Augustine and His Trinity:
Modalistic Monarchianism and Tritheism
Unwittingly Embracing Two Contradictory Propositions Without Apology or Explanation
by:
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Introducing the Indictment

It is doubtful that Western Christian Trinitarian theology has been more influenced by anyone other than the greatest of the Latin Fathers. The one who became *post apostolos ominium ecclesiarum magister*, the leader of the church after all the apostles, Aurelius Augustinus, usually referred to simply as Augustine, bishop of Hippo[1](354-430).[2] Much of 21st century Western Christian trinitarian argumentation, analogies and ways of speaking about the trinity are typically unknowingly more or less a direct offspring of illustrations and discussions found in Augustine's famous treaties on the subject, *De Trinitas*. It is my contention, that many of Augustine's statements about the trinity in *De Trinitas* sadly vacillate between tritheism (belief in three Gods) and modalistic monarchianism (God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are one person),[3] leaving the reader with only a contradictory proposition. In order to hold two diametrically opposed propositions, that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Sprit is God, and that there is only one God Augustine must defy logic, use incommunicable language, and distort Scripture.

The Big Picture

Augustine's original contribution to trinitarian argumentation comes largely, but not exclusively from 15 books he composed over a span of 20 years (400-420) toward the end of his life, called *De Trinitate*.[4] Before delving into some of the specific argumentation of his

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[1] Regius in Numidia in Roman North Africa

[2] D.F. Wright, "Augustine of Hippo (354-430)." *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 86-88.

[3] Essentially one actor wearing different masks.

[4] The English translation is, *On The Trinity*. Augustine also comments and analyzes the Trinity in *Sermons for Christmas and Epiphany, Enchiridion, Faith, Hope and Charity, Confessions, Letters, On Christian Teaching, City of God, Faith and the Creed, Of the Morals of the Catholic Church, Reply to Faustus the Manichaean, On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, On the Baptism of Infants, On Rebuke and Grace, On the Predestination of the Saints, On the Gift of Perseverance, On the Spirit and the Letter, On the Soul and Its Origin, The Harmony of the Gospels,* and *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament.* I am indebted to Roger Olson and Christopher Hall for this list, which is in one of their footnotes. See Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 46.

treaties, let's look at a simplified overview. Augustinian scholar Philip Cary outlines the general structure of the book and then Augustine's distinctive theme as follows:

1. Books 1-4 are concerned with the *theophanies*, i.e., the visible manifestations of God in the Bible. Augustine argues that no visible appearance can represent God adequately and hence that none of the biblical theophanies reveals the trinitarian structure of God.
2. Books 5-7 spell out the logic of Nicene doctrine.
3. Books 8-15 address the question: since the logic of the doctrine of the Trinity is so strange and none of the theophanies explain it, by what means are we to conceive of the trinitarian God? This is the most original (and distinctively Augustinian) part of the treatise. It focuses on:

1. As the soul was the clue to the incorporeal nature of God in *Confessions* 7, so here the soul is the clue to the trinitarian structure of God.
2. Augustine's key notion is that the human self is triadic in structure, in a way that reflects the trinitarian structure of God.
3. The triad of self-knowledge: Memory, Understanding, and Will. Each one of these *is* the mind, yet each distinct – like the Trinity.
4. The triad of self-love: Lover, Beloved, Love are one and yet distinct from one another.
5. For Augustine, the Holy Spirit is like the bond of love that unites Father and Son (the love between the Father and the Son *is* the Holy Spirit).[5]

Empty, Null and Void Terminology

Augustine strived to be logical thinker; in fact, he did not accept the terminology handed down to him from the Greeks because it was contradictory in Latin. Augustine says: "But because with us the usage has already obtained, that by essence we understand the same thing which is understood by substance; we do not dare to say one essence, three substances, but one essence or substance and three persons…."[6] By switching terms, he avoids the obvious contradiction of using language that would be blatantly incongruous, but does using the word 'person' help Augustine deflect the charge that the terminology then reflects three God's? This is a question that Augustine seems not be bothered by, yet struggles to answer. Here is Augustine's dilemma in his own words:

