

A Short History of the Trinity

By Gary Fakhoury

Normally focus on Scripture--John, etc.

Today focus on history. Reason being:

Karl Rahner: (Theologians) have been "embarrassed by the simple fact that in reality the Scriptures do not explicitly present a doctrine of the Trinity."

Sjordal is right. The vast majority of churchgoers have been taught Trinitarianism, not Armstrong Bitheism. We need to know their doctrine better than they do.

Mt. 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"

Does this imply that God is three persons in one being? Not necessarily. It states only that the Father, Son and HS play critical roles in the salvation of the person being baptized.

Given a Trinity-free Bible, how did Christendom get to the full exposition of the Trinity? Can we trace the steps that led Christianity from the simple monotheism of the Jesus' earliest followers to the difficult intricacies of the Trinity?

For that we have no choice but to examine post-biblical writings

The Apostolic Fathers--Early Second Century

Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp--undisputed students of the Apostles.

Quick study--nothing remotely Trinitarian in their writings

Ignatius: "...there is one God, Who has revealed Himself through His Son Jesus Christ, Who is His Word emerging from silence."

Clement: "Have we not (all) one God and one Christ? Is there not one Spirit of grace poured out upon us?"

Note focus on one God. No dispute among scholars--no Trinitarian (or even Binitarian) expressions in the writings of these men

The Apologists--Late Second Century

Apologia--Gk.

The next generation were first to explain the Christian faith to contemporary Greek thinkers.

Justin Martyr, his disciple Tatian and Theophilus of Antioch.

Principal preoccupation: the relationship of the Father and Son

Freewheeling speculation about the eternal Godhead; i.e. the *logos* did not have personality until His generation. No effort to systematize their beliefs about the nature of God.

However critical first steps. Athenagoras: We "acknowledge God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit and declare both their power in union and their distinction in order."

Notice language change--nomenclature different from biblical expressions--influence Gk. philosophy

Theophilus of Antioch, in speaking of the creation week, wrote, "In like manner the three days which were before the luminaries, are types of the trinity, of God, and His Word and His wisdom."

"Trinity" a term of convenience for F, S, & HS. No effort yet to define God as three in one, but to recognize three which perform divine work in the world and in men.

Irenaeus

First true theologian of the post-apostolic era--*Against Heresies*, 180 to 200 A.D.

Contemporary of the Apologists, but had little interest in demonstrating Christianity's affinity with Greek philosophy. A bishop who wanted to preserve and defend the faith. Writings on the nature of God developed as a reaction to Gnosticism, the principal doctrinal threat of the period.

"(We) should know that He which made, and formed...and nourishes us by means of the creation, establishing all things by His Word, and binding them together by His Wisdom – this is He who is only true God."

Still, one true God is the Father, not the F, S & HS. Still no Trinity.

Tertullian--155-230 AD

"Father of the Western Church" coined the term "trinity" and added formula, "one substance, three persons"

Latin *persona* --a mask that an ancient actor might wear to play a role. Neither the Greek nor Latin word carried with it the same sense of self-consciousness that we associate with the term "person" today.

“...the mystery of the economy, which distributes the unity into Trinity, setting forth the Father, Son and Spirit as three.” However adds the Spirit is itself a *persona*, but functions as the “deputy” of the Son.

Both *persona* and subordination later rejected, but pushed the discussion of the nature of the Godhead irrevocably forward to the next century, providing the concepts and language that formed the quarry from which later councils would extract the Trinitarian creeds.

Origen--182-250 AD

Chief contribution was in his suggestion of *hypostasis*, roughly meaning, "individual reality."

The Son to be derivative of the Father, as “secondary God.” The Spirit is “the most honorable of all the things brought into existence by the Word, the chief in rank of all the beings originated by the Father through Christ.”

Subordination later scrapped.

Nevertheless, Origen’s contribution of *hypostasis* was critical for the Trinity’s development

We have reached the fourth century and still no Trinity *per se*, but many competing ideas and doctrines of God. Those competing ideas would soon become a bloody battle among Christian brothers.

