

DID CONSTANTINE INVENT THE TRINITY?: THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY IN THE WRITINGS OF THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

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Opponents of the doctrine of the Trinity often claim that it was an invention of Emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicaea. This goes against much evidence that the early church fathers affirmed the Trinity. The ante-Nicene church fathers acknowledged that there is only one God. Yet, they also taught that the Godhead consists of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—three distinct Persons each of whom is God.

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The doctrine of the Trinity is founded on two fundamental theological realities: (1) There is one true God. (2) The one God has eternally existed as three distinct Persons, each of whom is equally and fully God.¹ The word *Trinity* captures those dual truths in a single, theological term. As Wayne Grudem explains, “The word *trinity* is never found in the Bible, though the idea represented by the word is taught in many places. The word *trinity* means ‘tri-unity’ or ‘three-in-oneness.’ It is used to summarize the teaching of Scripture that God is three persons yet one God.”² Thus, the term expresses the truth that the one God exists as a Tri-Unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three divine Members are equal to one another in essence, substance, and character, even though they are distinct Persons with functional differences.

¹ Authors John Ankerberg and John Weldon note that “the threeness and oneness of God constitute a paradox or an antinomy—merely an apparent contradiction, not a genuine one. . . . God’s oneness refers to the divine essence; His threeness to the plurality of persons.” (John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Knowing the Truth about the Trinity* [Chattanooga, TN: ATRI Publishing, 2011], 8.)

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 226.

Because the word *Trinity* does not appear in Scripture, opponents of this doctrine allege it was the invention of church history. In making such claims, they often point to historical developments in the fourth century—contending that belief in the Trinity began under Emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicaea. Here are several examples of such assertions:

Dennis A. Beard: “The Doctrine of the Trinity did not exist until 325 A.D.”³

Dan Brown: “Jesus’ establishment as ‘the Son of God’ was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea. . . . [It was] a relatively close vote at that. . . . By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a deity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengeable.”⁴

P. R. Lackey: “[At Nicaea] a whole new theology was formally canonized into the Church.”⁵

Robert Spears: “It is an unquestionable historical fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is a false doctrine foisted into the Church during the third and fourth centuries; which finally triumphed by the aid of persecuting emperors.”⁶

The Watchtower Society: “The testimony of the Bible and of history makes clear that the Trinity was unknown throughout Biblical times and for several centuries thereafter.”⁷

The Watchtower Society: “For many years, there had been much opposition on Biblical grounds to the developing idea that Jesus was God. To try to solve the dispute, Roman emperor Constantine summoned all bishops to Nicaea. . . . Constantine’s role was crucial. After two months of furious religious debate, this pagan politician intervened and decided in favor of those who said that Jesus was God. . . . After Nicaea, debates on the subject continued for decades. Those who believed that Jesus was not equal to God even came back into favor for a time. But later Emperor Theodosius decided against them. He established the creed of the Council of Nicaea as the standard for his realm and convened the Council of Constantinople in 381 C.E. to clarify the formula. That council

³ David A. Beard, *The Errors of the Trinity* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2003), 28.

⁴ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 253. This statement is made by one of Brown’s literary characters, Sir Leigh Teabing.

⁵ P. R. Lackey, *The Tyranny of the Trinity* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2011), 261.

⁶ Robert Spears, *The Unitarian Handbook of Scriptural Illustrations & Expositions* (London: British and Foreign Unitarian Association, 1883), 96.

⁷ *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1989). A detailed response to this Watchtower booklet can be found in Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Why You Should Believe in the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

agreed to place the holy spirit on the same level as God and Christ. For the first time, Christendom's Trinity began to come into focus.”⁸

Even some so-called evangelicals, while claiming to believe in the Trinity, seem to question its biblical legitimacy—treating it as if it were the product of later church history. In his book *Velvet Elvis*, Rob Bell describes the development of trinitarian doctrine this way:

This three-in-oneness understanding of God emerged in the several hundred years after Jesus’ resurrection. People began to call this concept the Trinity. The word *trinity* is not found anywhere in the Bible. . . . It is a spring, and people jumped for thousands of years without it. It was added later. We can take it out and examine it. Discuss it, probe it, question it. It flexes, and it stretches.”⁹

Later, Bell describes the doctrine of Christ’s deity with almost the same degree of theological nonchalance: “As [Jesus’] movement gathered steam, this Jewish man came to be talked about more and more as God, fully divine as well as fully human. As his followers talked about him and did what he said and told and retold his stories, the significance of his life began to take on all sorts of cosmic dimensions.”¹⁰ Such statements sound like intentional attempts to cast doubt on the truthfulness of both the Trinity and the deity of Jesus Christ.

As the above citations illustrate, many antagonists—from Muslims to Unitarians to popular skeptics—deny the doctrine of the Trinity, along with its corollary affirmation of the deity of Jesus Christ. And even some within broader evangelical circles question its legitimacy. Without fail, such allegations hinge largely on the claim that *Trinitarianism* was an invention of church history. The purpose of this article is to investigate those kinds of allegations. Was the doctrine of the Trinity invented by the Roman church of the fourth century? Or, to ask that question another way, Was Jesus “promoted” to divine status by Constantine and the Council of Nicaea? In order to answer such questions, it is necessary to consider the evidence for Trinitarian orthodoxy under the following three headings: biblical authority, patristic affirmation, and creedal articulation.

Biblical Authority

In keeping with the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*, evangelical Christians are rightly convinced that the truth of any doctrine must be established and grounded in the Scriptures. The authoritative basis for sound doctrine is the Bible, not church history. Consequently, evangelicals ultimately embrace the doctrine of the Trinity, not because it is affirmed throughout history, but because it is revealed in the Word of God.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 22.

¹⁰ Ibid., 124.