> Some persons, however, find a difficulty in this faith; when they hear that the Father is God, and the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God, and yet that this Trinity is not

three Gods, but one God; and they ask how they are to understand this: especially when it is said that the Trinity works indivisibly in everything that God works, and yet that a certain voice of the Father spoke, which is not the voice of the Son; and that none expect the Son was born in the flesh, and suffered, and rose again, and ascended into heaven; and that none except the Holy Spirit came in the form of a dove.[7]

The problem seems clear enough. The orthodox speak of three different entities, three separate beings, Augustine uses the word persons, to describe the three. Yet does not the language he uses communicate three gods just as clearly as if he would have said, Zeus spoke from heaven, Hercules died and rose again, and Hermes came in the form of a dove? When these names of Greek mythology figures are substituted for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it becomes all the more clear that Augustine is thinking of three gods, but refuses to admit it because this would directly contradict Scripture's monotheistic affirmation as found in the *Shema*. In fact, this is his frank acknowledgment,

> …why do we not also say three Gods?…Is it because Scripture does not say three Gods? But neither do we find that Scripture anywhere mentions three persons…it was lawful through the mere necessity of speaking and reasoning to say three persons, not because Scripture says it, but because Scripture does not contradict it: whereas, if we were to say three Gods, Scripture would contradict it, which says, 'Hear, O Israel; the Lord thy God is one God?'[8]

It is supremely unfortunate that Augustine felt the need to escape the logical implications of his own viewpoint and embrace a word just so that he could say something instead of nothing. Augustine candidly admits:

> Yet, when the question is asked, What three? human language labors altogether under great poverty of speech. The answer, however, is given, three 'persons,' not that it might be [completely] spoken, but that it might not be left [wholly] unspoken.[9]

At this point, I would think that as a scholar and a linguist, Augustine would have just acknowledged that he found three God's in Scripture instead of playing word games and language tricks. His inexplicable proposition that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, yet there are not three Gods, unmistakably defies the laws of logic. There are plainly three Gods if this is the case, regardless if Augustine claims the contrary.

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[7] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 21, 1:5:8.

[8] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 110, 7:4:8.

[9] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 92, 5:9:10.

Millard Erickson quotes Christian logician Steven Davis who summarizes the serious difficulty:

1. The Father is God.
2. The Son is God.
3. The Holy Spirit is God.
4. The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is not the Father.
5. There is one and only one God.

The problem is that these statements seem to constitute an inconsistent set, that is, a set of statements not all of whose members can be true. This can be shown easily, since, 1,2,3 and 5 entail:

6. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one thing.

And 4 entails:

7. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are separate things.

Since 6 and 7 are obviously inconsistent, 1-5 must be an inconsistent set of statements, in which case they cannot rationally be believed. If Christians are required to affirm both 6 and 7, as it seems they must, it then appears to be the case that they are obliged to contradict themselves…The truth of one premise, namely, 'God is one,' seems to imply the falsity of the other, namely, 'God is three.' How to resolve this tension has been the logical problem of the Trinity."[10]

Phillip Carey notes,

[T]he doctrine literally does not add up. Nicene doctrine names three distinct individual beings as God and then says they don't add up to three Gods. Hence Nicene theologians must say God is beyond counting, beyond number – and thus beyond rational understanding. This was, however, a very common thing to say about God in the Platonist philosophical tradition.[11]

Driven into an inexplicable linguistic safe haven, Augustine seems to stretch the rules of language[12] in order to not concede to his theological contemporaries, whom he seems to demonize by calling them heretics. "What therefore remains, except that we confess that these terms sprang from the necessity of speaking, when copious reasoning was required

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[10] Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 131.

[11] Phillip Cary, *Augustine*, 45.

