

Chapter 16:

The Trinity: *Homoousios*

We have already looked at the Nicene and pre-Nicene view of the Trinity, but we need to take a much deeper look at it for two reasons.

- Since Nicea the Trinity has become a touchy subject, and the words "heresy" and "heretic" are quickly thrown around.
- Trained theologians think that we understand the Trinity better today than Christians did before Nicea.

The comments of historians on the matter of the Trinity make it clear that modern Christians believe that it took some time to really understand the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, in his comments on the Arian Controversy in the "Prolegomena" to Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, Philip Schaff writes:

It must not be forgotten that at the beginning of the fourth century the problem of how to preserve the Godhood of Christ and at the same time his subordination to the Father ... had not been solved.⁴⁶⁹

In his eight-volume series, *History of the Christian Church*, he writes:

⁴⁶⁹ Schaff, Philip. Prolegomena: "The Outbreak of the Arian Controversy. The Attitude of Eusebius." *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Series II. Vol. I.

The Nicene fathers still teach, like their predecessors, a certain subordinationism, which seems to conflict with the doctrine of consubstantiality. But we must distinguish between a subordination of essence (*ousia*) and a subordination of hypostasis ... In this point, as in the doctrine of the Holy Ghost, **the Nicene system yet needed further development.** The logical consistency of the doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Son ... **must in time overcome this decaying remnant of the ante-Nicene subordinationism.**⁴⁷⁰

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, still the standard in Bible Encyclopedias for Protestant pastors, in its section on the Trinity, written by famed Evangelical theologian B.B. Warfield, says:

The formulated doctrine [*of the Trinity*] was of slow attainment. ... In the 2nd century the dominant neo-Stoic and neo-Platonic ideas deflected Christian thought into subordinationist channels, and produced what is known as the Logos-Christology ... meanwhile, to a great extent, the Spirit was neglected altogether.⁴⁷¹

Is this true? Was "Logos-Christology" the product of Stoic and Platonic influence on second-century Christians? Have we improved our understanding of the Trinity by throwing off the "Logos-Christology"?

Pre-Nicene Christianity and the Apostles

We have already seen that the pre-Nicene Christians believed they were carefully preserving the teachings of the apostles, not teaching "neo-Stoic and neo-Platonic" ideas.

And this is what the holy writings teach us, as well as all the Spirit-bearing men.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷⁰ Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church*. Vol. III. Section 130. Emphasis mine, parentheses his.

⁴⁷¹ Warfield, Benjamin B. "Trinity, 2." *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

⁴⁷² Theophilus, *To Autolycus*. II:22.

Theophilus, the writer of that passage, was the seventh bishop of Antioch, the apostle Paul's home church. He was writing just over 50 years after Ignatius was martyred. Ignatius was the first bishop of Antioch, and he had been chosen and overseen by the apostle John. Theophilus' claim to have the backing of the Scriptures and "the Spirit-bearing men," is no frivolous assertion!

How likely is it that Theophilus really got his teaching from the apostle John? We must remember that it was the John who wrote:

In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God. ... The *Logos* became flesh and lived among us.⁴⁷³

Should we now accuse the apostle John of being infected with "neo-Stoic and neo-Platonic" ideas?

We have further seen that the bishops at Nicea believed themselves to be simply outlining the teaching of the fathers who came before them. Their goal was to preserve apostolic teaching, not invent a new definition of the Trinity.

The in-depth and perhaps overwhelming look at the early Christian view of the Trinity in this chapter and the next are, I believe, necessary to establish that the Nicene view of the Trinity was both orthodox and apostolic. It does not need to be improved, but to be received as the early Christians received it.

The Simplicity of the Nicene View of the Trinity

I am not going to bore you in these two chapters any more than I have bored you in previous ones. I am going to spare you the difficult details of *homoousios*, *homoiousios*, and *homoian*. I am also going to spare you a discussion of the role of *hypostases* in explaining the Trinity.

We can complicate things so much that we miss the forest for the trees.

It is hard for me to conceive of books being written to explain why *hypostasis* is a necessary term to distinguish the persons of

⁴⁷³ John 1:1,14

God when in fact we modern Christians have completely missed the fact that the Nicene Creed says the one God is the Father, something we would never say! We are careful always to include the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit when mention the one God.

Why should we linger on the difference between *homo-ousios* and *homoi-ousios* when we haven't even discussed the fact that the Nicene Creed—and the Bible!—says that the Son is begotten in the beginning, while most Christians have no concept of the Son being begotten except at Bethlehem. To modern Christians, the Son is eternal in exactly the same sense that God is.

In fact, most modern Christians wouldn't say that sentence the way I just did. They would say "eternal in exactly the same sense that *the Father* is." Distinguishing God and his Son is not something we do, even though it's something the Scriptures always do.

Give yourself a thought experiment here:

- Can you picture the Scriptures saying, "The Son is sitting at the right hand of God"?
- Can you picture the Scriptures saying, "The Father is sitting at the left hand of God"?
- Can you picture an apostle greeting the church with "grace to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ his Son"?
- Can you picture an apostle greeting the church with "grace to you from God, Jesus Christ, and the Father his Father"?

Tertullian tells us that there's a reason that the answer to questions one and three are yes and the answers to questions two and four are no.

I shall follow the apostle [Paul], so that if the Father and the Son are alike to be invoked, I shall call the Father "God" and invoke Jesus Christ as "Lord."

But when Christ alone [is invoked], I shall be able to call him "God." As the same apostle says, "Of whom is Christ, who is over all, God blessed forever" [*Rom. 9:5*].

For I should give the name of "sun" even to a sunbeam, considered by itself. But if I were mentioning the

sun from which the ray emanates, I would certainly withdraw the name of sun from the mere beam. For although I do not make two suns, still I shall reckon both the sun and its ray to be as much two things—and two forms of one undivided substance—as God and his Word, as the Father and the Son.⁴⁷⁴

The places where we have wandered away from the apostolic understanding of the Trinity are not huge, but we have wandered. And we have wandered far enough to have our own difficulties with the Scriptures. Many new Christians blanch when they read that there is "One God and one Mediator between man and God, the Man Christ Jesus."⁴⁷⁵

No one has told those Christians, nor is it likely that they've told you, dear reader, that it was the practice of the apostle Paul that "if the Father and Son are alike to be invoked, I shall call the Father 'God' and invoke Jesus Christ as 'Lord.'" Yet it only takes a cursory familiarity with the Scriptures to realize that it's true.

How can we move on to *homoousios* and *hypostasis* when we haven't even mastered the basics of the faith, the things that the apostolic churches say were handed down to them?

In fact, why move on to *homoousios* and *hypostasis* at all? What good has it done us? We find even a great historian like Philip Schaff referring to the pre-Nicene Christians as "uncertain in regard to the exact relation of Father and Son"?

Not uncertain, my worthy Mr. Schaff; nothing about their quotes indicate uncertainty. The fact that they haven't defined the Trinity to the satisfaction of later generations is that we ask for too fine a definition, while we ignore their broader one because it does not suit our tastes.

If, then, it is once rightly understood that the only-begotten Son of God is his Wisdom existing in **substance**, I do not know whether our curiosity ought to advance beyond this.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁴ *Against Praxeas*. 13.

⁴⁷⁵ 1 Timothy 2:5

⁴⁷⁶ Origen. *De Principiis*. I:2:1-2. c. A.D. 230.

We have strained at gnats, but we have swallowed camels.

The Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Trinity

I am writing this chapter as a westerner because I believe the vast majority of my readers are westerners influenced by Roman Catholic or Protestant Christianity.

One further proof of my point in this chapter is that Eastern Orthodox Christians, who represent at least half of Christian tradition after Nicea, would agree that the western churches have greatly over-defined the Trinity.

On a web page created by Orthodox monks from the Decani monastery in Kosovo, I found:

An important element of the Eastern Christian understanding of God is the notion that God, in his essence, is totally transcendent and unknowable and that, strictly speaking, God can only be designated by negative attributes: it is possible to say what God is not, but it is impossible to say what he is.⁴⁷⁷

In other words, there are some aspects of the relationship between the persons of the Trinity that are best left undefined.

The Orthodox view of the Trinity was pointed out to me by a reader of my web site, *Christian History for Everyman*, who wrote:

It is good to see someone else defend the Nicene view of the Trinity. But remember, you are not alone!

He then gave me a list of podcasts by Orthodox priests on *Ancient Faith Radio*⁴⁷⁸ espousing the kinds of ideas you will be reading in the next two chapters. As it turns out, half of the world's Christian tradition does not believe that pre-Nicene and Nicene Christians were confused on the subject of the Trinity.

⁴⁷⁷ "The Doctrine of the Orthodox Church: The Basic Doctrines." Orthodox Christian Information Center. Accessed 2 Apr. 2011.

<<http://orthodoxinfo.com/general/doctrine1.aspx>>.

⁴⁷⁸ e.g., <http://ancientfaith.com/podcasts/podup/hopko/the_holy_trinity>.

The Faith Once for All Delivered to the Saints

I make regular reference in this book to Jude 3, where we are commanded to "contend earnestly" for "the faith once for all delivered to the saints."

God is far greater than we can understand. It would be demeaning to think that the God who created at least a hundred billion galaxies with at least a hundred billion stars each would be fathomable to the tiny human mind!

But there are things that God has revealed to us. He has revealed himself to us as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and—as we shall see in this chapter—there are aspects of that relationship that he has revealed to us as well.

I find it objectionable that we think that our precise definitions and our sophisticated—and perhaps ostentatious— theological terms are an improvement on the faith that was so carefully preserved in the early churches and outlined at the Council of Nicea.

It is true that the pre-Nicene Christians didn't have the precise definitions that we now have. But perhaps that is because some aspects of the relationship between the persons of the Trinity were *supposed to be* a mystery.

***Homoousios* and Proverbs 8:22**

In A.D. 325, all Christians believed that Proverbs 8:22 was a statement about the generation, begetting, or even "creation" of the Son of God in the beginning. Since pre-Nicene Christians, and fourth-century Christians in the east, used the Septuagint (LXX for short), a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, I will quote from it:

The Lord created me the beginning of his ways, with an eye to his works.

The Septuagint uses the word "created" (*ektisen* in Greek) in this passage that all pre-Nicene and Nicene Christians understood to refer to the generation of the Son in eternity past. Therefore, pre-Nicene Christian writers were not afraid to refer to the Son as "created" in the beginning.

Then Arius came along.

Arius applied the word "created" in a way that no pre-Nicene writer understood it. When pre-Nicene Christians used the word "created," they meant by it that inexplicable, incomprehensible, and mysterious birth of the Son of God before time began. They generally preferred to use the word "beget," as that's the word used almost exclusively in the New Testament.

They also understood, and clearly explained, that the Son of God was not created from nothing like all other creatures, but he came out of God. He was always the *Logos*—the "Word" or "Reason" of God—even before his generation before the creation.

Thus, to hear Arius declare that he was created from nothing, as all other creatures were, would have horrified earlier Christians every bit as much as it horrified the bishops of Alexandria in the fourth century. They would also have had the same objection that the bishops at Nicea had. If the Son was created from nothing, then he was of some other substance than God's. If he was the *Logos* of God, birthed from inside of God, only then did he share God's divine substance.

And they would have used the same terminology as the bishops at Nicea: *ousios* and *homoousios*.

***Homoousios* and the Substance of God**

"Substance," in the context of *homoousios*, means the "stuff" God is made of, if you'll excuse the expression. Of course, when we talk about God, we are talking about something far above ourselves. We will never be able to explain God.

On the other hand, pre-Nicene Christians argued that their conception of God and their understanding of the Trinity was passed down to them by the apostles. We may not be able to thoroughly describe God with any accuracy, but we can say the things that have been handed down to us as part of "the faith once for all delivered to the saints."⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁹ Jude 3

Athenagoras, a second-century apologist, provides a definition of the substance, or "essence," of God some 150 years before Nicea:

Because the multitude [of Roman pagans], who cannot distinguish between matter and God, or see how great is the interval which lies between them, pray to idols made of matter, are we therefore, who do distinguish and separate the uncreated and the created ... and who give the fitting name to each of them—are we to come and worship images? ... But if they are at the greatest possible distance from one another, as far apart as the artist and the materials of his art, why are we called to account?⁴⁸⁰

Athenagoras says here that there is a divine substance, which is uncreated, and there is matter, which is created. By "matter," he does not mean only material things, but everything that is not divine. Thus angels, humans, animals, trees, and rocks are all summed up in the word "matter." Everything that is created, living or not, is meant by "matter."

On the other hand, there is God, whose "substance" is uncreated.