It is outside the purview of this article to provide a full biblical case for the doctrine of the Trinity. Nonetheless, it is critical to state at the outset that the truthfulness of trinitarian doctrine rests, finally and fully, on the authority of biblical truth. The following chart provides a non-exhaustive sampling of the evidence from Scripture:

A Survey of Biblical Evidence for the Doctrine of the Trinity
<p><u>Reality 1: There Is One True God</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Isaiah 46:9—“Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me.” ○ Related passages: Deut 4:35; 6:4; Isa 43:10–11; 45:5, 18, 21–22; Joel 2:27; Zech 14:9; Mal 2:10; Mark 12:29; James 2:19; 1 Tim 2:5.
<p><u>Reality 2: God Exists as Three Distinct Persons, Each of Whom Is Equally and Fully God</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The Father Is God <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 2 Corinthians 1:3—“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.” ▪ Related passages: Matt 6:9, 14; John 17:1–3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Phil 2:11; Col 1:3; 1 Pet 1:2; <i>et. al.</i> ○ The Son Is God <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Titus 2:13—“looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” ▪ Related passages: Isa 9:6; Matt 1:23; John 1:1, 14, 18; 20:28; Acts 20:28; Rom 9:5; 1 Cor 1:24; 2 Cor 4:4; Phil 2:6, 10–11; Col 1:15–16; 2:9; Heb 1:3, 8; 2 Pet 1:1; 1 John 5:20. ○ The Son Is not the Father <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ John 1:1–2—“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word <u>was God</u>. He was in the beginning <u>with God</u>.” ▪ Related passages: Matt 11:27; John 3:35; 4:34; 5:30–32, 37; 6:38; 10:36; 12:49; 14:8–11; 17:20–24; Gal 4:41; John 2:1; Heb 7:25.

○ **The Holy Spirit Is God**

- Acts 5:3–4—“But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.’”
- The Spirit possesses all of the attributes of deity (Gen 1:2; 6:3; Job 33:4; Ps 139:7–8; John 3:3–8; 14:23; 1 Cor 2:10–11; 6:16,19; 2 Cor 3:18; Heb 9:14; 10:15–16; 2 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:10–11; 2 Pet 1:21).
- Moreover, He is a Person, possessing the attributes of personhood (Mark 3:29; John 14:26; 16:8; Acts 8:29; 13:2; 16:6; Rom 8:26; 15:30; 1 Cor 12:11; Eph 4:30; 1 Tim 4:1; Heb 10:29; Rev 2:7).

○ **The Spirit Is not the Father nor the Son**

- John 14:16–17—“I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.”
- Related passages: Isa 48:16; Matt 28:19; Luke 3:21; John 14:26; 16:13–14; Rom 8:27; Heb 9:8.

On this Basis, the Bible often Refers to God in Ways that Emphasize all Three Members of the Trinity

- 2 Corinthians 13:14—“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.”
- Related passages: Matt 28:19; Rom 14:17–18; 15:13–17; 15:30; 1 Cor 6:11, 17–19; 12:4–6; 2 Cor 1:21–22; 3:4–6; Gal 2:21–3:2; Eph 2:18; 21–22; 3:11–17; 4:4–6; 5:18–20; Phil 2:1, 6; Col 1:6–8; 1 Thess 1:1–5; 4:2, 8; 5:18–19; 2 Thess 2:13, 14; 3:5; Tit 3:4–6; Heb 9:14; 1 John 3:23–24; Jude 20–21.

Although the term *Trinity* does not occur in Scripture, the concept is inherently biblical. As the previous articles in this edition of the *Journal* have demonstrated, the trinitarian nature of God was revealed *implicitly* in the Old Testament and *explicitly* in the New. Thus, any discussion about the history of Trinitarianism must begin with the fact that this truth is established in the Word of God. It was not invented by those who lived centuries after the apostolic age.

Patristic Affirmation

In the generations following the apostles, the early church fathers looked to the Scriptures to define and defend orthodox doctrinal beliefs. Their writings, though not authoritative, provide vital insights into what the post-apostolic church was like, both in terms of faith and practice. But did these early Christian leaders affirm the doctrine of the Trinity?

Before answering that question directly, it is important to note that the church fathers understood the Scriptures alone to be their final authority. In contending for doctrinal truth, they consistently developed their arguments from the biblical text.¹¹ For example, in his conflict with the followers of Arius (who denied the Trinity), the fourth-century church leader Gregory of Nyssa explained that Scripture alone must be the determiner of such things. No council or church tradition would suffice. In Gregory's words:

What then is our reply [to the Arians]? We do not think that it is right to make their prevailing custom the law and rule of sound doctrine. For if custom [or tradition] is to avail for proof of soundness, we too, surely, may advance our prevailing custom; and if they reject this, we are surely not bound to follow theirs. Let the inspired Scripture, then, be our umpire, and the vote of truth will surely be given to those whose dogmas are found to agree with the Divine words.¹²

In the same way that evangelicals today look to God's Word as the *authoritative basis* for establishing doctrine, the church fathers of the first few centuries grounded their theological conclusions in the biblical text.

This article began by explaining that the doctrine of the Trinity is founded on two fundamental theological realities: (1) There is one true God. (2) The one God has eternally existed as three distinct Persons, each of whom is equally and fully God. With the Scriptures as their guide, the church fathers repeatedly affirmed those two truths. As Gregg Allison explains, "The early church was faced with both belief in monotheism and belief in the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—what would

¹¹ For an extensive treatment of this topic, see William Webster, *Holy Scripture*, vol. II (Battle-ground, WA: Christian Resources, 2001).

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Trinity, and of the Godhead of the Holy Spirit*. Translation from Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), V:327.

later be called Trinitarianism. And the early church affirmed both.”¹³ Though the term *Trinity* was not coined until the late second century,¹⁴ the affirmation of trinitarian doctrine is overwhelmingly supported in ante-Nicene patristic literature. The following survey of ante-Nicene writings demonstrates the widespread commitment of these early church leaders to these core doctrinal realities. In each patristic citation, key phrases have been underlined for the sake of emphasis.

Reality 1: There Is One True God

Early Christians were unwavering monotheists. Their bold denouncement of Greco-Roman polytheism was so ubiquitous that it earned them the label “atheists”—since they were those who denied the pantheon of pagan deities. Instead, Christians worshiped the one true God, a point they were quick to emphasize. Athenagorus of Athens (d. c. 190), a second-century Christian apologist, put it this way: “Our doctrine acknowledges one God, the Maker of this universe, who is Himself uncreated.”¹⁵ Athenagorus was certainly not alone in asserting his belief in the one true God. The chorus of ante-Nicene patristic literature reverberates with that same refrain:

Clement of Rome (d. c. 99): “[Moses] did it anyway, so that the name of the true and only God might be glorified, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.”¹⁶

Aristides (c. 125): “For they [Christians] know God, the Creator and Fashioner of all things through the only-begotten Son and the Holy Spirit; and beside Him they worship no other God.”¹⁷

Theophilus of Antioch (d. c. 185): “And I pray for favor from the only God, that I may accurately speak the whole truth according to His will, that you and everyone who reads this work may be guided by His truth and favor.”¹⁸

Irenaeus of Lyons (d. c. 202): “It is proper, then, that I should begin with the first and most important head, that is, God the Creator, who made the heaven and the earth, and all things that are therein . . . , and to demonstrate that there is nothing either above Him or after Him; nor that, influenced by any one, but

¹³ Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 232.

