

# OpenTheo

## Steven Duby and Joseph Minich on Divine Simplicity—'The Lord Is One: Reclaiming Divine Simplicity'

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Steven Duby and Joseph Minich recently joined me to discuss 'The Lord Is One: Reclaiming Divine Simplicity', a book to which they both contribute essays, which has just been published by the Davenant Press. Steven Duby, associate professor of theology at Grand Canyon University, is also the author of 'Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account' and 'God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology', which was published last week.

You can buy the books here (ads):

'The Lord Is One: Reclaiming Divine Simplicity' - <https://amzn.to/2MYUCg0>

'Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account' - <https://amzn.to/2FnZfvZ>

'God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology' - <https://amzn.to/36rGtiY>

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### Transcript

Welcome back. Today I am joined by two of my friends to discuss a recently published book by the David Trust called, *The Lord Is One, Recovering Divine Simplicity*. I highly recommend that you read this book.

It's a very stimulating book on the subject of divine simplicity. And to explain what exactly divine simplicity is and what this project involves, I have brought on my friends Joe Minich and Steve Duby. So first of all, Joe, could you tell us a bit about what this book project is and how it first came together? Sure, sure.

Basically, this book in some ways grows out of the controversy that was raging over the doctrine of God a couple of years ago, you know, that you've written about as well over the trinity and gender and this sort of thing. And one of the subjects that sort of became argued about around that was the role that divine simplicity plays in the formulation of the doctrine of the trinity. And so basically, I saw a need when I was watching that debate to see resources that both addressed the doctrine of divine simplicity from a kind of historical theological perspective, but also that perhaps scratched some of the itches of those who wanted more solid biblical material on the doctrine of divine simplicity, or who wanted to see material that was sensitive to, you know, the ancient Near Eastern context of the Old Testament in the formulation of the doctrine of God.

And that also respected the role that divine simplicity is played in the traditional formulation of the doctrine of the trinity, but also recognized, had the historical awareness to recognize the breadth of that doctrine as it has actually been expressed in history. And so part of what I wanted to do was on the one hand, kind of agree with the side that says, hey guys, when we're formulating the doctrine of the trinity, we need to be sensitive to the central role that divine simplicity is played in that doctrine. But also, I wanted to, on the other hand, say like, yes, but this doctrine also allows for a certain variety of expression.

And there's a case to be made that we need to go back to scripture, and have a more fine grained conversation about how those two discourses fit together. And so what I did is sort of approached a team of people, you know, some, a lot of whom we mutually know, you know, one of them being Mr. Dr. Duby here, but in others being somebody like Jamie DeGuide, who I knew through other means, and he's, you know, he's doing a PhD in Semitic studies, basically, but also has a pretty, pretty big concern for the doctrine of God. And I thought it'd be interesting to take somebody like him, who's, who's working with sort of, you know, ancient Near Eastern material, but also has a very, very kind of Orthodox Catholic doctrine of God in the little C sense there, and can put those two discourses together, where there's not a lot of material that puts those two discourses together.

And so each of the chapters are sort of attempts to have the conversation in that way, showing both its breadth, its necessity, but also the way in which we'd want to argue for

its biblical foundation. So it's meant to be a kind of creative, not, I wouldn't call it quite a middling thing in the sense, I mean, we're firmly landing on a particular side, right, that divine simplicity is correct. Nevertheless, we want to perhaps scratch the itches of those on another side who are worried that this doesn't honor, you know, other sets of data, basically.

So that's essentially how the kind of vision came together. And then it was just, you know, a couple of years of getting people to write things and, you know, get put together. Right.

So what exactly is the doctrine of simplicity? I imagine a number of people who are watching or listening to this have heard this word thrown around before, but to the extent that they have any exposure to the doctrine as it's been expressed, they can find it daunting and confusing. If you were to give a sort of potted definition of what the doctrine of simplicity is, and maybe also why it matters, what would it be? Yeah. So the doctrine of divine simplicity, yeah, it's a funny word to throw around about God that he's simple, because we think, gosh, he's, I think God is complicated, isn't he? You know, and I think that I think the best way to articulate that is, is that when you use the word simple in reference to God, the idea is not simple as opposed to complicated, but simple as opposed to composite.

That is to say, simple as opposed to composed of parts. And so the real idea of the doctrine of divine simplicity is that we never want to think of anything about God as sort of any kind of composition in the Godhead that he's this attribute plus this attribute plus a sprinkling of that attribute, or even that the persons of the Trinity, and this is where it can get a little tricky, or that even that the persons of the Trinity aren't, you know, we don't want to think of God as sort of the Father plus the Son plus the Holy Spirit, which all together sort of equal and add up to God. And the pastoral significance of that, the pastoral significance of that could be drawn out in some complex ways.

