An Evangelical Statement on the Trinity

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The Statement:

We believe that the sole living God who created and rules over all and who is described in the Bible is one Triune God in three co-eternal, co-equal Persons, each Person being presented as distinct yet equal, not as three separate gods, but one Godhead, sharing equally in honor, glory, worship, power, authority, rule and rank, such that no Person has eternal primacy over the others.

A Theological Commentary:

I. *Athanasius, the defender of the Nicaean Creed, correctly explained the faith once delivered to the saints:* Objecting to attempts of his day to reduce Jesus Christ (and the Holy Spirit) to secondary (and tertiary) status in being, authority, and power, Athanasius pointed out that, had his opponents understood Jesus "to be the proper offspring of the Father's substance, as the radiance is from light, they would not every one of them have found fault with the [Nicaean] Fathers; but would have been confident that the Council wrote suitably" (3.9.39).[i] Therefore, our guidance in constructing this statement comes from the Bible and the helpful explanations of Athanasius, from whose insights we draw the list of equal attributes at the end of our statement. For Athanasius, equality of attributes is the proof for equality of substance (being). Lose the first

and one loses the second. So he declares of the Christ, "This is why He has equality with the Father by titles expressive of unity, and what is said of the Father, is said in Scripture of the Son also, all but his being called Father."[ii]

Athanasius illustrates his position by citing Bible verses in which Jesus claims to possess all the Father possesses, for example, being named "God," "*the Almighty*," "Light," making "*all things*" and doing "*whatsoever*" the Father does, "being Everlasting" with "*eternal power and godhead.*" He also notes parallel scriptures in which the Son and the Father are described with the same terms: "being *Lord…through whom [are] all things,*" being "Lord of Angels" and "worshipped by them," "being honoured as the Father, for *that they may honour the Son,* He says, *as they honour the Father;* - being equal to God, *He thought it not robbery to be equal with God,"* "being Truth," "Life," being "*The Lord God*" and "*The God of Gods*," who forgives sins, being "*the King of glory*," as "David in the Psalm" states "of the Son" (3.20.49), and "God" verifies, "My glory I will not give to another" (3.21.50).

Athanasius concludes, "If then any think of other origin, and other Father, considering the equality of these attributes, it is a mad thought" (3.21.50).[iii]

Therefore, maintaining an understanding of the equality of the attributes of each Person of the Trinity is, for Athanasius, necessary to maintain a proper confession of each Person's equality of substance. Reduce one's belief in the equal status of the attributes of any of the Persons of the Godhead and one has eliminated one's proof of the existence of the Trinity, having reduced one's understanding of the doctrine to an ascending relationship of three gods in tandem. Arius made such a mistake when he declared, "Thus there is a Three, not in equal glories. Not intermingling with each other are their subsistences. One more glorious than the other in their glories unto immensity" (2.2.15).

Instead, having established the equality of the Father and Son's glory and other attributes in these quotations from the *De Synodis,* Athanasius proceeds to the question of rank in *Epistulae quattuor ad Serapionem,* explaining, "But of such rank [*taxis*] and nature the Spirit is having to the Son, so the Son has to the Father."[iv] The *Sermo contra Latinos*, by a

follower of Athanasius, confirms, "But the Father is first not according to time, and not according to rank, surely not!" [v]

II. *God is unique:* We have no precedent in our world for understanding how God can be one and at the same time three. We mistake the nature of the Godhead by positing three Persons in tandem, one eternally exercising authority over the others as human chief executive officers exercise authority over their subordinate staff. We impose human conduct in our fallen world onto the relationships in heaven's perfect one. But, since there is no exact point of reference for God in our contingent world, we must rely upon God's revelation of God's nature. Such specific divine revelation is recorded in the Bible in the form of affirmations, such as "Hear, Israel, the Lord (singular) your God (plural), the Lord (singular) is one" (Deut 6:4). The interchangeable use of the singular and plural names of God shows that God is unique.