[12] If I said God is three *bogolinza*, and then said that I use this word because I must say something, I would be charged of language foul play, or as I have said, stretching the rules of language.

against the devices or errors of the heretics?"[13] Was Augustine being stubborn, or was this a valid tactic? Augustine reveals his purpose of writing the treaties in the introduction to the first chapter: "This work is written against those who sophistically assail the faith of the Trinity, through misuse of reason."[14] It is questionable whether Augustine is not himself committing that which he is so opposed to.

The Old Battle Between Faith and Reason

Inexplicably, just sentences later, he writes,

> The following dissertation concerning the Trinity, as the reader ought to be informed, has been written in order to guard against the sophistries of those who distain to begin with faith, and are deceived by a crude and perverse love of reason.[15]

What does it mean to begin with faith? Is Augustine requesting that his readers just accept propositions prior to examining and thinking through them? Augustine then makes a statement that later became a prominent maxim within Christendom: "And if this cannot be grasped by the understanding, let it be held by faith…."[16] In saying this, Augustine seems to imply that faith in the unintelligible is a valid, responsible, acceptable method of discerning truth. If the concept being believed is not understood, what is actually being believed? I suggest nothing, or possibly contradictory propositions. If truly contradictory notions can be accepted as true, by what standard can something be falsified? If the same basketball player can be the tallest player on the team and the shortest player on the team at the same time in the same respect, what is actually being communicated? Should not this proposition be rejected, as it is unable to be true? It is not even a possibility. How Augustine would have responded to this line of argumentation, I cannot of course be sure, but surely Augustine demonstrates the use of reason,[17] in his 15 book treatise. Whether it would be proper to

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[13] Augustine, On The Trinity, 110, 7:4:9.

[14] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 17, 1:1.

[15] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 17, 1:1:1.

[16] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 114, 7:6:12

[17] 19th century British church historian Levi Paine speaking of Augustine and *De Trinitas* remarks, "…he began by treating the Trinity as a problem of faith; but it soon developed into a problem of reason. His whole argument starts on the basis of Scripture and revelation, but gradually passes into the remotest regions of philosophy. In fact the book is a most remarkable patchwork of appeal to authority and to reason, and contains some of the wildest specimens of theological metaphysics that can be found anywhere in the whole range of historical theology." Levi Leonard Paine, *A Critical History of The Evolution of Trinitarianism: And Its Outcome in The New Christology* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1900), 71-2.

consider Augustine's clarity on the number of patriarchs in the following passage with a 'perverse love of reason' is open to discussion.

> For when we say that Jacob was not the same as Abraham, but that Isaac was neither Abraham nor Jacob, certainly we confess that they are three, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But when it is asked what three, we reply three men, calling them in the plural by a specific name;…Of the Father, therefore, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, seeing that they are three, let us ask what three they are, and what they have in common.[18]

Everything is so plain, so clear, leading the reader to expect him to confess that there must be three Gods in Scripture, yet perhaps constrained by the creeds, the *Shema*, and a disdain for what he considers heresy, he refuses to do so. Augustine is not alone in this conundrum. Evangelical giant Millard Erickson, who has written at length on the subject of the trinity confesses:

> There is still confusion about just what the doctrine denotes. 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 and one in some other respect, but we do not know precisely what those two different respects are.[19]

Hiding Behind Divine Mystery

With this in mind, it becomes all the more clear as to why Augustine is found struggling with coming up with meaningful words. When reason, logic, and arguments run thin, he is finally found fleeing to divine mystery.

> … in order that there might be something to say when it was asked what the three are, which the true faith pronounces to be three, when it both declares that the Father is not the Son, and that the Holy Spirit, which is the gift of God, is nether the Father nor the Son. When, then, it is asked what the three are, or who the three are, we betake ourselves to the finding out of some special or general name under which we may embrace these three; and no such name occurs to the mind, because the supereminence of the Godhead surpasses the power of customary speech.[20]

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[18] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 109, 7:4:7.

