Selections from Tertullian’s Against Praxeas

2. In the course of time, then, the Father forsooth was born, and the Father suffered; God Himself, the Lord Almighty, whom in their preaching they declare to be Jesus Christ. We, however, as we indeed always have done (and more especially since we have been better instructed by the Paraclete, who leads men indeed into all truth), believe that there is one only God, but under the following dispensation, or oikonomia, as it is called, that this one only God has also a Son, His Word, who proceeded from Himself, by whom all things were made, and without whom nothing was made. Him we believe to have been sent by the Father into the Virgin, and to have been born of her—being both Man and God, the Son of Man and the Son of God, and to have been called by the name of Jesus Christ; we believe Him to have suffered, died, and been buried, according to the Scriptures, and, after He had been raised again by the Father and taken back to heaven, to be sitting at the right hand of the Father, and that He will come to judge the quick and the dead; who sent also from heaven from the Father, according to His own promise, the Holy Ghost, the Paraclete, the sanctifier of the faith of those who believe in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Ghost. That this rule of faith has come down to us from the beginning of the gospel, even before any of the older heretics, much more before Praxeas, a pretender of yesterday, will be apparent both from the lateness of date which marks all heresies, and also from the absolutely novel character of our new-fangled Praxeas. In this principle also we must henceforth find a presumption of equal force against all heresies whatsoever—that whatever is first is true, whereas that is spurious which is later in date. But keeping this prescriptive rule inviolate, still some opportunity must be given for reviewing (the statements of heretics), with a view to the instruction and protection of divers persons; were it only that it may not seem that each perversion of the truth is condemned without examination, and simply prejudged; especially in the case of this heresy, which supposes itself to possess the pure truth, in thinking that one cannot believe in One Only God in any other way than by saying that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are the very selfsame Person. As if in this way also one were not All, in that All are of One, by unity (that is) of substance; while the mystery of the dispensation is still guarded, which distributes the Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God, from whom these degrees and forms and aspects are reckoned, under the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. How they are susceptible of number without division, will be shown as our treatise proceeds.

3. The simple, indeed, (I will not call them unwise and unlearned,) who always constitute the majority of believers, are startled at the dispensation (of the Three in One), on the ground that their very rule of faith withdraws them from the world's plurality of gods to the one only true God; not understanding that, although He is the one only God, He must yet be believed in with His own oikonomia. The numerical order and distribution of the Trinity they assume to be a division of the Unity; whereas the Unity which derives the Trinity out of its own self is so far from being destroyed, that it is actually supported by it. They are constantly throwing out against us that we are preachers of two gods and three gods, while they take to themselves pre-eminently the credit of being worshippers of the One God; just as if the Unity itself with irrational
deductions did not produce heresy, and the Trinity rationally considered constitute the truth. We, say they, maintain the Monarchy (or, sole government of God). And so, as far as the sound goes, do even Latins (and ignorant ones too) pronounce the word in such a way that you would suppose their understanding of the monarchia (or Monarchy) was as complete as their pronunciation of the term. Well, then Latins take pains to pronounce the monarchia (or Monarchy), while Greeks actually refuse to understand the oikonomia, or Dispensation (of the Three in One). As for myself, however, if I have gleaned any knowledge of either language, I am sure that monarchia (or Monarchy) has no other meaning than single and individual rule; but for all that, this monarchy does not, because it is the government of one, preclude him whose government it is, either from having a son, or from having made himself actually a son to himself, or from ministering