Keep in mind here that Athenagoras is writing to the emperor of Rome. He is trying to describe Christianity in general; he is not trying to win a theological argument.

Notice also his use of "we." He says that "we" distinguish and separate the created and uncreated.

Throughout the pre-Nicene writings, you will find this sort of terminology. They cared about what "we," the churches in general, believed. It is no wonder that Arius aroused the ire of his contemporaries. Not only was he failing to distinguish between the uncreated and the created, between God and matter, but he also refused to be corrected. His divisive, unsubmitive attitude, so willing to split the church of God, was far worse than his misunderstanding of this somewhat technical issue.

⁴⁸⁰ *A Plea for the Christians*. 15.

Clement of Rome, possibly the earliest of the early Christian writers, writing around A.D. 96, describes the importance of the unity of the church and the attitude that Arius should have had:

Who, then, is noble-minded among you? Who compassionate? Who full of love? Let him declare, "If on my account sedition, disagreements, and schism have arisen, I will depart. I will go away wherever you desire, and I will do what the many command. Only let the flock of God live on terms of peace with the elders set over it."⁴⁸¹

How different things would have been—and how much less reliant upon emperors—if this had been the attitude of the fourth-century bishops!

Athenagoras goes on to say that distinguishing between God and matter, between uncreated substance and created substance was important enough to Christians that ...

We employ language which makes a distinction between God and matter ... For we acknowledge a God and a Son, his *Logos*, and a Holy Spirit, **united in essence**.⁴⁸²

As of this writing, I am unable to find the Greek original of Athenagoras' phrase, "united in essence." So perhaps here is the best place to discuss the importance of words.

The "Idea" of *Homoousios*

Did Athenagoras use the same wording that the Nicene Creed uses? Is "essence" a translation of the Greek word *ousios*? Is "united in essence" possible *homoousios* in the original Greek?

I don't have and don't know how to get the Greek original of *A Plea for the Christians*, so I can't answer that. I do know that it's very unlikely that Athenagoras actually used the word *homoousios* or, in all the research I've done, I would have found someone, or more likely many someones, who mentioned it. That he used *ousios* is very likely.

⁴⁸¹ *1 Clement*. 44.

⁴⁸² *A Plea for the Christians*. 24. Emphasis mine.

However, it is not words that matter, but ideas. Athenagoras explains what he means, and he does so thoroughly enough that it is easy to understand his point no matter what words he used. With or without *homoousios*, he is clearly conveying the same idea that the bishops at Nicea meant to convey.

That idea is this: What was the state of the Son of God prior to his generation?

It doesn't matter what term you apply to that generation. You can call it creation, birth, or begetting. The point is, what was the state of the Son of God prior to that creation, birth, begetting, or generation?

Arius' answer was that "he was not"; he didn't exist. The early Christian answer is that he was the *Logos* of God, inside of God.

For those that don't remember, *Logos* is the Greek word that we usually render "Word" in English. It has a wider meaning than "word." Early Christians suggest it is related to reason, mind, thought, and even wisdom, and, of course, we regularly translate it "message" in our English Bibles.

This is the main and most important meaning of *homoousios*.

Eusebius of Caesarea, after discussing *homoousios* with the council, wrote back to his church in Caesarea to explain what it meant:

That he is *homoousios* with the Father then simply implies that the Son of God has no resemblance to created things but is in every respect like the Father only who begat him; that he is of no other substance or essence but of the Father. To this doctrine, explained in this way, it seemed right to assent.⁴⁸³

This is what the council itself said that it meant by the term.

It corresponds exactly with what earlier Christians said about the relationship between the Father and the Son.

I apologize in advance for inundating you with all the quotes which follow, but I want you to see that the idea that the Son is

⁴⁸³ *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus* I:8

"begotten, not made, *homoousios* with the Father," was not a novel concept dreamed up by the bishops of Nicea. It is brought up in the pre-Nicene writings over and over again.

Justin Martyr, c. A.D. 155:

For I have already proven that he was the only-begotten of the Father in everything, being begotten, in a unique way, *Logos* and Power by him, and afterwards become man through the virgin, as we have learned from the memoirs.⁴⁸⁴

The following quote by Tatian is a little complicated. His last point is simply that just because God begat his *Logos* doesn't mean that he was left without *Logos*. God still had the ability to reason and speak as much as he did before the generation of his *Logos* as a person second to himself.

Hard to visualize? That's why the early Christians used such illustrations as the lighting of a torch or the procession of a stream from its source in a spring. We're not meant to fully understand God; the procession of the Son from the Father is supposed to be a mystery. We can understand only what he's revealed to us, and as we can see on these pages, that is mind-bending enough!

Tatian, c. A.D. 165:

God was in the beginning, but the beginning, we have been taught, is the power of the *Logos*. For the Lord of the universe ... was alone, but ... with him, by *Logos* power, the *Logos* himself also, who was in him, subsists. By his simple will, the *Logos* springs forth, and the *Logos*, not coming forth in vain, becomes the first-begotten work of the Father. ... But he came into being by participation, not by abscission [*i.e., cutting off*], for what is cut off is separated from the original substance. ...

For just as from one torch many fires are lit, but the light of the first torch is not lessened by the kindling of

⁴⁸⁴ *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*. 105. Justin uses the term "memoirs" or "memoirs of the apostles" to refer to the four Gospels, which he quotes frequently.

many torches, so the *Logos*, coming forth from the *Logos* power of the Father, has not divested him ... of the *Logos* power.⁴⁸⁵

Theophilus, c. A.D. 168:

God, then, having his own *Logos* internal, within his own bowels, begat him, emitting him along with his own Wisdom before all things. He had this *Logos* as a helper in the things that were created by him, and by him he made all things. ... Therefore he speaks in this way by the prophet Solomon: "When he prepared the heavens I was there, and when he appointed the foundations of the earth I was by him as one brought up brought up with him" [*Prov. 8:27*].⁴⁸⁶

But when God wished to make all that he determined, he begot this *Logos*, uttered, the firstborn of all creation, not himself being emptied of the Word, but having begotten Reason, and always conversing with his Reason.

And this is what the holy writings teach us, as well as all the Spirit-bearing men, one of whom, John, says, "In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God" [*Jn. 1:1*], showing that at first God was alone, and the *Logos* in him. Then he says, "The *Logos* was God; all things came into existence through him, and apart from him not one thing came into existence" [*Jn. 1:2*].⁴⁸⁷

Athenagoras, A.D. 177:

We acknowledge ... a Son of God. Don't let anyone think it ridiculous that God should have a Son. ... The Son of God is the *Logos* of the Father ... He is the first product of the Father, not as though he was being brought into existence, for from the beginning God, who is the eternal Mind, had the *Logos* in himself.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁵ *Address to the Greeks*. 5.

⁴⁸⁶ *To Autolycus*. II:10.

⁴⁸⁷ *ibid.* II:22.

⁴⁸⁸ *A Plea for the Christians*. 10.

Irenaeus, c. A.D. 185:

[The Gospel] according to John relates [Jesus Christ's] original, effectual, and glorious generation from the Father, thus declaring, "In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God" [*John* 1:1].⁴⁸⁹

Clement of Alexandria, c. A.D. 190:

Though despised as to appearance, [Jesus] was in reality adored, the expiator of sin, the Savior, the merciful, the Divine Word; he that is truly most apparently Deity. He is made equal to the Lord of the universe because he was his Son, and the Word was in God.⁴⁹⁰

Tertullian, c. A.D. 210:

I am led to other arguments derived from God's own dispensation, in which he existed before the creation of the world, up to the generation of the Son. For before all things God was alone ... He was alone because there was nothing external to himself except himself. Yet even then he was not alone, for he had with him that which he possessed in himself, that is to say, his own Reason. This Reason is his own Thought, which the Greeks call *Logos* ... Therefore, it is now usual with our people, owing to the mere simple interpretation of the term, to say that the Word⁴⁹¹ was in the beginning with God. ...

For although God had not yet sent his Word, he still had him within himself ... I may therefore without rashness first lay this down: that even before the creation of the universe God was not alone, since he had within

⁴⁸⁹ *Against Heresies*. III:11:8.

⁴⁹⁰ *Exhortation to the Heathen*. 10. "Word" is not rendered *Logos* here because Clement of Alexandria wrote in Latin, not Greek.

⁴⁹¹ Latin, *sermonem*. Clement and Tertullian's writings are in Latin, so they didn't generally use *Logos*, a Greek word. In *Against Praxeas*, Tertullian did use *Logos* regularly, despite the fact that the work is in Latin, because he was addressing the Trinity.

himself ... his Word, which he made second to himself by agitating it within him.⁴⁹²

In Origen's quote that follows, note his statement that this "Power" from God was "never at any time non-existent." It almost seems that he foresaw the appearance of such a man as Arius (or perhaps Lucian). But that is not the case; he died long before Lucian began his school. Arius was simply treading all over apostolic tradition, and that is why he was condemned.

Origen, c. A.D. 230:

Another Power ... is produced, which exists with properties of its own, a kind of breath, as Scripture says, of the primal and unbegotten power of God, deriving from him its being and never at any time non-existent.⁴⁹³

Therefore we have always held that God is the Father of his only-begotten Son, who was born of him in truth and derives from him what he is, but without any beginning.⁴⁹⁴

Eusebius, c. A.D. 325:

Whoever then defines the Son as made of things that are not, and as a creature produced from nothing pre-existing, forgets that while he concedes the name of Son, he denies him to be a Son in reality. For he that is made of nothing cannot truly be the Son of God, any more than the other things which have been made. The true Son of God, forasmuch as he is begotten of the Father, is properly denominated the only-begotten and beloved of the Father. For this reason also, he himself is God; for what can the offspring of God be but the perfect resemblance of him who begot him?⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹² *Against Praxeas*. 5.

⁴⁹³ *De Principiis*. I:2:9.

⁴⁹⁴ *ibid.* I:2:2.

⁴⁹⁵ *Against Marcellus*. As cited by *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus*. II:21.

And finally, even Athanasius, the recognized "father of orthodoxy," explains the Son in the same way, c. A.D. 350:

As the Savior says, "I in the Father and the Father in Me," so that it follows that the Word is in the One that begot him and that the One that is begotten lives eternally with the Father.⁴⁹⁶

As we read through these quotes, it almost seems as though they knew there would be an Arius and a Council of Nicea, and they prepared their defense against Arianism in advance!

The truth is that they did not prepare a defense against Arianism in advance. Instead, the bishops at Nicea achieved their goal. They based their response to Arius on the teachings of their forefathers, making the Nicene Creed a powerful, concise, and accurate summation of the apostolic faith that had been handed down since the earliest days of the church.

Note that I have only given you quotes that directly address the issue of the existence of the Son inside of God as the *Logos* of God prior to his generation before the creation of all things. There are many more passages that *imply* the eternal existence of the Son as the divine *Logos*. Nor have I given you a comprehensive list of quotes that directly address this subject.

That long list of quotes could have been much longer!

To complete our look at the Nicene term *homoousios*, we really need only address the pre-Nicene use of the terms "essence" and "substance" so that we can show that these, too were not novel at Nicea.

Pre-Nicene Reference to the Shared *Ousios* of the Father and the Son

I mentioned above that *ousios* is a reference to the "stuff" God is made of. Again, I must apologize for using such terminology. We are mere humans, and God is beyond our comprehension. Nonetheless, the pre-Nicene Christians believed that *homoousios*, the same or shared substance of divinity, was a teach-

⁴⁹⁶ *Against the Heathen*. III:47.

ing handed down to them as part of the apostolic faith. They talked about it, and they believed that the apostles wanted us to know it.

Who Are These People?

The passages I'm quoting can sound so foreign to modern ears that I'm sure many of you are wondering if these are orthodox, accepted writers I'm quoting.

They are, and everything I am quoting can be easily found online. The Christian Classic Ethereal Library,⁴⁹⁷ for instance, has all 10 volumes of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* and all 28 volumes of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series I and II, translated in the 19th century by the Church of England.

These are the fathers referred to by the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, and even the Reformers of the 16th century. These are the fathers to whom the emperor Theodosius I asked the various sects of the late fourth century to defer.⁴⁹⁸

Tertullian, quoted regularly, was the first person to use the word Trinity (*Trinitas* in Latin). Theophilus of Antioch, quoted later in this chapter, first used the Greek word *Triados* to reference the Trinity even earlier.

It is simply amazing that this wealth of information is not more freely discussed.

What is handed down to us from the apostles, Jesus' chosen messengers, is something that we can and should talk about.