The Fourth Century

Gregory of Nyssa: "In this city (Constantinople) if you ask a shopkeeper for change, he will argue with you about whether the Son is begotten or unbegotten.

If you inquire about the quality of bread, the baker will answer, 'The Father is greater, the Son is less.' And if you ask the bath attendant to draw your bath, he will tell you that the Son was created out of nothing."

Why the raging controversy? In a word, Arius. All these claims from common folk on the street were expressions of Arian thought, which argued that Jesus was the holiest man who ever lived, but was not the God of Israel walking the earth in the form of man.

People were already losing their lives over these questions, and the flames of passion rose ever higher. Something needed to be done but no one quite knew what.

Enter Constantine, converted in 312 and ascended to the role emperor of the entire Roman Empire in 324. More than anything else, Romans craved order. And no one craved order more than Constantine. Unfortunately, his church--the Christian church--was in the grip of turmoil the likes of which had not been spoken of even among the pagans.

This internal warfare within the Church could not have come at a worse time for the new Emperor. The Roman Empire had entered a period of rapid decline and frightening discord. The Barbarians were knocking on the gates and the old pagan religion was dying. Constantine was convinced that, If the Empire was to be saved, Christianity must assume paganism's former role in helping unify it. But to do this, the Christian Church itself needed to be unified. And it was anything but unified when Constantine assumed power.

To stave off the political crisis that the theological crisis was threatening the create, in 325 A.D Constantine called for a council of bishops--a council the Roman Emperor himself intended to host and attend--an historic first.

Constantine's personal interest in the theological dispute extended little further than the effect the Council's decision would have on the unity and health of the Empire he had inherited.

But even within that narrow space a preferred position had been adopted by the Emperor. While being careful to appear to be completely objective and even-handed, Constantine worked behind the scenes to tilt the decision toward the camp of Athanasius, the champion of Jesus' deity and the arch-rival of the Arians.

This is because Constantine became convinced that a God-Jesus was better for the Empire than a man-Jesus.

Rubenstein: "The people of Western Europe would not accept a Jesus who was too much like them...The Christ they wanted and needed was a High God who could save them by his grace and comfort them through the ministrations of His Church...Only a strong God, a strong Church, and a strong empire could provide helpless humans with the security that they craved."

There was one other factor in play here. Constantine shared Athanasius' hatred of Judaism. Since Arianism was closer to the Jewish view of Jesus' nature than Athanasias' was, that was just one more reason to favor Athanasias.

The deal, as it were, was now sealed. A new Rome needed a new God, and the new emperor was determined to deliver.

In late May, 325 AD, the first of about 250 bishops, nearly all from the Eastern part of the empire, began to trickle onto the grounds of Constantine's lakeside palace in Nicaea, in northwest Asia Minor.

For some two weeks these men would discuss their views of nature of Jesus and how to express it. No detailed minutes of the meeting have survived, but apparently Arius was not given the opportunity to make his case, ostensibly because he was not a bishop and therefore was not technically permitted to address the assembly.

Not surprisingly, given these circumstances, Athanasius carried the day, and the council issued the following creedal statement:

"We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible. And we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from

the Father, only begotten, that is from the Father's substance, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father. Through him were made all things, both in heaven and on earth. For us and for our salvation he came down, was incarnate and became human. He suffered, rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens and is coming to judge the living and the dead. And we believe in the Holy Spirit.

But those who say, 'there was once when he was not' and 'before he was begotten he was not,' and that 'he was made out of nothing,' or who affirm that 'the Son is of a different hypostasis (individual reality) or substance,' or that he is mutable or changeable - these the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes."

In the end, all but two bishops signed the decree. Constantine immediately sentenced the two loyal followers of Arius to spend the rest of their natural lives in exile. Thus, Constantine hoped, the Arian fever had been broken, and the unification of the Church and empire could begin. Within weeks it would become clear that Constantine's was a false hope. Arianism was going nowhere any time soon.