his own monarchy by whatever agents he will. Nay more, I contend that no dominion so belongs to one only, as his own, or is in such a sense singular, or is in such a sense a monarchy, as not also to be administered through other persons most closely connected with it, and whom it has itself provided as officials to itself. If, moreover, there be a son belonging to him whose monarchy it is, it does not forthwith become divided and cease to be a monarchy, if the son also be taken as a sharer in it; but it is as to its origin equally his, by whom it is communicated to the son; and being his, it is quite as much a monarchy (or sole empire), since it is held together by two who are so inseparable. Therefore, inasmuch as the Divine Monarchy also is administered by so many legions and hosts of angels, according as it is written, "Thousand thousands ministered unto Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him;" and since it has not from this circumstance ceased to be the rule of one (so as no longer to be a monarchy), because it is administered by so many thousands of powers; how comes it to pass that God should be thought to suffer division and severance in the Son and in the Holy Ghost, who have the second and the third places assigned to them, and who are so closely joined with the Father in His substance, when He suffers no such (division and severance) in the multitude of so many angels? Do you really suppose that Those, who are naturally members of the Father's own substance, pledges of His love, instruments of His might, nay, His power itself and the entire system of His monarchy, are the overthrow and destruction thereof? You are not right in so thinking. I prefer your exercising yourself on the meaning of the thing rather than on the sound of the word. Now you must understand the overthrow of a monarchy to be this, when another dominion, which has a framework and a state peculiar to itself (and is therefore a rival), is brought in over and above it: when, e.g., some other god is introduced in opposition to the Creator, as in the opinions of Marcion; or when many gods are introduced, according to your Valentinuses and your Prodicuses. Then it amounts to an overthrow of the Monarchy, since it involves the destruction of the Creator.

4. But as for me, who derive the Son from no other source but from the substance of the Father, and (represent Him) as doing nothing without the Father's will, and as having received all power from the Father, how can I be possibly destroying the Monarchy from the faith, when I preserve it in the Son just as it was committed to Him by the Father? The same remark (I wish also to be formally) made by me with respect to the third degree in the Godhead, because I believe the Spirit to proceed from no other source than from the Father through the Son. Look to it then, that it be not you rather who are destroying the Monarchy, when you overthrow the arrangement and dispensation of it, which has been constituted in just as many names as it has pleased God to employ. But it remains so firm and stable in its own state, notwithstanding the introduction into it of the Trinity, that the Son actually has to restore it entire to the Father; even as the apostle says
in his epistle, concerning the very end of all: "When He shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; for He must reign till He hath put all enemies under His feet;" following of course the words of the Psalm: "Sit Thou on my right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool." "When, however, all things shall be subdued to Him, (with the exception of Him who did put all things under Him,) then shall the Son also Himself be subject unto Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all." We thus see that the Son is no obstacle to the Monarchy, although it is now administered by the Son; because with the Son it is still in its own state, and with its own state will be restored to the Father by the Son. No one, therefore, will impair it, on account of admitting the Son (to it), since it is certain that it has been committed to Him by the Father, and by and by has to be again delivered up by Him to the Father. Now, from this one passage of the epistle of the inspired apostle, we have been already able to show that the Father and the Son are two separate Persons, not only by the mention of their separate names as Father and the Son, but also by the fact that He who delivered up the kingdom, and He to whom it is delivered up--and in like manner, He who subjected (all things), and He to whom they were subjected—must necessarily be two different Beings.