Therefore, brothers, stand fast and hold onto the traditions which you have received from us, whether by word or by our letter.⁴⁹⁹

Irenaeus speaks marvelously of what God has given us to understand:

⁴⁹⁷ <<http://www.ccel.org>>.

⁴⁹⁸ Chapter 8.

⁴⁹⁹ 2 Thessalonians 2:15

Through his love and infinite kindness, [God] has come within reach of human knowledge; knowledge, however, not with regard to his greatness or with regard to his essence—for that no man has measured or handled—but after this sort: that we should know that he who made, formed, and breathed in them the breath of life, and nourishes us by means of the creation, establishing all things by his *Logos* and binding them together by His Wisdom, this is he who is the only true God.⁵⁰⁰

While we may not understand his essence, and while speaking of the "stuff" of which God is made is crude and beyond us; nonetheless, we can know that he established all things by his preexistent *Logos*, and we can know that the essence of God which is so far beyond our comprehension, is shared by the Father and the Son.

Therefore, the pre-Nicene Christians wrote these sorts of things:

Justin Martyr, c. A.D. 155:

This Power was begotten from the Father, by his power and will, but not by abscission [*i.e., cutting off*], as if the **essence** of the Father were divided.⁵⁰¹

Athenagoras, A.D. 177:

We employ language which makes a distinction between God and matter ... For we acknowledge a God and a Son, his *Logos*, and a Holy Spirit, **united in essence**.⁵⁰²

Irenaeus, c. A.D. 185:

Carefully, then, has the Holy Spirit pointed out, by what has been said, [Jesus'] birth from a virgin, and his **essence**, that he is God—for the name Emmanuel indicates this.⁵⁰³

Tertullian, c. A.D. 210:

⁵⁰⁰ *Against Heresies*. III:24:2.

⁵⁰¹ *Dialogue with Trypho*. 128.

⁵⁰² *A Plea for the Christians*. 24.

⁵⁰³ *Against Heresies*. III:21:4.

[I] derive the Son from no other source but from the **substance** of the Father.⁵⁰⁴

Clement of Alexandria, c. A.D. 190

[When First John] says, "That which was from the beginning," he touches upon the generation without beginning of the Son, who is co-existent with the Father: ... The Word itself, that is, the Son of God, who being by equality of **substance** one with the Father, is eternal and uncreated.⁵⁰⁵

Notice Clement's use of "uncreated" here. Clement is among those who applies Proverbs 8:22-31 to the Son,⁵⁰⁶ but he nonetheless calls the Son uncreated. His generation in the beginning can be called a creation, but his substance, because he has eternally existed as the *Logos* of God inside of God, is uncreated.

Origen, c. A.D. 230:

If, then, it is once rightly understood that the only-begotten Son of God is his Wisdom existing in **substance**, I do not know whether our curiosity ought to advance beyond this.⁵⁰⁷

Dionysius, c. A.D. 245:

The plant that springs from the root is something distinct from that from which it grows up. Yet it is of one nature with it. The river which flows from the spring is something distinct from the spring. For we cannot call either the river a spring, or the spring a river. Nevertheless we allow that they are both one according to nature, and also **one in substance**; and we admit that the spring may be

⁵⁰⁴ *Against Praxeas*. 4.

⁵⁰⁵ "Fragments of Clemens Alexandrius." Fragment III. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. II.

⁵⁰⁶ *Miscellanies*. VII:2.

⁵⁰⁷ *De Principiis*. I:2:1-2.

conceived of as father, and that the river is what is begotten of the spring.⁵⁰⁸

Again, these quotes are so relevant to *homoousios* that it seems that these pre-Nicene Christians foresaw the Arian Controversy and prepared for it. Of course, they did not; instead, the framers of the Nicene Creed were careful to frame their case in the wording that was handed down to them by the fathers of their faith.

The wording there, "handed down to them," is key. These bishops were not dependent on a man like Eusebius of Caesarea, a scholar and historian, to sift through the ancient writings and find quotes such as these. *These quotes exist because the teaching that the Son is the pre-existent Logos of the Father was passed down from bishop to bishop, elder to elder, and generation to generation in the catholic churches.*

Thus, the bishops at Nicea already understood these things before scholars like Eusebius of Caesarea or Sisinnius⁵⁰⁹ had to pull out the ancient scrolls. In A.D. 325, apostolic tradition⁵¹⁰ still had a somewhat firm hold upon the church.

This is what made Arius' crime so great. It was this handing down of apostolic truth that had been a foundation of Christian unity for three centuries. The church was built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,⁵¹¹ and it was the job of the elders in the church to preserve the faith unchanged, not manufacture new doctrines based on personal interpretations of Scripture.

Oh Timothy, guard what is committed to your trust, avoiding profane things and unimportant issues and the opposition of *gnosis*, falsely named.⁵¹²

⁵⁰⁸ "Of the One Substance." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. vol. VI.

⁵⁰⁹ The Novatian scholar whose advice helped put an end to the Arian Controversy in A.D. 383. See Chapter 8.

⁵¹⁰ References to apostolic tradition are found in Scripture in passages like 1 Corinthians 11:2 and 2 Thessalonians 2:15 and 3:6.

⁵¹¹ Ephesians 2:20

⁵¹² 1 Timothy 6:20. Paul was specifically referring to gnosticism in that verse, which he calls *pseudonymos*, a pseudonym.

Hold the pattern of healthy words which you heard from me in faith and love, which is in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposited with you by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.⁵¹³

Apostolic Tradition and Apostolic Succession

Apostolic succession will be discussed directly in Chapter 18, but we should touch on it here.

Apostolic succession, in the pre-Nicene writers, was simply a means to preserve apostolic tradition. If the bishops and elders have lost the apostolic tradition, then there is no succession. Succession was never said by the earliest Christians to convey authority. Yes, bishops and elders had authority, but that was given to them by the election of the people and the approval of the rest of the elders.

Succession was never a **teaching** addressed to the church; it was an **argument** addressed to heretics. The question was, do the catholic churches teach the truth as it was sent from heaven? Their answer was, yes, we have a succession from God to Jesus to the apostles to the elders they appointed and, finally, to the elders who succeeded them. These have faithfully preserved the truth as it was given to us from the apostles.

*We refer [the gnostics] to that tradition which originates from the apostles, which is preserved by means of the succession of elders in the churches.*⁵¹⁴

A Different Foundation

It is of note that all the major players of the early Arian Controversy were trained in the school of Lucian. As Tertullian pointed out, "No casualty distributed among men results in one and the same result." Eusebius of Nicomedia, Theognis of Nicea, and Arius were in agreement against the tradition of the apostles because of a common source, the late third-century school of Lucian in Antioch.

⁵¹³ 2 Timothy 1:13-14

⁵¹⁴ Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. III:2:2.

Saint(?) Lucian?

Believe it or not, despite the fact that Lucian and his school were excommunicated for between 16 and 35 years, he is honored as a martyr by the Roman Catholic Church and referred to as a saint by the Orthodox Churches. He had been reinstated at the beginning of the Great Persecution and was martyred a year after it was supposed to end.

There is no record of what Lucian taught or why he was out of fellowship with the church of Antioch for between 15 and 35 years. He is only mentioned in passing by those who were taught by him, though his writings on the interpretation of Scripture and his work on the text of the Septuagint left him held in the highest regard by men like Eusebius of Caesarea and Jerome.

Even good men can produce bad things if they divide and do not hold firmly to the source, which would explain why Paul emphasized to Timothy that he must guard what was committed to him.⁵¹⁵

Lucian may or may not have been a great teacher, but, as Irenaeus put it a century before Lucian's time:

Nor will any one of the rulers in the churches, however gifted he may be in point of eloquence, teach doctrines different from these, for no one is greater than his Master. ... Because the faith is ever one and the same ... one who is able at great length to discourse regarding it does not make any addition to it.⁵¹⁶

To drive the point home even further, he adds:

⁵¹⁵ I have been asked repeatedly by Roman Catholics why, if I believe in holding firmly to "the source," I have not returned to "mother church." The reason is that the Roman church is not "mother church." The independent apostolic churches maintained a unity that was based on apostolic tradition and obedience to the teachings of Christ. (Chapter 15.) I live in Selmer, Tennessee. If the church in Rome will hold to apostolic tradition, then the church in Selmer will be in fellowship and mutual submission with them. But submitting to a bishop in another country has nothing to do with anything the apostles taught.

More on Roman Catholicism in Chapter 18.

⁵¹⁶ *Against Heresies*. I:10:2.

It does not follow that because men are endowed with greater and less degrees of intelligence that they should therefore change the subject matter of the faith itself.⁵¹⁷

The Arian Controversy found its wellspring in Lucian's teaching, not in the apostle's teaching, and it found its power in the divisive, self-confident attitude of Arius and of Eusebius of Nicomedia.

Scriptural Sources for *Homoousios*

Everything the apostles taught the church was based in the Hebrew Scriptures and the teaching of Christ. The letters of the apostles are laced with scriptural quotations to justify their position.

But *the apostolic teaching could be proven from Scripture; its source was not Scripture, but Jesus Christ himself.*⁵¹⁸

No apostle or any other man properly predicted the coming of Christ before our Lord came. There were those who recognized and believed in him, but there were none who properly understood the prophecies before he came.

Just as no one was ever able to come up with an accurate picture of the coming Messiah from the Scriptures, so no one was going to come up with an accurate picture of the generation of the Son in the beginning until he came. After he came, John would provide us the clearest description of the Son as *homoousios* with the Father.

John 1:1

In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was divine. This one was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him nothing was made that was made. (Jn. 1:1-3)

I have written "the *Logos* was divine" here rather than "the *Logos* was God," for a reason.

⁵¹⁷ *ibid.* I:10:3.

⁵¹⁸ John 5:39-40. Matthew 5:17-48.

The following exposition of John 1:1 could easily be a highly emotional issue. Thank God for the internet! At *Resources for Learning New Testament Greek* on the web⁵¹⁹ is a scholarly exposition of John 1:1 saying exactly what I'm saying here, and he is kind enough to give numerous mainstream Protestant sources for it.

These include, and I'm quoting with copy and paste: "Daniel Wallace ('Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics'), A.T. Robertson (both his 'Grammar' and 'Word Pictures'), R.C.H. Lenski (in his commentary on the Gospel of John), Henry Alford ('Greek Testament'), J.A. Bengel ('Word Studies'), Albert Barnes ('Barnes' Notes'), B.F. Westcott, and F.L. Godet, (and many others)."

The point is that what I'm saying here about John 1:1 may not be widely known, but it is not controversial, neither to Protestant nor to Roman Catholic scholars.

In a sentence like the last part of John 1:1, "Θεὸς ἦν ὁ Λόγος"—literally, "God is the Word"—Greek speakers would indicate the subject of the sentence by putting the word "the" in front of it. In this sentence, it is *Logos* that is preceded by "the."

The other noun is then roughly the equivalent of an adjective.

Because of this, my first year Greek teacher⁵²⁰ explained that John 1:1 could best be translated, "The Word has the character and nature of God," or, "The Word is exactly like God." I have since read several other scholarly discussions on John 1:1, all of them, without exception, agreeing that the sense of the sentence is that the Word is exactly similar to God.

My thought is, why bother with all those words when we have a word that exactly suits that purpose: "divine"?

⁵¹⁹ *Learning New Testament Greek*. <http://www.ntgreek.org/answers/answer-frame-john1_1.htm>.

⁵²⁰ I've only had one year of Greek, which I took from a college professor at a large Assembly of God church. My claim to fame in Greek is that I read the excellent book *Do It Yourself Hebrew and Greek* by Professor Ed Goodrick. Thus, I learned that I should never trust my limited Greek and always lean on those who know more than me, a practice I've been careful to follow throughout this book.

The web site I reference in the text box above suggests an even more interesting word to use in that sentence, one with which we are already familiar. He explains that this verse says that the Word has the same "essence" and "nature" as God.

This is exactly how the pre-Nicene Christians understood John 1:1:

When God wished to make all that he determined, he begot this *Logos* ... Hence the holy Scriptures teach us, as well as all the Spirit-bearing men, one of whom, John, says, "In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God," showing that at the first God was alone and the *Logos* in him. Then he says, "The *Logos* was God."⁵²¹

Proverbs 8:22-31

Since almost all pre-Nicene Christians read Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, I am going to cite Proverbs 8:22-31 from an English translation of the Septuagint.

