

Chapter Six

THE TRINITY: FACT OR FICTION?

1. A Christian is one that believes things his reason cannot comprehend... 2. He believes three to be one, and one to be three; a Father not to be elder than his Son; a Sonto be equal with his Father; and one preceding from both to be equal with both; he believing three persons in one nature, and two natures in one person. 3. He believes a virgin to be a mother of a son, and that very son of hers to be her Maker. He believes Him to have been shut up in a narrow room whom heaven and earth could not contain. He believes Him to have been born in time who was and is from everlasting. He believes Him to have been a weak child, carried in arms, who is the Almighty; and Him once to have died who only hath life and immortality in himself.

-Francis Bacon

(WORKS, vol vii, p.410)

Lord Francis Bacon, the seventeenth century philosopher and Chancellor of England who wrote these words, was obviously a believer in the Trinity. The essay quoted consists of thirty-four such “Christian Paradoxes” which illustrate his belief that:

“The more absurd and incredible any divine mystery is, the greater honor we do to God in believing it...” (as quoted by James Yates, *A VINDICATION OF UNITARIANISM*, Wells & Lilly, 1816, p. 278).

The Trinity has always been a mystery. In fact, it is usually described as a divine mystery. When I was young I asked several good Christians to explain the Trinity to me. I was told that the Trinity must be accepted on faith because we cannot always understand the ways of God. Such an answer requires the acceptance that blind faith is a virtue.

The concept of Trinity is that “the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God” (as stated in one of the critical statements of the doctrine, the Athanasian Creed). These three are all thought of as uncreated, eternal and omnipotent.

You can see why a confused student is told to accept on faith alone!

All this seems to have been confusing for early Christians too. Before the controversy over the Trinity came to a head in the Councils of Nicene during the fourth century, there were many different understandings of the nature of Christ, and an even wider range of understandings about the Holy Spirit. There were those who believed that Jesus was just a mortal man who had a very special relationship with God. Then there were those who agreed with Theodotus of Byzantium that Jesus was born a mere man and attained the

ability to work miracles at the time of his baptism. Some of Theodotus' students later believed that Jesus became God after his resurrection. And then there were those known as Monarchians who believed that God and Jesus were one and the same from the beginning of time.

Many of those same views are still held today by various groups of Christians.

SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE

What do we know about the early belief in the Trinity? Clearly the strong Jewish tradition among the first Christians slowed the initial development of the doctrine. This is especially true since Jesus never preached it. The only place in the gospels that even hints at the doctrine of the Trinity are the last verses of Matthew:

Jesus came forward and addressed them in these words: "Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth; go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name 'of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.'"

[Matthew 28:18-19]

Nor is the doctrine stated in the Epistles or the Acts of the Apostles. In fact, there is no place in the Testaments, Old or New, which speaks directly of the Trinity.

The whole concept also runs contrary to many verses and themes in the Bible. The most obvious of these is monotheism itself. The next few verses demonstrate this point clearly.

Jesus made it clear that there is only one God:

Eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God....

[John 17:3]

God is 'Almighty.' God uses this word only as a description of Himself:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said: "I am God the Almighty...."

[Genesis 17:1]

'Almighty' means by definition that He has *all* power. There is nothing and no one else with any real power. All power stems from God, and it is not shared by anyone.

No one else can ever fit that word! There is only One who is Almighty:

I am God, there is no other; I am God, there is none like me.

[Isaiah 46:9]

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The recognition of the Trinity as an innovation started very early in Christian history. Back in the seventh century, the Eastern theologian John of Damascus, in defending his icons, stated that icons were as unscriptural as the Trinity: “You will not find in scripture the Trinity or the homoousion [of the same essence as God] or the two natures of Christ either.”

Yet, having acknowledged that icons, the Trinity and the incarnation are innovations, John of Damascus continued to defend them because they were “venerable traditions delivered to us by the fathers.” (See *THE MYTH OF GOD INCARNATE*, p. 133.)