[19] Erickson, *God in Three Persons,* 19. Erickson even mentions that the Christian Logician Steven Davis candidly confesses after examining the major contemporary trinitarian explanations and finding them not to accomplish what they claim, that he does not know in what way God is one and in what different way God is three. See Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 258.

[20] Augustine, On The Trinity, 109-10, 7:4:7.

Augustine is a brilliant writer. His prose is beautiful and often times elegantly poetic. It is so moving that it is easy to miss what Augustine has done. He has placed God beyond the categories of language. In essence, he is resorting to divine mystery to explain how there are three who are God, but not three Gods. It is suspicious that when Augustine is obliged by customary speech to accept that there are three Gods, he pleads that the subject is essentially beyond understanding, ineffable, mysterious and above reason.[21] Why not allow arguments and ordinary language to work against his doctrine instead of escaping into the realm where the idea becomes indefeasible, and therefore impossible to falsify? This is the sad tale of much religion. Many skeptics have scoffed at pastors and priests who have little interest in subjecting their views to examination, critique, and possibly falsification. Scientists publish their works for the very purpose of having their claims checked by the scientific and broader community. Scientists often revise their work and change their thesis when shown to be in error.[22] Religious truths, often thought to have come directly from God are often seen as on another plane altogether. A Christian adage which makes adherents immune from criticism says, 'How can I be wrong? If what I believe is based on my own experience with God, nothing can be said to change my mind.' It is only after people realize that many ideas about God are based on an interpretation of events or ancient texts that self-reflective, critical assessment can take place.[23]

Revelation, Comprehension, and Contradiction

If the doctrine of the trinity is a divine mystery, is it proper to claim that it has been revealed? "Revelation is, by definition, *the unveiling of a mystery:* once revealed, it is a mystery no longer (see Eph. 1:9-10; 3:1-6; Col. 2:2-3); if it remains a mystery, then it has not been revealed. In other words, revelation on God's side corresponds to understanding on the human side."[24] It is true that there are mysteries in the Hebrew tradition, in fact

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[21] This is not uncommon among Christian's, especially among the Reformed tradition. Reformed theologian and historian Robert Letham notes in the preface of his work on the trinity, "…for what an enormous challenge it is to write about the one who is utterly transcendent and incomprehensible!" Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 2004), ix.

[22] I owe this insight to my friend Steve Scianni. I am not saying that pastors and priests don't change their minds, but it is atypical and not commonly welcomed. Clergy usually carry a defensive disposition.

[23] I have covered this issue and others related to intellectual honesty in a separate paper. Dan Mages, "A Humble Plea for Intellectual Honesty and Authenticity among the People of God: A Key to Unlocking Dialogue with a World that has not acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah" (paper presented at the 14th Annual Theological Conference, Atlanta Bible College, Morrow, Georgia, April 29, 2005).

[24] Robert Hach, *Possession and Persuasion: The Rhetoric of Christian Faith* (Xlibris Corporation, 2001), 116.

Deuteronomy 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God…" but we do not know what things are secrets, because they are just that, secrets. Many things have been revealed though, thus, the verse continues by saying, "…but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). As far as the trinity is concerned, Millard Erickson confesses, "To say the doctrine has been revealed is a bit too strong, however, at least with respect to the biblical revelation."[25] In another eye-opening admission, he unequivocally says, "It is unlikely that any text of Scripture can be shown to teach the doctrine of the Trinity in a clear, direct, and unmistakable fashion."[26]

Cosmic Numerology

It seems yet still that Augustine wrestles, struggles, and is belabored from attempting to explain the inexplicable,

> For as the Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, which no one doubts to be said in respect to substance, yet we do not say that the very supreme Trinity itself is three Gods, but one God. So the Father is great, the Son great, and the Holy Spirit great; yet not three greats, but one great…And the Father is good, the Son good, and the Holy Spirit good; yet not three goods, but one good…So the Father is omnipotent, the Son omnipotent, and the Holy Spirit is omnipotent; yet not three omnipotent, but one omnipotent.[27]