In some cases, it's fairly inferential, but actually one of my favorite ways to capture why it's significant is a famous statement by Karl Barth, you know, I know we're only supposed to like Barth a little bit, but you know, he said some good things. And one of them I think he said is, and I'm probably butchering this a bit, but it's taken the doctrine of divine simplicity is the idea that God is all that he is and all that he does. That is to say that anytime God is anything toward anything in creation, we can be assured that he is everything that he is toward whatever object he's relating to.

And that has significance perhaps, I think, on a pastoral level, where we can perhaps isolate attributes of God and then relate to God by means of a kind of singular image, as it were, that runs the risk of runs the risk of, this is a long sentence, runs the risk of creating some possibility that we're projecting on God by means of some kind of singular thing like God's judgment or his anger or his wrath. Or on the other hand, just saying,

you know, God's gentleness, you know, none of these words fully ever capture all that God is in anything that God is doing. And so it gives us a kind of theological apparatus that helps us, I think, think of and relate to and worship God rightly as we relate to him, you know, worship in an engaging scripture.

So that would be a kind of baseline, I think, pastoral implication of the doctrine. I found maybe reading someone like St. Augustine, you have a deep sense of the centrality of a classical theology of God at the very heart of his piety. It's not something that's just appended as philosophical speculation.

It's at the very heart of you read the confessions. And on each page, you see that this doctrine of God is something that moves him to piety, it helps him to read the scripture in a far deeper way than he would have done otherwise. And it's not something divorced from either the reading of scripture or the practice of Christian piety and the worship of God.

And I was wondering if you, we, having Steve on the show, we have the person who has literally written the book on divine simplicity. All right. He has written a book called Divine Simplicity, a dogmatic account, and recently has come out with another book, God in Himself, Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology.

And I would like to ask Steve, what is the reason for engaging in this sort of questioning about the doctrine of simplicity? Surely this is Greek thought, Greek metaphysics, and it's divorced from biblical Hebrew reasoning. How should we understand this endeavor? What justification do we have for it? Yeah, that's a great question. That's certainly how a lot of people would have conceived of divine simplicity in generations past, more recently.

But I would want to emphasize that the material that we find in the biblical canon is fundamentally what points us as Christians toward divine simplicity. So I would say the fact that the God of the Bible is underrived, He doesn't depend on something other than Himself to be the God that He is, is fundamentally the thing that drives us to affirm the doctrine of divine simplicity. So when Joe was saying that God's attributes are not things that come together to make up what we're saying is God's holiness or God's righteousness or God's love, just as God Himself viewed from a certain angle.

And so when we say that, all of a sudden we realize that God isn't latching onto something outside of Himself in order to make sure that He is holy or make sure that He is full of love or grace. This is just who and what God is. And so when we read scripture and we see that God is underrived, that God doesn't have to fulfill Himself by engaging with something outside of Himself, then we're led to say, aseity is a viable divine attribute that we want to affirm, and simplicity as well.

And also, when we look at the doctrine of the Trinity, Joe started to bring this up as well,

but when we look at the doctrine of the Trinity, we don't want to say that the Father is some part of who God is and the Son is some part of who God is, especially in light of a text like Colossians 2.9, where we read that all the fullness of deity dwells bodily in Christ. So I think you may not read it this way at first glance, but I think ultimately that text communicates that Jesus doesn't have some part of what it means to be God. All that it is to be God subsists or exists in the Father, in the Son, in the Holy Spirit.

And when we affirm that, we can see just how much we are called to focus on Christ as the highest revelation of God, as the one who fulfills all of our spiritual needs, and as the one who is able to save because of who he is. So I think that scripture points us toward divine simplicity, and the idea that it would simply be built on Greek philosophy is a misconception. Now, it is fair to say that as Christians, we are free to draw upon concepts that have been analyzed in a thorough way by Greek philosophers in the past, but that doesn't mean that we're taking Greek philosophy and just wanting to affirm whatever it is that these philosophers might have affirmed.

What you're describing there, it seems to me that it's maybe trying to bring the doctrine of divine simplicity, which has often been expressed in a more philosophical idiom, more closely into relationship with the language and the categories of scripture, that we're speaking about the uncreated living God, the God who is not derived from anything, the God who is not defined by anything outside of himself. He's the God who is truly himself as well, in a way that means that he will never change. He's not a creature that he should undergo the sort of shifts and the alterations, and that he might become something other than himself over a period of time.

