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INCORRUPTIBLE TRINITY: SKETCH OF A DOCTRINE

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The doctrine of divine incorruptibility deserves more focused attention than it has generally received, especially in the modern period. This article draws the doctrine from its Scriptural sources (especially making use of the phthora *word-group) and sketches its basic shape for systematic theology. First, it establishes the doctrine as a statement about God's nature (that it is not subject to decay), and then traces its implications through Christology and soteriology. Finally, with the overall doctrine sketched out, the article suggests what is especially trinitarian in the doctrine of God's incorruptibility.*

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Incorruptibility is a divine perfection—that is, an attribute of the triune God. Only twice in the New Testament is God directly called incorruptible, both times in the writings of Paul (1 Tim 1:17 and Rom 1:23). But the broader set of words and concepts associated with incorruption[1] in general are spread much more widely throughout Scripture, so that when Paul at last affirms that God is incorruptible, something very important comes to the surface. Incorruptibility is, in fact, a massive doctrinal complex presupposed in the rest of Scripture and energetically developed in early Christian theology. The focus of this short essay is to draw attention to the doctrine of divine incorruptibility and to display some of its theological and spiritual ramifications, with a special goal of exhibiting its connections to the doctrine of the Trinity.

That God is incorruptible means that he is not subject to decomposition. He cannot disintegrate or be dismembered. God does not rot. "Incorruptible" is a double-

[1] I will use "incorruptibility" and "incorruption" interchangeably for reasons of style, though these terms could also be distinguished from each other (the former as the property of not being able to be corrupt, the latter merely the state of not being corrupt). The distinction is not relevant to the current sketch. As we will see, considerable verbal flexibility is necessary for dealing with this doctrine at all, since no adequate word has consistently imposed itself on the English-language theological tradition.

negative construction, confessing a positive thing by denying its negation. It belongs among that whole class of divine attributes whose power and usefulness derive from their ability to teach us what concepts we must reject if we are to affirm the truth about God's being. In rehearsing such attributes, we deny that God is limited by any power, surrounded by any presence, derived from any other; he is not changeable, visible, mortal, compound, or composed of parts. There is something almost arbitrary or reactive about which negative doctrines we stipulate of God, since we would never bother to make the movement of negation unless the possibility of affirmation was proposed to us. God is not blue, for example, but unless and until someone proposes a doctrine of divine blueness, there is no need to insist on this particular denial. The history of theology has made a select group of these negations strategically important. All of these doctrines sound somewhat more positive to us when we state them in English words that partly conceal their built-in negations. We characterize God as having divine infinity, aseity, immutability, invisibility, immortality, and simplicity. But each of these words are in fact double negations which gesture toward the transcendent reality of God, a reality about which we can also, based on revelation, make a few positive statements as well.

What is that positive truth guarded by the doctrine of incorruptibility? It is the simple and vital reality that God is one, and alive: he has strong unity and perfect life. It is the one, living God who Christian theology confesses as incorruptible. As the incorruptible one, God is radically distinguished from all creatures, and by grace he offers himself to his creation as the rock of its salvation, the stable source of a creature's finite, dependent integrity. It is this soteriological note that sounds out so affirmatively from the Biblical witness to divine incorruptibility: "The Lord lives, and blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my salvation" (Psalm 18:46). [2] God lives, and is an indestructible rock. On this basis he saves.

Biblical Exposition: Creator and Creation

To exposit the Bible's own way of teaching divine incorruptibility, we can choose between following along after the chronological sequence of the canon's unfolding storyline, or examining the conceptual structure of the fully realized doctrine. The former approach (chronological) would be especially conducive for a leisurely exploration of the full range of Scripture's varied ways of speaking of God, and would enable us to watch how the doctrine grows from lesser to greater focus and definiteness. The latter approach (conceptual) would be especially valuable for providing a rapid overview, and generating conceptual paraphrases that can easily enter into dialogue with other systematic theological topics.[3] A middle approach mingles the two, arranging topical clusters in patterns that follow the broad outline of Scripture's development of the theme. This mixed approach is the one followed in this sketch.