Upon first glace, this looks like utter non-sense, and although it may be, we can sympathize with Augustine as he is obviously vacillating between modalistic monarchiansim, and tritheism.[28] He is unable to explain, but just states that there are three who are God, yet not three God's but one. According to Gerald Bray, Augustine is contradictory, confusing, and moving close to modalism.[29] It is as if he is trapped, going from three to one, three to one…. Since he ends up with one, maybe Gerald Bray is making a fair assessment. Nineteenth-century, British church historian Levi Paine, asks, "Was he a Sabellian without

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[25] Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 258.

[26] Erickson, *God in Three Persons,* 109.

[27] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 91, 5:8:9.

[28] According to Levi Paine, "The critical test of Sabelianism *versus* the Nicene doctrine is whether the Trinity is essentially one Being or three Beings. Sabellianism says one Being; Athanasianism says three Beings. Hence Saballianism is monistic, while Athanasianism is trinitarian. Here Augustine plainly sides with Sabellius." Paine, *A Critical History of The Evolution of Trinitarianism*, 75. I tend to think if one believes in three beings, it would be better represented by the term tritheism, rather than trinitarianism, which seems to be more ambiguous. This is why I see Augustine as vacillating between modalism and tritheism instead of trinitarianism.

[29] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 185.

knowing it, and even while striving to distinguish his doctrine from that of Sabellius?"[30] Augustine gives a series of illustrations to show that God is a trinity. Since the illustrations, describe one person, not three, he seems to subscribe to Sabellianism. In reference to God, Augustine writes, "Since, then, these three, memory, understanding, will, are not three lives, but one life; nor three minds, but one mind; it follows certainly that neither are they three substances, but one substance."[31] What has Augustine proved by giving an analogy of memory, understanding and will since all of these descriptions of the processes or functions of the mind reside within a single person?   Reformed theologian and historian Robert Letham agrees,

> In book 9, he introduces the triad of mind, knowledge, and love. This, if effective as an illustration, would prove modalism, not orthodoxy. These are all abstract qualities of a single mind. Again, how is the triad of memory, understanding, and will in book 10 (his favorite illustration) different from modalism?…Similar objections apply to the proposed triads of wisdom, rational knowledge, and animal knowledge (book 12), and memory, thought, and will (book 13)…He returns to the triad of memory, understanding, and will in book 14. The mind remembers, understands, and loves itself. This he claims, is 'a certain kind of trinity.' But he is close to modalism again, for these three things are activities, not personal entities, and are attributes of a single mind. Augustine has his 'attention riveted on the essential unity,' and so the persons are not 'objective realities in their own right, but expressions of real relations inherent in the divine being.[32]

In one sweep of the pen, Letham reveals the true nature of Augustine's original contribution to the trinity. In the 15th, and final book of his treatise, Augustine himself seems to basically acknowledge that his argument would be understood as modalistic, but then more or less responds by resorting to the widespread dictum that, 'God can do all things'.

> In brief, by all these three things, it is I that remember, I that understand, I that love, who am neither memory, nor understanding, nor love, but who have them. These things, then, can be said by a single person, which has these three, but is not these three. But in the simplicity of that Highest Nature, which is God, although there is one God, there are three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.[33]

Apparently frustrated with Augustine, Levi Paine remarks, "How so logical a thinker could have thus lost himself in the mazes of monism and played jumping-jack with his own logic

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[30] Paine, *A Critical History of The Evolution of Trinitarianism*, 74.
[31] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 142, 10:11:18.
[32] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 196-7.
[33] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 222, 15:22:42.

