

## Did the Early Christians Teach/Believe a “Trinity” Doctrine?

Although many Trinitarian’s readily admit to the fact that Scripture does not contain an actual clear-cut teaching of the Trinity, many still insist that there yet remains within the body of Scripture the framework for just such a teaching - that is, by the combination of one passage with another; or, as some would suggest, by the collective implication of such scriptures. And so, in order to avoid any accusation of having misquoted any of the sources below, it must be said that, before or after the portion we quote, a number of these had actually stated in their discussions of this subject just such thoughts, expressing just such a view.

On the other hand, there are also any number of scholars/historians who have interpreted the development of such events in a different way, and this would be that, no such belief was either taught, explained and/or defended within the New Testament or by any of the early Christians, but that the eventual development of this teaching/doctrine was evidence of a corruption which had taken place with regard to the true teachings of Jesus and his disciples. This would, no doubt, explain why it had taken some 300 years to find an actual expression of that particular perception and/or understanding of God - particularly as a statement of faith (often called a “confession”) - that is, by any of the early Christian writers, especially on the part of those who had made it their purpose to either explain and/or defend the Christian system of belief. And so, likewise, a number of scholars below have expressed this particular view as well.

(I do have a number of other references but, if readers of this document know of any others which express something similar to these, please, I’d appreciate your emailing me with that information: ResearchLC@earthlink.net < <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/JohnOneOne/> > Thank you.)



1833 Norton, Andrews (b.1786-d.1853). *A Statement of Reasons For Not Believing The Doctrines of Trinitarians, Concerning The Nature of God and The Person of Christ*. Edited by Ezra Abbot (b.1819-d.1884), d.d, ll.d. (Cambridge: Brown, Shattuck, and Company; Boston: Hilliard, Gray, and Company, 1833), pp. 38, 39. BX9841 .N7 1833 / unk83-14874.<sup>1</sup>

... the unbelieving Jews, in the time of the Apostles, opposed Christianity with the utmost bitterness and passion. They sought on every side for objections to it. There was much in its character to which the believing Jews could hardly be reconciled. The Epistles are full of statements, explanations, and controversy, relating to questions having their origin in Jewish prejudices and passions. With regard however to this doctrine [the Trinity], which if it had ever been taught, the believing Jews must have received with the utmost difficulty, and to which the unbelieving Jews would have manifested the most determined opposition,-with regard to this doctrine, there is not trace of any controversy. But, if it had ever been taught, it must have been the main point of attack and defense between those who assailed, and those who supported Christianity. There is nothing ever said in its explanation. But it must have required, far more than any other doctrine, to be explained, illustrated, and

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<sup>1</sup> In the event that some may not understand this coding, these represent the Library of Congress’ [L.C.] (Washington, D.C.) call numbers and registry card numbers.

enforced; for it appears, not only irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Unity of God, but equally so with that of the humanity of our Saviour; and yet both these doctrines, it seems, were to be maintained in connexion with it. It must have been necessary, therefore, to state it as clearly as possible, to exhibit it in its relations, and carefully to guard against the misapprehensions to which it is so liable on every side. Especially must care have been taken to prevent the gross mistakes into which the Gentile converts from polytheism were likely to fall. Yet so far from any such clearness of statement and fulness of explanation, the whole language of the New Testament in relation to this subject is . . . a series of enigmas, upon the supposition of its truth. The doctrine, then, is never defended in the New Testament, though unquestionably it would have been the main object of attack, and the main difficulty in the Christian system. It is never explained, though no doctrine could have been so much in need of explanation. On the contrary, upon the supposition of its truth, the Apostles express themselves in such a manner, that it had been their purpose to darken and perplex the subject, they could not have done it more effectually. And still more, this doctrine is never insisted upon as a necessary article of faith; though it is now represented by its defenders as lying at the foundation of Christianity.

- 1845 Newman, John Henry (b.1801-d.1890), Cardinal. *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. 2nd Edition (1st-1845). (London: J. Toovey, 1846), pp. 14-18, 40-42 (respectively). BT21 .N5 1846 / 26-022128.