8. If any man from this shall think that I am introducing some probole—that is to say, some prolation of one thing out of another, as Valentinus does when he sets forth aeon from aeon, one after another--then this is my first reply to you: Truth must not therefore refrain from the use of such a term, and its reality and meaning, because heresy also employs it. The fact is, heresy has rather taken it from Truth, in order to mould it into its own counterfeit. Was the Word of God put forth or not? Here take your stand with me, and flinch not. If He was put forth, then acknowledge that the true doctrine has a prolation; and never mind heresy, when in any point it mimics the truth. The question now is, in what sense each side uses a given thing and the word which expresses it. Valentinus divides and separates his prolations from their Author, and places them at so great a distance from Him, that the aeon does not know the Father: he longs, indeed, to know Him, but cannot; nay, he is almost swallowed up and dissolved into the rest of matter. With us, however, the Son alone knows the Father, and has Himself unfolded "the Father's bosom." He has also heard and seen all things with the Father; and what He has been commanded by the Father, that also does He speak. And it is not His own will, but the Father's, which He has accomplished, which He had known most intimately, even from the beginning. "For what man knoweth the things which be in God, but the Spirit which is in Him?" But the Word was formed by the Spirit, and (if I may so express myself) the Spirit is the body of the Word. The Word, therefore, is both always in the Father, as He says, "I am in the Father;" and is always with God, according to what is written, "And the Word was with God;" and never separate from the Father, or other than the Father, since "I and the Father are one." This will be the prolation, taught by the truth, the guardian of the Unity, wherein we declare that the Son is a prolation from the Father, without being separated from Him. For God sent forth the Word, as the Paraclete also declares, just as the root puts forth the tree, and the fountain the river, and the sun the ray. For these are probolai, or emanations, of the substances from which they proceed. I should not hesitate, indeed, to call the tree the son or offspring of the root, and the river of the fountain, and the ray of the sun; because every original source is a parent, and everything which issues from the origin is an offspring. Much more is (this true of) the Word of God, who has actually received as His own peculiar designation the name of Son. But still the tree is not severed from the root, nor the river from the fountain, nor the ray from the sun; nor, indeed, is the Word separated from God. Following, therefore, the form of these analogies, I confess that I
call God and His Word—the Father and His Son--two. For the root and the tree are distinctly two things, but correlative joined; the fountain and the river are also two forms, but indivisible; so likewise the sun and the ray are two forms, but coherent ones. Everything which proceeds from something else must needs be second to that from which it proceeds, without being on that account separated. Where, however, there is a second, there must be two; and where there is a third, there must be three. Now the Spirit indeed is third from God and the Son; just as the fruit of the tree is third from the root, or as the stream out of the river is third from the fountain, or as the apex of the ray is third from the sun. Nothing, however, is alien from that original source whence it derives its own properties. In like manner the Trinity, flowing down from the Father through intertwined and connected steps, does not at all disturb the Monarchy, whilst it at the same time guards the state of the Economy.

9. Bear always in mind that this is the rule of faith which I profess; by it I testify that the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit are inseparable from each other, and so will you know in what sense this is said. Now, observe, my assertion is that the Father is one, and the Son one, and the Spirit one, and that They are distinct from Each Other. This statement is taken in a wrong sense by every uneducated as well as every perversely disposed person, as if it predicated a diversity, in such a sense as to imply a separation among the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit. I am, moreover, obliged to say this, when (extolling the Monarchy at the expense of the Economy) they contend for the identity of the Father and Son and Spirit, that it is not by way of diversity that the Son differs from the Father, but by distribution: it is not by division that He is different, but by distinction; because the Father is not the same as the Son, since they differ one from the other in the mode of their being. For the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole, as He Himself acknowledges: "My Father is greater than I." In the Psalm His inferiority is described as being "a little lower than the angels." Thus the Father is distinct from the Son, being greater than the Son, inasmuch as He who begets is one, and He who is begotten is another; He, too, who sends is one, and He who is sent is another; and He, again, who makes is one, and He through whom the thing is made is another. Happily the Lord Himself employs this expression of the person of the Paraclete, so as to signify not a division or severance, but a disposition (of mutual relations in the Godhead); for He says, "I will pray the Father, and He shall send you another Comforter...even the Spirit of truth," thus making the Paraclete distinct from Himself, even as we say that the Son is also distinct from the Father; so that He showed a third degree in the Paraclete, as we believe the second degree is in the Son, by reason of the order observed in the Economy. Besides, does not the very fact that they have the distinct names of Father and Son amount to a declaration that they are distinct in personality? For, of course, all things will be what their names represent them to be; and what they are and ever will be, that will they be called; and the distinction indicated by the names does not at all admit of any confusion, because there is none in the things which they designate. "Yes is yes, and no is no; for what is more than these, cometh of evil."