The trinitarian doctrine developed gradually over several centuries, through numerous controversies. There were many influences in its formulation and development: the Apostles Creed (around A. D. 160), the Arian controversy (about A. D. 318 to 380), the Nicene Council (A. D. 325), the Council of Constantinople (A. D. 381), the Council of Chalcedon (A. D. 451), and the Athanasian Creed (about A. D. 460) are the major ones.

The Council of Nicaea in 325 initiated the Trinity formula in its statement that the Son is “of the same essence [*homoousios*] as the Father,” even though it said very little about the Holy Spirit. Over the next half-century, Athanasius defended and refined the Nicene formula. By the end of the fifth century, the doctrine of the Trinity had taken essentially the form it has today.

The Nicene Creed was originally written in Greek. Its principal liturgical use is in the Eucharist in the West and in both Baptism and the Eucharist in the East. The following text has the additions used only by the Western Church in brackets:

I believe in one God the Father Almighty; maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds [God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance [essence] with the Father; by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And [I believe] in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets.

And [I believe] in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The historical development of the Nicene Creed is more complex than most people realize. It was long assumed that the creed was initially stated in the council of 325 and then enlarged in 381 at the Council of Constantinople. Discovery of documents from the period has changed that assumption. What we now take to be the Nicene Creed may actually have been based on a pre-existing baptismal creed which was enlarged and first stated at the Council of Constantinople.

We know from the proceedings of the Robber Council that there was more than one version of the Nicene Creed in existence at the time of its convening in 449. This council was called to judge the case of the elderly head of a local monastery whose understanding of the nature of Christ was in question. This monk cited an earlier text of the creed than was currently in use, causing quite a bit of excitement and debate in the council (see Robert L. Wilken, *THE MYTH OF CHRISTIAN BEGINNINGS*, Doubleday & Co., 1971).

Even before the formalization of the Nicene Creed, the persecution of those with non-Trinitarian views began. For example, the bishop of Antioch was condemned in a synod held there around 270 for his reported belief that Jesus was a human being in whom the Word of God dwelt, much as a person's reason dwells in him. This was just the forerunner of centuries of similar persecution against those who did not conform exactly to the accepted doctrine of the time.

So far what we have mentioned concerns the controversy surrounding the various understandings of the nature of Christ. There was an equally vehement dispute around the *Filioque* clause which is: "*and the Holy Spirit...who proceedeth from the Father and from the son.*" This addition of the son's participation in the Holy Spirit's existence was gradually introduced starting in the 6th century. It is accepted only in the Western Church. The Eastern Church still rejects it as a theological error. Thus the controversy continues.

THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS

We have touched on the historical aspects of the development of this doctrine, but what of the psychological and theological aspects? John Hick, H. G. Wood Professor of Theology at Birmingham University, and editor of *THE MYTH OF GOD INCARNATE*, attributes the development of the Trinity doctrine to a human tendency to exalt the religion's founder beyond his true identity. As mentioned in Chapter Two, he finds a parallel in the Buddhist trinitarian doctrine which was never preached by Buddha. Hick sums up the doctrine of the Trinity as follows:

Returning, then to the theme of the exaltation of a human being to divine status, the understanding of Jesus which eventually became orthodox Christian dogma sees him as God the Son incarnate, the Second Person of the Trinity living a human life. As such he was, in the words of the 'Nicene' creed, 'the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father'. But this is...far from anything that the historical Jesus can reasonably be supposed to have thought or taught...