would be a profound mystery to any one who had not studied the history of human speculation."[34] It is as if the whole enterprise of making sense of Augustine's understanding of the trinity is a lost cause, Millard Erickson reiterates, "There is a fundamental difficulty that lies at the heart of the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity: The doctrine seems to be impossible to believe, because at its very core it is contradictory."[35] This makes sense. It is impossible to believe in a square circle or a married bachelor, as these are literally empty, meaningless statements. A statement and its negation cannot both be true. Aristotle expressed the principle of non-contradiction in this way; "Nothing can be and not be at the same time in the same respect."[36] Erickson acknowledges Augustine's trinitarian conundrum:

> The problem here is that of the meaningfulness of the terminology used, namely, that we do not seem to know what we are referring to. Basically, we can identify rather clearly what this form of the doctrine of God is not. It rejects both monotheism and polytheism, but just what it affirms is not as clear. Because God is not an object of our experience, it is difficult for us to describe what the doctrine of the Trinity is referring to. It appears to be without any real analogies.[37]

It is astounding that an Evangelical orthodox trinitarian scholar acknowledges that trinitarain doctrine actually rejects monotheism in positing three persons who are each God in-and-of themselves. Conversely, he says that the doctrine also rejects polytheism by suggesting that there is only one God. By rejecting both, monotheism and polytheism, what is left? Apparently nothing, which is why Erickson says that the doctrine seems to be impossible to believe.

> The usual response is that God is not one and three at the same time and in the same respect. If that is the case, however, what is the respect in which he is one and the respect in which he is three? That is where the vagueness becomes really serious. Distinguishing or defining just what these two dimensions of God's nature are seems at best to be quite difficult. Again, the formula appears quite vacuous.[38]

The Love Argument

Although willing to admit that he was forced to use the word person, just so that he could say something instead of nothing, Augustine does not want to give up on the teaching

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[34] Paine, *A Critical History of the Evolution of Trinitarianism*, 82.

[35] Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 130. Admittedly there is some ambiguity in Erickson's statement here. It is difficult to tell whether he is acknowledging that he thinks the Trinity is a contradictory belief, or whether it just seems like it is. This may be his way as a traditional Evangelical Christian to sound the contradiction alarm with an easy escape route if need be.

[36] Richard Purtill, "Principle of Contradiction" *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd Ed, 737.

[37] Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 21.

[38] Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 21.

handed down to him. Reaching for another "dim illustration"[39] for the trinity in book 8, Augustine uses what I call, "The Love Argument." He implicitly compares God the Father to a lover, Jesus the Son to the beloved, and the Holy Spirit to the love that exists between them. In his words, "Behold, then, there are three things: he that loves, and that which is loved, and love." Letham retorts, "However, this poses immediate problems, for while the lover and the one loved are real personal entities, love is not. This illustration draws into question the personal status of the Holy Spirit."[40] It is difficult not to agree with this assessment. If the Holy Spirit is the love that exists between the Father and the Son, the Spirit could only be an impersonal "it", and not a personal being. Love is an abstract noun, not a personal one. In this regard, Augustine seems to depersonalize and reduce the third member of his trinity to a thing, rather than illustrate a personal being. Ironically a similar argument is often times used today to make sense of human personality. We are relational creatures, only because God is relational in the sense that God has eternally existed as a lover, a beloved and the love between the two. Although I do not find this argument either compelling or convincing, many others do. In fact, by the regularity of its use, some may even wonder if this argument is derived from Scripture. While Augustine does make arguments from Scripture, this is not one of them. So what passage(s) of Scripture reigned as king in Augustine's mind?

Scriptural Considerations

Concerning Jesus being God, he states dogmatically,

> They who have said that our Lord Jesus Christ is not God, or not very God, or not with the Father the One and only God, or not truly immortal because changeable, are proved wrong by the most plain and unanimous voice of divine testimonies; as, for instance, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' For it is plain that we are to take the Word of God to be the only Son of God, of whom it is afterwards said, 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,' on account of that birth of His incarnation, which was wrought in time of the Virgin. But herein is declared, not only that He is God, but also that He is of the same substance with the Father…[41]

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[39] "Augustine is prepared to recognize all this. In his *Confessions*, he says concerning the triad of being, knowledge, and will, that 'these three are far other than the trinity' – a dim illustration, not an analogy. He repeatedly distances himself from Sabellianism, although Harnack thought that this was merely assertion, and that nothing else would lead the reader to recognize a difference." Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 197.