11. It will be your duty, however, to adduce your proofs out of the Scriptures as plainly as we do, when we prove that He made His Word a Son to Himself. For if He calls Him Son, and if the Son is none other than He who has proceeded from the Father Himself, and if the Word has proceeded from the Father Himself, He will then be the Son, and not Himself from whom He proceeded. For the Father Himself did not proceed from Himself. Now, you who say that the Father is the same as the Son, do really make the same Person both to have sent forth from
Himself (and at the same time to have gone out from Himself as) that Being which is God. If it was possible for Him to have done this, He at all events did not do it. You must bring forth the proof which I require of you--one like my own; that is, (you must prove to me) that the Scriptures show the Son and the Father to be the same, just as on our side the Father and the Son are demonstrated to be distinct; I say distinct, but not separate: for as on my part I produce the words of God Himself, "My heart hath emitted my most excellent Word," so you in like manner ought to adduce in opposition to me some text where God has said, "My heart hath emitted Myself as my own most excellent Word," in such a sense that He is Himself both the Emitter and the Emitted, both He who sent forth and He who was sent forth, since He is both the Word and God. I bid you also observe, that on my side I advance the passage where the Father said to the Son, "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten Thee." If you want me to believe Him to be both the Father and the Son, show me some other passage where it is declared, "The Lord said unto Himself, I am my own Son, to-day have I begotten myself;" or again, "Before the morning did beget myself;" and likewise, "I the Lord possessed Myself the beginning of my ways for my own works; before all the hills, too, did I beget myself," and whatever other passages are to the same effect. Why, moreover, could God the Lord of all things, have hesitated to speak thus of Himself, if the fact had been so? Was He afraid of not being believed, if He had in so many words declared Himself to be both the Father and the Son? Of one thing He was at any rate afraid—of lying. Of Himself, too, and of His own truth, was He afraid. Believing Him, therefore, to be the true God, I am sure that He declared nothing to exist in any other way than according to His own dispensation and arrangement, and that He had arranged nothing in any other way than according to His own declaration. On your side, however, you must make Him out to be a liar, and an impostor, and a tamperer with His word, if, when He was Himself a Son to Himself, He assigned the part of His Son to be played by another, when all the Scriptures attest the clear existence of, and distinction in (the Persons of) the Trinity, and indeed furnish us with our Rule of faith, that He who speaks, and He of whom He speaks, and to whom He speaks, cannot possibly seem to be One and the Same. So absurd and misleading a statement would be unworthy of God, that, when it was Himself to whom He was speaking, He speaks rather to another, and not to His very self. Hear, then, other utterances also of the Father concerning the Son by the mouth of Isaiah: "Behold my Son, whom I have chosen; my beloved, in whom I am well pleased: I will put my Spirit upon Him, and He shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles." Hear also what He says to the Son: "Is it a great thing for Thee, that Thou shouldest be called my Son to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the dispersed of Israel? I have given Thee for a light to the Gentiles, that Thou mayest be their salvation to the end of the earth." Hear now also the Son's utterances respecting the Father: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel unto men." He speaks of Himself likewise to the Father in the Psalm: "Forsake me not until I have declared the might of Thine arm to all the generation that is to come." Also to the same purport in another Psalm: "O Lord, how are they increased that trouble me!" But almost all the Psalms which prophesy of the person of Christ, represent the Son as conversing with the Father—that is, represent Christ (as speaking) to God. Observe also the Spirit speaking of the Father and the Son, in the character of a third Person: "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit Thou on my right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool." Likewise in the words of Isaiah: "Thus saith the Lord to the Lord mine Anointed." Likewise, in the same prophet, He says to the Father respecting the Son: "Lord, who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? We brought a report concerning Him, as if He were a little child, as if He were a root in a dry ground, who had no form nor comeliness." These are a few testimonies out of
many; for we do not pretend to bring up all the passages of Scripture, because we have a
tolerably large accumulation of them in the various heads of our subject, as we in our several
chapters call them in as our witnesses in the fulness of their dignity and authority. Still, in these
few quotations the distinction of Persons in the Trinity is clearly set forth. For there is the Spirit
Himself who speaks, and the Father to whom He speaks, and the Son of whom He speaks. In the
same manner, the other passages also establish each one of several Persons in His special
caracter--addressed as they in some cases are to the Father or to the Son respecting the Son, in
other cases to the Son or to the Father concerning the Father, and again in other instances to the
(Holy) Spirit.