III. *God is not limited to human gender:* Christians differ over their understanding of God's intention for the ecclesiastical and domestic relationship between the genders. But, this topic should be included under the doctrine of humanity and not of the Trinity, since God is neither male nor female (as we learn from Deuteronomy 4:15-16), and God is not limited to two Persons, but is one God in three Persons. Thus, no direct and specific analogical correspondence exists between one male and one female in relationship or in church service or all females and all males in relationship or in church service and the perfect love relationships within the monotheistic Godhead of the Trinity. Further, the attempt to ignore the Holy Spirit and forge some sort of corresponding relationship to human gender out of the incarnational, metaphorical designations of "father" and "son" is at best logic fault and at worst heterodoxical.

Athanasius warns against over anthropomorphizing Trinitarian familial language. He counters the charge that his insistence on equality in the Trinity reduces two Persons of the Godhead to "brothers": "One is not Father and the Other Son, but they are brothers together" (3.23.51).[vi] Athanasius answers that equality does not mean that one Person in the Godhead cannot be identified as "father," as another takes on flesh and enters our world as an infant who is the child of divine intervention (by the Holy Spirit, who is another Person of the Trinity [Luke 1:35]) and human childbirth (see Phil. 2:5-11), and he cites

numerous examples of human parents begetting children. Yet, he warns that this human understanding must be confined to our human realm. We must approach the eternal by "casting away human images, nay, all things sensible, and ascending to the Father, lest we rob the Father of the Son in ignorance, and rank Him among His own creatures" (3.23.51).

In summary, Athanasius insists that equality of attributes demonstrates equality of substance (being) in the One Triune God.

IV. *God exercises perfect co-operative relationships:* God models perfect love, respect, co-operation. Although Jesus in his human incarnation was limited in various ways (Phil 2:6-8), including in knowledge (e.g. Matt 24:36; Mark 13:32), at his ascension he returned to his former place of authority and glory, where he receives prayer and grants power from heaven (Acts 7:56, 59; Luke 24:49). In eternity, the Persons of the Trinity know each other intimately. As 1 Corinthians 2:10 tells us, the Spirit searches the thoughts of the others. The Persons of the Godhead indwell each other (John 17:21), expressing perfect love and mutual glorification (John 17:1; 23-24), each sharing cooperatively in humanity's creation, redemption, and sanctification.[vii] God exemplifies a unity in diversity that we should emulate between the genders and practice in the global, multi-cultural, mutual submission and respectful cooperation of all humans.

V. *Voluntary deference as part of the salvific plan:* Deference within the Trinity is mutual: the Father defers to the Son to carry out the plan of salvation, as does the Holy Spirit, and so the Son is honored as he in turn defers to Father and Spirit. All mutually honor and defer to one another.

Such deference did not reveal a permanent superiority of one Person of the Trinity over the Others to John Calvin, who wrote:

> We ought also to understand what we read in Paul: after the judgment "Christ will deliver the Kingdom to his God and Father" (1 Cor. 15:24p.). Surely the Kingdom of the Son of God had no beginning and will have no end. But even as he lay concealed under the lowness of flesh and "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7; cf Vg.), laying aside the splendor of majesty, he showed himself obedient to his Father (cf. Phil. 2:8). Having completed this subjection, "he was at last crowned with glory and honor" (Heb. 2:9p.).

The mission of Jesus Christ was not simply to lead humanity in righteous and obedient living, as was the task of the first humans. Christ's mission was greater, having to redeem fallen humanity, after which, Calvin explains, "So then will he yield to the Father his name and crown of glory, and whatever he has received from the Father, that 'God may be all in all' (1 Cor 15:28)." To perform this mission, Christ becomes our "Mediator" and our "Lord," a title, Calvin notes, "belongs to the person of Christ only in so far as it represents a degree midway between God and us." But once Christ has completely fulfilled the role of humanity's "Lord," Calvin explains, "Then he returns the lordship to his Father so that – far from diminishing his own majesty – it may shine all the more brightly. Then, also, God shall cease to be the Head of Christ,[viii] for Christ's own deity will shine of itself, although as yet it is covered by a veil." Calvin adds, the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity "will cease to be the ambassador of his Father, and will be satisfied with that glory which he enjoyed before the creation of the world."[ix]

B.B. Warfield agrees that the term "Lord" indicates "function"[x] in Christ's mission, as can be seen in his explanation of why "Paul might very well call Christ 'Lord over all' but not 'God over all.'" To him, "'Lord over all' would have meant, however, precisely what 'God over all' means."[xi] Warfield specifically denies:

> that Paul in currently speaking of Christ as "Lord" placed him on a lower plane than God. Paul's intention was precisely the opposite, viz., to put him on the same plane with God; and accordingly it is as "Lord" that all divine attributes and activities are ascribed to Christ and all religious emotions and worship are directed to him. In effect, the Old Testament divine names, Elohim on the one hand, and Jehovah and Adhonai on the other, are in the New Testament distributed between God the Father and God the Son with as little implication of difference in rank here as there.[xii]

Instead, for Warfield, "despite this earthly origin of His human nature, He yet is and abides (present participle) nothing less than the Supreme God, 'God over all [emphatic], blessed forever,'"[xiii] "our 'great God' (Tit.ii.13)."[xiv] "Paul couples God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ in his prayer on a complete equality."[xv] Even "the adjective 'only begotten' conveys the idea, not of derivation and subordination, but of uniqueness

and consubstantiality,"[xvi] since Jesus "places Himself in a position, not of equality merely, but of absolute reciprocity and interpenetration of knowledge with the Father."[xvii] Clearly, both Calvin and Warfield affirm that a temporary (not eternal) submission of one of the Persons of the Godhead in the incarnation was a mutually agreed-upon part of God's plan for saving humanity from eternal condemnation, wherein a Person of the Godhead became fully human, while remaining fully God (John 1:1, 14).[xviii] Jesus Christ, God-Among-Us, "pitched the tent of a body" (*skênôn*, John 1:14), much as the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, was placed in the center of Israel's encampment so that humans could encounter God face to face. According to the Bible, there is salvation through no other name than that of Jesus Christ and through no other means but the death of Jesus Christ for our sins (John 3:16; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim 2:5-6). Humans witnessed the spirit of servanthood that God values and displays. It was exemplified by the once and for all sacrifice of God-Among-Us to restore humanity to God's favor through God's grace (Heb 10:14). God's mutual deference models a virtue for both men and women to follow.

VI. *Avoiding elements of Arianism:* Suggestions that superiority and inferiority of authority eternally exist among the Persons of the Godhead are problematic. All God's attributes are essential. We should not posit distinctive, unequal attributes that divide God's substance. If divine attributes are ranked in a hierarchy, then it necessarily follows that the lower ranked are of inferior quality. Therefore, it is contradictory to say that they share the identical substance (ousia), and yet the degree of each attribute can differ according to rank. Such an eternal distinction makes the Son less in authority than the Father, thereby dividing and separating the one God. Such radical social trinitarianism ends up as tritheism. Affirming one God in three co-eternal, co-equal Persons[xix] is, therefore, necessary to preserve and perpetuate the one faith once given to the saints.

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[i] All quotations of Athanasius are from *The Epistle of S. Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria, Concerning the Councils Held at Ariminum in Italy and at Seleucia in Isauria (or De Synodis),* in Members of the English Church, *Select Treatises of S. Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria, in Controversy with the Arians,* trans. J. H. Newman (Oxford: John Henry Parker, J.G.F. and J. Rivington: 1842), except where otherwise noted.

[ii] Punctuation is that of the translator of the *De Synodis*.

[iii] This concern for and attention to the relationship between equality in substance and attributes can be seen in "The Westminster Confession of Faith," 9:1, which recognizes, "The Holy Spirit, the third Person in the Trinity, proceeding from the Father and the Son, of the same substance and equal in power and glory, is, together with the Father and Son, to be believed in, loved, obeyed, and worshipped throughout all ages," in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1999), 131. "The Westminster Shorter Catechism" continues this equation in its answer to Question 6, "There are three Persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory" (Ibid., 175). "The Westminster Larger Catechism" slightly amplifies this statement in its answer to Question 9, "There be three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished by their personal properties" (Ibid., 196).

[iv] *Thesaurus linguae graecae: Canon of Greek Authors and Works ,* vol. 26, p. 580, line 24, accessed 23 Feb. 2006, available from http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/inst/textsearch, translation by William David Spencer.