Indeed, some 30 years after Nicea, a far more representative council of over 500 bishops from both the East and West converged upon Rimini-Seleucia and produced an Arian creed. This creed was later repudiated by the Church, and this council's work was struck from most Church records. In religion, as in war, history has indeed been written by the victors. The Church of the fourth century was not majority Athanasian by any measure. But you might not know this by just reading the standard works of mainstream Christianity.

In any case, what Nicea produced was, at best, as Binitarian--but arguably a vague Binitarianism. What is clear is that the council was in no mood to speculate upon the nature of the Holy Spirit, and its relation to the Godhead. This work would be left for others to complete.

The Road to Constantinople

As should be expected, Athanasius championed the creed of Nicea as a bulwark against Arian heresy, and encouraged theologians to further develop its conclusions. These included the "three Cappadocians," Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. They dedicated their work primarily around the nature of the Holy Spirit, culminating in the Council of Constantinople in 381

Ideas promulgated about the nature of the Holy Spirit prior to the council of Constantinople were legion. The Spirit was, depending upon whom you spoke to, either a non-entity, the Logos, an impersonal power brought forth by the Logos after His ascension, a created divine being, an angel, a second derivation of the Father, the "Wisdom" of the Old Testament, or a full-fledged Person of the Godhead.

The three Cappodocians noted the divine titles, qualities and operations given to the Spirit; especially "Holy," which Gregory of Nazianzus took to imply the "fulfillment of his nature" concluding therefore that the Holy Spirit must be sanctifying by nature, not sanctified by some primary source.

Gregory asked, if it was the Spirit who regenerated and sanctified, how could He be anything less than divine? Furthermore, Basil argued, "spirit" itself necessarily meant unchangeable and eternal.

This, combined with the inclusion of the name of the Holy Spirit in the tripartite baptismal formula which had by then become standard practice, led Basil to conclude that rejecting the deity of the Holy Spirit was tantamount to setting aside the very essence of salvation itself.

With the work of the three Cappodocians and the Council of Constantinople,, the formal doctrine of the Trinity was complete: God was "One *ousia*, three *hypostases*," or, roughly, "One essence, three distinct grounds of being." From this is derived the simplest and most popular Trinitarian formula, "one God in three persons."

Gregory of Nyssa recognized, but somewhat defensively chides others for pointing out, the logical difficulties this new formula he and his compatriots presented: "The difference in the *hypostases* does not dissolve the continuity of their nature nor does the community of their nature dissipate the particularity of their characteristics. Do not be amazed if we declare that the same thing is united and distinct, and conceive, as in a riddle, of a new and paradoxical unity in distinction and distinction in unity."

Rubenstein:

“...to many skeptics, the new theology’s most troubling feature was that, in redefining the relationship of the Father to the Son, it altered the Christian understanding of God...It was one thing to say, as Athanasius and other early Nicenes did, that Jesus and God shared a common essence. That meant that the Son was every whit as divine as the Father, and that he was in some mysterious way united with Him...What the Cappadocian theology did was to make it clear that if Christ was fully divine, God could not be primarily a Father, but must be equally a Son and a Spirit...Was the Lord’s Prayer addressed only to hypostasis of the Father...or to the entire ousia of the Godhead? Basil’s answer was to declare that what was common to the three and what was distinctive among them lay beyond speech and comprehension and therefore beyond either analysis or conceptualization...Even today, many Christians who consider themselves orthodox conceive of God primarily as a Father. But the real thrust of the Cappadocian doctrine was to differentiate the Christian Godhead, which now incorporated Jesus and the Holy Spirit, from the monolithic God worshipped by Jews, and later, Muslims...As a result, Christians who accepted this triune God, distributed equally over three persons, no longer shared Jehovah with their Jewish forbears...Doctrinally, this is the point at which Christianity breaks decisively with its parent faith and with other forms of monotheism.”