibid, 12.607.

[45] Ibid, 9.603-604; See also chapters 2, 8, 13.

[46] Ibid, 30.627.

God and live, that no one has seen God at any time and that God exists in inapproachable light. Yet God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. He shut up the ark. He spoke to Moses face to face. He appeared to Abraham and the prophets. He appeared as "the fourth" in the fiery furnace. How are both of these sets of statements true?[47]

Tertullian solves the paradox with the distinction of persons in the Godhead. God is invisible as the Father and visible as the Son. In one sense, neither the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit are visible, in that they are God. But the Son makes himself visible in enigma, in vision, in dream, as in a glass darkly.[48] The Son is not only visible in the days of his flesh, but "before the days of his flesh." All Theophanies in Scripture are Christophanies.

> He is one, who anciently was visible only in mystery and enigma, and became more clearly visible by His incarnation, even the Word who was also made flesh; whilst He is another whom no man has seen at any time, being none else than the Father . . . He was always seen from the beginning, who became visible in the end; and that He (on the contrary,) was not seen in the end who had never been visible from the beginning; and that accordingly there are two - the Visible and the Invisible. It was the Son, therefore, who was always seen, and the Son who always conversed with men.[49]

The pre-incarnate appearances of the Son were "rehearsals" of the Incarnation. Knowing that God had revealed Himself in such a way in the past leveled the way of faith for the believers to accept the idea that God could reveal Himself.[50] When Jesus says, "Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape," (John 5:37) he is affirming that it was not the Father who was seen in past times, but the Son.[51] It was the Son, the Word, who actually communed with the patriarchs and prophets and from the beginning held intercourse with men.[52]

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[47] Ibid, 14 -16.609-612.
[48] Ibid, 14.610.
[49] Ibid, 15.610.
[50] Ibid, 16.611.
[51] Ibid, 21.616.
[52] Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 2.27; 5.19.

DID THE SON ALWAYS EXIST?

One thorny problem to the modern interpreter of Tertullian is his language in some of his writings about the apparent beginning of the existence of the second person of the Trinity. In *Against Hermogenes*, Tertullian is refuting Hermogenes' idea that matter is eternal. Tertullian argues that God alone eternally exists as a divine substance. The name "God" is eternally applicable to Him because it refers to the divine substance itself. But even the titles, "Lord," "Father," and "Judge," on the other hand, are functional. They are only applicable when the thing occurs that cause them to be true. They are not eternally true.

> God is the designation of the substance it self, that is, of the Divinity; but Lord is (the name) not of substance, but of power. I maintain that the substance existed always with its own name, which is God; the title Lord was afterwards added, as the indication indeed of something occurring . . . Because God is in like manner a Father, and He is also a Judge; but He has not always been Father and Judge, merely on the ground of His having always been God. For He could not have been the Father previous to the Son, nor a Judge previous to sin. There was, however, a time when neither sin existed with Him, nor the Son; the former of which was to constitute the Lord a Judge, and the latter a Father.[53]

Later in chapter 18 of *Against Hermogenes*, Tertullian also uses language that appears to contradict the eternality of the Son. Again he is arguing against the eternality of matter. God's "wisdom" or "word" was present with Him before the creation. The Word is the one in whom the Lord took delight and with whom He daily rejoiced before the foundation of the earth. But, even the very Word or Wisdom of God had a beginning. God created Him in time.

> Indeed, as soon as He perceived It to be necessary for His creation of the world, He immediately creates It, and generates It in Himself . . . Let Hermogenes then confess that the very Wisdom of God is declared to be born and created, for the especial reason that we should not suppose that there is any other being than God alone who is unbegotten and uncreated. For if that, which from its being inherent in the Lord was of Him and in

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[53] Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes*, trans. Peter Holmes, in <u>Latin Christianity: Its Founder Tertullian</u>, vol. 3, <u>The Anti-Nicene Fathers</u>, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), chap. 3.

Him, was yet not without a beginning, - - I mean His wisdom, which was then born and created, when in the thought of God It began to assume motion for the arrangement of His creative works, - - how much more impossible is it that anything should have been without a beginning which was extrinsic to the Lord! But if this same Wisdom is the Word of God, in the capacity of Wisdom, and (as being He) without whom nothing was made, just as also (nothing) was set in order without Wisdom, how can it be that anything, except the Father, should be older, and on this account indeed nobler, than the Son of God, the only-begotten and the first-begotten Word?[54]

In *Against Praxeas*, Tertullian uses some equally perplexing language. Before all things, God was alone. But even then, He was not alone because He had "that which He possessed in Himself – His Reason." This reason is God's own thought which the Greeks call logo~ and which Tertullian designates "Word" or "Discourse." God did not have the Word from the beginning, but he had Reason even before the beginning. However, Word consists of Reason. And even when God had not yet sent out His Word, He still possessed the Word within Himself.