And so all of this, it seems to me, is an attempt to think biblically, but to think biblically in a sense, not just with the surface of the text, but to see what's implied beneath the surface, that there is this far deeper account of God that holds together all the biblical evidence. And it seems for that sort of task, we're bringing together a lot of different material from scripture itself to synthesize into this account of God. Where do you find the main sources for the doctrine of simplicity within the text of scripture itself? If you're thinking about specific biblical passages that will point in that direction, I think one of them would be the revelation of the divine name in Exodus 3. That in itself is a controversial thing to say because of how that text is viewed in contemporary Old Testament studies sometimes, not all the time.

But the canon develops the meaning of the divine name across a range of different texts, including the chapters on Isaiah that are very rich, and the revelation of God's transcendence that appears in John's gospel, where Jesus invokes the statement I am, and then in the book of Revelation as well. I think a text like that points us to the fact that God just is who he is. He's the eternal one that's not established as what he is by someone else.

Also, if you were to look at texts that speak of God not just having light or love, but being light and love, I don't think we need to say that the apostle John had everything in mind that Thomas Aquinas had in mind when he was writing the Summa. But at the same time, texts like that speak of the fact that God isn't grabbing hold of something else in order to be the God that he is. They speak to the fact that there's not a greater version of these things beyond God himself.

And so, when we read that God is love, I think it's fair to begin to think love is not something floating around out there that God has to exemplify. The greatest love, the absolute, the ultimate love, is God himself. And again, that doesn't necessarily give us all the building blocks of a doctrine of divine simplicity that we find in Thomas or someone else, but it does point us along the way.

And then I think our thinking on these things needs to be integrated, and it can be really helped along by different figures from the Christian tradition who have thought deeply about these things like Augustine or Aquinas or other figures like that. How would you understand the doctrine of divine simplicity in terms of the theological discourses of, on the one hand, a sort of apophatic discourse, and on the other hand, a doctrine of analogy? How does the doctrine of divine simplicity fit within those frameworks? That's a great question. I would say that simplicity pushes us to affirm both sides of speech about God, namely the side that has us recognizing our limitations about our speech about God, which is, of course, in the apophatic side of things, as you mentioned.

But then it also helps us to have a strong sense of what we do know about God and just how rich that knowledge is. So on the apophatic side, we are led to think that God doesn't have his attributes as different qualities that begin to adhere to God or things that grow in God and then get attached to his essence. But then what it looks like to say that God's wisdom just is God himself or God's own essence or God's love just is God himself, we come up against the real mystery that surrounds God pretty quickly there.

And so I think that that funds our apophatic element in our Christian doctrine of God, because we recognize that there are some things that we don't know, some things that we have to say are not true of God, even if we can't then explain everything there is to say about what is true of God. And yet, if we take it on the other hand as well, we look at what we positively can know and can say about God in the cataphatic register or by way of analogy. Simplicity helps us there because it reminds us that analogy is not just an unspecified concept.

Our speech about God is analogous for some very particular reasons, namely when we say God is wise or God is good, we have to recognize that these things are infinite in God and not present in God in the way that they are in a creature. Also, these things are not, as I mentioned, qualities added to God's essence. They just are God.

So simplicity helps inform our understanding of what we mean when we say that our

speech about God is analogous. And then also, when we begin to about the implications of a statement like each of God's attributes just is God's essence, we can see that when we know something of God's wisdom or when we know something of God's goodness, we don't know something that stands out in front of God and blocks us from knowing the true God. In fact, if we know something of God's wisdom, we know something of God himself.

And if we know something of God's goodness, we know something of God himself. And I think that's actually very important theologically, but it's also existentially important because we can see that the goodness of God is not something that might be falsified by something that lies behind it. The goodness of God just is God himself.

And so everything that God is and does will be characterized by supreme goodness, which, as I said, is important for intellectual reasons in theology, but also for pastoral reasons, too. Right. Joe, I was wondering if you could say something about the fact that within the Old Testament, we see a lot of language used for God that seems very God reveals himself almost as a man, for instance, to Abraham when he visits with the two angels.

We have other accounts of theophanies. We have descriptions of God's strong right hand. We have descriptions of God's nostrils when he's angry and all these other descriptions in Scripture that seem to be at odds with the sort of discourse that we're engaging in here.

How do we hold these things together or reconcile them or maybe even see some deeper harmonization between them? Yeah, we have a couple of strategies I think we can use to read that well. I mean, one of the strategies, of course, is just to note that the Old Testament itself talks in both registers. It's biblical language itself that kind of has that interesting tension in it.

And it's the kind of tension that's noted. One person who's done some really interesting work on this, as you know, is Mike Heiser's sort of Old Testament account of these angelic theophanies relative to other discourse about God. And one of the things he shows in his biblical theological work is that not only do we see this kind of duality of kind of transcendence and imminent language throughout the Old Testament, it's something that, you know, Second Temple Judaism picks up on as well.