12. If the number of the Trinity also offends you, as if it were not connected in the simple Unity,
I ask you how it is possible for a Being who is merely and absolutely One and Singular, to speak
in plural phrase, saying, "Let us make man in our own image, and after our own likeness;"
whereas He ought to have said, "Let me make man in my own image, and after my own
likeness," as being a unique and singular Being? In the following passage, however, "Behold the
man is become as one of us," 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, "Let us make;" and, "in our image;" and, "become as one of us." 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, as with His ministers and witnesses. In
the following text also He distinguishes among the Persons: "So God created man in His own
image; in the image of God created He him." Why say "image of God?" Why not "His own
image" merely, if He was only one who was the Maker, and if there was not also One in whose
image He made man? But there was One in whose image God was making man, that is to say,
Christ's image, who, being one day about to become Man (more surely and more truly so), had
already caused the man to be called His image, who was then going to be formed of clay--the
image and similitude of the true and perfect Man. But in respect of the previous works of the
world what says the Scripture? Its first statement indeed is made, when the Son has not yet
appeared: "And God said, Let there be light, and there was light." Immediately there appears the
Word, "that true light, which lighteth man on his coming into the world," and through Him also
came light upon the world. From that moment God willed creation to be effected in the Word,
Christ being present and ministering unto Him: and so God created. And God said, "Let there be
a firmament,...and God made the firmament:" and God also said, "Let there be lights (in the
firmament); and so God made a greater and a lesser light." But all the rest of the created things
did He in like manner make, who made the former ones--I mean the Word of God, "through
whom all things were made, and without whom nothing was made." 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.

25. What follows Philip's question, and the Lord's whole treatment of it, to the end of John's Gospel, continues to furnish us with statements of the same kind, distinguishing the Father and the Son, with the properties of each. Then there is the Paraclete or Comforter, also, which He promises to pray for to the Father, and to send from heaven after He had ascended to the Father. He is called "another Comforter," indeed; but in what way He is another we have already shown, "He shall receive of mine," says Christ, just as Christ Himself received of the Father's. Thus the connection of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Paraclete, produces three coherent Persons, who are yet distinct One from Another. These Three are one essence, not one Person, as it is said, "I and my Father are One," in respect of unity of substance not singularity of number. Run through the whole Gospel, and you will find that He whom you believe to be the Father (described as acting for the Father, although you, for your part, forsooth, suppose that "the Father, being the husbandman," must surely have been on earth) is once more recognised by the Son as in heaven, when, "lifting up His eyes thereto," He commended His disciples to the safe-keeping of the Father. We have, moreover, in that other Gospel a clear revelation, i.e. of the Son's distinction from the Father, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" and again, (in the third Gospel,) "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." But even if (we had not these passages, we meet with satisfactory evidence) after His resurrection and glorious victory over death. Now that all the restraint of His humiliation is taken away, He might, if possible, have shown Himself as the Father to so faithful a woman (as Mary Magdalene) when she approached to touch Him, out of love, not from curiosity, nor with Thomas' incredulity. But not so; Jesus saith unto her, "Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father; but go to my brethren" (and even in this He proves Himself to be the Son; for if He had been the Father, He would have called them His children, (instead of His brethren), "and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God." Now, does this mean, I ascend as the Father to the Father, and as God to God? Or as the Son to the Father, and as the Word to God? Wherefore also does this Gospel, at its very termination, intimate that these things were ever written, if it be not, to use its own words, "that ye might believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?" Whenever, therefore, you take any of the statements of this Gospel, and apply them to demonstrate the identity of the Father and the Son, supposing that they serve your views therein, you are contending against the definite purpose of the Gospel. For these things certainly are not written that you may believe that Jesus Christ is the Father, but the Son.