[40] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 196.

[41] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 21, 1:6:9.

What was most plain and clear to Augustine is not so apparent to modern scholars. Colin Brown remarks:

> It is a common but patent misreading of the opening of John's Gospel to read it as if it said: 'In the beginning was the *Son*, and the *Son*, was with God, and the *Son* was God' (John 1:1). What has happened here is the substitution of *Son* for *Word* (Greek *logos*), and thereby the *Son* is made a member of the Godhead which existed from the beginning. But if we follow carefully the thought of John's Prologue, it is the *Word* that preexisted eternally with God and is God.[42]

Brown goes even further in stating: "Indeed, to be a 'Son of God' one has to be a being who is *not* God! It is a designation for a creature indicating a special relationship with God. In particular it denotes God's representative, God's vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the king as God's son."[43] James Mackey writes, "It would be wrong to start with some Trinitarian doctrinal formula and simply use Scripture to substantiate this: though this is exactly what has been done by almost all practitioners of the theological art, even the great Augustine."[44] When Augustine comes in contact with John 17:3 which records Jesus saying that the Father is the only one who is truly God, he seems to muddle the waters, possibly even purposely changing the wording of the text itself to defend himself against the Arians. Augustine writes,

> And this the Arians indeed usually take, as if the Son were not true God. Passing them by, however, we must see whether, when it is said to the Father, 'That they may know Three the one true God,' we are forced to understand it as if He wished to intimate that the Father alone is the true God; lest we should not understand any to be God, except the three together, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Are we therefore, from the testimony of the Lord, both to call the Father the one true God, and the Son the one true God, and the Holy Spirit the one true God, and the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit together, that is, the Trinity itself together, not three true Gods but one true God? Or because He added, 'And Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent,' are we to supply 'the one true God;' so that the order of the words is this, 'That they may know Thee, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent, the one true God?'[45]

It is almost frightening that Augustine would go to such great lengths; even tampering with the text in John 17:3 in order hold what he considered to be orthodoxy. It is even more

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[42] Colin Brown, "Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *ExAud* 7 (1991): 89.

[43] Brown, "Trinity and Incarnation," 88. Within this same article, Brown points out that the term son of God is also used of the Israelite nation (Exodus 4:22), angels (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Genesis 6:2,4), Adam (Luke 3:38), and as quoted, kings (Psalms 2:6-8; 89:26-27; 2 Samuel 7:14).

[44] James P. Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity* (London: The Chaucer Press, 1983), 49.

[45] Augustine, *On The Trinity,* 102, 6:9:10.

alarming that after quoting a number of NT texts[46] that show the superiority of the Father and the subordination of the son, passages that should give Augustine reservations about equating Jesus with, 'the only true God,' that he says, "…*nothing* may hinder us from confessing the absolute equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."[47] If this is the case, it is truly disquieting as all arguments are then futile and vain in the face of such certainty. Maybe instead of accepting the Nicene Council at face value, Augustine should have challenged its declarations. Erickson proposes,

> Perhaps the councils did not come to correct and final conclusions. Since some councils overruled and contradicted earlier ones, in principle not all of them could have been correct. It therefore becomes incumbent on us to scrutinize carefully the creeds formulated by the councils, to make certain they embody most fully the truth about the deity.[48]

Practical Significance

Since there are so many problems with Augustine's doctrine, we can understand why he would say that if anyone tried to understand it, they would lose their mind, but why did he also say that if anyone denied it, they would lose their salvation?[49] Why did Augustine also say, "…in no other subject is error more dangerous…"?[50] Erickson is confounded with the stress that is placed on this teaching, arguing,