[v]literally: "may it not happen! *mê genoito*." Ibid., vol. 28, p. 829, line 47, translation by William David Spencer. The statement cited in our text is included in a discussion of the theory of the "eternal emergence" of the Son and Spirit, which seeks to clarify that the Spirit is "conjoined and together and not being inferior according to the emergence after the Son…For just as the Son immediately and closely is out of the first, which implies the Father, so also the Spirit is immediately out of the Father, with reference to the eternal emergence. But the Father is first neither according to time, nor according to rank – surely not!" As we can see, the Son and Spirit proceeding from the Father may be understood as *order*, but without an eternally hierarchical *ordering*.

In addition, we can notice this concern is also expressed in the "Second Helvetic Confession," "Thus there are not three gods, but three persons, consubstantial, coeternal, and coequal; distinct with respect to hypostases, and with respect to order, the one preceding the other yet without any inequality" (chapter 3, "Of God, His Unity and Trinity," "The Second Helvetic Confession," in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], Part I: Book of Confessions*, 56).

[vi] In a May, 1537 letter to Simon Grynée, the rector of the Academy of Basle, John Calvin reports he was labeled a Sabellian for claiming Jesus Christ was "that Jehovah, who of Himself alone was always self-existent" (in other words *autotheos*). This is noted by Charles Hodge (see his *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952], 467 [vol. i. ch. 4.sec. 6A]. Referencing Ignatius, Athanasius makes a similar point to that of Calvin, that, strictly speaking, "the Son was ingenerate," since the Second Person of the Trinity was not created, though the Son was generate in the incarnation (*De Synodis,* 3.17.46): "We are persuaded that the blessed Ignatius was orthodox in writing that Christ was generate on account of the flesh, (for He was made flesh,) yet ingenerate, because He is not in the number of things made and generated, but Son from Father" (Ibid., 3.18.47). Charles Hodge, however, seems to disagree, seeing the "fathers who framed that [Nicene] Creed" as "denying to the Father any priority or superiority to the other persons of the Trinity," but yet being "the Monas, as having in order of thought the whole Godhead in Himself; so that He alone was God of Himself (*autotheos,* in that sense of the word)," being "greater than the other divine persons" (465). In regard to "the Father, Son, and Spirit," Prof. Hodge believes in "their absolute unity as to substance or essence, and their consequent perfect equality; and the subordination of the Son to the Father, and of the Spirit to the Father and the Son, as to the mode of subsistence and operation" (462), offering quotations of scholars ancient and contemporary to himself, including Prof. Waterland, who claims, "The title of *ho Theos* [the God]*,* being understood in the same sense with *autotheos*, was, as it ought to be, generally reserved to the Father, as the distinguishing personal character of the first person of the Holy Trinity" (465). Hodge, however, cautions that "neither the Bible nor the ancient creeds explain" what is "meant" by the term "sonship," and, in fact, "it may be something altogether inscrutable and to us incomprehensible" (468). Still,