¹⁴ Theophilus of Antioch is considered the first to use the term “Trinity” or “Triad”; though Tertullian later popularized its usage. Cf. Theophilus, *Epistle to Autolycus*, 2.15.

¹⁵ Athenagorus, *A Plea for the Christians*, 4. Translation from Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), II:131. *Ante-Nicene Fathers* is hereafter abbreviated as *ANF*.

¹⁶ Clement, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 43. Translation from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 103. *Apostolic Fathers* is hereafter *AF*.

¹⁷ Aristides, *Apology*, Greek version, 15.

¹⁸ Theophilus, *Epistle to Autolycus*, 3.23. *ANF*, II:118.

of His own free will, He created all things, since He is the only God, the only Lord, the only Creator, the only Father, alone containing all things, and Himself commanding all things into existence.”¹⁹

Irenaeus (again) [in response to the polytheistic teachings of Gnosticism]: “Impious indeed, beyond all impiety, are these men, who assert that the Maker of heaven and earth, the only God Almighty, besides whom there is no God, was produced by means of a defect, which itself sprang from another defect, so that, according to them, He was the product of the third defect.”²⁰

Irenaeus (again): “Now, that this God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul the apostle also has declared, [saying,] “There is one God, the Father, who is above all, and through all things, and in us all.” I have indeed proved already that there is only one God; but I shall further demonstrate this from the apostles themselves, and from the discourses of the Lord. For what sort of conduct would it be, were we to forsake the utterances of the prophets, of the Lord, and of the apostles, that we might give heed to these persons, who speak not a word of sense?”²¹

Irenaeus (again): “We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith. . . . These [the Apostles] have all declared to us that there is one God, Creator of heaven and earth, announced by the law and the prophets; and one Christ the Son of God. If anyone do not agree to these truths, he despises the companions of the Lord; nay more, he despises Christ Himself the Lord; yea, he despises the Father also, and stands self-condemned, resisting and opposing his own salvation, as is the case with all heretics.”²²

Tertullian (c. 160–225) [in response to the false teachings of Hermogenes who taught that matter was eternal]: “This rule is required by the nature of the One-only God, who is One-only in no other way than as the sole God; and in no other way sole, than as having nothing else with Him. So also He will be first, because all things are after Him; and all things are after Him, because all things are by Him; and all things are by Him, because they are of nothing: so that reason coincides with the Scripture, which says: ‘Who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been His counselor? or with whom took He counsel? or who hath shown to Him the way of wisdom and knowledge? Who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed to him again?’ Surely none! Because there

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.1.1. *ANF*, I:359.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.16.3. *ANF*, I:342.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.2.5. *ANF*, I:362.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.1.1–2. *ANF*, I:414–15.

was present with Him no power, no material, no nature which belonged to any other than Himself.”²³

Tertullian (again) [after defending his belief in the Trinity notes:] “That there are, however, two Gods or two Lords, is a statement which at no time proceeds out of our mouth.”²⁴

Origen (185–254) [in response to the attacks of the skeptical Celsus]: “We Christians, however, who are devoted to the worship of the only God, who created these things, feel grateful for them to Him who made them.”²⁵

Reality 2: God Exists as Three Distinct Persons, Each of Whom Is Equally and Fully God

Though they unanimously maintained monotheistic convictions, the early church fathers also bore testimony to the fact that the one God exists as three distinct Persons. They affirmed the deity of God the Father, the deity of His Son Jesus Christ, and the deity of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, they viewed each of these divine Persons as being distinct from one another.

By looking at the fundamental truths that comprise the doctrine of the Trinity through the lens of ante-Nicene literature, it becomes readily apparent that the early church fathers embraced trinitarian theology. At least five fundamental truths must be examined: 1) The Father is God. 2) The Son is God. 3) The Son is not the Father. 4) The Holy Spirit is God. 5) The Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son.

The Father is God

Hundreds of examples could be given in this regard, demonstrating that early believers often referred to God using the title “Father.” As a case in point, Irenaeus spoke of “the preaching of the apostles, the authoritative teaching of the Lord, the announcements of the prophets, the dictated utterances of the apostles, and the ministration of the law—all of which praise one and the same Being, the God and Father of all.”²⁶ Because this fundamental truth is rarely (if ever) questioned by anti-Trinitarians, it is sufficient to simply mention it before moving on to consider a second fundamental truth.

The Son is God

Abundant evidence from the ante-Nicene period confirms the early church’s belief in the deity of Jesus Christ. Around 106, the Roman governor Pliny the

²³ Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes*, 17. ANF, III:486–87.

²⁴ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 13. ANF, III:608.

²⁵ Origen, *Against Celsus*, 4.75. ANF, IV:531.

²⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.35.4. ANF, I:413.

Younger wrote a letter in which he explained that the Christians in his region sang hymns “to Christ as to a god.”²⁷ That commitment to the deity of Christ is affirmed repeatedly throughout ante-Nicene literature:

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 50–117): “For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary according to God’s plan, both from the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit.”²⁸

Ignatius (again): “Consequently all magic and every kind of spell were dissolved, the ignorance so characteristic of wickedness vanished, and the ancient kingdom was abolished when God appeared in human form to bring the newness of eternal life.”²⁹

Ignatius (again): “For our God Jesus Christ is more visible now that he is in the Father.”³⁰

Ignatius (again): “I glorify Jesus Christ, the God who made you so wise, for I observed that you are established in an unshakable faith, having been nailed, as it were, to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.”³¹

Ignatius (again): “Wait expectantly for the one who is above time: the Eternal, the Invisible, who for our sake became visible; the Intangible, the Unsuffering, who for our sake suffered, who for our sake endured in every way.”³²

Polycarp of Smyrna (69–155): “Now may the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the eternal high priest himself, the Son of God Jesus Christ, build you up in faith and truth . . . , and to us with you, and to all those under heaven who will yet believe in our Lord and God Jesus Christ and in his Father who raised him from the dead.”³³

Epistle of Barnabas (c. 70–130): “If the Lord submitted to suffer for our souls, even though he is Lord of the whole world, to whom God said at the foundation of the world, ‘Let us make humankind according to our image and likeness,’ how is it, then, that he submitted to suffer at the hands of humans?”³⁴

Justin Martyr (100–165): “And that Christ being Lord, and God the Son of God, and appearing formerly in power as Man, and Angel, and in the glory of

²⁷ Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96–97. Letter to the Emperor Trajan.

²⁸ Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 18.2. Holmes, *AF*, 197.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.3. Holmes, *AF*, 199.

³⁰ Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans*, 3.3. Holmes, *AF*, 229.