The expression "God the Son," an important component of the Trinity, is never found in the gospels. John Hick points out that "as Christian theology grew through the centuries it made the very significant transition from 'Son of God' to 'God the Son,' the Second Person of the Trinity" (Ibid., p. 175). The Trinity as an innovation is illustrated well by Michael Goulder, Staff Tutor in Theology at Birmingham University:

...I went to visit a patient in hospital. I had to wait, and was shortly joined by two further Christian ministers, the one a Congregationalist, the other (in my opinion at the time) of an even lower breed, completely without the law. There being nothing else to do, we fell naturally to theological disputation, and in the course of time the sister was somewhat startled to come in as my Congregationalist friend was saying, 'Well, one thing is certain; he didn't think he was the Second Person of the Trinity'. I found the remark doubly annoying—partly because I had always supposed that Jesus thought he was the Second Person of the Trinity (although wisely not mentioning the fact), and now it was said, it somehow had the ring of the obvious. And partly also I did not relish being enlightened by a minister not of the established church. (Ibid, p. 48)

When we look at the Nicene Creed we easily see the human tendency to exaggerate and to exalt the founder of a religion beyond his own wishes. Referring to Jesus as "God of God" and "very God of very God" clearly reveals excessive emotionalism and exaggeration. One is reminded of the folk wisdom that: "Anything that exceeds the limits, turns to the opposite." When love exceeds the limits it becomes unbearable jealousy and possessiveness; it turns into hate. Obviously, the writers of the Nicene Creed aimed at endearing and exalting Jesus in the eyes of their followers. Their zealous attempts led to serious distortions of Jesus' message—to a point that would be horrifying to Jesus himself:

*"None of those who cry out 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of God but **only** the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. When that day comes, many will plead with me, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? Have we not exorcised demons by its power? Did we not do many miracles in your name as well?' Then I will declare to them solemnly, 'I never knew you. Out of my sight, you evildoers!'"*

[Matthew 7:21-23]

We cannot study the subject of the Trinity without looking at the views of other, more recent scriptures. The Quran, for example, condemns in the strongest possible terms both the concept of Jesus' divinity and the Trinity:

Unbelievers indeed are those who say that the Messiah, Son of Mary, is God. The Messiah himself said, "O Children of Israel, you shall worship only God, my Lord, and your Lord." Certainly, anyone who sets up an idol to rank with God, God has forbidden for him Paradise; his sure destiny is the hellfire. Such evildoers will have no helpers. Unbelievers indeed are those who say that God is one third of a trinity. Absolutely, there is no other god besides the One God. Unless they abstain from such utterances such unbelievers will incur painful retribution. Would they not repent before God and seek His forgiveness? God is forgiver, merciful. The Messiah, son of Mary, was no more than a messenger like the messengers who preceded him, and his mother was a saint. Both of them used to eat the food. Note how we clarify the revelations for them, then note how they still

deviate. Proclaim: "Would you idolize, besides God, those who possess no power to harm you or benefit you?" God is the only One who is the hearer, the omniscient.

[Quran 5:72-76]

CONTINUING UNITARIAN vs TRINITARIAN DEBATE

It is important to realize that the debate between Unitarians and Trinitarians continues today, and that a significant segment of modern Christians do not accept the Trinity as a valid doctrine. One denomination even calls themselves the Unitarians.

A typical modern-day unitarian Christian view of the Trinity was published in recent years by a group named "Unity" (Unity Village, Missouri 64065). In their book entitled *THE MAGNIFICENT TOOLS OF THE MIND*, Eric Butterworth writes:

The term "Holy Spirit" is an important but greatly misunderstood word in Christianity. It is thought of as one part of the Trinity (God in three persons); thus, it is clothed with a kind of individuality which comes and goes in our experience. The concept of the Trinity did not originate with Jesus. It is not even vaguely suggested in his teachings. It was a term that came into being as a result of an effort by the bishops of the early church to define the indefinable. It was a teaching symbol that may have had meaning in its time and among the people of that day. However, it needs to be clearly redefined in terms of contemporary insights and integrated into the "new model of the universe."

SUMMARY

The doctrine of the Trinity does not originate in the gospels, or in the teachings of Jesus. It demonstrates the human tendency to exalt the object of our love and admiration.

The Nicene creed is the most commonly known statement of the doctrine, but many events shaped its development. The doctrine was formulated over the third and fourth centuries, amid much discussion and controversy.

It still produces much discussion and controversy.