drawing on human analogy, he himself believes, "In the consubstantial identity of the human soul there is a subordination of one faculty to another, and so, however incomprehensible to us, there may be a subordination in the Trinity consistent with the identity of essence in the Godhead" (474). Likewise, Augustus Hopkins Strong also notes the charge of Sabellianism against Calvin (*Systematic Theology* [Old Tappen, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1907], 334 [vol.1, pt. 4, ch. 2, sec. 4c]) and himself states, "The New Testament calls Christ *Theos,* but not *ho theos.* We frankly recognize an eternal subordination of Christ to the Father, but we maintain at the same time that this subordination is a subordination of order, office, and operation, not a subordination of essence" (342 [i.4.2.5: 3d]). Prof. Strong believes his anthropomorphic view of "the possibility of an order, which yet involves no inequality, may be illustrated by the relation between man and woman. In office man is first and woman second, but woman's soul is worth as much as man's" (Ibid.). Such distinctions can be traced in the early church to Origen in his *Commentary on John,* Book 2, section 13 (p. 98), where he suggests of John 1:1, "John has used the articles in one place and omitted them in another very precisely, and not as though he did not understand the precision of the Greek language. In the case of the Word, he adds the article 'the,' but in the case of the noun 'God,' he inserts it in one place and omits it in another." Origen contends, "the noun 'God' stands for the uncreated cause of the universe, but he omits it when the Word is referred to as 'God.'" (14). Origen's view is that "the Word has become God because he is 'with God'" (12), therefore, "God, with the article, is very God, wherefore also the Savior says in his prayer to the Father, 'That they may know you the only true God.' On the other hand, everything besides the very God, which is made God by participation in his divinity, would more properly not be said to be '*the* God,' but 'God.'" So, Jesus Christ has "drawn divinity into himself," (17) "though he would not remain God if he did not continue in unceasing contemplation of the depth of the Father." "*The* God, therefore, is the true God" (18) [Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Books 1-10,* trans. Ronald E. Heine [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989], 98-99). With this argument, Origen strangely ignores the fact that, with the verb "to be" requiring a predicate nominative rather than a direct object, and with Greek syntax depending on case endings not word order, the structure of the final clause of John 1:1, having two nominative endings, demands that only one may take an article in order to distinguish the clause's subject from its predicate nominative. Therefore, the presence of a lone definite article in John 1:1's final clause ("the Word was God") is grammatically not theologically determined. Still, Origen's argument manages to preserve the divinity of Christ, as sharing the deity of the Father, while maintaining the Son's eternal subordination and complete dependence on the Father, and further preserving to the Father the idea of self-existence. Such reasoning leads Origen to appear to draw such conclusions as subordination within human society reflects the subordination in the Trinity, since the Son and Spirit's eternal subordination is necessary for the Father to maintain the attribute "almighty," since "one cannot be a father apart from having a son, nor a lord apart from holding a possession or a slave, so we cannot even call God almighty if there are none over whom he can exercise his power" (*On First Principles,* trans. G. W. Butterworth [New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1966], 23 [chap. 2, sec. 10]), and, despite the example of Stephen in Acts 7:59 and the apostle Paul in Rom. 1:8, "perhaps we ought not to pray to anyone born (of woman), nor even to Christ himself, but only to the God and Father of all" (Origen, "On Prayer," in *Alexandrian Christianity,* Library of Christian Classics, vol. 2, trans. John Ernest Leonard Oulton and Henry Chadwick (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1954), 269 [15.1]). J.N.D. Kelly observes of Origen, "The impact of Platonism reveals itself in the thoroughgoing subordinationism which is integral to Origen's Trinitarian scheme. The Father…is alone *autotheos*; so St. John, he points out, accurately describes the Son simply as *theos*, not *ho theos.* In relation to the God of the universe He merits a secondary degree of honour; for he is not absolute goodness and truth, but His goodness and truth are a reflection and image of the Father's" (*Early Christian Doctrines* [New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1960], 131-132). One can see how this viewpoint contrasts with Athanasius's painstaking identification of the Son as almighty, worthy of worship, equal in honor, goodness, truth, et al. to the Father. Still, the subordinationism found in Origen, when divorced from his theology of continuous derivation of divinity from the Father to the Son, or the

completely Platonic perspective of the Son as less than the Father in being, has a history of acceptance in some circles of Christianity (as we saw reflected in the thought of Strong and Hodge), though such a perspective appears to be less than the high Christology we noted in Athanasius, Calvin, and Warfield, and which we affirm in our present "An Evangelical Statement on the Trinity."

[vii] Even the order in which the persons of the Trinity are mentioned can be changed according to emphasis in the Bible, as can be seen in 2 Cor. 13:13 (verse 14 NIV), "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the partnership (*koinônia*) of the Holy Spirit be with all of you," so no strict protocol of mentioning the Father first as having superior precedence is rigidly maintained. Translation by William David Spencer.

[viii] 1 Cor. 11:3.

[ix] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 485-486 (2.14.3).

[x] Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ,* ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 226.

[xi] Ibid., 224.

[xii] Ibid., 225.

[xiii] Ibid., 46.

[xiv]Ibid., 47.

[xv] Ibid., 75.

[xvi] Ibid., 56.

[xvii] Ibid., 65.

[xviii] See also such passages recognized as establishing Jesus Christ as fully God, as John 1:18; 5:18; 8:58-59 (cf. Exod 3:14); 10:30; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:19; 2:9; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pet. 1:1, and passages seen as establishing Jesus Christ as fully human, as Matt. 8:27; 9:3; 13:54; John 6:52; 19:5; Acts 2:22; Rom. 1:3; 5:15; 9:5; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 2:14-18. Jesus being completely God and completely human is also the major concern of "The Definition of Chalcedon."