And there's a whole commentary on this, like why are we using this kind of deeply anthropomorphic language to talk about God? You know, this is before any sort of Christian, or at least Christian tradition of this discourse develops. It's already something we're reading in the text. And so we have a couple of categories to talk about that.

And this is one of those cases where there's probably a range of answers that the church has given to sort of talk about how do we put those two discourses together well. You

know, one answer that the church has given that is useful and is in predate, certainly predates Christianity, is that some of this language is anthropomorphic, right? We're communicating to human beings who know that God is majestic and awesome and up there, and he's not like us. That's, you know, kind of a basic assumption of the Old Testament is God is not like us in some relative sense.

And yet God is communicating to us who are his image. And so there's this way in which putting his activities and his acts and his kind of internal dispositions and the language of human being and knowing is a just a way, is a kind of irreducible and in some ways a necessary way of communicating with human beings at all. In fact, even transcendent language, even language that even those sentences and statements of scripture that speak of God in the most transcendent way themselves are still in human language, still can connote images that we have some kind of finite frame of reference for, etc.

And so on the one hand, it's kind of irreducible, it's kind of inevitable that this tension sort of exists. Nevertheless, the Old Testament tradition, it's worth saying, does seem to be fairly willing, and maybe we should modify that and say God himself, if we think this is his word, seems to be fairly willing to wrap himself in the language of fairly discrete and kind of earthy metaphors, and that is significant. And we might not want to go all the way, you know, one proposal out there is sort of all, you know, for those in the know, is sort of Oliphant's proposal of how the incarnation is a kind of metaphor that brings up a set of issues that helps us maybe see how some of what's going on in the Old Testament, that is to say the incarnation is maybe a lens we can use, the theologization that we do with the incarnation is a theology that will help us, those categories will help us read maybe how we can put some of this together in the Old Testament.

And it's possible that the particular proposal of Oliphant and the way he's doing that is less than fully what we would want to say in an orthodox account of God. It might be, it might nevertheless be the case that that move in itself does capture some things. So for instance, one account, and this is thick in the Christian tradition, actually, it's a fairly traditional account to say some of this, some of the most kind of embodied moments of sort of God in the Old Testament was interpreted by the Church to be moments of encountering the pre-incarnate Christ, who was almost this kind of angelic theophanic character.

And there's dispute about this in the Christian tradition, but there are moments, it's interesting to think that in, for instance, John 12, this moment when Isaiah encounters a kind of embodied, the very kind of embodied depiction of God in Isaiah 6. Isaiah encounters God and sort of he's wearing a robe and the train fills the temple and it's extremely embodied sort of vision of God. And yet when John is reflecting on this in chapter 12 of the Gospel of John, he's fairly comfortable just saying that's Jesus. And there's interesting moments like that in the Old Testament and New Testament when they come together that a lot of this winds up, I've been surprised in fact, how often



some of the most visceral language in the Old Testament winds up being used by New Testament authors to be a reference to the Christ.

And so that's one way of looking at things and perhaps sort of putting this on various registers. And I think another thing to, and this is a harder thing to do, but I think another angle that we can take on this is just to recognize that the Old Testament, if we are saying that part of the reason for this is that God is communicating with human beings, I think we should perhaps factor in the dimension to which these are also human beings in peculiar and particular historical situations with a particularly developed way of discoursing. And so one thing I try to do in my chapter in the book is talk about how, you know, the discourse of humanity in the era in which most of the Old Testament is written, it's not that the discourse of sort of the Roman Empire and all of the philosophy of that time is contradictory necessarily to that more ancient Near Eastern discourse, but there is some discursive development.

And I think that's significant to take note of. You know, God is speaking to a particular civilization in a lot of the Old Testament, and that civilization is not entirely changed by the time we get to New Testament revelation, but there are some changes in the discourse. And we see this most obviously in just the shift from Hebrew to Greek, right? That's not an insignificant shift in God's mode of revealing himself to people, it's shifting the language in which he's revealing himself to people.

And what you see in the New Testament, nevertheless, is a drawing upon the whole inheritance of God's revelation in the Old Testament, but you also see the conversation partners maximized in the New Testament. So Paul is thoroughly conversant with trends that are going on in Greek philosophy. And one of the peculiarities is that almost every time Paul is explicitly appealing to this literature of the Mediterranean, he's agreeing with it.

Most of the time, Paul actually quotes it. He's saying, hey, there's some insight here, guys. And so part of what you see going on in the New Testament is a kind of the project of the church that puts together the revelation of the Old Testament and the reflections of, you know, sort of Greek and Roman philosophy is a project that we already see kind of cryptically begun.

