

## ST. AUGUSTINE ON THE CONCEPT OF THE TRINITY

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### Abstract

*The Researcher's aim is to know or understand the concept God as three "Persons" is a mystery as St. Augustine understood through his transitions from Manicheanism to Christianity. How can a man with finite understanding, and further his understanding has been blurred by the fall know God or understand God. Many have tried to explain Trinity as water, steam and ice since the base composition is H<sub>2</sub>O. A few others have explained looking at egg. Trinity has always been a mystery. Many have erred into heresy and have landed up as Modalism or Sabellism, Pentecostalism or Arianism etc.*

*And yet if we reflect on it, we can see also that it is the way that God has been revealed to us, as Father or Creator; as the so, Jesus; and as the Holy Spirit or the Advocate. It's also clear that of the fundamental attributes of the Trinity is that it is about relationship between those three, and with us.*

*Augustine always struggled with the concept of Trinity. It was another complexity that he faced with apart from good and evil. He was a man who pursued till he got a clear answer for his complex issues of understanding of various topics.*

**Key Words:** Trinity, Modalism, Sabellism, Pentecostalism, Arianism, Augustine, Nebridius, Nicene, Donatists, Pelagius, Aurelius



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### Introduction:

One day, St. Augustine was taking a walk along the beach, while he was on a break from writing his treatise on the Trinity. The great scholar just couldn't get his mind around this great complex mystery of God being Triune. It was said that he saw a little boy digging a hole in the sand, and then running to the ocean, filling up his hands with seawater, running back to the hole and emptying the water into the hole. Augustine watched as the child went

back and forth several times. Finally, he said to the boy, “what are you doing?” The boy said, “Trying to fill that hole with the ocean.” And Augustine said, “Neither will you be able to fit the Trinity into your mind.”

This treatment of the Trinity not speculative but comes out of need to deal with Latin-speaking Arian sympathizers (Homoeans) who denied that the Father and Son were had the same fundamental existence (were of the same substance) and said that the two instead were only alike (similar but not the same) in will and activity; this created a clear distinction between the Father and the Son and made the Son a creature who did what the Father wanted him to do. • The Nicene response was to say that the operations of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit outside the Godhead are inseparable (i.e. all are involved in what each does, i.e. creation, sanctification, etc.), but this posed its own set of problem.

In 389, Augustine’s friend Nebridius had asked: If the Trinity does everything together in unity, how is it that the Son becomes incarnate, but not the Father and the Holy Spirit? (Augustine responded briefly in Ep. 11 and then later in detail in De trinitate 15.11.20: only the Son became incarnate, but every member of the Trinity played a role in bringing this about. The De Trinitate turned out to be quite popular in the Middle Ages, which would have surprised Augustine who thought few would be able to understand it (Ep. 169: *Nimis operosi sunt, et a paucis intelligi posse arbitror*). Its success has to do with certain difficulties that make it hard to think about the Trinity and to understand the Spirit’s particular role within the divine life:

“The De Trinatate is not the best known of St. Augustine’s works. But in my opinion it is his masterpiece, of a far greater doctrinal importance in the History of the Catholic Faith than the Confessions or the City of God. It is indeed something of a theological portent, and as benefits such a portent it took an uncommonly long time in coming to birth. As he himself says in a letter to the Bishop of Carthage which prefaces the work: “I was a young when I began it, an old man when I had it published.” It seems that he began it about 400 AD. Twelve years later it was still unfinished, and his friends getting impatient managed to publish the first eleven books of it and part of the twelveth, which was as far as he had got, without his consent. At this he stopped work on it altogether for sometime, but was at length prevailed onto finish it-there are fifteen books of it in all-and publish it, perhaps around about 418 AD. This slowness of composition indicates that it was not a work which had any pastoral or controversial urgency about it. Augustine wrote it because it was on a theme which was of deep personal interest to him; it was a work of reflection on the central mystery

of the Christian religion for its own sake.” (HILL, EDMUND. “St Augustine on the Trinity—I.” *Life of the Spirit (1946-1964)*, vol. 15, no. 180, Wiley, 1961, pp. 540–48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43705747>.)