Let us allow that the whole circle of doctrines, of which our Lord is the subject, was consistently and uniformly confessed by the Primitive Church. . . .But it surely is otherwise with the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity. I do not see in what sense it can be said that there is a consensus of primitive [Church authorities] in its favour. . . .the doctrine of our Lord's divinity itself partly implies and partly recommends the doctrine of the Trinity. . . .the Creeds of that early day make no mention in their letter of the Catholic doctrine [of the Trinity] at all. They [the early Christian writings] make mention indeed of a Three; but that there is any mystery in the doctrine, that the Three are One, that They are coequal, coeternal, all increate [uncreated], all omnipotent, all incomprehensible, is not stated, and never could be gathered from them. Of course we believe that they imply it, or rather intend it.

- 1857 Ellis, George Edward (b.1814-d.1894). *A Half-Century of the Unitarian Controversy, With Particular Reference to its Origin, its Course, and its Prominent Subjects Among the Congregationalists of Massachusetts*. (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Company; Cambridge: Metcalf and Company, Printers to the University, 1857), Appendix VIII, "The Doctrine of the Trinity," pp. 464, 465. BX9841 .E5 / 33-022268.

The doctrinal statement of the Trinity leads off the Orthodox creeds: no vague, inferential implication of the contents of the doctrine is thought to be satisfactory. Doubt about it is dangerous; a rejection of it is fatal. The doctrine

is obtruded upon us in its stiffest literal terms, though, strange to say, many of its champions affirm that they dislike its terms, and wish that they could express it more adequately. Hered certainly is no backwardness, no hesitation, on the part of those who, believing the doctrine, think it ought to be reiterated and emphasized. Now, how comes it that Christ and his Apostles furnish us not one single announcement of it? If anything can be inferred with certainty as to the belief of the Jews concerning the mode of the Divine existence, it is that they knew nothing of the Orthodox dogma of the Trinity. Surely then we might expect that their first Christian teachers would have been at least as careful to declare it to them as a new revelation of truth, the basis of all Christian doctrine, as modern Christian teachers are to demand a faith in it from their pupils. It will not do to say that the Apostles left other essential Christian doctrines without any direct, explicit statement of them. It is not true. They had a commission from their Master, and they discharged it. Whatever they have not taught plainly, must be pronounced to be. no part of their teaching, however positively their successors may have taught it. Peter, who preached to the Jews the first Christian discourse after the Church had risen from the grave of its Founder, told them that "Jesus of Nazareth," "whom they had put to death," was "a man approved of God by works which God did by him," and that God had raised him up. Words could not be more explicit. Yet not from them, and from no other words spoken by the Apostles to the Jews, as recorded, could they have gathered a plain statement of the Trinity. As to the Gentiles, we find traces, among a school of philosophic dreamers, of a sort of Trinitarian conception, far unlike that, however, which Christian divines now receive, though the dogma came into the Church by that channel. No direct announcement of the doctrine was made by the Apostles when they preached to Gentiles, who certainly were ignorant of it, and might claim to be distinctly informed about the first fundamental doctrine of the Gospel.

1860 Lamson, Alvan (b.1792-d.1864), D.D. *The Church of the First Three Centuries*. (London: British and Foreign Unitarian Association, 1860), pp. 52, 70, 71, 75, 76, 284, 341 (respectively). BR165 .L3 1860 / unk81-037404.

We maintain that the doctrine of the Trinity was of gradual and comparatively late formation; that it had its origin in a source entirely foreign from that of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures; that it grew up, and was ingrafted on Christianity, through the hands of the Platonizing Fathers; that in the time of Justin, and long after, the distinct nature and inferiority of the Son were universally taught; and that only the first shadowy outline of the Trinity had then become visible. . . .The inferiority of the Son was generally, if not uniformly, asserted by the ante-Nicene Fathers. . . .That they viewed the Son as distinct from the Father is evident from the circumstance that they plainly assert his inferiority. . . . They considered him distinct and subordinate. . . .The modern popular doctrine of the Trinity . . . derives no support from the language of Justin [Martyr]: and this observation may be extended to all the ante-Nicene Fathers; that is, to all Christian writers for three centuries after