The Lord made me the beginning of his ways for his works. He established me before time was in the beginning, before he made the earth: even before he made the depths; before the fountains of water came forth: before the mountains were settled, and before all hills, he begets me. The Lord made countries and uninhabited tracks, and the highest inhabited parts of the world. When he prepared the heaven, I was present with him; and when he prepared his throne upon the winds: and when he strengthened the clouds above; and when he secured the fountains of the earth: and when he strengthened the foundations of the earth: I was by him, suiting myself to him, I was that wherein he took delight; and daily I rejoiced in his presence continually. For he rejoiced when

⁵²¹ Theophilus. *To Autolytus*. II:22. c. A.D. 168. That last sentence could be translated "The *Logos* was divine" because Theophilus is directly quoting John 1:1 in Greek.

he had completed the world, and rejoiced among the children of men.⁵²²

It's easy to see that if you were a pre-Nicene Christian, taught that the Son of God was the pre-existent *Logos*, birthed by the Father before time began, that this passage of Scripture would leap out at you as clearly indicative of the eternal generation of the Son of God and the subsequent creation of the world.

It leaps out at us today, too, but we're not really allowed to believe it's a prophecy of Christ—because Arius used it.

We have overreacted to Arius. We have thrown out the baby with the bathwater.

Even Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria who excommunicated Arius, applies Proverbs 8 to the Son of God, though we find him quoting from a little further down in the passage in a letter to the bishop of Constantinople, also named Alexander:

Since the Son is always with him, the Father is always perfect ... who ... has begotten his only-begotten Son. How, then, is it not impious to say that the Wisdom of God once did not exist, when it speaks in this way concerning itself: "I was with him forming all things; I was his delight" [*Prov. 8:30*].⁵²³

Justin Martyr is the earliest known writer to use Proverbs 8:22, writing between A.D. 150 and 160. He applies it to convince some Jews, with whom he is debating, that the one God has an only-begotten Son:

It is written in the book of Wisdom: " ... The Lord created me the beginning of his ways for his works. From everlasting he established me in the beginning, before he formed the earth, before He made the depths, before the springs of waters came forth, and before the mountains were settled. He begets me before all the hills." When I repeated these words, I added: "You perceive, my hearers, if you pay attention, that the Scripture has declared

⁵²² Brenton. *English Translation of the Greek Septuagint Bible*.

⁵²³ Alexander of Alexandria. "Epistles on the Arian Heresy and on the Deposition of Arius." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. vol. VI.

that this Offspring was begotten by the Father before all things created."⁵²⁴

A Little More Foreign Grammar

Nowadays we struggle with identifying Jesus with Wisdom of Proverbs, despite the obvious similarities, because Wisdom is identified as a she.

Struggle no more!

In English, he and she indicate sex. I'm a male, and you call me "him." My wife's a female, and you call her "her." My house is an object, so I call it "it."

It's not so simple in Hebrew, Greek, German, Spanish, or most other languages. In German, for example, my coffee cup is a she. The coffee in it is a he. My car is an it, but only if I call it "*Auto*." If I call it "*Wagen*," another German word for car, then it's he. Worse yet, that *Fräulein* you see in the movies is also an it! (Or, at least, until the last few decades she was.)

Most languages are like that. Their pronouns indicate gender, not sex. Why that is, I don't know. As an American, it seems pointless to me. But it's real.

Thus, Wisdom in Proverbs is only called "she" because the Hebrew word *chokmah* is feminine. So is the Greek word *Sophia*. The use of "she" in Proverbs has nothing whatsoever to do with Wisdom actually being a woman. It's simply the nature of the language.

Some 30 years later, Irenaeus uses Proverbs 8:22 in his refutation of the gnostics, although he applies the passage to the Holy Spirit:

I have ... demonstrated that the *Logos*, namely the Son, was always with the Father, and that Wisdom also, which is the Spirit, was present with him before all creation. He declares by Solomon: ... "The Lord created me the beginning of his ways in his work. He set me up from everlasting, in the beginning, before he made the earth."

⁵²⁴ *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*. 129.

... There is therefore one God, who by the *Logos* and Wisdom created and arranged all things.⁵²⁵

The editors of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* add a note that says, "This is one of the favourite Messianic quotations of the Fathers, and is considered the base of the first chapter of St. John's Gospel."⁵²⁶

They're right. Early Christians consistently applied Proverbs 8 to the birth of the *Logos* in the beginning:

Theophilus, seventh bishop of Antioch, c. A.D. 168:

For the prophets did not exist when the world came into existence, but the wisdom of God which was in him and his holy *Logos*, which was always present with Him. Therefore he speaks in this way by the prophet Solomon: "When he prepared the heavens I was there, and when he appointed the foundations of the earth I was with him, putting things in order" [*Prov. 8:27*].⁵²⁷

Athenagoras, A.D. 177:

The Son of God is the *Logos* of the Father ... But if ... 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, had the *Logos* in himself, being from eternity instinct with *Logos* ... The prophetic Spirit also agrees with our statements: "The Lord," it says, "made me the beginning of his ways to his works" [*Prov. 8:22*].⁵²⁸

Clement of Alexandria, c. A.D. 190:

Ignorance does not apply to the God who before the foundation of the world was the Counselor of the Father. For he was the Wisdom in which the sovereign God "delighted" [*Prov. 8:30*]. For the Son is the Power of God, as

⁵²⁵ *Against Heresies*. V:20:4.

⁵²⁶ Note 4074.

⁵²⁷ *To Autolycus*. II:10.

⁵²⁸ *A Plea for the Christians*. 10.

being the Father's most ancient Word before the production of all things, and his Wisdom.⁵²⁹

Cyprian, c. A.D. 255:

This passage from Cyprian uses an interesting convention. Cyprian provides headings, and then he simply lines up Scripture under the headings.

"That Christ is the firstborn and that he is the Wisdom of God by whom all things were made:"

Solomon in the Proverbs: "The Lord established me in the beginning of His ways, into His works: before the world He founded me ... " [Cyprian gives all of Prov. 8:22-31, then lists other Scriptures].⁵³⁰

Dionysius of Alexandria, c. A.D. 260:

Being the brightness of the eternal Light, [the Son] himself also is absolutely eternal. ...He is that Wisdom which says, "I was the one in whom he delighted, and I was daily his delight before his face at all times" [Prov. 8:30].⁵³¹

Athanasius, c. A.D. 350:

One comment on the quote that follows. Athanasius says in his Defense of the Nicene Definition that the Arians use Proverbs 8:22 to say that the Son was created. From about A.D. 350 on, Athanasius takes the position that Proverbs 8:22 applies to the Son only when he's born on the earth. On the other hand, he uses Proverbs 8:25 and 8:27 to apply to the generation of the Son before the beginning.

I quote Athanasius, who is considered "the father of orthodoxy" by modern Christians, to show that even Athanasius, with all his reactions to Arianism, stated clearly that homoousios is a reference to the fact that the Son was the Father's Word, generated before the beginning.

Who was with him when he made all created existence, except his Wisdom, who says, "When he was making the

⁵²⁹ *Miscellanies*. VII:2.

⁵³⁰ *Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews*. II:1.

⁵³¹ "Letter to Dionysius, Bishop of Rome." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. VI.

heaven and the earth, I was present with him"? [*Prov.* 8:27]. ... Being present with him as his Wisdom and his Word, looking at the Father, he fashioned the universe ... being the good Offspring of him who is good and true Son, he is the Father's Power and Wisdom and Word ... To sum all up, he is the wholly perfect fruit of the Father and is alone the Son.⁵³²

Of the Son [divine Scripture] introduces not another, but the Father himself, saying, "I have begotten you from the womb before the morning star" [*Ps.* 110:3, LXX⁵³³], and again, "You are my Son, this day have I begotten you" [*Ps.* 2:7]; and the Lord says of himself in Proverbs, "Before all the hills, he begets me" [*Prov.* 8:25].⁵³⁴

Is it really acceptable that we have not had these things explained to us? It has taken me many pages to explain, but that is only because I have had to justify it with many quotes. The description of the generation of the Son in the beginning could be done in a paragraph or two.

Instead, we have replaced it with assertions that the doctrine of the Trinity had to be carefully developed after Nicea by bishops whose congregations were the entire population of a city, whose positions were as political as they were ecclesiastical, and who could not claim to have apostolic teaching directly delivered to them. They were almost as reliant on the writings of the fathers before them as we are.

Worse, the "developed" doctrine of the Trinity is confined to theological seminaries, requiring an exact knowledge of persons, natures, and the one essence of God expressed in terms like *hypostasis* and *ousios*. How much simpler—and more Scriptural!—to simply say that God was able to beget his Wisdom in the beginning, before the creation, and through that Son, his Wisdom and Word, he created all things?

⁵³² *Against the Heathen.* III:47.

⁵³³ LXX is short for Septuagint. Both terms suggest the number 70, which was believed to be the number of Jewish scholars who translated the Septuagint.

⁵³⁴ *Defense of the Nicene Definition.* 13.

What's the Septuagint?

The text most commonly used for the Old Testament of our English Bibles is called the *Masoretic* text. It was carefully preserved by Jewish scribes, known as *Masoretes*, for centuries.

It might seem that the Masoretic text would be more reliable because it is Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, whereas the Septuagint is a translation. That is not necessarily so.

*The Septuagint ... is a version of a Hebrew text earlier by about a millennium than the earliest dated Hebrew manuscript extant ... a version, in particular, prior to the formal rabbinical revision of the Hebrew that took place early in the 2nd century A.D.*⁵³⁵

Thus, the Septuagint, though a translation, represents a more ancient textual tradition.

It was hoped that the Dead Sea Scrolls would solve the debate between which is preferable, but they raised as many questions as they answered.⁵³⁶

Psalm 45:1

Psalm 45 was another favorite of the early Christians. In the LXX⁵³⁷ it read:

My heart has brought forth a good Word.⁵³⁸

Again, this passage leaped out at the early Christians. Psalm 45 is a Messianic Psalm anyway; verses six and seven are quoted in Hebrews. (If you don't know, understand, and practice verses 10 and 11, then you're missing out on a great blessing.)

⁵³⁵ Thackeray, H. St. J. "Septuagint." *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

⁵³⁶ Sussman, Ayala & Peled, Ruth. "The Dead Sea Scrolls." *Jewish Virtual Library*. Sussman and Peled are the authors of *Scrolls from the Dead Sea*. Library of Congress, 1993.

⁵³⁷ Short for Septuagint.

⁵³⁸ Brenton. *English Translation of the Greek Septuagint Bible*.

Psalm 45:1 is quoted extensively in the early Christian writings. Both Justin Martyr and Cyprian used it to convince Jews, as though they had some confidence that this verse would mean something to them. Jews of that day would have interpreted the Scriptures somewhat symbolically, just as Christians of that day did, so it's likely that this verse was effective with them.

Psalm 110:3

Psalm 110:3 is another that only applies in the Septuagint.

I have begotten you from the womb before the morning star.⁵³⁹

This passage was employed by Alexander, bishop of Alexandria in his letter explaining the excommunication of Arius:

How can [the Son] be made of things which do not exist, when the Father says, "My heart has dictated a good Word" [Ps. 45:1] and, "From the womb, before the morning, I have begotten you"? [Ps. 110:3].⁵⁴⁰

Athanasius, too, the "father of orthodoxy," was still using Psalm 110:3 in A.D. 350:

Of the Son [divine Scripture] introduces not another, but the Father himself, saying, "I have begotten you from the womb before the morning star" [Ps. 110:3, LXX], and again, "You are my Son, this day have I begotten you" [Ps. 2:7]; and the Lord says of himself in Proverbs, "Before all the hills, he begets me" [Prov. 8:25].⁵⁴¹

Miscellaneous Verses

Pre-Nicene Christians were masters at putting the Scriptures to good use. They found passages we never consider. For example, this one, having to do with his being born as man rather than

⁵³⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁴⁰ "Epistle Catholic." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. vol. VI.

⁵⁴¹ *Defense of the Nicene Definition*. 13.

his generation before the beginning, is in our Hebrew Bibles as well as the Septuagint:

Binding his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washed his garments in wine and his clothes in the blood of grapes.⁵⁴²

What a terrific prophecy of Jesus' work on earth! Who washes their garments in wine? Who washes their clothes in grape juice?

This passage is a bizarre description of laundering, but it is an excellent picture of the cleansing blood of Christ which washes us and makes our robes, representative of our righteousness,⁵⁴³ white.

Perhaps because they lived so close to the time that Jesus expounded the Scriptures concerning himself on the road to Emmaus,⁵⁴⁴ their repertoire of prophecies from the Old Testament Scriptures were much greater than ours today. (Everyone should avail themselves of Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*⁵⁴⁵ for the most extensive collection of old covenant verses about Christ ever put together.)