³¹ Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 1.1. Holmes, *AF*, 249.

³² Ignatius, *Letter to Polycarp*, 3.2. Holmes, *AF*, 265.

³³ Polycarp, *Philippians 12:2*. Holmes, *AF*, 295.

³⁴ *Epistle of Barnabas*, 5.5. Holmes, *AF*, 393.

fire as at the bush, so also was manifested at the judgment executed on Sodom, has been demonstrated fully by what has been said.”³⁵

Justin (again): “Permit me first to recount the prophecies, which I wish to do in order to prove that Christ is called both God and Lord of hosts.”³⁶

Justin (again): “Therefore these words testify explicitly that He [Jesus] is witnessed to by Him [the Father] who established these things, as deserving to be worshipped, as God and as Christ.”³⁷

Justin (again): “The Father of the universe has a Son; who also, being the first-begotten Word of God, is even God. And of old He appeared in the shape of fire and in the likeness of an angel to Moses and to the other prophets; but now in the times of your reign, having, as we before said, become Man by a virgin . . .”³⁸

Justin (again): For if you had understood what has been written by the prophets, you would not have denied that He was God, Son of the only, unbegotten, unutterable God.³⁹

Tatian (110–172): “We do not act as fools, O Greeks, nor utter idle tales when we announce that God was born in the form of man.”⁴⁰

Melito of Sardis (d. c. 180): “He that hung up the earth in space was Himself hanged up; He that fixed the heavens was fixed with nails; He that bore up the earth was born up on a tree; the Lord of all was subjected to ignominy in a naked body – God put to death! . . . [I]n order that He might not be seen, the luminaries turned away, and the day became darkened—because they slew God, who hung naked on the tree. . . . This is He who made the heaven and the earth, and in the beginning, together with the Father, fashioned man; who was announced by means of the law and the prophets; who put on a bodily form in the Virgin; who was hanged upon the tree; who was buried in the earth; who rose from the place of the dead, and ascended to the height of heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father.”⁴¹

Irenaeus of Lyons (120–202): “For I have shown from the Scriptures, that no one of the sons of Adam is as to everything, and absolutely, called God, or

³⁵ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 128. ANF, I:264.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 36. ANF, 212.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 63. ANF, 229.

³⁸ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 63. ANF, I:184.

³⁹ Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 126. ANF, I:263.

⁴⁰ Tatian, *Address to the Greeks*, 21. ANF, II:74.

⁴¹ Melito, 5. ANF, VIII:757.

named Lord. But that He is Himself in His own right, beyond all men who ever lived, God, and Lord, and King Eternal, and the Incarnate Word, proclaimed by all the prophets, the apostles, and by the Spirit Himself, may be seen by all who have attained to even a small portion of the truth. Now, the Scriptures would not have testified these things of Him, if, like others, He had been a mere man. . . . He is the holy Lord, the Wonderful, the Counselor, the Beautiful in appearance, and the Mighty God, coming on the clouds as the Judge of all men;—all these things did the Scriptures prophesy of Him.”⁴²

Irenaeus (again): “Christ Jesus [is] our Lord, and God, and Savior, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father.”⁴³

Irenaeus (again): “Christ Himself, therefore, together with the Father, is the God of the living, who spoke to Moses, and who was also manifested to the fathers.”⁴⁴

Irenaeus (again): “He received testimony from all that He was very man, and that He was very God, from the Father, from the Spirit, from angels, from the creation itself, from men, from apostate spirits and demons.”⁴⁵

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215): “This Word, then, the Christ, the cause of both our being at first (for He was in God) and of our well-being, this very Word has now appeared as man, He alone being both, both God and man—the Author of all blessings to us; by whom we, being taught to live well, are sent on our way to life eternal. . . . The Word, who in the beginning bestowed on us life as Creator when He formed us, taught us to live well when He appeared as our Teacher; that as God He might afterwards conduct us to the life which never ends.”⁴⁶

Tertullian (c. 160–225): “For God alone is without sin; and the only man without sin is Christ, since Christ is also God.”⁴⁷

Tertullian (again): “Thus Christ is Spirit of Spirit, and God of God, as light of light is kindled. . . . That which has come forth out of God is at once God and the Son of God, and the two are one. In this way also, as He is Spirit of Spirit and God of God, He is made a second in manner of existence—in position, not in nature; and He did not withdraw from the original source, but went forth. This ray of God, then, as it was always foretold in ancient times, descending

⁴² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.19.2. *ANF*, I:449.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.10.1. *ANF*, I:330.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.5.2. *ANF*, I:467.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.6.7. *ANF*, I:469.

⁴⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, 1. *ANF*, II:173.

⁴⁷ Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, 41. *ANF*, III:221.

into a certain virgin, and made flesh in her womb, is in His birth God and man united."⁴⁸

Hippolytus (170–235): "The Logos alone of this God is from God himself; wherefore also the Logos is God, being the substance of God."⁴⁹

Caius (180–217) [in response to those who would question the deity of Christ]: "Perhaps what they allege might be credible, did not the Holy Scriptures, in the first place, contradict them. And then, besides, there are writings of certain brethren older than the times of Victor, which they wrote against the heathen in defense of the truth, and against the heresies of their time: I mean Justin and Miltiades, and Tatian and Clement, and many others, in all which divinity is ascribed to Christ. For who is ignorant of the books of Irenaeus and Melito, and the rest, which declare Christ to be God and man? All the psalms, too, and hymns of brethren, which have been written from the beginning by the faithful, celebrate Christ the Word of God, ascribing divinity to Him."⁵⁰

Origen (c. 185–254): "Jesus Christ . . . in the last times, divesting Himself (of His glory), became a man, and was incarnate although God, and while made a man remained the God which He was."⁵¹

Novatian of Rome (210–280): "For Scripture as much announces Christ as also God, as it announces God Himself as man. It has as much described Jesus Christ to be man, as moreover it has also described Christ the Lord to be God. Because it does not set forth Him to be the Son of God only, but also the Son of man; nor does it only say, the Son of man, but it has also been accustomed to speak of Him as the Son of God. So that being of both, He is both, lest if He should be one only, He could not be the other. For as nature itself has prescribed that he must be believed to be a man who is of man, so the same nature prescribes also that He must be believed to be God who is of God. . . . Let them, therefore, who read that Jesus Christ the Son of man is man, read also that this same Jesus is called also God and the Son of God."⁵²

The Son is not the Father

This point can be repeatedly demonstrated by the way the church fathers distinguish the Son from the Father. Irenaeus provides a case in point:

⁴⁸ Tertullian, *Apology*, 21. *ANF*, III:34–35.

⁴⁹ Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, 10.29. *ANF*, V:151.