That discourse, that dialogue is already nascently and cryptically begun in the New Testament itself. And the early church, and then up into Nicaea and Constantinople, of course, or Chalcedon, they're just beginning the project that's already in seed form begun in the New Testament itself. And so I think there's perhaps ways of talking about this that really just, at least maybe one thing I hope the book is adding is trying to look at this dispute or look at the development of this doctrine in a discursive way.

In other words, saying at one stage, divine discourse is speaking, you know, sort of within this set of categories. And then when human discourse changes, there's already

God's sort of accommodation to that. And then the conversation of the church itself sort of continues, continues reflecting upon God's multifaceted discourse and in itself, in itself continues that process of intellectual and imaginative integration, something like that.

And I think that's a long winded way of saying, I think there's actually several strategies of resolving some of those disputes and figuring out exactly how to fit all of that together. And maybe one thing to say is that that's a, that's a putting all of that data together is something we can keep continue, we can continue doing as well. That is to say, we, you know, one, one lovely thing we can always say as Protestants is maybe there's more to be said.

While respecting, drawing upon the wisdom of the tradition, of course, you know, without just dismissing. One of the things that you're bringing up there, I think that is important is just the way in which the text itself invites this sort of reflection, invites and engages in this sort of reflection at certain points. So there are ways in which we'll have a more anthropomorphic description of God, relenting, regretting his decision, something like that.

And then right next to that in some places, like in first Samuel, you have statements that God is not a man that he should relent. And these things invite by the very proximity that they have a reflection upon the way in which both of these things can be true and invites through the creation of an opening for reflection, a discourse that concerns some greater reconciliation of these statements within some understanding of both analogical discourse and the ways in which scripture is accommodated to human understanding. And then also a discourse that talks about some of the theological frameworks within which this could be understood relative to who God is in himself.

One of the things I was wondering if you could address, Steve, was when we talk about the Lord is one, that word one, I mean, when we use the word one, we're usually referring to this is one pen, or this is one finger on my hand, or this is something else, one plate, whatever it is. And yet, when we're talking about God, surely the word must have a slightly different sense. What do we mean when we use the word one about God? And also, along with that, how does the doctrine of divine simplicity deal with the supposed problem of three in one? Yeah, that's a great question.

I would say it's helpful to note the differences between the ways that we say some creaturely thing is one and the ways that we say God is one. So, sometimes we say one, and we mean to speak about the quantity of something. But we know that God is not corporeal.

We know that God doesn't exist in that way. We can qualify that by saying, yes, of course, God the Son ultimately does take on human flesh. But we're talking about God with respect to his Godness at the moment.

God is not one with regard to quantity. Also, we're not saying that he is the first of something in a long line of similar things. So, when we say that God is one, in an important sense, we're speaking negatively.

God is not more than one. But there also is a positive meaning as well. And one helpful treatment of this, can be found in the early reformed theologian, Amandus Polonus, who says, ultimately, what we mean there is God is the unique one or God is the only God.

Something along those lines can help us tighten up our speech when we say that God is one. And that can be expressed, I think, in the word singularity. And then simplicity brings in another aspect of oneness when we begin to talk about God not being composed of parts or all that is in God just being God himself.

Now, all of this does raise a question about how divine simplicity fits with the doctrine of the Trinity. And I think there have been some huge misunderstandings on this front. And that's been one of the big reasons that people have been hesitant to affirm divine simplicity.

One of the things that I would want to say is that when we say God is simple, and we deny that God is composed of different parts, we are not saying that God has absolutely no distinctions in himself. We are not precluding all types of distinctions, but only those distinctions that would imply a compiling of parts that make up a greater whole. So the question then is, okay, can we explain how or talk about the fact that the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father, you know, neither is the Holy Spirit.

Each one is distinct from the other two persons within God without having to rely on viewing these persons as parts. I think most definitely we can talk about distinctions among the persons without suggesting that we have to invoke parts for some reason. Traditionally, theologians have said that each person is distinct from the other two by having his own proper mode of existing.

There is a certain way in which each person exists relative to the other two that distinguishes that person as the person that he is. So the Father is the distinct person that he is by having generated the Son, the Son is the person that he is by having eternally come forth from the Father as the Son, and then the Spirit is the person that he is by having proceeded eternally from the Father, and Western Christians would typically say, and the Son. These ways of existing do not at all assume that each person has his own part, and when we use the language of modes of existing, that is typically connected to a statement like, you know, the persons are distinct from one another modally, but not by being different beings or different parts within God.