In the *Retractations* (ii. 15) Augustine speaks of this work in the following terms:—  
I spent some years in writing fifteen books concerning the Trinity, which is God. When, however, I had not yet finished the thirteenth Book, and some who were exceedingly anxious to have the work were kept waiting longer than they could bear, it was stolen from me in a less correct state than it either could or would have been had it appeared when I intended. And as soon as I discovered this, having other copies of it, I had determined at first not to publish it myself, but to mention what had happened in the matter in some other work; but at the urgent request of brethren, whom I could not refuse, I corrected it as much as I thought fit, and finished and published it, with the addition, at the beginning, of a letter that I had written to the venerable Aurelius, Bishop of Carthage, in which I set forth, in the way of prologue, what had happened, what I had intended to do of myself, and what love of my brethren had forced me to do.

The letter to which he here alludes is the following:—

*“To the most blessed Lord, whom he reveres with most sincere love, to his holy brother and fellow priest, Pope Aurelius, Augustine sends health in the Lord. I began as a very young man, and have published in my old age, some books concerning the Trinity, who is the supreme and true God. I had in truth laid the work aside, upon discovering that it had been prematurely, or rather surreptitiously, stolen from me before I had completed it, and before I had revised and put the finishing touches to it, as had been my intention. For I had not designed to publish the Books one by one, but all together, inasmuch as the progress of the inquiry led me to add the later ones to those which precede them. When, therefore, these people had hindered the fulfillment of my purpose (in that some of them had obtained access to the work before I intended), I had given over dictating it, with the idea of making my complaint public in some other work that I might write, in order that whoever could might know that the Books had not been published by myself, but had been taken away from my possession before they were in my own judgment fit for publication. Compelled, however, by the eager demands of many of my brethren, and above all by your command, I have taken the pains, by God's help, to complete the work, laborious as it is; and as now corrected (not as I wished, but as I could, lest the Books should differ very widely from those which had surreptitiously got into people's hands), I have sent them to your Reverence by my very dear*

*son and fellow deacon, and have allowed them to be heard, copied, and read by every one that pleases. Doubtless, if I could have fulfilled my original intention, although they would have contained the same sentiments, they would have been worked out much more thoroughly and clearly, so far as the difficulty of unfolding so profound a subject, and so far, too, as my own powers, might have allowed. There are some persons, however, who have the first four, or rather five, Books without the prefaces, and the twelfth with no small part of its later chapters omitted. But these, if they please and can, will amend the whole, if they become acquainted with the present edition. At any rate, I have to request that you will order this letter to be prefixed separately, but at the beginning of the Books. Farewell. Pray for me."*

### **His Quest for the Truth**

In his Confessions, Augustine penned his now famous line, "You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you." This phrase is a fitting summary of Augustine's theology. First, it reveals that man is utterly restless without God, lost and wandering. Secondly, it reveals that only God can provide true rest for the human heart. Augustine finds great comfort and affection the character, nature, and works of God.

Augustine's understanding of life and conversion is tethered to the salvific work of the Triune God in his own life. He can only make sense of his salvation through the lens of God's Sovereignty and redemptive purposes, through the work of the Godhead. For Augustine, the whole of theology and life flow from God. Reflecting on his own transformation, Augustine confesses, "You, my God, brought that about....How can salvation be obtained except through your hand remaking what you once made?"

Augustine's Trinitarianism is a helpful reference point for us. His view can, at least in part, provide a platform for considering the Trinity in our own lives. I can summarise Augustine's teaching like this:

#### **1. The Father as Initiator**

For Augustine, the Father's role in the creation narrative is as the one who begets the Son through the Spirit, and the one who creates all things through them. This is one of Augustine's most pointed emphasis on the work of the Father. Yet, he does not promote hierarchy. He's not necessarily treating the Son and Spirit as mere bench players. Augustine explains that "the Trinity, my God - Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit is the Creator of the entire creation." So God the Father creates with and through God the Son and God the Spirit,

giving the divine persons co-equal tribute for the creation of all things. This, for Augustine, is derived from the statement, “let us make man in our image.” Gen 1:26

### **The Son as the Mediator**

In his Confessions, he critiques his pre-conversion Neo-Platonism, saying that though they helped him understand aspects of abiding in Christ, they did not “contain that ‘at the right time he died for the sinners’ Rom 5:6 and that ‘you did not spare your only Son but gave Him up for us all Romans 8:32.’” Without this, it is only foolishness masquerading as wisdom. Without the incarnation or paschal elements of Christ’s work, there is no true reflection of his work on man’s behalf.