⁵⁰ Caius, *Fragments*, 2.1. *ANF*, V:601.

⁵¹ Origen, *De Principiis*, Preface, 4. *ANF*, IV:240.

⁵² Novatian, *On the Trinity*, 11. *ANF*, V:620. Cf. Novatian, *Treatise Concerning the Trinity*, 15, 16, 26, 31.

Irenaeus (d. c. 202): “Therefore neither would the Lord, nor the Holy Spirit, nor the apostles, have ever named as God, definitely and absolutely, him who was not God, unless he were truly God; nor would they have named any one in his own person Lord, except God the Father ruling over all, and His Son who has received dominion from His Father over all creation, as this passage has it: ‘The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit Thou at my right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool.’ Here the [Scripture] represents to us the Father addressing the Son; He who gave Him the inheritance of the heathen, and subjected to Him all His enemies. Since, therefore, the Father is truly Lord, and the Son truly Lord, the Holy Spirit has fitly designated them by the title of Lord.”⁵³

As early church leaders began to consider these dual truths—namely that the Son is fully God yet distinct from the Father—they began to speak of *essential unity* and *numeric* or *economic distinction* between the Father and the Son.

Justin Martyr (100–165): “Reverting to the Scriptures, I shall endeavor to persuade you, that He who is said to have appeared to Abraham, and to Jacob, and to Moses, and who is called God, is distinct from Him who made all things,— numerically, I mean, not in will. For I affirm that He has never at any time done anything which He who made the world — above whom there is no other God — has not wished Him both to do and to engage Himself with.”⁵⁴

Justin Martyr (again): “We can indisputably learn that [God] conversed with someone who was numerically distinct from Himself and also a rational Being.”⁵⁵

Irenaeus (d. c. 202) articulated the different roles within the Trinity in this way: “the Father planning everything well and giving His commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit nourishing and increasing [what is made].”⁵⁶

Irenaeus elsewhere explained the Triune way in which “was God revealed; for God the Father is shown forth through all these [operations], the Spirit indeed working, and the Son ministering, while the Father was approving, and man’s salvation was being accomplished.”⁵⁷

Tertullian (c. 160–225): “Thus the connection of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Paraclete, produces three coherent Persons, who are yet distinct One from Another. These Three are one essence, not one Person, as it is said, ‘I

⁵³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.6.1. *ANF*, I:418.

⁵⁴ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 56. *ANF*, I:223–24.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 62. *ANF*, I:228.

⁵⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.38.3. *ANF*, I:521–22.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.20.6. *ANF*, I:489.

and my Father are One,' in respect of unity of substance, not singularity of number."⁵⁸

Tertullian (again): “We, however, as we indeed always have done and more especially since we have been better instructed by the Paraclete, who leads men indeed into all truth, believe that there is one only God, but under the following dispensation, or οἰκονομία [economy], as it is called, that this one only God has also a Son, His Word, who proceeded from Himself, by whom all things were made, and without whom nothing was made. Him we believe to have been sent by the Father into the Virgin, and to have been born of her – being both Man and God, the Son of Man and the Son of God, and to have been called by the name of Jesus Christ; we believe Him to have suffered, died, and been buried, according to the Scriptures, and, after He had been raised again by the Father and taken back to heaven, to be sitting at the right hand of the Father, and that He will come to judge the quick and the dead; who sent also from heaven from the Father, according to His own promise, the Holy Ghost, the Paraclete, the sanctifier of the faith of those who believe in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Ghost. That this rule of faith has come down to us from the beginning of the gospel.”⁵⁹

Tertullian (c. 160–225): “The Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, and each is God; . . . when Christ should come He might be both acknowledged as God and designated as Lord, being the Son of Him who is both God and Lord. . . . As soon, however, as Christ came, and was recognized by us as the very Being who had from the beginning caused plurality (in the Divine Economy), being the second from the Father, and with the Spirit the third, and Himself declaring and manifesting the Father more fully (than He had ever been before), the title of Him who is God and Lord was at once restored to the Unity (of the Divine Nature).”⁶⁰

Admittedly, these early Christians sometimes found it difficult to articulate what they understood to be eternal mysteries. Athenagoras and Origen, for example, provide examples of early theologians who struggled to know how to express trinitarian truth. Because they lived before the time of Nicaea, they did not have the advantage of being able to use the precise wording articulated in the Nicene Creed.

Athenagoras (d. c. 190): “The Son of God is the Logos of the Father, in idea and in operation; for after the pattern of Him and by Him were all things made, the Father and the Son being one. And, the Son being in the Father and the Father in the Son, in oneness and power of spirit, the understanding and reason

⁵⁸ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 25. ANF, III:621.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2. ANF, III:598.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 13. ANF, III:608.

(νοῦς καὶ λόγος) of the Father is the Son of God. But if, in your surpassing intelligence, it occurs to you to inquire what is meant by the Son, I will state briefly that He is the first product of the Father, not as having been brought into existence (for from the beginning, God, who is the eternal mind [νοῦς], had the Logos in Himself, being from eternity instinct with Logos [λογικός]); but inasmuch as He came forth to be the idea and energizing power of all material things.⁶¹

Origen (185–254): in trying to describe the inner workings of the Trinity in eternity past is forced to acknowledge: “When we use, indeed, such terms as ‘always’ or ‘was,’ or any other designation of time, they are not to be taken absolutely, but with due allowance; for while the significations of these words relate to time, and those subjects of which we speak are spoken of by a stretch of language as existing in time, they nevertheless surpass in their real nature all conception of the finite understanding.”⁶²

As Christians searched for suitable language to express the ineffable, that the word *Trinity* began to be used as a way to articulate that which was ultimately recognized as a mystery. Tertullian was one of the earliest theologians to use the term to describe the three-in-oneness of God:

Tertullian (c. 160–225): “The mystery of the dispensation [economy] is still guarded, which distributes the Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God, from whom these degrees and forms and aspects are reckoned, under the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”⁶³

It was also in this context that the heresy of modalistic monarchianism (also known as Sabellianism) developed. Modalism denied that God simultaneously exists as three distinct Persons—arguing instead that the one God sometimes manifests Himself as Father, sometimes as Son, and sometimes as Spirit, but never all three at the same time. Modalists accused Trinitarians of belief in multiple gods. But orthodox church leaders responded by condemning Modalism as a heresy—using the biblical text to prove that, although there is only one God, each Member of the Trinity is distinct.

Tertullian (c. 160–225): “We have, moreover, in that other Gospel a clear revelation, i.e. of the Son’s distinction from the Father, ‘My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?’ and again, (in the third Gospel,) ‘Father, into Thy hands I com-

⁶¹ Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians*, 10. ANF, II:133.