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[2] Scripture passages are from the ESV throughout, except where noted.

[3] Both approaches count as "biblical reasoning," which, as John Webster points out, can take the two forms of "exegetical reasoning" or "dogmatic reasoning." Webster rightly recognizes exegetical reasoning as the "theologically primary act," but commends dogmatic reasoning for making possible "swift, non-laborious and non-repetitive access to the text's matter." John Webster, "Biblical Reasoning," in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 130–31.

We begin with praise: "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." This doxology from 1 Timothy 1:17 features the single word that is central for the doctrine of incorruptibility: *aphthartō*.[4] For our purposes, it would be more helpful if this key word were translated here by incorruptible. But since it is rendered as immortal in the vast majority of English versions of this passage, we should take the opportunity to point out the importance of the distinction. To follow the tradition of translating *aphthartō* here with "immortal" may be justifiable, but is definitely a simplification. "Immortal" rightly indicates that God is not subject to death (mortality), but it smooths over the detail of the particular kind of death he is immune to: death by decomposition, that is, by corruption. In rendering *aphthartō* in this verse with immortal rather than incorruptible, translators may be interpretively harmonizing it with 1 Timothy 6:16, which says that God "alone has immortality (*athanasian*)." The longer doxology at the end of 1 Timothy does seem to be Paul's own expanded recapitulation of the first chapter's brief doxology, following the same sequence of concepts: exalted kingship, immortality, invisibility, and honor forever. Nevertheless, simplifying incorruption to immortality in 1:17 omits the concept of corruption (*phtharsis*), substituting for it the concept of death. There is much to be gained from recognizing that the word used here is not *athanatos*, but *aphthartos*.[5] We should bear in mind the several differences between the concepts of death and corruption: first, death lacks the idea of losing composition. Second, while corruption suggests a process or a continuum along which things can be more or less corrupted, death suggests a condition more punctiliar, all or nothing. Richard Chenevix Trench, famously attentive to the shades of meaning between synonyms, notes that there is "a clear distinction" between the two ideas, admitting that the translation "incorruptible" is "to be preferred: the word predicating of God that He is exempt from that wear and waste and final perishing; that *phthora*, which time, and sin working in time, bring about in all which is outside of Him, and to which He has not communicated his own *aphtharsia*."[6] Finally, as we move on from this examination of the key word, it is worth noting that there is no well-established English word that accomplishes all we require in service of this divine perfection we are calling incorruptibility. Other translational possibilities

[4] The most helpful lexicon entries on this word group are Günther Harder, "phtheiro," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 9:93–106; T. Holtz, "Phthora," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* , ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993) 3:422–23; and "phtheiro," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Moises Silva (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014) 4:597–602. For the patristic development, see G. W. H. Lampe, "aphthartos," in *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 276–77.

[5] *aphthartō* is the well-attested reading in I Tim 1:17 and is not controversial either in eclectic texts or in older versions. The manuscript known as Codex Claromontanus, a sixth-century uncial diglot rife with scribal corrections, has *aphthartō* in the main text with *athanatō* in the margin. For detailed consideration of text-critical issues in this verse, see J. K. Elliott, *The Greek Text of the Epistles to Timothy and Titus*, Studies and Documents XXXVI (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1968). Elliott judges *aphthartō* to be "probably original," which aligns with the major critical editions available.

[6] Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (London, 1880; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 254.

include imperishability, invincibility, and indestructibility.[7] But the closest we have come to a standardized term set apart for this task is incorruptible.