> For before all things God was alone – being in Himself and for Himself universe, and space and all things. Moreover, He was alone, because there was nothing external to Him but Himself. Yet even not then was He alone; for He had with Him that which He possessed in Himself, that is to say, His own Reason. . . This Reason is His own Thought (or Consciousness) which the Greeks call logo~, by which term we also designate Word or Discourse . . . God had not Word from the beginning, but He had Reason even before the beginning; because also Word itself consists of Reason . . . For although God had not yet sent out His Word, He still had Him within Himself, both in company with and included within His very Reason, as He silently planned and arranged within Himself . . . He has reason within Himself even while He is silent, and involved in that Reason His Word! I may therefore without rashness first lay this down (as a fixed principle) that even then before the creation of the universe God was not alone, since He had within Himself both Reason, and, inherent in Reason, His Word, which He made second to Himself by agitating it within Himself. [55]

> This is the perfect nativity of the Word, when He proceeds forth from God – formed – by Him first to devise and think out all things under the name of Wisdom . . . then afterward begotten, to carry all into effect. . .Thus does He make Him equal to Him: for by proceeding from Himself he became His first-begotten Son, because begotten before all things; and His only-begotten also, because alone begotten of God, in a way peculiar to Himself, from the womb of His own heart – even as the Father Himself testifies: "My

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[54] Ibid, 18.
[55] Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 5.600.

heart," he says, "hath emitted my most excellent Word." . . . He became also the Son of God, and was begotten when He proceeded forth from Him.[56]

Tertullian seems to promote an eternal possession of the Word and Reason, and yet at the same time a generation or emission in time. Osborn explains this as an "intelligent exploitation" of the Stoic distinction between internal and uttered word. God always possessed the Word internally, but did not always speak. But inner reason and the spoken word are always essential to each other.[57]

These statements are most perplexing because of other things Tertullian says about the Word. It is essential for one to believe that God is unchangeable. God "neither ceases to be what He was, nor can He be anything than what He is." Tertullian's very next words are "The Word is God."[58] Christ is the very Being who, from the beginning, caused plurality in the divine economy.[59] So how does one evaluate this part of Tertullian's theology? Tertullian must be read in his timeframe. He is battling modalism on the one hand and polytheism on the other. He clearly asserts the deity and equality of the three persons of the Trinity. But there are these passages which question the eternality of the Son. The generation of the Son does not appear to be a part Tertullian's theology that he reasoned to its logical and theological conclusions.

HOW FAR DID TERTULLIAN ADVANCE THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY?

Tertullian did a great deal to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity. There is one God who is one undivided substance. He exists in three persons who equally share that same substance. They are susceptible to number without division. The Son and the Spirit are generated and

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[56] Ibid, 7.601. See also chapter 19 where Tertullian contrasts the Word, who was sent forth in the beginning by the Father, with the Father, who "has no beginning, as proceeding from none." Here Tertullian seems to equate procession with beginning in time.
[57] Osborn, <u>Tertullian, First Theologian</u>, 124.
[58] Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 27.623
[59] Ibid, 13.608.

proceed from the Father. While the three persons in the Trinity possess functional or economic differences, they are substantially and essentially the same.

The three persons in the Trinity relate and interact in all kinds of ways. They speak to one another. The Son and the Spirit pray to and advocate before the Father. They praise and affirm one another. They testify concerning one another. They command and obey. They send and go forth. They express love toward one another.

Tertullian was not consistent in his language concerning the eternal possession of the Word or Wisdom by God and His apparent generation in time. He does not seem to connect this with the full and proper deity of the Son, which he affirms. Deity, for him, comes through partaking of the Father's very substance. All of his other language concerning the deity of Christ appears orthodox.

THE PRACTICAL VALUE OF TERTULLIAN FOR TODAY

Tertullian developed a very useful apologetic for interacting with modern modalists: his idea of relational language in the Gospels, especially the Gospel of John. Living and ministering in Texas, the heart and birthplace of oneness Pentecostalism, I have a pragmatic and vested interest in Trinitarian apologetics. United Pentecostal students of mine have been perplexed when faced with Tertullian's questions: Who is Jesus praying to when He prays His high priestly prayer, Himself? Who had glory with the Father before the world began? Surely not the human nature of Jesus? Doesn't it make logical, theological and linguistic nonsense of the text in John 14-16 if Jesus is praying to Himself, to send another counselor (Himself), to be with the disciples after He Himself leaves? How does He speak of Himself and the Father as "we"? Does He send Himself? Does He obey Himself? Who was God the Father commanding when He said, "Let

there be light"? These are questions for which Modalism, ancient and modern, has no satisfactory answers, but for which Tertullian has alternate answers. Many of Tertullian's arguments are still useful in this regard. Even given his inconsistencies, his doctrine of the Trinity is well-developed for his time and useful for our time. Modern students and theologians would do well to study Tertullian.

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