⁶² Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.3.4. ANF, IV:253.

⁶³ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 2. ANF, III:598.

mend my spirit.’ But even if (we had not these passages, we meet with satisfactory evidence) after His resurrection and glorious victory over death. Now that all the restraint of His humiliation is taken away, He might, if possible, have shown Himself as the Father to so faithful a woman (as Mary Magdalene) when she approached to touch Him, out of love, not from curiosity, nor with Thomas’ incredulity. But not so; Jesus saith unto her, “Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father; but go to my brethren” (and even in this He proves Himself to be the Son; for if He had been the Father, He would have called them His children, (instead of His brethren)), “and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God.” Now, does this mean, I ascend as the Father to the Father, and as God to God? Or as the Son to the Father, and as the Word to God? Wherefore also does this Gospel, at its very termination, intimate that these things were ever written, if it be not, to use its own words, “that ye might believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?” Whenever, therefore, you take any of the statements of this Gospel, and apply them to demonstrate the identity of the Father and the Son, supposing that they serve your views therein, you are contending against the definite purpose of the Gospel. For these things certainly are not written that you may believe that Jesus Christ is the Father, but the Son.”⁶⁴

Hippolytus (170–235): “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, viz., the grace of the Holy Spirit. For the Father indeed is one, but there are two persons, because there is also the Son; and then there is the third, the Holy Spirit. The Father decrees, the Word executes, and the Son is manifested, through whom the Father is believed on. The economy of 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 who is *above all*, and the Son who is through all, and the Holy Spirit who is in all.”⁶⁵

Novatian (210–280): [in response to the Sabellian heretics who accused Trinitarians of teaching multiple gods] “Let us therefore believe this, since it is most faithful that Jesus Christ the Son of God is our Lord and God; because ‘in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word. The same was in the beginning with God.’ And, ‘The Word was made flesh, and dwelt in us.’ And, ‘My Lord and my God.’ And, ‘Whose are the fathers, and of whom according to the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for evermore.’ What, then, shall we say? Does Scripture set before us two Gods? How, then, does it say that ‘God is one?’ Or is not Christ God also? How, then, is it said to Christ, ‘My Lord and my God?’ Unless, therefore, we hold all this with fitting veneration and lawful argument, we shall reasonably be thought to

⁶⁴ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 25. ANF, III:621.

⁶⁵ Hippolytus, *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*, 14. ANF, V:228.

have furnished a scandal to the heretics, not assuredly by the fault of the heavenly Scriptures, which never deceive; but by the presumption of human error, whereby they have chosen to be heretics.”⁶⁶

Ignatius (Longer Text) (c. 250): “For there are some vain talkers and deceivers, not Christians, but Christ-betrayers, bearing about the name of Christ in deceit, and “corrupting the word” of the Gospel; while they intermix the poison of their deceit with their persuasive talk. . . . Some of them say that the Son is a mere man, and that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are but the same person, and that the creation is the work of God, not by Christ, but by some other strange power.”⁶⁷

Thus, early Christians affirmed both the reality that there is only one God (in contrast to pagan polytheism); while also affirming a distinction between the Members of the Trinity—each of whom is fully God. As Gregg Allison explains, “The early church rejected both dynamic monarchianism and modalism as being far removed from its traditional understanding of the oneness of God and the threeness of the Father, Son (who is fully divine), and Spirit. Dynamic monarchianism considered Jesus Christ to be a mere man, while modalistic monarchianism emphasized the oneness of the Godhead to such an extent that the three were lost in the one. The church found neither of these views acceptable.”⁶⁸

The Holy Spirit is God

The ante-Nicene fathers not only affirmed the deity of the Father and the Son, but also of the Holy Spirit. After surveying the patristic evidence, John Ankerberg and John Weldon explain, “Although the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was theologically less refined in the early Church than the doctrine of Jesus Christ, there was still recognition that the Holy Spirit was both personal and God.”⁶⁹ Here is a small sampling of patristic citations to support that assertion:

Athenagoras (d. c. 190): [in response to the pagan accusation that Christians were atheists] “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 declare both their power in union and their distinction in order, called atheists?”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Novatian, *A Treatise on the Trinity*, 30. ANF, V:642.

⁶⁷ Ignatius, *To the Trallians*, Longer, 6. ANF, I:68.

⁶⁸ Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 236.

⁶⁹ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Knowing the Truth about the Trinity*, chap. 6.

⁷⁰ Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians*, 10. ANF, II:133.

Origen (185–254): “We must understand, therefore, that as the Son, who alone knows the Father, reveals Him to whom He will, so the Holy Spirit, who alone searches the deep things of God, reveals God to whom He will: ‘For the Spirit bloweth where He listeth.’”⁷¹

Origen [refuting the notion that the Holy Spirit is not the eternal Third Member of the Trinity]: “For if this were the case, the Holy Spirit would never be reckoned in the Unity of the Trinity, i.e., along with the unchangeable Father and His Son, unless He had always been the Holy Spirit.”⁷²

Origen (again): “From all which we learn that the person of the Holy Spirit was of such authority and dignity, that [the formula for] baptism was not complete except by the authority of the most excellent Trinity of them all, i.e., by the naming of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and by joining to the unbegotten God the Father, and to His only-begotten Son, the name also of the Holy Spirit. Who, then, is not amazed at the exceeding majesty of the Holy Spirit, when he hears that he who speaks a word against the Son of man may hope for forgiveness; but that he who is guilty of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit has not forgiveness, either in the present world or in that which is to come!”⁷³

The Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son

In addition to affirming the deity of the Holy Spirit, the church fathers were careful to distinguish Him from both the Father and the Son. They did this both by describing His unique function, and by depicting Him as a distinct Person.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp (2nd century): “We wish you, brethren, all happiness, while you walk according to the doctrine of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; with whom be glory to God the Father and the Holy Spirit, for the salvation of His holy elect, after whose example the blessed Polycarp suffered, following in whose steps may we too be found in the kingdom of Jesus Christ!”⁷⁴

Irenaeus (d. c. 202): “The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from

⁷¹ Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.3.4. ANF, IV:253.

⁷² Ibid. ANF, IV:253.

⁷³ Ibid. ANF, IV:252.