The language of this passage is exalted. While it is more doxological than argumentative, it makes an important point in the way it draws together a small but potent cluster of theological terms. We can see that incorruptibility belongs in a series of divine attributes that characterize God as eternal, invisible, and, as Paul concludes perhaps by way of summary, as "the only God." As Gerald Bray notes, "this is one of the few places in the New Testament where divine attributes are specifically listed."[8] The doxology includes key terms for speaking monotheistically about God in Greek. Even if the crucial concepts clustered here are all powerfully present in the Old Testament, they are expressed in terms that had also come to be current in Hellenistic philosophical discourse.[9] Trench notes that *aphthartos* in particular, "a word of the later Greek, is not once found in the Septuagint, and only twice in the Apocrypha (Wisdom 12:1; 18:4)." He goes on to point out that "properly speaking, God only is *aphthartōs*, the heathen theology recognizing this not less clearly than the Biblical."[10] In his commentary on Titus, Philip Towner asserts that the word *aphthartōs* as used here is "borrowed from Greek categories by late Jewish writers."[11] Its usage here in a Christian doxology, surrounded by key terms of monotheistic reflection, establishes the term's significance as part of a very high doctrine of God.[12] Even though Paul does not bring to bear any arguments about the word, or linger over any analysis that might draw out the implications of calling God *aphthartō* here, we can learn a lot about the word by the company it keeps in this doxology.

The situation is different in the one other New Testament passage that calls God incorruptible. Rather than just employing the term itself, the first chapter of Romans makes use of it in a discursive framework that establishes its meaning and its implications. As he traces the trajectory of human away from God, he moves through the categories of ungodliness and unrighteousness, reaching the conceptual climax in the notion of corruption:

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[7] Luther has *dem Unvergänglichen* both here and in Romans 1:25. The word remains unsettled even in English translation of Greek patristic sources. In the works of Gregory of Nyssa, "'indestructible' and 'indestructibility' are used to render *aphthartos, aphtharsia*," because "there is no satisfactory term in English: alternatives might be 'incorruptible, -ility', 'imperishable, -ility', 'immortal, -ity'." Stuart George Hall, notes to his translation, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium II, An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Lenka Karfíková, Scot Douglass, and Johannes Zachhuber (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 87; see the same lament repeated at 141. On the breadth of the whole *phthora* word group, see the remarks below by Thiselton.

[8] Gerald Bray, *The Pastoral Epistles: An International Theological Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2019), 123.

[9] While we often tend to think of ancient paganism as uniformly polytheistic, there was also a powerful philosophical current of monotheistic thought at work in Greek thought, stretching from Plato to the various Hellenistic schools. This pagan monotheism was a valuable dialogue partner for early Christian thinkers. See the range of options presented in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

[10] Trench, *Synonyms,* 253–54.

[11] Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 152. For a good rehearsal of aphtharsia's path through Wisdom and Maccabees to the New Testament, see Dănuț-Vasile Jemna, "The Aphtharsia in the Pauline Thought, A Biblical Anthropological Perspective," *Sacra Scripta* 9, no. 1 (2012): 69–97.

[12] Jerome H. Neyrey, S. J., "'Without Beginning of Days or End of Life' (Hebrews 7:3): Topos for a True Deity," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991): 439–55. Especially helpful is the careful review of terminology in the sub-section "The Shape of Hellenistic God-Talk," 440–48.

> For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, being understood by what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their reasonings, and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible mankind, of birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures. (Rom 1:20–23, NASB)

Here the contrast between incorruption and corruption serves to mark the boundary between the creator and the creature. The incorruptible God (*aphthartou Theou*) is characterized as having eternal power and a divine nature (*theiotēs*) which, though invisible in themselves, are the objects of human mental perception insofar as they are "understood by what has been made." Humans, by contrast, are identified as corruptible mankind (*phthartou anthrōpou*), and stand at the head of a descending series of creatures that get closer and closer to the ground: "birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures." The essence of idolatry is an exchange (Ps 106:20; Jer 2:11) of that which is creaturely for that which is divine, and here we are told specifically that what is exchanged is "the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible mankind." The special value of focusing on divine incorruptibility here is for its contrast to the idolatrous substitution of creatures, precisely in their corruptibility. Idols are assembled from parts and shaped by human craftsmanship, then set in place and carefully preserved from harm. Idols are compositions made of selected segments of wood no different from the other segments from which they sawed (Isa 44:9–20), covered with silver gathered in from Tarshish and gold imported from Uphaz, all painted with many colors (Jer 10:8-9), "But the LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King" (Jer 10:10). As a result, the prophetic message is that "The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth will perish from the earth and from under these heavens" (Jer 10:11). In Romans 1, Paul sets the prophetic critique of idolatry against the background of the corruptible/incorruptible distinction, thereby drawing out its implications in a more explicitly metaphysical register. Assemblages can, by nature, become disassembled or disintegrated. The mark of the true God is, by contrast, to be truly and inherently incorruptible.[13]