the birth of Christ. It is true, they speak of the Father, Son, and prophetic or holy Spirit, but not as co-equal, not as one numerical essence, not as Three in One, in any sense now admitted by Trinitarians. The very reverse is the fact. The doctrine of the Trinity, as explained by these Fathers, was essentially different from the modern doctrine. This we state as a fact as susceptible of proof as any fact in the history of human opinions. . . .They occasionally make use of a phraseology, which, in the mouth of a modern Trinitarian, would imply a belief that the Son is of one numerical essence with the Father. But this they never thought of asserting. The most they meant to affirm was that the Son, as begotten of God, partook in some sort of the specific nature (that is, a divine), just as an individual of our race partakes of the same nature or essence with the parent from whom he sprung (that is, a human). At the same time they taught that he was relatively inferior to the Father from whom he was derived, and entitled to only inferior homage. . . .We challenge any one to produce a single writer of any note, during the first three ages, who held this [Trinity] doctrine in the modern sense.

- 1883 Gibbon, Edward (b.1737-d.1794). *History of Christianity: Comprising all that Relates to the Progress of the Christian Religion in "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," and A Vindication of Some Passages in the 15th and 16th Chapters, with a Life of the Author, Preface, and Notes by the Editor, Including Variorum Notes by Guizot, Wenck, Milman, "An English Churchman," and Other Scholars.* (New York: P. Eckler, 1883), preface. BR170 .G4 / 32-030333.

If Paganism was conquered by Christianity, it is equally true that Christianity was corrupted by Paganism. The pure Deism<sup>2</sup> of the first Christians . . . was changed, by the Church of Rome, into the incomprehensible dogma of the trinity. Many of the pagan tenets, invented by the Egyptians and idealized by Plato, were retained as being worthy of belief.

- 1896 Harnack, Adolf von (b.1851-d.1930). *History of Dogma.* 7 vols. Translated from the 3rd German Edition. vols. 1 & 2, translation by: Buchanan, Neil (b.?-?); vols. 3 & 5, translation by: Millar, James (b.1857-?); vol. 4, translation by: Speirs, Ebenezer Brown (b.?-?) and Millar, J. (b.?-?); vols. 6 & 7, translation by: M'Gilchrist, William (b.?-?). Edited by: Bruce, Alexander Balmain (b.1831-d.1899). (London: Williams & Norgate, 1896-99), vol. 3, p. 135. BT21 .H33

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<sup>2</sup> It must be pointed out that the work of which we quote has its origin from this:

Gibbon, Edward (b.1737-d.1794). *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* New Edition. 12 vols. (London: W. Strahan [etc.], 1783-1790). DG311 .G42 / 04-03393.

Please keep in mind that, because Gibbon's work was originally published in the 1700's, in order to appreciate the way in which he would have used this term, it is important to consider the meaning associated with its use during the time period in which he wrote. Otherwise, according to the 1911 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, this term, first and foremost, had this simple meaning: "DEISM (Lat. deus, god), strictly the belief in one supreme God." <http://21.1911encyclopedia.org/D/DE/DEISM.htm>

The idea of the subordinate God is indeed as old as the theology of the Christian Church; even the Apologists shared it, and Origin, with all caution, adopted and justified it in working out his doctrine of the Son.

- 1957 Werner, Martin (b.1887-d.1964). *The Formation of Christian Dogma; An Historical Study of its Problem. Rewritten in Shortened form by the Author from his Die Entstehung des Christlichen Dogmas, and Translated, with an Introduction by S[amuel] G[eorge] F[rederrick] Brandon [b.1907-d.1971].* (New York: Harper, 1957), pp. 122, 125. BT23 .W413 / 57-010528.

In the Primitive Christian era [First Century] there was no sign of any kind of Trinitarian problem or controversy, such as later produced violent conflicts in the Church. The reason for this undoubtedly lay in the fact that, for Primitive Christianity, Christ was . . . a being of the high celestial angel-world, who was created and chosen by God for the task of bringing in, at the end of the ages, . . .the Kingdom of God. . . .That relationship was understood unequivocally as being one of “subordination”, i.e. in the sense of the subordination of Christ to God. Wherever in the New Testament the relationship of Jesus to God, the Father, is brought into consideration, . . . it is conceived of and represented categorically as subordination. And the most decisive Subordinationist of the New Testament, according to the Synoptic record, was Jesus himself. . . .This original position, firm and manifest as it was, was able to maintain itself for a long time. All the great pre-Nicene theologians represented the subordination of the Logos to God.