The language of mode is important there, and because I think some people have taken all talk of modes to imply modalism or Sabellianism, sometimes people can be hesitant to use that, but it's actually historical language that the Fathers grabbed hold of even as

they were resisting the error of Sabellianism. So to boil it all down, we want to affirm distinct persons in God, but not that the persons are parts, rather that each person is distinct from the others by the unique way in which he exists. One challenge that I think has been raised to the doctrine of divine simplicity that I'd love to hear your thoughts on, as I think is an important and difficult challenge to answer, is the problem of creation.

That first of all, the alterity of creation as distinct from God, and then also the fact that God's action in creation as a particular action, that God at some point, we would seem to think, becomes the creator, and that the creation being brought into being, surely that entails a change in God, that God has accomplished something. Now there is something else out there apart from God, and that that changes God at least relative to that thing. How can we deal with that? Because it seems to be a pretty big problem.

Yeah, I think the main thing to say at the beginning is just that when God performs an action like creation, or blessing his creatures, judging his creatures, regenerating, justifying, we can say that God truly performs those actions at distinct points in time, with distinct effects, without implying that there is the sort of change in God that I think scripture precludes, but then also has historically been denied by major thinkers of the Christian tradition. One of the things that's commonly said is that a predicate like creator, or king, or something like that, is predicated of God on the basis of his relationship to the creature, and that relationship, it doesn't mean something new for the creature, but it doesn't mean the introduction of something new in God's own being. One traditional way of expressing that is to say that the relationship between God and the creature is real on the side of the creature, but not real on the side of God, but that has to be articulated very carefully, because we do want to say the creature truly does stand in relation to God, God truly does stand in a very important sense in relation to the creature.

What that means is just that the creature's relation to God is constitutive of the creature's being, it factors into establishing what the creature is, whereas in the case of God, that's not the case. He truly is the one that brought the creature into being, but on God's side of things, that didn't introduce a new thing into God's being. One of the things that comes up in connection with this is the question of whether God is pure act without any passive potential, and I don't know if that will sound terribly abstract at first to folks that may be listening, but that is one of the claims that goes along with the doctrine of simplicity, is that God's being is just active, it doesn't include any passive potential.

So questions come up then regarding whether creation is necessary, after all if God didn't have any passive potential that he began to actualize at a certain point, it sounds like creation would have to be eternal and would have to be just as necessary as God's own active being. I'm not sure that we can fully comprehend everything that's happening when God brings the universe into being, but what I would want to say is that there are some ways that we can clarify what we do and don't mean by saying that God is pure

actuality. So I would want to say that God is pure act, he's totally active, and the eternal processions in the Trinity help us understand that God was never inactive before creating the world, he's always been active.

But then we have to say that God's being didn't imply the being of creation and in the act of creation God is freely applying his eternal actuality to perform this particular work. So given that there is a free application involved there, a free direction of God's essential actuality, God's essential power toward a created effect, I would say that that opens up a space where we can say God's act of creation or God's act of judgment or justification or whatever it is, it is not absolutely identical to God's own active being. It is something that comes forth from a particular application of God's active being in a particular direction.

That may have been more than what you asked about, but I think it does connect to that question and people typically want to think about that when they think about simplicity. That's fantastic, thank you. Giving a sort of lay of the land of the debates at the moment, what are some of the internal debates among people who hold to the doctrine of divine simplicity? What are some of the points where people are trying to sharpen concepts up, maybe disagreeing with each other, maybe having different notions of what is entailed by commitment to the classical doctrine? I'd be interested in both of your thoughts on this one.

What are some of the things that you've noticed in the course of this project, for instance? Yeah, I guess I can start there. So some of them are theological and philosophical, and then some of them are historical. And so on the former side, you have, for instance, the difference between Thomas and Scotus on divine simplicity.

Both hold to divine simplicity, but the way they resolve certain intellectual problems with the doctrine is slightly different. And in fact, Nathan Greeley, he wrote our chapter in the book on philosophical objections to divine simplicity. Unlike a lot of recent writers on this, agrees with, I think, I'm pretty sure he's explicit about this in the chapter, if I recall, but he sort of leans towards sort of the Scotus position on some of those resolutions, while sort of trying to respect sort of the Thomist sort of inflection of that doctrine.

So some of it is just technicalities. There's certainly a dispute, I think, in some circles about how precisely how do we talk about the relationship between the attributes of God and the essence of God. There's various ways of sort of in a fine grained manner articulating that, are each of them sort of approximations of all that God is? Or should we rather say, you know, should we treat them aspectually and then use more unknowable language of the essence or something like this? So there's some, I'm not sure that those, it's not always clear to me, you know, and I'm not a professional theologian, it's not always clear that those distinctions wind up on a holistic level, creating something that's all that different.