The two New Testament passages that directly call God incorruptible establish a solid foundation for elaborating a broader theology of divine incorruptibility, with implications for Christology and soteriology. It is worth noting how decisively these two passages function to elevate the Christian doctrine of God to the greatest heights of divine glory and to distinguish the creator from the creature: the eternal and incorruptible God is always to receive honor and glory, a glory which should never be transferred to corruptible creatures.

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[13] For a programmatic outworking of this insight in terms of ontology and the history of salvation, see Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, in *"Contra gentes" and "De incarnatione,"* ed. and trans. Robert W. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971).

Christology and Soteriology

There are several possible paths by which to trace the notion of incorruptibility from the doctrine of God to the doctrine of Christ, and then to the doctrine of salvation. First, it is worth noting that Jesus' own teaching presupposes divine incorruptibility in several ways. For example, his exhortation to store up treasures in heaven (Matt 6:19–20) is based on his absolute trust in his heavenly Father. He states this in terms of a contrast between heaven's security and earth's insecurity—in this world, valuables can be consumed by moth and rust, or stolen by thieves. But things of real value are secure against everything when they are kept by the imperishable and invincible heavenly Father of Jesus.[14] Jesus' close identification with the Father already associates him with the heavenly security about which he teaches his followers. In that sense there is a kind of assimilation to divine incorruptibility already latent in Jesus' own teaching.

But secondly, the New Testament teaching about Christ also goes on to include him within the divine incorruptibility. It does this by invoking the Old Testament's vision of God as exalted above the created order:

> Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
> and the heavens are the work of your hands.
> They will perish, but you will remain;
> they will all wear out like a garment.
> You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,
> but you are the same, and your years have no end. (Ps 102:25–27)

Once again we see the art of contrast at work here—God's eternally stable identity ("you are the same") is brought into high relief by comparison with the perishing, transient nature of the created heavens and earth. The incorruptible God can doff these ancient works "like a garment" as they wear out and pass away. But God's years have no end, and he is "the same." This high praise is quoted in Hebrews 1:10–12 as part of the rehearsal of Christ's divine identity in contrast to even the highest, angelic creatures. Specifically, these words from the Psalm are recognized as the Father's speech to his one and only Son, ascribing to him the essential divine reality of being "the same."[15] The words "the same" return in Hebrews 13:8, functioning again almost like a divine title: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." All things must pass, but the Son is not among those things—he stands on the other side of the frontier between creator and creation.

In soteriology, the broadest statement about incorruption is 2 Timothy 1:10's announcement that "our Savior Christ Jesus … abolished death (*thanaton*) and brought life and immortality (*aphtharsian*) to light through the gospel." This language of manifestation is typical of the Pastoral Epistles' unique vocabulary and expansive way of stating theological claims. The details of how incorruptibility was manifested and made effective for human salvation are spelled out in Paul's other

[14] See Rudolf Stier, *The Words of the Lord Jesus* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1861), 1:255.

[15] For an account of how the words function in Hebrews as the Father's address to the Son, see Madison N. Pierce, *Divine Discourse in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Recontextualization of Spoken Quotations of Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 56–59.

writings, especially 1 Corinthians. Notice the key role played by incorruptibility in his argument about the resurrection:

> I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable (*phthora*) inherit the imperishable (*aphtharsian*). Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:50–53)