For Augustine, a living relationship with Christ must include reconciliation to God through the payments for sins. This is why the Son of God ‘appeared among mortal sinners as the immortal righteous one, mortal like humanity, righteous like God. Because the wages of righteousness are life and peace Rom 6:23.’ Christ “came into the Virgin’s womb.... so that mortal flesh should not for ever be mortal.”

For God Himself to condescend to the earth, after man’s disobedience, means that arrogance for the believer should not exist. It is the humility of God that humbles us. That is what the Neo-Platonists missed. They were arrogant in thinking that the divine life could be achieved alone, through human means. But only through the “True Mediator” God in the flesh could man find salvation.

### **The Holy Spirit as the Unifier**

Coming back to the original quote of Augustine, “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.” The Holy Spirit dwells within believers and unites them to the Godhead. By sharing in God’s life, believers will share in his rest for eternity. So finding rest in the Triune God is not only a disposition of the affections or the will; rest is something intrinsic within God and therefore intrinsic within the souls of those who are united with him. Augustine also explains that the Holy Spirit is the giver of the knowledge of God. Hostile minded believers “do not see your works with the help of your Spirit and do not recognise you in them.” No one knows or loves the things of God except through receiving his Spirit.

### **The Trinity Shaped Gospel**

Augustine poetically states in his Confessions that God is “the life of souls, the life of lives. You live in dependence only on yourself, and you never change, life of my soul”

The Triune God revealed in the Scriptures, confessed by the creeds, and experienced through the life altering work of the Holy Spirit was a reality that Augustine could not escape. And once he was gripped by God, Augustine's theology and life were subject to him. For us, the Trinity is sometimes assumed overlooked. We say, "The trinity Ah, of course, the three in one. Water, snow, ice. Got it." The Trinity becomes a dusty Sunday School fact, not a fresh every day source of wonder. Understanding God as Triune is a theology driving, awe inspiring, life giving truth.

The Triune God is reclaiming His Kingdom and Redeeming all things, including you and me. The Gospel has an inescapably Trinitarian Shape. The Father has chosen to reveal his love to us through the sacrifice of His Son and sending the Holy Spirit. Eph 1:9-14 Augustine wrote that if you are asked what God was doing before he created time, the best answer was that he was creating fires of hell for people who ask questions like that. Try to understand Trinity and you will lose your mind is a quote attributed to Augustine.

In his masterful work, *De Trinitate*, Augustine embarked on a rigorous journey through biblical texts, logical reasoning, and psychological models in order to defend the full deity, as well as the unity, of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Though this book is as much a work of apologetics as it is of dogmatics, Augustine's 'proofs' come from Scripture. He is careful to present his models and analogies of the Trinity as helpful aids to conceptualize that which is ultimately incomprehensible, but never as dogma. Throughout this work, Augustine's wisdom, humility, and piety are evident as he treats the most difficult Christian doctrine, explaining that "nowhere else is a mistake more dangerous, or the search more laborious, or discovery more advantageous."

Augustine begins his defense of the Trinity with the full deity of the Son by utilizing the *qua* move. In order to make sense of the biblical witness which at times "appear to be in flat contradiction with each other" Augustine distinguished between the form-of-a-servant rule and the form-of-God rule concerning the Son. *Qua* form-of-God, the Son is creator of all; *qua* form-of-a-servant, i.e. incarnate, the Son was made of a woman and born under the Law. With this tool in hand, Augustine is able to dispel apparent contradictions in the hypostatic union with ease and lead the reader back onto sure footing.

## **Conclusion**

Augustine concluded that Trinity is the core of the Christian Doctrine departing from this Truth will either make you to deny one of the three persons in the God head or have a faulty understanding of them either way will make one a heretic. Augustine believed that a

believer is absolutely safe in the hands/palms of THE TRIUNE GOD-GOD THE FATHER, GOD THE SON AND GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT. It's vital for every Christian to believe in Trinity and enjoy that knowledge.

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