⁷⁴ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 22. ANF, I:43.

the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord.”⁷⁵

Tertullian (c. 160–225): “Thus the connection of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Paraclete, produces three coherent Persons, who are yet distinct One from Another. These Three are one essence, not one Person, as it is said, ‘I and my Father are One,’ in respect of unity of substance not singularity of number.”⁷⁶

Tertullian (again): “I confess that I call God and His Word—the Father and His Son—two. For the root and the tree are distinctly two things, but correlatively joined; the fountain and the river are also two forms, but indivisible; so likewise the sun and the ray are two forms, but coherent ones. Everything which proceeds from something else must needs be second to that from which it proceeds, without being on that account separated: Where, however, there is a second, there must be two; and where there is a third, there must be three. Now the Spirit indeed is third from God and the Son; just as the fruit of the tree is third from the root, or as the stream out of the river is third from the fountain, or as the apex of the ray is third from the sun. Nothing, however, is alien from that original source whence it derives its own properties. In like manner the Trinity, flowing down from the Father through intertwined and connected steps, does not at all disturb the Monarchy, whilst it at the same time guards the state of the Economy.”⁷⁷

Origen (185–254): “As, then, after those first discussions which, according to the requirements of the case, we held at the beginning regarding the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it seemed right that we should retrace our steps, and show that the same God was the creator and founder of the world, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, i.e., that the God of the law and of the prophets and of the Gospel was one and the same; and that, in the next place, it ought to be shown, with respect to Christ, in what manner He who had formerly been demonstrated to be the Word and Wisdom of God became man; it remains that we now return with all possible brevity to the subject of the Holy Spirit. It is time, then, that we say a few words to the best of our ability regarding the Holy Spirit, whom our Lord and Savior in the Gospel according to John has named the Paraclete. For as it is the same God Himself, and the same Christ, so also is it the same Holy Spirit who was in the prophets and apostles, i.e., either in those who believed in God before the advent of Christ, or in those who by means of Christ have sought refuge in God.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.1. ANF, I:330.

⁷⁶ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 25. ANF, 3:621.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 8. ANF, III:603.

⁷⁸ Origen, *De Principiis*, 2.7.1. ANF, IV:284.

**On this Basis, the Ante-Nicene Fathers often Referred to God
in Ways that Emphasize All Three Members of the Trinity**

Often, the writings of the ante-Nicene fathers assume a trinitarian posture—reflecting the language of the New Testament in its discussion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Early Christians sometimes spoke of the Son as the *Word of the Father* and of the Spirit as the *Wisdom of the Father*—using these titles to designate each Member of the Trinity. As Gregg Allison explains:

An early description of the relationship between the three referred to the Son as the Word of the Father and to the Spirit as the Wisdom of the Father; these two were the two “hands” of the Father as he created. In an interesting reference to the creation of the sun and moon on the fourth day of creation, Theophilus noted: “The three days which were before the lights are types of the Trinity—of God, his Word, and his Wisdom” [*To Autolytus*, 2.15]. Appealing to Proverbs 3:19–20 and 8:22–31, Irenaeus “demonstrated that the Word, namely the Son, was always with the Father; and that Wisdom also, which is the Spirit, was present with him, anterior [prior] to all creation. . . . There is therefore one God, who by the Word and Wisdom created and arranged all things” [Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.20.3–4].⁷⁹

Additionally, the ante-Nicene fathers frequently spoke of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—using Trinitarian language to describe the Godhead. The following patristic selections provide a representative sampling of the way early Christian leaders regularly spoke of the Godhead:

Clement of Rome (c. 30–95): “Do we not have one God and one Christ and one Spirit of grace that was poured out upon us?”⁸⁰

Clement (again): “For as God lives, and the Lord Jesus Christ lives, and the Holy Spirit (who are the faith and the hope of the elect), so surely the one who with humility and constant gentleness has kept without regret the ordinances and commandments given by God will be enrolled and included among the number of those who are saved through Jesus Christ, through whom is the glory to God for ever and ever. Amen.”⁸¹

Ignatius (d. c. 117): “You are stones of a temple, prepared beforehand for the building of God the Father, hoisted up to the heights by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, using as a rope the Holy Spirit; your faith is what lifts you up, and love is the way that leads up to God.”⁸²

⁷⁹ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 233.

⁸⁰ Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 46. Holmes, *AF*, 107.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 58. Holmes, *AF*, 123.

⁸² Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, Middle Recension, 9. Holmes, *AF*, 191.

Polycarp (c. 69–160): “Lord God Almighty, the Father of thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ . . . wherefore also I praise Thee for all things, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, with whom, to Thee, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen.”⁸³

Martyrdom of Polycarp (second century): “I have collected these things, when they had almost faded away through the lapse of time, that the Lord Jesus Christ may also gather me along with His elect into His heavenly kingdom to whom, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be glory forever and ever. Amen.”⁸⁴

Justin Martyr (c. 100–165): “For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water.”⁸⁵

Justin Martyr (again): “. . . the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and other virtues, who is free from all impurity. But both Him, and the Son (who came forth from Him and taught us these things . . .), and the prophetic Spirit, we worship and adore, knowing them in reason and truth.”⁸⁶

Irenaeus (d. c. 202): “The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: . . . one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father ‘to gather all things in one,’ and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Savior, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, ‘every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess; to him, and that He should execute just judgment towards all.’”⁸⁷

Tertullian (c. 160–225): “We define that there are two, the Father and the Son, and three with the Holy Spirit, and this number is made by the pattern of salvation . . . [which] brings about unity in trinity, interrelating the three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are three, not in dignity, but in degree, not in substance but in form, not in power but in kind. They are of one substance and

⁸³ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 14. *ANF*, I:42.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* *ANF*, I:44.

⁸⁵ Justin, *First Apology*, 61. *ANF*, I:183.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 6. *ANF*, I:164.

⁸⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.1. *ANF*, I:330.

power, because there is one God from whom these degrees, forms and kinds devolve in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”⁸⁸

Tertullian (again): “Now, with regard to this rule of faith—that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend—it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen ‘in diverse manners’ by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh. This rule, as it will be proved, was taught by Christ, and raises amongst ourselves no other questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics.”⁸⁹

Tertullian [in response to the modalistic monarchianism of Praxeas]: “But as for me, who derive the Son from no other source but from the substance of the Father, and (represent Him) as doing nothing without the Father’s will, and as having received all power from the Father, how can I be possibly destroying the Monarchy from the faith, when I preserve it in the Son just as it was committed to Him by the Father? The same remark (I wish also to be formally) made by me with respect to the third degree in the Godhead, because I believe the Spirit to proceed from no other source than from the Father through the Son.”⁹⁰

Hippolytus (170–235): “[It is] the Father who is above all, the Son who is through all, and the Holy Spirit who is in all. And we cannot otherwise think of one God, but by believing in truth in Father and Son and Holy Spirit. . . . For it is through this Trinity that the Father is glorified. . . . The whole Scriptures, then, proclaim this truth.”⁹¹

Origen (185–254): “Moreover, nothing in the Trinity can be called greater or less, since the fountain of divinity alone contains all things by His word and

⁸⁸ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 2. PL 2.156–57.