Phthora, Paul tells us, cannot inherit *aphtharsian*: there must be a mysterious change ("Behold, I tell you a mystery"). That change he explicates in terms of the corruptible "putting on" the incorruptible, donning it as if it were a protective or transformative garment. Anthony Thiselton argues that within the argument of 1 Corinthians, there is a contrast between corrupt and incorrupt that requires us to think of incorruption as something much thicker than simply extended duration. *Phthora*, he says, "is a term within the semantic opposition that carries the decisive content, in relation to which the contrast is signalled by the alpha privative." Since *phthora* "denotes decreasing capacities and increasing weaknesses, issuing in exhaustion and stagnation," he takes it to signal "a state of decay."[16] And if *phthora* is decay, then "the semantic contrast to such decay would not be permanence or everlasting duration, but ethical, aesthetic, and psychological flourishing and abundance, even perhaps perfection, and certainly fullness of life."[17] Salvation comes to us as a rescue from decay on all levels of our human creaturely reality, by way of protective inclusion within the wholeness and flourishing that are best conceived as the positive opposite of rotting. In Thisleton's argument we see again the great value of distinguishing between death and corruption, and therefore between divine immortality and divine incorruption.

Our participation in that incorruption is described more cosmically in Romans 8, where Paul expands the scope of his teaching on the resurrection body for a moment. It is not just the human body but creation itself that "was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption (*phthoras*) and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:20–21). All creation is somehow bound by the decay-inducing power of corruption, and eagerly awaits the deliverance from it which will be manifested in the resurrection of believers. All of this depends on the resurrection of Christ himself, which is the decisive manifestation of God's essential incorruption brought down and opened up for our participation, or put into action for the purposes of salvation.

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[16] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1272. I have omitted Thiselton's typographical complexities here. His pattern of italics, bolds, self-quotations, and even shifts from serif to sans serif fonts may work well in his large commentary, but are distracting to reproduce in quotation.

[17] Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1272.

How did this divine perfection of incorruption break through into the reality of fallen human creatures subjected to corruption? It did so in the Father's refusal to let the incarnate and crucified Son undergo decay. Psalm 16 contains an oracle about a righteous one who the Lord will not surrender to corruption; Peter quotes that Psalm in Acts 2 as fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ, who says prophetically to his Father, "You will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption (*diaphthoran*)." Here is the doctrinal benefit of approaching this passage from the perspective of divine incorruptibility. It primes us to recognize that God was in Christ restoring the fallen creature to participation in incorruptibility. Just as the resurrection of Christ is the triumphant securing of the incarnate Son's invincibility at the right hand of God, so the resurrection of believers is the activation and application of that divine power for the conquering of our natural downward drive into disintegrated and decaying fragments of ourselves.

There are some important Christological complexities involved here. Because our goal in this sketch is to establish the broad, systematic outlines of the doctrine of divine incorruptibility, we can only indicate a few of the Christological details here. By the hypostatic union in which the eternal Son took to himself human nature, God the Son came within the range, so to speak, of corruptibility. That is, his divine nature was, and remains, incorruptible in itself—this has been the burden of arguing that divine incorruptibility is an attribute of God. But the human nature which the Son assumed into personal union with himself as his own human nature, was such a nature as could be subject to corruption. Human nature as such can come apart; it can decay.[18] In fact, when the Son of God experienced human death in his assumed human nature, that human nature did come apart in one crucial way—the created human body of Christ and the created human soul of Christ were separated from each other. This is human death, and Jesus died humanly. The next downward step in human dissolution is for the body, after the soul's departure, to undergo biological decay as its organic parts lose the functions of life and self-preservation. But this physical corruption is what God intervened to stop. He did not permit his holy one to see it, but raised him instead. And in the interim, during which body and soul were sundered in death, both continued to be the exclusive property of the incorruptible Son of God. We might say it this way: Body and soul lost each other in death, but the incorruptible Son lost neither his own human soul nor even his own human body. The implications for believers are immense. The seventeenth-century poet Henry Vaughan imagined a dialogue between the human soul and the body on the subject of resurrection, in which the body admits that it is exposed to the danger of decay in a way the soul is not, and yet it trusts in God's promise:

> Shall I then thinke such providence will be
> Lesse friend to me;
> Or that he can endure to be unjust
> Who keeps his covenant even with our dust?[19]

[18] For an excellent exposition of the soteriological and theological issues involved, worked out on intentionally traditional lines and in direct opposition to modern revisionism, see David J. Luy, *Dominus Mortis: Martin Luther on the Incorruptibility of God in Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

[19] "Resurrection and Immortality," in *The Poetical Works of Henry Vaughan* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, and Co, 1871), 59.