> Further, it is not clearly or explicitly taught anywhere in Scripture, yet it is widely regarded as central doctrine, indispensable to the Christian faith. In this regard, it goes contrary to what is virtually an axiom of biblical doctrine, namely, that there is a direct correlation between the scriptural clarity of a doctrine and its cruciality to the faith and life of the church.[51]

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[46] "'All are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's.' And again, 'The head of the woman is man, the head of the man is Christ, and the head of Christ is God.' But again, if God is only all three together, how can God be the head of Christ, that is, the Trinity the head of Christ, since Christ is in the Trinity in order that it may be the Trinity? Is that which is the Father with the Son, the head of that which is the Son alone? For the Father with the Son is God, but the Son alone is Christ: especially since it is the Word already made flesh that speaks; and according to this His humiliation also, the Father is greater than He, as He says, 'for my Father is greater than I;' so that the very being of God, which is one to Him with the Father, is itself the head of the man who is mediator, which He is alone. For if we rightly call the mind other chief thing of man, that is, as it were the head of the human substance, although the man himself together with the mind is man; why is not the Word with the Father, which together is God, much more suitably and much more the head of Christ, although Christ as man cannot be understood except with the Word which was made flesh?" Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 102, 6:9:10.

[47] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 102, 6:9:10. Emphasis mine.

[48] Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 29.

[49] Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 1.

[50] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 19, 1:3:5.

[51] Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 12.

Contra Augustine who claimed that there is no discovery of truth that is more profitable,[52] Emannuel Kant stated,

> From the doctrine of the Trinity, taken literally, nothing whatsoever can be gained for practical purposes, even if one believes that one comprehended it – and less still if one is conscious that it surpasses all our concepts….it is impossible to extract from this difference any different rules for practical living.[53]

Along the same lines, Karl Rahner claimed that, "should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major parts of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged."[54] Letham joins in and admits, "For the vast majority of Christians, including most ministers and theological students, the Trinity is still a mathematical conundrum, full of imposing philosophical jargon, relegated to an obscure alcove, remote from daily life."[55]

Concluding Comments

After having examined some of Augustine's remarks concerning the trinity, I am inclined to agree with Adolf Harnack who said that although Augustine would have denied the charge of modalistic monarchianism, in assertion only.[56] That is to say Augustine can deny whatever he wants in words, but substantially and in reality he is a tritheist sometimes and a modalist at others. In fact, Augustine helps us to define trinitarianism as the vacillation between tritheism and modalsim. I'm not confident that a careful reader would disagree. I can appreciate Bernard Lonergan's remark that, "the trinity is a matter of five notions or properties, four relations, three persons, two processions, one substance or nature, and no understanding."[57] Augustine concludes his treatise by saying, "O Lord the one God, God the Trinity, whatever I have said in these books that is of Thine, may they acknowledge who are Thine; if anything of my own, may it be pardoned both by Thee and by those who are Thine. Amen."[58] I wholly concur with the spirit of this text, in fact desire the same grace for this paper which Augustine requests for his. I am in accord with Augustine once again when

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[52] See Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 19, 1:3:5

[53] Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 111. In order to be fair to Millard Erickson, it should be noted that he continues to call himself a trinitarian. Whether or not this self-designation can legitimately continue to be held after the questions raised and problems encountered in his work is another question altogether. I find the incoherency between his frank, reflective reasoning and doctrinal profession to be rather striking.

[54] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 1.

[55] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 1.

[56] See Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 197.

[57] See Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 1.

[58] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 228, 15:28:51.

he says that our thoughts concerning God fall, "…very far short of Him of whom we think, nor comprehends Him as He is; but He is seen, as it is written, even by those who are so great as was the Apostle Paul, 'through a glass and in an enigma.'"[59] For this humble disposition, Augustine should be applauded.

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[59] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 87, 5:1:1.