Nevertheless, there's at least a discursive difference in some of the ways of articulating

things. On a historical level, you know, you have, for instance, this book by, and I don't know how to say his name, I think it's Radagalwicz, you know, the transformation of divine simplicity, where he basically argues that sort of your, your sort of the kind of Greek, the kind of, if you could imagine the Greek philosophy, simplicity gets transformed by means of Trinitarian discourse, basically in the Cappadocians. Stephen Wedgworth in our volume has, he's written a particularly useful chapter, because he interacts with a lot of the most up-to-date scholarship on simplicity in the Church Fathers, and even shows that that particular author I just mentioned has since modified his position after some critique.

And so there are some historical disputes about exactly how all this, sort of how all that fits together. Those are the ones I have in mind. And then, of course, there's, I mean, the most, the other obvious dispute we can have here is that we have a lot of people in the modern evangelical church, in the modern reformed church, who still do maintain that they claim the doctrine of divine simplicity.

So one of the things that's complicated about some of the recent disputes is that, you know, you, if you take a K. Scott Olafend or a John Frame, both of them actually do claim and own the label, at least the label of divine simplicity as part of their theology. The question then becomes, among the church and among theologians, whether this is the historic doctrine, or whether there's elements there that just don't sit well enough with the historical doctrine to say there's the sufficient level of continuity there that we'd want to see. Or if we want to be really bold, say, oh, who cares? You know, here's a better way of saying things.

And I think most people are unpersuaded, and perhaps rightly so, that this is a better way of saying things. So that's, you know, so that's another angle, you know, kind of sort of modern angle of disputes than divine simplicity. But Dr. Dube might have more professional things to say here.

Well, I think it's helpful to point out the different historical differences. A person that wants to think about the doctrine of divine simplicity, and then also maybe build constructively from what previous thinkers have done, might latch on to the Cappadocian fathers as representatives of a certain way of formulating the doctrine. John of Damascus, Gregory Palamas, these would be examples of theologians who handle things a little bit differently than some of the Western writers.

And by differently, I haven't, by saying that, I haven't mined their treatment of things like the way that the divine attributes relate to the essence, or questions about whether divine energies are distinct from God's own essence, and how to make sense of all of that. And then in the West, there are the positions of folks like Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus. You could even draw attention to Barthes as someone that does something different with divine simplicity.

Although I think a lot of Barthes' dissatisfaction with previous framings of divine simplicity are more from not quite understanding the historical sources all that well. I think Barthes could probably have been pretty happy with some of the things that previous thinkers said if the engagement with them was a little bit more patient. Now, today, there are people who would be firmly in the discipline of theology, who are trying to do different things with simplicity, and then others who might be trained as philosophers who are interested in engaging the doctrine of divine simplicity.

And beyond what Joe has mentioned, it might be worth highlighting that some of the people that have a background in analytic philosophy, or would simply call themselves analytic theologians, they are doing work on divine simplicity. Sometimes that is strongly connected to previous thinkers in the tradition like Aquinas or Scotus or someone else. Sometimes, people working in that mode are trying to do stuff that you could say is brand new, or at least large parts of it are brand new.

That has to do a lot of times with people trying to resolve tensions like the question of whether God can be pure act and still entirely free in performing his outward actions. There are questions about the coherence of simplicity and the trinity that are taken up by philosophical theologians. Some of them are quite skeptical and adamantly against recovering the doctrine of divine simplicity in one of its forms, but then others are more sympathetic.

And they're just generating different proposals on how to answer some of the logical objections to it. So one of the things that I'm hearing in your discussion is that this is not just an intramural debate for Thomists and Aristotelians. There's a broader constituency of scholars thinking about these questions.

And it's something that has a place within the Christian tradition and the classical theological tradition that is broader than just one particular strand of it. Yeah, absolutely. And to, I guess, expand on what I was saying before, it's important to recognize that even amidst small or small-ish differences among different thinkers in the Christian tradition, this is something that is present throughout patristic theology mainstream, small c Catholic, patristic theology, present in the writings of the medieval doctors, albeit in some slightly different forms, and something that was affirmed in the great Protestant thinkers and the major confessions throughout the Reformation.

So even if it might seem unfamiliar to a lot of modern students of theology, it is something that we could say is, for lack of a better word, just normal in the Christian doctrine of God. And something that those who subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith or other confessions are, whether they always know it or not, they're actually bound to uphold it and really should have a good understanding of what it means, because it's part of our inheritance as small c Catholic Christians. Joe, I'd be interested in, as we draw to a close, to hear some of your thoughts on what you hope that this book

achieves.