In less evocative but more careful doctrinal language, classical theologians have affirmed this profound truth about the way the incorruptible God encountered human death in Christ:

> Even though as man He did die and His sacred soul was separated from His immaculate body, the divinity remained unseparated from both—the soul ... and the body. Thus, the one Person was not divided into two persons. For from the beginning both had existence in the same way in the Person of the Word, and when they were separated from each other in death, each one of them remained in the possession of the one Person of the Word.[20]

The holy one experienced death, but in fulfillment of God's faithful promise, he did not see corruption.[21] The Son of God died our death for us, but did not rot for us. Instead, he made a way for our corruption to become invested with his incorruption.

Incorruptibility and the Trinity

Much more could be said about the doctrine of incorruptibility. Its implications for ethics and eschatology are especially rich and far-reaching: the *phthora* word group takes on moral connotations even in the New Testament, and we have already glimpsed how incorruptibility characterizes the risen life of the saints. But having surveyed the basic outlines of the doctrinal complex and shown how it all descends from a confession of incorruptibility as a divine perfection, we are in a position to conclude with some indications of how incorruptibility characterizes the Christian confession of the Trinity.

The Trinity, of course, does not come apart and cannot rot. But with attention to the nature of corruption, we can say a bit more. In pre-Christian Greek theology, corruption was the second term in a two-term complex. As birth corresponds to death, coming-to-be corresponds with ceasing-to-be. In the argument of Plato's *Phaedo*, there is a continuum of creation (*genesis*) and destruction (*phthora*). This continuum presupposes some kind of system or medium in which the twinned terms can function:

> What does not feature explicitly in Socrates' theory, but which may have been lying at the back of Plato's notion of unchanging eternal entities such as the Forms, is the Presocratic idea that matter cannot cease to exist, but that generation and destruction were in reality modifications of a basic, eternal

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[20] John of Damascus, *Orthodox Faith*, in *Saint John of Damascus: Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase Jr., FC 37 (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1958), 3:27:332. For the same claim in Thomas Aquinas, *see Summa Theologiae* III, Q. 50, A. 2. A contemporary evangelical restatement that pays special attention to the defense of body-soul dualism can be found in Matthew Y. Emerson, *"He Descended to the Dead": An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

[21] The further question of whether Christ's body could have decayed requires a conceptual distinction between the "potential disposition for an actual property" of decay and "the actual state" of decay. It is easy to see how this could matter in disputes about monophysitism, and it did in fact emerge as significant in a dispute between Julian of Halicarnassus and Severus of Antioch. See Aloys Grillmeier in collaboration with Theresia Hainthaler, *Christ in Christian Tradition,* Vol. 2, Part 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 79–121, esp. 100. On the history of what was called aphthartodocetism, see Grillmeier, 212-229; for its systematic status, see Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics* 5:2 (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Academic, 2021), 154–55.

> substance, whether one of the elements, such as Anaximenes' air, Heraclitus' fire or, perhaps more suggestively, Anaximander's *to apeiron* (the boundless), a kind of reservoir from which opposites were generated and to which they returned.[22]

In Christian appropriation, however, this continuum had to be shattered, since the biblical God could not be situated within it. Or rather, some such metaphysical continuum might be seen as appropriately characterizing created being, but could not encompass God's own manner of being. God is above the cycle of coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be, and is also (however difficult this may be to conceive of in formal categories) above whatever ineffable and mysterious continuum of existence plays host to that contrast.

This understanding of God's transcendence was at work even as the early church confessed that the eternal Son of God was *monogenes* in the sense of being eternally generated by the Father. Trinitarian theology affirmed that the Son had his origin in the Father, but utterly denied that this origin was to be understood as the first part of the dyad that concluded with *phthora*. The denial of corruptibility, in other words, helped to sharpen and focus the confession of eternal generation—it was not the kind of generation that presupposed completion in decline and decay. The Son's eternal origin from the Father had nothing to do with a mythological theogony that located the divine within a wider world process, because the eternal Son was from the eternal Father in a way that transcends world process. Chrysostom somewhere describes the Son as being "generated incorruptibly." The confession of eternal generation takes on its full metaphysical implications, and can be recognized as utterly unique, when it is understood as radically breaking free from the conceptual cycle of generation and decay.