Alexander's letter explaining the excommunication of Arius by over 100 Egyptian and Libyan bishops provides a taste of the many verses that provide a picture of the generation of the *Logos* before the beginning:

Who that hears John saying, "In the beginning was the Word" [*Jn. 1:1*], does not condemn those that say, "There was a period when the Word was not"? Or who, hearing in the Gospel of "the only-begotten Son" and that "all things were made by him," [*Jn. 3:16; Jn. 1:3*] will not abhor those that pronounce the Son to be one of the things made?

How can he be one of the things which were made by himself? Or how can he be the only-begotten, if he is

⁵⁴² Genesis 49:11

⁵⁴³ Revelation 19:8

⁵⁴⁴ Luke 24:27

⁵⁴⁵ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. vol. I. Available for free to read or a nominal price to download on the web at <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers/>>.

reckoned among created things? And how could he have derived his existence from nonentities when the Father has said, "My heart has dictated a good Word," and, "I begat thee out of my bosom before the dawn"? [*Ps.* 45:1; 110:3, LXX]. Or how is he unlike the Father's essence, who is "his perfect image" and "the brightness of his glory" and says, "He that has seen me has seen the Father"? [*Col.* 1:15; *Heb.* 1:3; *Jn.* 14:9].

Again how, if the Son is the Word and Wisdom of God, was there a period when he did not exist? For that is equivalent to their saying that God was once destitute both of Word and Wisdom.

How can he be mutable and susceptible to change when he says of himself, "I am in the Father, and the Father in me," and, "I and the Father are one"? [*Jn.* 14:10; *Jn.* 10:30]. And again by the prophet, [he says], "Behold me because I am, and have not changed" [*Mal.* 3:6]. But if any one may also apply the expression to the Father himself, yet would it now be even more fitly said of the Word because he was not changed by having become man, but as the apostle says, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever" [*Heb.* 13:8].

But what could persuade them to say that he was made on our account, when Paul has expressly declared that "all things are for him, and by him"? [*Heb.* 2:10]. One need not wonder indeed at their blasphemous assertion that the Son does not perfectly know the Father; for ... they reject even the words of the Lord himself, when he says, "As the Father knows me, even so I know the Father" [*Jn.* 10:15].⁵⁴⁶

We have thoroughly covered the idea of *homoousios* and its relation to the "Logos-doctrine" in early Christianity. We've also looked at some of the verses they used. Let us turn now to the one God and the "heresy" of subordinationism.

⁵⁴⁶ *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus.* I:6.

Chapter 17:

The Trinity at Nicea

We have already had an in-depth introduction to the Trinity in early Christian thought in the last chapter. That will save us a lot of time in this chapter!

I commend you for making it this far. If you skipped here to see what I have to say on the Trinity, you skipped one chapter too far. The chapter on *homoousios* contains the most important information on the pre-Nicene and Nicene view of the Trinity.

One God, the Scriptures, and the Jehovah's Witnesses

The Jehovah's Witnesses have at least one unique accomplishment. They are the only significant sect to revive and perpetuate the Arian heresy in the history of the church.

They appear to have adopted the Arian heresy exactly as it came from the mouth of Arius. Their main headquarters, the Watchtower, writes:

Thus, Jesus had an existence in heaven before coming to the earth. But was it as one of the persons in an almighty, eternal triune Godhead? No, for the Bible plainly states that in his prehuman existence, Jesus was a created spirit being, just as angels were spirit beings created by God.

Neither the angels nor Jesus had existed before their creation.⁵⁴⁷

So we see that like Arius, the Jehovah's Witnesses teach that before he was created by the Father, the Son did not exist. In fact, they may go further than Arius because "created" is their preferred term for the generation of the Son in the beginning. They don't appear even to have heard of the idea that the Son was "generated" or "begotten" in the beginning.

They defend their view by appealing to the same Scriptures that we looked at in the last chapter, verses that modern Christians no longer understand because we no longer understand the faith that was promulgated and triumphed at the Council of Nicea.

If you have read this entire book to this point—or even if you have only read Chapter 16—you understand the true meaning of the verses that Jehovah's Witnesses throw at mainstream Christians. Since almost no one else does, however, the Watchtower uses those verses, combined with quotes—and misquotes—from the early church fathers, to produce a plausible and confusing defense of their monotheism.

I have obtained the following quotes from *Watchtower: Official Website of the Jehovah's Witnesses* at watchtower.org. Because I want you to see how comfortably Scriptural the faith of the Nicene Christians is, I ask you to read these slowly and consider how easily the Council of Nicea would have addressed these Scriptures, but what anguish they might cause to modern Christians.

From "Who Is 'the Only True God'":⁵⁴⁸

Jesus petitioned: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your son, that your son may glorify you. This means everlasting life, their taking in knowledge of you, the only true

⁵⁴⁷ "What Does the Bible Say About God and Jesus." *Watchtower*. Accessed Feb. 15, 2011 <http://www.watchtower.org/e/ti/article_05.htm>.

⁵⁴⁸ "Who is 'the Only True God.'" *Watchtower*. Accessed Feb. 15, 2011 <http://www.watchtower.org/e/20050422/article_02.htm>. Parentheses theirs.

God, and of the one whom you sent forth, Jesus Christ."—John 17:1, 3.⁵⁴⁹

Notice that Jesus prays to One whom he calls "the only true God." He points to God's superior position when he continues: "So now you, Father, glorify me alongside yourself with the glory that I had alongside you before the world was." (John 17:5) Since Jesus prayed to God requesting to be alongside God, how could Jesus at the same time be "the only true God"?

"This Jesus God resurrected," the apostle Peter reports, "of which fact we are all witnesses." (Acts 2:31, 32) Could Jesus have resurrected himself?

For example, Jehovah is "from everlasting to everlasting." But the Bible says that Jesus is "the firstborn of every creature." That Jehovah is greater than Jesus, Jesus himself taught when he said: "My Father is greater than I." (Matthew 6:9; Psalm 90:1, 2; Colossians 1:15; John 14:28, King James Version) Yet, the Trinity doctrine holds that the Father and the Son are "equally God."

From "Those Who Are Called 'Gods'":⁵⁵⁰

Consider how John identified "the Word" in the first chapter of his Gospel. "The Word became flesh and resided among us," he wrote, "and we had a view of his glory, a glory such as belongs [not to God but] to an only-begotten son from a father." So "the Word," who became flesh, lived on the earth as the man Jesus and was seen by people. Therefore, he could not have been Almighty God, regarding whom John says: "No man has seen God at any time."—John 1:14, 18.

From "Is Jesus Almighty God?":⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁹ Unless otherwise referenced, their Scripture quotes are from *The New World Translation*, their own translation of the Bible.

⁵⁵⁰ "Those Who Are Called 'Gods.'" *Watchtower*. Accessed Feb. 15, 2011 <http://www.watchtower.org/e/20050422/article_03.htm>.

⁵⁵¹ "Is Jesus Almighty God." *Watchtower*. Accessed Feb. 15, 2011 <http://www.watchtower.org/e/20090201/article_04.htm>. Parentheses theirs.

"If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going my way to the Father, because the Father is greater than I am." (John 14:28) Jesus acknowledged that he and his Father are not equals.

Even after his death and resurrection, Jesus is described in the Bible as being subordinate to God. The apostle Paul reminds us that "God is supreme over Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:3, Today's English Version)

The Jehovah's Witnesses have naturally tailored their arguments to what they know will be most effective among Christians. Of course, they have to ignore many passages of Scripture to hold the Arian view, but they are keenly aware of the passages that modern Christians have to ignore as well. John 17:3 does not fit well into modern Trinitarian doctrine!

This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

Of course, neither does the Nicene Creed ...

The Nicene Creed and One God

At the heart of the Nicene Creed⁵⁵² is the threefold statement of belief:

We believe in one God, the Father ... and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God ... also in the Holy Spirit.

That is the basic outline. The rest is explanatory.

Notice that the one God, according to the Nicene Creed, is the Father. Jesus is the one Lord and the Son of God, and nothing at all is said about the Holy Spirit except that he exists. (Sorting out early Christian opinion on the Holy Spirit is very hard work, and I am glad that nothing about the Council of Nicea obligates me to do that in this book!)

Of course, the fact that the Nicene Creed says that the one God is the Father does not shoot down the modern understanding of the Trinity. It doesn't even prove that the modern understand-

⁵⁵² Appendix G.

ing of the Trinity is different than the Nicene understanding. All educated modern Christians know, for example, that most of Paul's letters begin with a blessing "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

So we all know that the Bible occasionally applies the title "God" to the Father only. In fact, 1 Corinthians 8:6 uses almost exactly the same words as the Nicene Creed:

But for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we for him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him.

Modern Christians know this kind of Biblical terminology, and we accept it. That is not the issue. The issue is whether we would dare use the same terminology.

My Intended Audience

I need to point out here that I am addressing my words to those that hold the same belief as the early Christians concerning the Scriptures and the apostles. To the early Christians the Scriptures were fully inspired and fully authoritative. You did not disagree with the Scriptures, you learned from them.

It is true that the Nicene, and even the pre-Nicene, Christians honored apostolic tradition, but they never believed apostolic tradition to contradict the Scriptures. The apostles were taught the Old Covenant Scriptures by Jesus, then they wrote the New Covenant Scriptures. Therefore, it is impossible that tradition that is truly apostolic would contradict the Bible.

For those that freely disagree with the Bible, the words in this chapter are not addressed to you. You may perhaps benefit from them as a historical curiosity, but I am writing as though I am addressing those who consider the Scriptures inspired and the apostles sent from God.

Would we dare say in our churches (for which churches I'm referencing see the text box above) that the Father is the one true God? Jesus said it. Would we dare teach that we have only one God and that that God is the Father? Paul taught it.

I believe that if we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we have adopted a view of the Trinity that is different from

Nicea. We would never write a creed that says, "We believe in one God, the Father, and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit." That simply is not the terminology we would use.

Instead, we would use something closer to what is known as the Athanasian Creed, which Athanasius did not write, but dates to somewhere around the end of his life in A.D. 360 or later. I am quoting just portions of it here because it is quite long.⁵⁵³

We worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity ...
The Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Spirit Almighty. Yet there are not three Almighties, but one Almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three Gods, but one God

No wonder the Trinity is so confusing to people! Is this anything like the wonderfully clear explanations of the pre-Nicene Christians that we've been reading about?

Is there anything in Scripture resembling the terminology we see here in the Athanasian Creed?

The Nicene Creed and the doctrine of the pre-Nicene churches—with its one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ—find their match in every greeting of Paul's letters, in 1 Corinthians 8:6, in John 17:3, and in dozens of other places.

Our terminology, on the other hand—that there is one God, the Father, Son, and Spirit—finds no corresponding terminology in the Bible at all.

But is my description true? Do modern churches really say something closer to the Athanasian Creed than the Nicene Creed?

The Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination in the United States, with 68 million members, according to the National Council of Churches.⁵⁵⁴ The Nicene Creed in the

⁵⁵³ You can read the entire creed at my web site, *Christian History for Everyman*. <<http://www.christian-history.org/athanasian-creed.html>>.

⁵⁵⁴ Jenks, Philip E. "Catholics, Mormons, Assemblies of God growing; Main-line churches report a continuing decline." 12 Feb. 2010. *National Council of*

version known as the Nicaeano-Constantinopolitanum Creed⁵⁵⁵ is still the official creed of the Roman Catholics. Nonetheless, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* article on "The Dogma of the Trinity" appeals first to the Athanasian Creed:

The Trinity is the term employed to signify the central doctrine of the Christian religion — the truth that in the unity of the Godhead there are Three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, these Three Persons being truly distinct one from another.

Thus, in the words of the Athanasian Creed: "the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God."⁵⁵⁶

Southern Baptist Convention:

The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest non-Catholic denomination in the U.S. with more than 16 million members. Its official website says:

The eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.⁵⁵⁷

United Methodist Church:

The United Methodist Church is third largest denomination. It's official website says:

We describe God in three persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are commonly used to refer to the threefold nature

Churches. Accessed 4 Apr. 2011.

<<http://www.nccusa.org/news/100204yearbook2010.html>>.

⁵⁵⁵ Appendix G.

⁵⁵⁶ Joyce, George. "The Blessed Trinity." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Accessed 15 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15047a.htm>>.

