

The History of the Trinity

By Jerry Johnson

Numerous cults, like the Jehovah's Witness and Oneness Sabellians, continue to misrepresent the historical doctrine of the Trinity by stating that the doctrine was formulated at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325, thereby implying that the doctrine of the Trinity was **NOT** believed by the early Church. This is a gross historical error. Though we can say in one sense that the full formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity was written down in creedal form at Nicea and further clarified by the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381, it would be a total **distortion** of history to say that the doctrine of the Trinity was not believed until Nicea.

So you may ask, "why did the doctrine of the deity of Christ/Trinity need to be explained"? As the first and second century came and went, the Biblical doctrine on the Nature of God came under attack. The attack, for the most part, took place upon the Deity (state of being God) of the Lord Jesus Christ. This was the reason for the Council at Nicea. The Arians, who got their name from the main proponent of their doctrine, a man named Arius, was teaching that the Lord Jesus Christ was **NOT** God Himself, but, a created lesser god not equal with the Father. Nicea was NOT called to create the doctrine of the Trinity, but to confirm that the Bible taught Jesus was fully God in accordance with the already accepted teachings of the church. The Council of Nicea was Christological not Trinitarian, though it did address the issue.

It must further be noted that Trinitarian Christians do not believe the doctrine of the Trinity because some early Church father said too. Nor do we believe it because of some creed or council decided for us. We believe the doctrine of the Trinity because Scripture teaches that there is but one God (monotheism), and yet there is a person called the Father who is referred to in personal pronouns and is accredited with personal attributes, there is a person called the Son, who is referred to with personal pronouns and converses with the person of the Father, and there is a person called the Holy Spirit, who is referred to with personal pronouns and personal attributes. Since we hold the Word of God in high esteem, we are forced to conclude that these three persons are the One God.

What follows is a small sampling of the understanding of the Nature of God, as understood by the early Church up through the time of Nicea in A.D. 325. This brief reading should settle the questions at hand. Did Nicea CREATE or CONFIRM the deity of Christ/Trinity?

The Didache, which appears to have been a teaching manual for new converts, and is dated at between A.D. 60 to A.D. 80 (the latest date suggested in A.D. 150), states, "But concerning baptism, thus shall ye baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living (running) water....But if thou hast neither, then pour on the head thrice in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (J.B. Lightfoot, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, Eerdmans, 1976, p 126.)

Ignatius, writing around A.D. 110 - 120 in responding against those who denied the eternity of the person of the Son wrote, "We have also as a physician the Lord our God, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son and Word, **before time began**, but who

afterwards became also man, of Mary the virgin ." (Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Eerdmans, 1975, vol. 1, p. 52.)

Another of the defenders of Orthodoxy, Justin Martyr, who lived between A.D. 114 - 168 wrote, "For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they receive that washing with water." (*First Apol.*, LXI. *ibid.* Vol. 1, p. 183.)

Theophilus, a Greek who was converted to Christianity, was the first to use the word **Trinity** in writing ca. A.D. 170 to describe the relationship between the persons in the Godhead. (E. Calvin Beisner, *God in Three Persons*, Tyndale House, 1984, pg. 90. This book is an excellent study on the doctrine of the Trinity both exegetically from Scripture as well as from Church history.)

Irenaeus, who lived between A.D. 130 - 200 and was a disciple of Polycarp who was in turn a disciple of the Apostle John, wrote against the Gnostics and stated, "Know thou that every man is either empty or full. For if he has not the Holy Spirit, he has no knowledge of the Creator, he has not received Jesus Christ the life; he knows not the Father who is in heaven..." (*Against Heresies* 3:16.)

Athenagoras, writing between A.D. 170 - 180 in response to the Greek thinking that it was absurd for God to have had a Son stated, "Nor let any one think it ridiculous that God should have a Son. For through the poets (He is referring to the poetic Greek philosophers), in their fictions, represent [their] gods as no better than men, our mode of thinking is not the same as theirs, concerning either God the Father or the Son." (Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, p. 133.) It must be noted that in the construction of this statement, "...either God the Father or the Son" that the word "God" proceeded by the word "either" demands that "God" is placed before both "Father" and "Son" so that it would render, "...either God the Father or [God] the Son."

Athenagoras does not stop with his understanding of the Doctrine of the Trinity and Christology, but also has a well developed doctrine of the Holy Spirit when he wrote, "The Holy Spirit Himself also, which operates in the prophets, we assert to be an effluence of God, flowing from Him, and returning back again like a beam of the sun. Who, then would not be astonished to hear men who speak of God the Father, and of God the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and who declared both their powers in union and their distinction in order..." (*ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 133)

Hippolytus, in his work *Against the Heresy of Noetus*, who was the forerunner of Sabellius wrote, "If, then the Word was with God and was also God what follows? Would one say that he speaks of two Gods? I shall not indeed speak of two Gods but of one; of two Persons however and of a third economy (disposition), viz., the grace of the Holy Ghost. For the Father indeed is One but there is [another] Person because there is also the Son; and there is a third the Holy Spirit....The economy of the harmony is led back to one God; for God is One. It is the Father who commands and the Son who obeys and the Holy Spirit who gives understanding; the Father is above all, and the Son who is through all and the Holy Spirit who is in all. And we cannot think of one God, but by believing in truth in Father and Son and Holy Spirit." (*Against the Heresy of Noetus*, chapter 14.) Hippolytus was born in A.D. 170 and dies in A.D. 236. This commentary was on John 1:1.

Tertullian, writing between A.D. 190 and at the latest A.D. 240 though most scholars say no later than A.D. 220, was the first of the Latin writers to use the word Trinity. He wrote, "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, since 'I and my Father, [We] are one.'" (*Against Praxeus*, chapter 8.) Note: John 10:30 which states, "I and my Father are one." The Greek word employed by John for "one" is *hen*. It is in the neuter and not the masculine followed by *sumas* which is in the plural. Therefore the transliteration of John 10:30 is "I and my Father, we are one." The plural "we" relates to the subjects "I" and my "Father". Two persons no matter which way you look at it.

Novatian who wrote no later than A.D. 250 stated, "He [Jesus] never either compared or opposed Himself to God the Father. He remembered throughout His earthly ministry, that He was **from** the Father." (*Ancient Christian Commentary*, InterVarsity Press, 1999, vol. III p. 241.) The word "from" is *ek* meaning an extension of one from another. Jesus, as a person was the one from or out of another person the Father.

Gregory Thaumaturgus of Neo-Caesarea ca. A.D. 270 wrote.... [God is] a perfect Trinity, not divided nor differing in glory and eternity and sovereignty. Neither, indeed, is there any thing created or subservient in the Trinity, nor introduced, as though not there before but coming afterwards; nor, indeed, has the Son ever been without the Father, nor the Spirit without the Son, but the Trinity is ever the same, unvarying and unchangeable." (Beisner, *God in Three Persons*, pg. 81.)

We could continue to site quotes from the first three centuries of the Church, but, the point has been demonstrated. Enemies of the Trinity, who either out of **ignorance** or **deceit** maintain that the doctrine of the Trinity was **not** taught by the early Church have clearly been refuted. Please note that the last quote from Gregory Thaumaturgus was 65 years before the council of Nicea and that the first quote from the *Didache*, which gave the Trinitarian formula for baptism, was 265 years before the Council of Nicea and no less than 175 years and was possibly written before the Apostles John, Peter and Paul were martyred!