God's life is perfect in itself, and God lives by the power of his own life. The Son and the Holy Spirit are included within that perfect divine life, which we confess negatively by saying that their common life is not subject to decay or decomposition—it is incorruptibly complete and fully realized in itself. It is simple and uncompounded, having no segment or parts into which it can be divided. The positive reality guarded by this negative formulation is that the triune God is the living God, having simplicity and aseity in the fullness of the fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Putting Incorruptibility Back into Circulation

In conclusion we can ask, Is the doctrine of the incorruptible Trinity a neglected one? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that there are no academic articles or monographs devoted directly to the subject, even though it is a topic inherently worthy of study. Yes again, in the sense that although it is a subject directly taught in the words of Scripture and richly embedded in the classic theological tradition, it does not draw much attention from Christian theologians or preachers. It is certainly a profound theme that repays contemplation. In that sense, it is a doctrine worthy of study and ripe for retrieval.

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[22] Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, *Plato I: Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo*, Loeb Classical Library 36 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 287–88.

But no, it is not a neglected doctrine in the weightier sense, as if it has been substantively absent from Christian theology. When we confess God's attributes, one of the things we confess is that we cannot confess them all. They are, in the words of Charles Wesley, "glorious all, and numberless."[23] Since God's perfections cannot be exhaustively or definitively catalogued, it would be unseemly to accuse anybody of leaving one or two of them out. It is entirely possible to bring out the reality of divine incorruptibility indirectly, by attending to adjacent doctrines like simplicity, aseity, impassibility, and blessedness. Those doctrines easily overlap with each other in such a way that they effectively cover nearly all the territory which could be surveyed in a thematic focus on incorruptibility. For example, in Stephen Charnock's classic volumes *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, while there is no chapter or section devoted to incorruptibility, his discussion of divine immutability not only covers much of the same ground, but employs much of the same terminology.[24] Charnock takes as his guiding text Psalm 102:26–27, which we have seen is a key Old Testament passage on incorruptibility. Following this Psalm's lead, he explains creaturely mutability largely in terms of corruptibility, even contrasting it with divine incorruptibility. The most stable of creatures (the earth and heavens) "have it not from themselves that they do not perish, but from thee, who didst endue them with an incorruptible nature."[25] In all the ways that matter most, Charnock does not lack a doctrine of divine incorruptibility, though he lacks the locus.

Most systematic theologies, in fact, lack this locus. It is in hard to find historic examples of theological writers drawing out divine incorruptibility for special attention. The traditional arrangement shows a preference for folding this doctrine into the nearby doctrines in which its elements are implicated. The particular vocabulary (the *phtarsis* word group and its correlates) and concerns (the denial of constitution) of divine incorruptibility are usually scattered around in various other doctrines, lending to them a pervasive background, an occasional tone, or a subtle flavoring that we can recognize as the doctrine of divine incorruptibility. We do well to remember what a strength it is that the divine attributes mutually implicate each other.

But there are also strategic reasons to focus attention on particular attributes, or to approach the character of God from various angles. This essay is an investment in approaching the central Christian doctrines from the point of view of the doctrine of incorruptibility. It has been not so much a work of retrieval as an a work of recirculation, bringing a set of terms and concepts back into currency, to draw attention to the particular exegetical trajectories and systematic associations that carry the doctrine. Placing divine incorruptibility in the midst of the full doctrine of God, we can benefit from confessing God as incorruptible in all ways—incorruptibly holy, incorruptibly just, incorruptibly merciful, incorruptibly good, incorruptibly patient, and incorruptibly Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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[23] Charles Wesley, "Glory Be to God on High," verse two.

[24] Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853), 1:310–62. See also Steven J. Duby, *God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

[25] Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, 311.