⁵⁵⁷ "The Baptist Faith and Message." *sbcnet*. Southern Baptist Convention. 1999-2011. Accessed 15 Feb., 2011 <<http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>>.

of God. Sometimes we use other terms, such as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.⁵⁵⁸

Church of God in Christ:

The Church of God in Christ is the fourth-largest denomination.⁵⁵⁹ Their main web site says:

We believe that there is only One God, eternally existent in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶⁰

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the sixth-largest denomination,⁵⁶¹ begins their "Statements of Belief" with:

Lutherans believe in the Triune God.⁵⁶²

The Assemblies of God:

The Assemblies of God, The USA's eighth-largest denomination, lists 16 "nonnegotiable tenets of faith" on their official website. Their explanation of the second—"There is only One True God—revealed in three persons...Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"—says:

⁵⁵⁸ "Our Christian Roots." *The People of the United Methodist Church*. United Methodist Communications. 2006-11. Accessed 15 Feb. 2011 <http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.2299859/k.13B7/Our_Christian_Roots.htm>.

⁵⁵⁹ I ignored the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) on the National Council of Church's list because they openly reject the faith embraced by Nicea.

⁵⁶⁰ "Statement of Faith." *Church of God in Christ*. Church of God in Christ, Inc. 2001-09. Accessed 15 Feb., 2011 <<http://cogic.net/cogiccms/default/cogic-history/statement-of-faith/>>.

⁵⁶¹ I skipped the fifth and seventh-largest because they were both Baptists, and we've already addressed Baptists in the second-largest denomination.

⁵⁶² "Statements of Belief." *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. Accessed 4 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Statements-of-Belief.aspx>>.

We therefore may speak with propriety of the Lord our God who is One Lord, as a trinity or as one Being of three persons.⁵⁶³

If we have not changed the faith confirmed at Nicea, then why have we changed the terminology?

It's not that I have a great problem with these statements of faith, but ...

- if the Council of Nicea confirmed the faith of their forefathers;
- and, if their forefathers received that faith from the apostles;
- and, if their terminology is much closer to Scripture than ours ...

then shouldn't we be saying what they say?

The One God in Scripture and Pre-Nicene Christianity

What exactly did the early Christians say? Was the Nicene Creed's terminology really normative? Do the verses quoted above by the Jehovah's Witnesses really represent the way early Christians—and, more importantly, the apostles—spoke on a regular basis?

Let's find out.

To begin with, let's look at Tertullian's *Against Praxeas*, written around A.D. 210. Tertullian found Nicene terminology typical enough to offer an explanation for it! (He is, of course, not referring to the Nicene Creed itself, since it would not be written for more than a century.)

I shall follow the apostle [Paul], so that if the Father and the Son are alike to be invoked, I shall call the Father "God" and invoke Jesus Christ as "Lord."

⁵⁶³ "Fundamental Truths (Condensed Statement)." *Assemblies of God USA*. General Council of the Assembly of God. 2010. Accessed Feb. 15, 2011 <http://www.ag.org/top/beliefs/statement_of_fundamental_truths/sft_short.cfm>.

But when Christ alone [is invoked], I shall be able to call him "God." As the same apostle says, "Of whom is Christ, who is over all, God blessed forever" [*Rom. 9:5*].

For I should give the name of "sun" even to a sunbeam, considered by itself. But if I were mentioning the sun from which the ray emanates, I would certainly withdraw the name of sun from the mere beam. For although I do not make two suns, still I shall reckon both the sun and its ray to be as much two things—and two forms of one undivided substance—as God and his Word, as the Father and the Son.⁵⁶⁴

Tertullian seems to think that the apostles, or at least the apostle Paul, only called Jesus God when the Father is not being discussed along with him. Is this true?

If you're familiar with the Scriptures, you probably don't need me to tell you it's true. You already know. But let's give you some statistics:

For the following chart, I am using only the books from Acts to the Revelation. It seemed irrelevant to reference the Gospels because Jesus, the Son, was doing so much of the speaking.

- The Father is referred to as God in a verse where Jesus is also mentioned—and not called God—42 times.
- Jesus is referred to as God in a verse where the Father is also mentioned—and also called God—1 time.⁵⁶⁵
- God is used in such a way as to clearly indicate a reference to all three persons of the Trinity 0 times.
- Jesus is called God in a verse where the Father is *not* mentioned at least seven times.⁵⁶⁶

I'm not sure how accurate that last number is. I couldn't figure out how to do a search that would ensure that I didn't miss a place where Jesus is called God. The exact number won't matter, because seven is enough to establish that it's not unusual to call Je-

⁵⁶⁴ *Against Praxeas*. 13.

⁵⁶⁵ Hebrews 1:8-9

⁵⁶⁶ Matthew 1:23; John 1:1; 10:33; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8

sus God ... at least as long as the Father isn't being mentioned with him.

These numbers make it abundantly clear that Tertullian is correct. When the Father and Son are named together, the Father is *usually* referred to as God, whereas the Son is only once referred to as God when the Father is mentioned as well. Even then, the Father is called Jesus' God in that verse.

Which leads me to ask: In all the studies of the Trinity that have been published since the printing press has been invented, is it really true that no one has noticed these things? While scholars and historians were publishing careful definitions of *hypostasis*, *ousios*, and *homoios* did they really not notice that the Nicene Creed calls the Father the one God and we don't? Did they really never run across Tertullian's explanation of the reason for that?

I can't help but feel that it's dishonest to point out that Tertullian was the first early Christian writer to use the term Trinity, but then never to tell us what he meant by the term!

Worse, it's larceny! We have been robbed of a closer, easier relationship with the Scriptures and a better understanding of God, within the context he's been revealed to us! We're not overstepping our bounds in understanding God more fully this way; instead, we are holding more closely to "the faith once for all delivered to the saints."⁵⁶⁷

The One God and the Son in the Pre-Nicene Churches

We have already thoroughly covered the generation of the Son in eternity past.⁵⁶⁸ We do not need to go over the early Christian quotes one more time.

It would be good, however, to review their explanation of the relationship between the Father and the Son because it will help nail down the reason that the Father is called the one God in the Nicene Creed and in pre-Nicene terminology.

This is a review. The quotations supporting what I am about to describe were given in Chapter 16. We will look at a number

⁵⁶⁷ Jude 3

⁵⁶⁸ Chapter 16

of other references further in this chapter. There will be no shortage of evidence and elaboration for what follows.

The Pre-Nicene Explanation of the Trinity

In the beginning, God was alone in the sense that there was nothing outside of him. Inside of him, however, was the *Logos*—his reason, thought, or word. When he was ready to create all things, he birthed his *Logos* in some manner that we cannot comprehend.

There is not a separation between the two, for the divine substance fills all things. Instead, the *Logos* became distinct from God, his Father, in the way that a stream issues from a spring or a beam of light from the Sun. The substance is not divided. There is only one divine substance, and the Son of God shares that substance with the Father.

Just because the one God has a Son, produced from his divine essence, does not mean that he ceased being the one God. The Son does the will of the Father. There is only one divine rule, and the rule comes from the Father. God sends his Son; the Son does not send the Father.

Thus, when we speak of the Father and the Son together, we refer to the Father as God and the Son as Lord. When the Son is referred to alone, then it is permissible and proper to speak of him as God because he is not one of the creatures. He is the only-begotten Son of God. He has always existed, though at one time he existed inside of the Father. Thus, he is intrinsically eternal. Unlike us, who must be given eternal life by the Son, the Son has eternal life in himself. He had no beginning, and he not only will not, but cannot, have an end.

Subordinationism

Subordinationism is the teaching that the Son is subordinate to the Father. Today, it is always seen as an error, for the Son is believed to be equal to the Father in every way. Taken far enough, subordinationism is seen as heresy.

However, some sort of subordinationism is unavoidable. The Father sent the Son, not vice versa. The Father loved the world

and gave his Son for it, not vice versa. The Son always does the will of the Father, not vice versa.

Everyone agrees with subordinationism when it is simply a matter of rank. As long as the Son only submits to the Father, but is not lesser than him in any other way, then modern Christians will not complain.

But we have seen that the doctrine of the Trinity espoused by the early church and by the Council of Nicea teaches that the Son is the *Logos* of the one God. When they are mentioned together, the Father is called the one God, and the Son is called Lord.

You can probably deduce on your own that the early Christians believed God is greater than his Son in some way other than just rank.

And you would be right.

In John 14:28, Jesus said:

If you loved me, you would rejoice because I said, "I go to the Father," for my Father is greater than I.

Modern Christians, holding to a co-equal Trinity, generally believe that the Father was only greater than the Son while the Son was on earth. On the other hand, every pre-Nicene or Nicene writer who addresses John 14:28 believes that the Father is *eternally* greater than the Son because God is greater than his own *Logos*. Such a belief is called *subordinationism*.

The following is, as far as I know, an exhaustive list of Pre-Nicene references to John 14:28.

Irenaeus, c. A.D. 185:

For if any one should ask the reason that the Father, who has fellowship with the Son in all things, has been declared by the Lord to alone to know the hour and the day, he will find at present no more suitable, becoming, or safe reason than this ... that the Father is above all things. For "the Father," he says, "is greater than I" [*Jn. 14:28*].⁵⁶⁹

Tertullian, c. A.D. 210:

⁵⁶⁹ *Against Heresies*. II:28:8.

For the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole, as [the Son] himself acknowledges: "My Father is greater than I" [Jn. 14:28].⁵⁷⁰

Origen, c. A.D. 230

Grant that there may be some individuals among the multitudes of believers who are not in entire agreement with us and who incautiously assert that the Savior is the Most High God; however, we do not hold with them, but rather believe him when he says, "The Father who sent Me is greater than I" [Jn. 14:28].⁵⁷¹

Novatian, c. A.D. 255⁵⁷²

Who does not acknowledge that the person of the Son is second after the Father, when he reads that it was said by the Father, consequently to the Son, "Let us make man in our image and our likeness"? [Gen. 1:26]. ... Or when he finds it written: "Because he who sent me is greater than I"? [Jn. 14:28]. Or when he considers the passage. "I go to my Father, and your Father; to my God, and your God"? [Jn. 20:17].⁵⁷³

Methodius, c. A.D. 300

And so the prophets and apostles—who spoke more fully concerning the Son of God, and assigned to him a divinity above other men—did not refer their praises of him to the teaching of angels, but to him upon whom all authority and power depend. For it was fitting that he who was greater than all things after the Father, should have the Father, who alone is greater than himself, as his witness.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷⁰ *Against Praxeas*. 9.

⁵⁷¹ *Against Celsus*. VIII:14.

⁵⁷² Novatian was the founder of the Novatianist sect; however, we saw in Chapter 8 that the catholics and Novatians were in agreement on the Nicene Creed and thus on the Trinity. Novatian split from the church at Rome only over the readmission of Christians who lapsed during persecution. On other matters, they were orthodox.

⁵⁷³ *Concerning the Trinity*. 26.

⁵⁷⁴ *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*. Discourse VII. Chapter 1.

Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, c. A.D. 320

But we must say that to the Father alone belongs the property of being unbegotten, for the Savior himself said, "My Father is greater than I" [*Jn. 14:28*].⁵⁷⁵

Comments on Subordinationism

Today subordinationism is seen as a borderline heresy. What amazes me is that *the early Christians themselves are seen as borderline heretics* for embracing subordinationism.

Somewhere we have forgotten that the faith was handed down *in full* by the apostles and meant to be preserved by the church. Paul asked the Thessalonians to hold fast to his traditions, not to improve on them!⁵⁷⁶

Our view of the Trinity has changed since Nicea, which I hope is obvious to you by now, and the scholars who know and admit it somehow believe that we have improved it! We have better words to use, they think. Because we have embraced *homoousios*, and because we apply it to the shared divinity of the triune God while applying *hypostasis* to the individual persons, then we are better able to explain the Trinity than they were.

Not true! We do not differ on mere wording. We differ on our understanding of what happened in the beginning, who the Son is in relation to the Father, and in the titles we apply to them. Getting *homoousios* and *hypostasis* correct will not resolve our differences with them!

What's worse is that in our blind assumption that we cannot be wrong, we assume that every early Christian writer who does not explicitly disagree with us must agree with us. For, after all, we naively assume, we are the standard for what is true.

Scholars are aware that "some" pre-Nicene Christians were subordinationist. They believe that this is forgivable to pre-Nicene

⁵⁷⁵ "To Alexander, Bishop of Constantinople." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. VI.

⁵⁷⁶ 2 Thessalonians 2:15

Christians who were not "enlightened" by later councils as we have been. But note whom they charge with this forgivable error.

Let's begin with a man for whom I have great respect, Philip Schaff, the great 19th-century historian. He writes in his introduction to Eusebius of Caesarea in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series II, vol. I:

That Eusebius [of Caesarea] was a decided subordinationist must be plain to every one that reads his works with care, especially his earlier ones. ... The same subordinationism may be clearly seen in the writings of Dionysius of Alexandria and of Gregory Thaumaturgus, two of Origen's greatest disciples. ... Eusebius in his earlier writings shows that he holds both [the divinity of Christ and his subordination to the Father] ... but that he is as far from a solution of the problem, and is just as uncertain in regard to the exact relation of Father and Son, as Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, Dionysius, and Gregory Thaumaturgus were.