How do you hope that the conversation on divine simplicity and the more general place of the doctrine within the church, how do you hope that that will proceed going forward? Yeah, what I wanted to do, I mean, it would be hard to imagine that any book would satisfy the, or maybe I'll say that differently, maybe would scratch the itches of the most virulent critics. Persuasion is hard, and I'm not necessarily blaming them for that. But what I hope it does is, for those who feel the itch that I want to make sure that we're not just kind of hamstringing the Bible into philosophical categories, I hope it at least gives you a sense that that's not really going on here.

Even if you disagree with exactly how the tradition is sort of put these things together, this is a good faith, fair and intelligent, and in some ways compelling reading of the Bible and how to fit it with conclusions we can draw from general revelation. So I want to give a kind of conceptual apparatus to those who are suspicious that maybe this is the tail wagging the dog. And if nothing else, help them walk away to say, okay, it was, you know, it's more complicated than I thought.

And I hope that we do that on the historical level as well. On the one hand, there's the, you know, there's chapters that sort of say, here's sort of the development of the doctrine, and here's the particular role this played in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and Athanasians, for instance. But two of the chapters that are really exciting, I think, and can be really helpful, are done by just the very, very talented Derek Peterson, where he really shows the other side of this coin, which is why don't we think this anymore? And it's really him talking about the doctrine of divine simplicity and the doctrine of the Trinity from a more early modern to modern perspective and saying what kind of shifts in our intellectual apparatus have sort of attuned us to think about the world in such a way that that old classical discourse of divine simplicity is just not an elegant fit.

And so one of the things we need to do is kind of step away from ourselves and look at ourselves and say, who are we who are asking this question? And what ideas have we received that may be tripping us up a bit as we hit that? And I think in doing that, I hope in my last chapter, the last chapter, which is written by me, Quo Valianus, sort of whither thou goest classical theism. I hope what I, I hope the spirit that we can communicate there is, and I suppose some people could be nervous about this, but I hope the spirit that we're communicating there is that these are genuinely difficult questions. And even if there's a thick kind of Catholic, small c Catholic resource to draw upon, we are nevertheless coming at this question from where we're actually at, you know, with the theological influences that we actually have.

And I think there's some space to be had for maybe not overly throwing out heresy labels and sort of strangling each other theologically and, you know, sort of getting all,



you know, SpongeBob SquarePants agitated, you know, but maybe calming down and saying, hey, let's have a really realistic look about the theological world that we've inherited. And then, and then graciously say, hey, can we, can we, can we respect the good instincts that that's given us? In other words, let's look at the modern situation as one in which, yes, we've lost some things, but we've also gained some things and maybe some gained some good instincts. And one of the things I'd like to see the book do is say like, let's honor those instincts and also honor that, that, that small c C Catholic tradition and see if we can appeal to people.

What I hope it does rhetorically is appeals to people precisely in this space, not by just saying like, hey, you need to scrap this whole project you're doing and go do this one, but rather say, hey, there's some good things about your project and there's some good instincts that you have, but also it's missing this big chunk and there, and actually what's good in you and good there can be put together. And so I'm hoping it's a, both rhetorically and intellectually, a kind of work of, of mediation, but a mediation that's not compromising the classical doctrine and, or, or, or so modifying it that it's not, you know and again, part of that mediation is saying like, hey, it's a big, it's a, it's a bigger tent than you might think. And part of that mediation is to say, hey, you have your own pedigree that's peculiar and you need to know that.

But then putting that together is, is always a kind of fresh act of wisdom and, and, and theological creativity, you know, no, and I think about this a lot, actually, that as it turns out, anytime somebody sits down and writes and tries to defend the classic doctrine of divine simplicity, you're always saying it in a slightly different way. Otherwise we wouldn't be writing books, right? Or we just say, read that one over there. We're always spinning it just a little different, see, differently.

And that, that is what actually creates understanding is to try and come up with clarified language that reaches people precisely where they're at. And so I, I hope it's a, I hope it's a well-crafted piece of rhetoric that, that both, that people outside of the discourse can sympathize with, that is intellectually compelling, biblically compelling, but also perhaps helps you unite people on various sides of the dispute. Again, not the, perhaps the committed agitators on either side, but you know, if I could be so hubristic, reasonable people.

Joseph and Steve, thank you both so much for coming on. It's been a really helpful conversation, and I hope that some of the listeners will go out and get the book, which is sold, wherever good books on classical theism are sold, on the Davenant website. And I would also very strongly recommend Steve's books, Divine Simplicity, A Dogmatic Account, and his recent one, God and Himself, Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology.

Thank you all so much for listening. God bless.