⁸⁹ Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics*, 13. ANF, III:249.

⁹⁰ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 4. ANF, III:599.

⁹¹ Hippolytus, *Against Noetus*, 14. ANF, V:228.

reason, and by the Spirit of His mouth sanctifies all things which are worthy of sanctification.”⁹²

Origen (again): “But in our desire to show the divine benefits bestowed upon us by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which Trinity is the fountain of all holiness.”⁹³

Gregory Thaumaturgus of Neo-Caesarea (205–270): “All [the persons] are one nature, one essence, one will, and are called the Holy Trinity; and these also are names subsistent, one nature in three persons, and one genus [kind].”⁹⁴

As these selections demonstrate, the ante-Nicene fathers frequently employed trinitarian language to describe the nature and work of God. On the one hand, they declared themselves to be monotheists, who believed in the one and only God. On the other hand, they clearly affirmed that the one God has eternally existed as three distinct Persons, each of whom is equally and fully God.

Creedal Articulation

It is important to stress that the patristic evidence considered above is from the ante-Nicene period of church history—long *before* Constantine and the Council of Nicaea. It thus becomes obvious that the councils and creeds of the fourth century did not invent Trinitarian doctrine. They simply *affirmed* and *articulated* that which had been established in Scripture and taught by those Christian leaders in the generations before them.

But this raises an important question: If belief in the Trinity was well-attested before the fourth century, why did it take so long for the church to develop an official creed in which the doctrine of the Trinity was clearly articulated? The answer is due, at least in part, to the imperial persecution Christians faced during the ante-Nicene period. With the ushering in of religious freedom, beginning under Constantine in AD 313, church leaders were finally given the opportunity to convene in empire-wide councils. That freedom allowed them to articulate a creedal formulation regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, a necessary response to the attack leveled against the deity of Christ by Arius and his followers.⁹⁵

At the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, Christian theologians from across the Roman Empire (and even a few from outside its boundaries) came together to address the teachings of Arius, which had been denounced as heretical at an earlier synod of Egyptian bishops in AD 318. The bishops who attended the council overwhelmingly

⁹² Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.3.7. *ANF*, IV:255.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 1.4.2. *ANF*, IV:256.

⁹⁴ Gregory Thaumaturgus, *On the Trinity*. *ANF*, VI:48.

⁹⁵ James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998), 178. White notes that, “The end of persecution brought an almost immediate refocusing of the church’s attention upon the issues of the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Indeed, the first major council of the church, called by Emperor Constantine in Nicaea in A. D. 325, addressed the issue of the nature of Christ a scant dozen years after the persecutions ended.”

denounced Arianism and affirmed the Nicene Creed. It is important to again emphasize that the Council of Nicaea did not *determine* or *establish* the doctrine of Christ's deity. It simply affirmed and defended a doctrine that had always been taught by the church going back to the time of the apostles.

Antagonists and skeptics may claim that the deity of Christ was invented at the Council of Nicaea, but those allegations fall flat. For example, *The Da Vinci Code* asserts that Christ's deity was determined by "a relatively close vote" at Nicaea. But that is simply not true. As has been demonstrated, the doctrine of the deity of Christ is established in Scripture. Moreover, the affirmation of His deity was overwhelmingly recognized by those who participated in the Council of Nicaea. Of the 318 bishops who attended, 316 ultimately signed the Nicene Creed.

The trinitarian language of the Nicene Creed could not be more clear: "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, from the essence of the Father, God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one essence with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who for us men and for our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, He suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come again to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Spirit."

Though the victory at Nicaea had been overwhelming, the controversy with Arianism still raged in the Roman Empire over the next 50 years. During this time, church leaders like Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus), stood firm in their defense of biblical truth. In addition to emphasizing the deity of Christ (the doctrine that had been the focus of Nicaea), they also emphasized the deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit. In 381, at the Council of Constantinople, Arianism was fully and finally defeated within the Roman Empire. A modified version of the Nicene Creed was also adopted, one in which more detail was given regarding the Person and work of the Holy Spirit. Later creeds, such as the Athanasian Creed exhibited this same Trinitarian emphasis.

Conclusion

Properly framed, a study of the doctrine of the Trinity in early church history begins with the recognition that both the oneness and threeness of God are theological realities which are established in Scripture. Thus, the Bible alone provides the authoritative basis for belief in the Trinity, and in the closely-related doctrine of Christ's deity.

The witness of church history clearly affirms that biblical truth. The ante-Nicene church fathers acknowledged that there is only one God. Yet, they also taught that the Godhead consists of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—three distinct Persons each of whom is God. Though these Christian leaders lived before the time of Nicaea, and thus sometimes used terminology that may sound slightly different than that found in the Nicene Creed, they affirmed the fundamental truths on which

Trinitarianism rests. When trinitarian doctrine came under attack in the fourth century, the church rose to defend the truth against Arian error. Political factors at that time made it possible for an ecumenical council to be convened—the result of which was a clear articulation, in creedal form, of the trinitarian doctrine that the church had always held going back to the time of the apostles.

Though some critics and skeptics may claim that the Trinity was invented in the fourth century, nothing could be further from the truth.⁹⁶ Even a brief survey of the ante-Nicene patristic literature (like that included in this article) demonstrates that trinitarian beliefs were held by Christians long before the Council of Nicaea.⁹⁷ As church historian Roger Olson rightly observes, “A few groups flatly deny the doctrine of the Trinity as false and perhaps an invention of certain church fathers unduly influenced by the Roman emperor Constantine. But church history proves these groups wrong. The very earliest church fathers believed in the Trinity, and the Trinity is strongly implied in Scripture. In fact, there’s no way to make sense of Scripture without it!”⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Fred von Kamecke, *Busted: Exposing Popular Myths about Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 161. Kamecke writes, “Was the Trinity invented? No. Rather, it was the inevitable response of the church’s experience with God. He’s the One who revealed himself to us in this mysterious manner, a fact borne out by the Scriptures. The word ‘Trinity’ never appears, but the reality to which the term points is everywhere evident. Since it is a concept so deeply imbedded in the Scriptures, it is God himself who is responsible for it. This is the eternal, unchanging nature of this incredible God.”

⁹⁷ J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 116: “It is impossible for Constantine to have invented the deity of Christ when that doctrine is already found in manuscripts that predate him by a century or more.”

⁹⁸ Roger E. Olson, *Finding God in the Shack* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 144–45.