These are important and many names that Schaff is throwing around! A limited number of writers wrote extensively on the subject of the Trinity prior to Nicea. Schaff has mentioned Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, Dionysius, and Gregory Thaumaturgus, and he has suggested that they are "uncertain in regard to the exact relation of the Father and Son."

That's five writers, plus Origen. There are not many left to choose from!

And others get them all!

- An article at *Theopedia* refers to subordinationism as a "heretical view." It then quotes the *Ellwell Evangelical Dictionary* as stating **Justin Martyr**, **Origen**, and **Tertullian** show a certain amount of subordinationism.⁵⁷⁷
- *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* says, "[Subordinationism] was a characteristic

⁵⁷⁷ "Subordinationism." *Theopedia*. Accessed 19 Mar. 2011
<<http://www.theopedia.com/Subordinationism>>.

tendency in **much teaching of the first three cents.**, but by the standards of orthodoxy established in the fourth cent. it came to be regarded as heretical."⁵⁷⁸

- *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Early Church* tells us, "Subordinationist tendencies are evident esp. in theologians like **Justin, Tertullian, Origen** and **Novatian**; but even in **Irenaeus**, to whom trinitarian speculations are alien, commenting on Jn 14, 28, [*sic*] has no difficulty in considering Christ inferior to the Father" (II:797).⁵⁷⁹
- The *Catholic Encyclopedia*: "Philosophic speculation is responsible ... for the subordinationism of **Justin's** theology."⁵⁸⁰
- The *Catholic Encyclopedia* again: "As to the Divine Nature of the Word, all apologists are agreed but to some of them, at least to **St. Justin** and **Tertullian**, there seemed to be in this Divinity a certain subordination."⁵⁸¹
- The same page in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* has: "In **Clement [of Alexandria]**, it is true, we find only a few traces of subordinationism ... **Origen**, on the other hand, frequently and formally defended subordinationist ideas."
- The *Catholic Encyclopedia* one last time: "**Hippolytus** ... stood uncompromisingly for a real difference between the Son (Logos) and the Father, but so as to represent the Former as a Divine Person almost com-

⁵⁷⁸ Livingstone, E. A. "Subordinationism." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 2000. Encyclopedia.com. Accessed 19 Mar. 2011 <<http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/subordinationism.aspx>>.

⁵⁷⁹ Simmonetti, M. *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Early Church*. II.797. As cited by "Subordinationism." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. Accessed 19 Mar. 2011 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subordinationism>>.

⁵⁸⁰ Lebreton, Jules. "St. Justin Martyr." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Accessed 19 Mar. 2011 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08580c.htm>>.

⁵⁸¹ Lebreton, Jules. "The Logos." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Accessed 19 Mar. 2011 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09328a.htm>>.

pletely separate from God (Ditheism) and at the same time altogether subordinate to the Father (Subordinationism).⁵⁸²

What are we to do with these statements? Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, Novatian, Dionysius, Gregory Thaumaturgus, and Eusebius the historian. Among these, they've managed to list every writer that wrote a treatise specifically devoted to the doctrine of the Trinity prior to Nicea and some that didn't!

Subordinationism was the doctrine of all pre-Nicene writers familiar with the faith once for all handed down to the saints because it follows naturally from what we know about the Son as the *Logos* of God.

But what about the whole idea of Jesus being the *Logos* of God. Is that really from the apostles? Is it really the tradition of the church?

Some say that the idea of the *Logos* comes from Greek philosophy, not the apostles.

The *Logos* of God and Greek Philosophy

The idea that the *Logos* doctrine came from Greek philosophy is another case of missing the forest for the trees. Here, we could go into a long history of the Greek philosophers, and we could analyze the use of the Greek philosophers by men like Justin, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and even the historian Socrates Scholasticus.

Such an analysis would be pointless.

For those of us that are Bible believers, we have no choice but to see the *Logos* doctrine as apostolic *because it is in the Bible*. There is no more clear exposition of Jesus as the *Logos* of God than the Gospel of John chapter one. It is short, and it is incomplete, but it is unmistakable.

⁵⁸² Kirsch, Johann Peter. "St. Hippolytus of Rome." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Accessed 19 Mar. 2011 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07360c.htm>>. Parentheses original.

In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was divine.⁵⁸³ This one was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him nothing was made that was made. ... And the *Logos* became flesh and lived among us. ... No one has seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed him .⁵⁸⁴(Jn. 1:1-3, 14, 18)

As an aside, it is fascinating to me that the word I've rendered "reveal" from John 1:18, and which the King James Version translates as "declare," is the same Greek word from which we get "exegesis." We strive to be exegetes of the Bible, but Jesus was an exegete of God himself!

All the major tenets of the *Logos* doctrine of the pre-Nicene and Nicene Christians—for the Nicene Creed espouses the *Logos* doctrine as well—are right here in John chapter one.

I provided a long list of early Christian quotes concerning the *Logos* in the last chapter. If you look at them, you will see some central issues that are in John 1:

- The *Logos* was in the beginning.
- The *Logos* made all things, hearkening back to Proverbs 8:22-31.
- The *Logos* had the character, nature, and essence of God.⁵⁸⁵
- The *Logos* comes from "the bosom" of the Father, hearkening back to Ps. 45:1 and 110:3 in the Septuagint.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸³ The explanation for this rendering of John 1:1 is given in Chapter 16. As pointed out there, it is not controversial even among Protestant scholars.

⁵⁸⁴ John 1:1-3,14,18

⁵⁸⁵ See the explanation of the translation of John 1:1 in Chapter 16.

⁵⁸⁶ The Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was the Old Testament of the Greek-speaking early churches and is still used by the Eastern Orthodox Churches today.

So the *Logos* doctrine did not come into the church through Greek philosophy. It came into the church through the apostle John.

In fact, it would be more fair to say that it came into the church through Proverbs 8:22-31.

How are we to explain Proverbs 8, and its consistent and constant use by the church, if not by the teaching of the *Logos*? It is a glorious picture, and one that I believe should thrill the heart of believers. I'm quoting it again from the Septuagint:

The Lord made me the beginning of his ways for his works. He established me before time was in the beginning, before he made the earth: even before he made the depths; before the fountains of water came forth: before the mountains were settled, and before all hills, he begets me. The Lord made countries and uninhabited tracks, and the highest inhabited parts of the world. When he prepared the heaven, I was present with him; and when he prepared his throne upon the winds: and when he strengthened the clouds above; and when he secured the fountains of the earth: and when he strengthened the foundations of the earth: I was by him, suiting myself to him, I was that wherein he took delight; and daily I rejoiced in his presence continually. For he rejoiced when he had completed the world, and rejoiced among the children of men.⁵⁸⁷

Here it would be good to address one more issue concerning John chapter one that is talked about often in the pre-Nicene writings of the church.

No One Has Seen God at Any Time

No one has seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed him.⁵⁸⁸

If Jesus is God, then how could John have said that no one has seen God at any time?

⁵⁸⁷ Brenton. *English Translation of the Greek Septuagint Bible*.

⁵⁸⁸ John 1:18

We addressed this above, but this is easy to resolve for anyone familiar with the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity, which, admittedly, is not very many people. That group now includes you!

John 1:18 is clearly distinguishing between God the Father and his Son, the *Logos*. People have seen the *Logos*, the one who reveals the Father, but no one has seen the Father ... not at any time.

Obviously, this means that all the appearances of God in the ancient Israel were not *theophanies*, but *Christophanies*. The Israelites were seeing their Messiah, the *Logos*, before he was born among men.

This is the obvious conclusion from John 1:18 if we are reading it from the perspective of our fathers in the faith, and they all read it that way.

We'll cite only a few examples.

Justin Martyr, c. A.D. 155:

You must not imagine that the unbegotten God himself came down or went up from any place. The ineffable [*i.e., unnamable*] Father and Lord of all neither has come to any place, nor walks, nor sleeps, nor rises up, but remains in his own place, wherever that is, quick to behold and quick to hear, having neither eyes nor ears, but being of indescribable might. He is not moved or confined to a spot in the whole world, for he existed before the world was made. How, then, could he talk with anyone, be seen by anyone, or appear on the smallest portion of the earth when the people at Sinai were not even able to look upon the glory of the one who was sent by him?⁵⁸⁹ ... Therefore, neither Abraham, nor Isaac, nor Jacob, nor any other man saw the Father and ineffable Lord of all ... but saw him who was according to his will his Son, being God, and the Angel,⁵⁹⁰ of whom also it pleased [God] that he would be born man by the virgin.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁹ Exodus 34:29-30. Moses' face shone so brightly that the Israelites could not keep looking at him

⁵⁹⁰ Justin explains elsewhere that he is called "Angel" because he is God's Messenger. The word translated "angel" in our Bibles, from both Hebrew and

Theophilus, c. A.D. 168:

It is true that the God and Father of all cannot be contained and is not found in a place ... but his *Logos*, through whom he made all things, ... assuming the person of the Father and Lord of all, went to the garden in the person of God, and conversed with Adam. For the divine writing itself teaches us that Adam said that he had heard the voice. But what else is this voice but the *Logos* [i.e., the "Word" or "Message"] of God, who is also His Son? ... The *Logos*, then, being God, and being naturally produced from God, whenever the Father of the universe wills, he sends him to any place; and he, coming, is both heard and seen, being sent by him, and is found in a place.⁵⁹²

Eusebius of Caesarea, A.D. 323:

For if it is unreasonable to suppose that the unbegotten and immutable essence of the almighty God was changed into the form of man ... [then] when the God and Lord who judges all the earth and executes judgment is seen in the form of a man, who else can be called [God], if it be not lawful to call him the first cause of all things, than his only pre-existent *Logos*? Concerning whom it is said in the Psalms, "He sent his Word and healed them and delivered them from their destructions" [*Ps. 107:20*].⁵⁹³

Rather than inundate you with even more quotes, I think it is more profitable to discuss the note that the editors of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* attach to the quote from Eusebius above. They write:

Eusebius accepts the common view of the early Church, that the theophanies of the Old Testament were Christophanies; that is, appearances of the second person of the

Greek, means "messenger." It does not specifically mean a species of heavenly being, and it is used a number of times of men in the New Testament. (e.g. Luke 7:24; 9:52.)

⁵⁹¹ *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*. 127.

⁵⁹² *To Autolycus*. II:22. Brackets mine.

⁵⁹³ *Ecclesiastical History*. I:2:8.

Trinity. Augustine seems to have been the first of the Fathers to take a different view, maintaining that such Christophanies were not consistent with the identity of essence between Father and Son, and that the Scriptures themselves teach that it was not the Logos, but an angel, that appeared to the Old Testament worthies on various occasions (cf. De Trin. III. 11).⁵⁹⁴

Why would Augustine, who became bishop of Hippo in north Africa in A.D. 395 or 396, some 70 years after Nicea, deny what was "the common view of the early Church"?

The editors answer that for us. He maintained that Christophanies were "not consistent with identity of essence between the Father and Son."

I mentioned in Chapter 9 that some eastern bishops may not have been Arian, but merely concerned about adding a non-scriptural word, *homoousios*, even if it were not *unscriptural*, to the creed of the Church. The concern would be that later Christians would take the word and run with it, producing doctrines inconsistent with Scripture and the faith handed down from the beginning.

Here we have an example of it in Augustine.

Augustine argues:

Therefore the substance, or, if it is better to say, the essence of God, wherein we understand ... the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, since it is in no way changeable, can in no way in its proper self be visible.⁵⁹⁵

I have said repeatedly that we must beware of the dangers of over-analyzing the faith. Today, we have become such excellent expositors of the doctrine of the Trinity that we have changed what was delivered to us from the fathers. In Augustine, we have an example of that already at the turn of the fifth century, less than a century after Nicea.

⁵⁹⁴ *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*. Series II. Vol. 1. Note 31. Parentheses theirs.

⁵⁹⁵ *On the Trinity*. III:11.

The fact is, it is not just the fathers who tell us that the appearances of God in Old Testament times were Christophanies. Jesus tells us himself!

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; he saw it, and was glad.⁵⁹⁶

The apostle John adds his own comment to that effect:

They could not believe because Isaiah said again, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart ..." [*Is. 6:10*]. Isaiah said these things when he saw his glory and spoke of him.⁵⁹⁷

When did Isaiah see these things? He saw them when he saw "the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up."⁵⁹⁸

Even this incredible appearance of Isaiah in the throne room of God finds the pre-incarnate *Logos* sitting on the throne!

The Father cannot be seen with human eyes. Both our Christian forefathers and God himself tell us so, for God once told Moses, "You cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live."⁵⁹⁹

If the Israelites could not bear to see the face of Moses shining with God's glory, how could they possibly behold God himself? But the *Logos*, say the early Christians and the apostle John, can reveal the glory of the Father.

Augustine, one of the greatest theologians who ever lived, was just wrong.

And he was wrong because he ignored the faith that had been handed down to him since the beginning.

Two Lord Yahwehs

In my early days as a Christian I read a lot of books answering the "cults." Today, because I am familiar with the faith once for all delivered to the saints, I no longer need to read such

⁵⁹⁶ John 8:56

⁵⁹⁷ John 12:39-41

⁵⁹⁸ Isaiah 6:1-10

⁵⁹⁹ Exodus 33:20

books. The Scriptures are easy for me to read, and almost nothing in them is difficult. I have learned the faith from men who learned it from the apostles, and I have been careful to learn from those that have borne good fruit.⁶⁰⁰ I can recognize counterfeits because I have learned to handle the real thing.

I should add that by the incredible grace, mercy, and kindness of God I am in a church that cares only about pleasing our Lord Jesus Christ. I have a lot of freedom to pursue the faith of our fathers because our church has respect for holiness and for the church through the ages, willing to learn from all those who have named the name of Christ and departed from iniquity.⁶⁰¹ The church is, after all, the pillar and support of the truth.⁶⁰²

One of the passages that those anti-cult books liked to use against the Jehovah's Witnesses was Genesis 19:24. They claimed that it showed two persons called Yahweh (or Jehovah), something the Jehovah's Witnesses could never agree with.

Then Yahweh rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and on Gomorrah from Yahweh out of heaven.

One Yahweh in heaven, and one on earth: two Yahwehs.⁶⁰³
The early churches agreed.

When Scripture says, "The Lord rained fire from the Lord out of heaven," the prophetic word indicates that there were two in number: One upon the earth, who, it says, descended to behold the cry of Sodom; another in heaven, who also is Lord of the Lord on earth, as he is Father and God.⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰⁰ Matthew 7:15-20

⁶⁰¹ 2 Timothy 2:19

⁶⁰² 1 Timothy 3:15

⁶⁰³ Most English Bibles render LORD or GOD in all caps when they are a translation of YHWH, which most scholars write as "Yahweh" and which the Jehovah's Witnesses render "Jehovah." The vowels and pronunciation of YHWH have been lost because the Jews refused to pronounce the name of God for centuries.

⁶⁰⁴ Justin. *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*. 129. c. A.D. 155.

Since, therefore, the Father is truly Lord and the Son truly Lord, the Holy Spirit has fitly designated them by the title of Lord. ... referring to the destruction of the Sodomites, the Scripture says, "Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah fire and brimstone from the Lord out of heaven." For it here points out that the Son, who had also been talking with Abraham, had received power to judge the Sodomites for their wickedness.⁶⁰⁵

Irenaeus, author of the second of those quotes, adds that Genesis 19:24 isn't the only place this truth is shown:

This declares the same truth: "Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever; the scepter of your kingdom is a right scepter. You have loved righteousness and hated iniquity: therefore God, your God, has anointed you" [*Ps. 45:6-7*]. For the Spirit designates both by the name of God—both him who is anointed as Son and him who anoints, that is, the Father.⁶⁰⁶

Another such passage, and a very interesting one is Zechariah 2:8-11. This passage is quoted often by the early Christians to talk about Jerusalem as the apple of God's eye, but for some reason they don't seem to point out that there are two Yahwehs mentioned in this passage as well, one sending the other:

For this is what Yahweh of Armies says, "After the glory he has sent me to the nations which spoiled you, for he that touches you touches the apple of his eye. For, behold, I will shake my hand upon them, and they shall be a spoil to their servants. Then you will know that Yahweh of Armies has sent me.

"Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in your midst," says Yahweh, "And many nations shall be joined to Yahweh in that day and shall be my people. And I will dwell in the midst of you, and you shall know that Yahweh of Armies has sent me to you."

⁶⁰⁵ Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. III:6:1. c. A.D. 185.

⁶⁰⁶ *ibid.*

Again here you have Yahweh sending Yahweh. While there was probably no way for anyone to pick up on it before the *Logos* came to the earth and revealed the Father to us, the eternal and divine Son of God is talked about often in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Early Christian Illustrations of the Trinity

Today we have lost the idea of the similar substance of the Father and the Son. We have lost the idea of the Father being the source of the Son, though that is what the name "Father" implies.

As a result we don't use the same illustrations that the early churches used.

Because we dare not make the persons of the Trinity unequal, our illustrations often use parts of a whole: The skin, pulp, and core of an apple, for example, or the shell, white, and yolk of an egg.

The early Christians didn't use such illustrations. They preferred to use substances that flowed from a source, like a stream from a spring or the light from the sun.

The plant that springs from the root is something distinct from that from which it grows up. Yet it is of one nature with it. The river which flows from the spring is something distinct from the spring, for we cannot call either the river a spring or the spring a river. Nevertheless we allow that they are both one according to nature and also one in substance; and we admit that the spring may be conceived of as father, and that the river is what is begotten of the spring.⁶⁰⁷

When we give out some word, we beget the word; yet not by abscission [*i.e., cutting off*], so as to lessen the word in us. Just as we also see happening in the case of a fire, which is not lessened when it has kindled [another], but remains the same; and that which has been kindled by it

⁶⁰⁷ Dionysius. "Exegetical Fragments V: Of the One Substance." *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. VI.

likewise appears to exist by itself, not diminishing that from which it was kindled.⁶⁰⁸

Tertullian even gives us an illustration that includes the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰⁹ I include this long passage in its entirety in hope that illustrations like this may help you in fully grasping the early Christian—and Nicene—concept of the Trinity:

I would not hesitate ... to call the tree the son or offspring of the root, and the river of the spring, and the ray of the sun. Every original source is a parent, and everything which issues from the origin is an offspring. Much more is the Word of God, who has actually received as his own peculiar designation the name of Son.

But still the tree is not severed from the root, nor the river from the spring, nor the ray from the sun. Nor, indeed, is the Word separated from God.

Following, therefore, the form of these analogies, 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 spring 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 spring, 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.⁶¹⁰

⁶⁰⁸ Justin. *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*. 61. c. A.D. 155.

⁶⁰⁹ The reason the Holy Spirit is not addressed in this chapter or in this book is explained below.

⁶¹⁰ *Against Praxeas*. 8.

Such illustrations help us to picture things that are infinitely beyond us. It is important, though, to remember that they really are infinitely beyond us. These are just illustrations that the church, our mother, has provided to help us grasp what is by nature unable to be fully comprehended by man.

Therefore, let us limit ourselves to what has been handed down, but let us not limit ourselves beyond what has been handed down. These things have been recorded in Scripture and handed down to us by the church to assist us in our knowledge, praise, and worship of our Almighty God and his eternal, only-begotten Son.

That said, Tertullian offers us one other illustration that is unique to him. It does not carry any authority, being only his own, but I have yet to find anyone who didn't enjoy hearing it.

An Early Christian Definition of *Logos*

Tertullian is the only author that explains the *Logos* this thoroughly, though no other author says anything to contradict it. I present this for your interest, not as apostolic tradition. I have yet to talk to anyone who didn't find this description by Tertullian fascinating:

Observe, then, that when you are silently conversing with yourself, this very process is carried on within you by your reason, which meets you with a word at every movement of your thought ... Whatever you think, there is a word ... You must speak it in your mind ...

Thus, in a certain sense, the word is a second person within you, through which in thinking you utter speech ... The word is itself a different thing from yourself. Now how much more fully is all this transacted in God, whose image and likeness you are?⁶¹¹

Tertullian is also responsible for another fascinating piece of conjecture. Once again, Tertullian is alone on this, and it is presented merely for your interest:

⁶¹¹ *ibid.* 5.

Then, therefore, does the Word also himself assume his own form, glorious garb, and sound and vocal utterance when God says, "Let there be light." This is the perfect nativity of the Word, when he proceeds forth from God, formed by him first to devise and think out all things by the name of Wisdom.⁶¹²

Here, Tertullian suggests that the *Logos* was begotten at the time God said, "Let there be light."

This speculation of his has a lot to do with his translation of *Logos* into Latin. He prefers "Reason" to "Word" as a translation, but "Word" is more common among his Latin contemporaries. So he suggests the idea that the *Logos* was Reason while he was inside of God, and he did not become Word until God first spoke.

Interesting. Not apostolic tradition, and not something you'd want to put into a creed, but interesting.

In Tertullian's defense, Irenaeus has something to say about Christians speculating. He suggests it's a gift of God if it does not interfere with the faith as it has been handed down:

It does not follow that because men are endowed with greater and lesser degrees of intelligence they should change the subject matter of the faith itself ... [It] simply implies this: that one may bring out the meaning of those things which are spoken of in parables ... explain the operation and dispensation of God connected with human salvation ... set forth why it is that one and the same God has made some things temporary and some eternal, some heavenly and some earthy ... show why it was that more covenants than one were given to mankind ... search out for what reason God has included everyone in unbelief so that he may have mercy on all [etc.] ... For in reference to these points and others of a like nature, the apostle exclaims, "Oh! The depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God; how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"⁶¹³

⁶¹² *ibid.* 7.

⁶¹³ *Against Heresies*. I:10:3. Brackets in original translation from *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*.

And since we're talking about speculation, for historical purposes, it is probably important to discuss a speculation of Origen's that became popular in Alexandria.

Eternal Generation

Alexandrians seemed to be a highly mystical bunch. Origen especially loved to talk about the "time" before time was created. To him, there was no such time. What was before time, always was.

Is your head spinning yet?

I'm sorry for the necessity of writing about such an other-worldly, fantastical subject. It's not a talent of mine, but I'm afraid it's unavoidable.

Who that is capable of entertaining reverential thoughts or feelings regarding God can suppose or believe that God the Father ever existed, even for a moment of time, without having generated this Wisdom?⁶¹⁴

To Origen, if God generated the Son before time was created, then the Son was always generated. Unlike Tertullian and others who say that before the beginning God was alone except that he had his *Logos* already inside of him, Origen says that the *Logos*, whom he here terms Wisdom, was always generated. Never, not even "for a moment of time," was God not the Father.

For in that case [*i.e. if God existed at any time without having generated Wisdom*] he must say either that God was unable to generate Wisdom before he produced her ... or that he possessed the power indeed, but—what cannot be said of God without impiety—was unwilling to use it. Both of which suppositions, it is patent to all, are alike absurd and impious, for they amount to this: Either God advanced from a condition of inability to one of ability or, although possessed of the power, he concealed it and delayed the generation of Wisdom.⁶¹⁵

⁶¹⁴ Origen, *De Principiis*. I:2:2.

⁶¹⁵ *ibid.*

That may be brilliant thinking—and I am a huge fan of Origen, who tried to be martyred with his father as a young man and was tortured for the faith as an old man—but it is not apostolic, and it is not traditional. Origen breaks new ground with his version of the eternal generation of the Son.

His argument is not very convincing to me, but his idea caught on in Alexandria, where Christians were prone to being mystical anyway. Clement of Alexandria has some of the most unusual comments in all the Christian writings, and he loved philosophy. Origen was similar.

Dionysius, who became bishop of Alexandria near the time of Origen's death, had obviously picked up on Origen's idea of eternal generation.

There certainly was not a time when God was not the Father. Nor, indeed, as though he had not brought forth these things, did God afterwards beget the Son ... Being the brightness of the eternal Light, he himself also is absolutely eternal. For since light is always in existence, it is manifest that its brightness also exists, because light is perceived to exist from the fact that it shines ... But God is the eternal Light, which has neither had a beginning nor shall ever end. Therefore the eternal brightness shines out from him, and coexists with him, in that, existing without a beginning and always begotten, he always shines before him.⁶¹⁶

Its funny that Origen, who makes the begetting of the Son of God eternal, and thus is a bit closer to our modern version of the Trinity, is usually the first to be maligned for being a subordinationist!

Why Doesn't This Book Talk About the Holy Spirit

This book does not address the Holy Spirit because the Council of Nicea didn't address the Holy Spirit. The extent of their

⁶¹⁶ "Letter to Dionysius, Bishop of Rome." *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. VI.

creed's reference to the Spirit is, "[We believe] also in the Holy Spirit."

That's it!

I'm glad that I don't have to address the subject of the Holy Spirit in early Christianity because it could be an entire book on its own!