- 1957 *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Embracing Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology and Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Biography from the Earliest Times to the Present Day, Based on the Third Edition of the Realencyklopädie Founded by J. J. Herzog, and Edited by Albert Hauck, Prepared by More than Six Hundred Scholars and Specialists Under the Supervision of Samuel Macauley Jackson (editor-in-chief) with the assistance of Charles Colebrook Sherman and George William Gilmore (associate editors) and [others including: Herzog, Johann Jakob (b.1805-d.1882); Schaff, Philip (b.1819-d.1893); Hauck, Albert (b.1845-d.1918); Jackson, Samuel Macauley (b.1851-d.1912), editor; Sherman, Charles Colebrook (b.1860-d.1927), joint editor; Gilmore, George William (b.1858-d.1933), joint editor].* 13 vols. (New York; London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1908-c1914), vol. IX [9], p. 91. BR95 .S43 / 08-020152.

The doctrines of the Logos and the Trinity received their shape from Greek Fathers, who. . .were much influenced, directly or indirectly, by the Platonic philosophy. . . .That errors and corruptions crept into the Church from this source can not be denied.

- 1963 *Dictionary of the Bible.* Hastings, James (b.1852-d.1922), Editor. Revised Edition by: Grant,

Frederick Clifton (b.1891-d.1974) and Rowley, Harold Henry (b.1890-d.?). (New York: Scribner, 1963), pp. 337, 338. BS440 .H5 1963 / 62-021697.

Considering how strongly conscious the Jews were of their monotheism, it is interesting to note that as far as the N[ew] T[estament] evidence goes the Jewish opposition did not charge the Christians movement with tritheism or polytheism, a common Jewish criticism later.

- 1967 *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Prepared by an editorial staff at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967-c1989), vol. XIV [14], p. 299 (italics theirs). BX841 .N44 1967 / 66-022292.

The formulation “one God in three Persons” was not solidly established, certainly not fully assimilated into Christian life and its profession of faith, prior to the end of the 4th century. But it is precisely this formulation that has first claim to the title *the Trinitarian dogma*. Among the Apostolic Fathers<sup>3</sup>, there had been nothing even remotely approaching such a mentality or perspective.

- 1969 Henderson, Ian (b.1910-d.?), University of Glasgow. *Encyclopedia International*. 20 vols. (New York: Grolier, 1969), “Trinity,” p. 226. AE5 .E447 1968b / 69-010050.

The doctrine of the Trinity did not form part of the apostles' preaching, as this is reported in the New Testament.

- 1969 Dawe, Donald G. (b.?-?). *No Orthodoxy But the Truth, A Survey of Protestant Theology*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 21. BX4805.2 .D34 / 69-10424.

In its finished form the Trinitarian doctrine went beyond the biblical materials in both form and content. It was deeply indebted, as indeed was the Christological dogma, to the philosophical and religious thought of Greco-Roman antiquity.

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<sup>3</sup> The import of this statement becomes all the more significant when we appreciate the fact that “the Apostolic Fathers” are those who were said to have lived during the same time period as the Apostles themselves; with some, perhaps, having even been taught by them as well. These include: Barnabas (not the Barnabas of Acts), Hermas, Papias, and the author of the epistle to Diogenetus. Otherwise, it is Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Polycarp, who are the generally believed to being the undisputed students of the Apostles

Therefore, if among “the Apostolic Fathers” “there had been nothing even remotely approaching such a mentality or perspective,” and, especially, for this teaching to not have ever been a part of the Christian “profession of faith,” that is, as expressed within any Christian ‘declaration of belief’ until the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, then this would unequivocally substantiate the fact that neither the Apostles nor any of the earliest of Christians had ever *believed* and/or been *taught* any such radically new concept about God.

- 1971 Wilken, Robert Louis (b.1936-?). *The Myth of Christian Beginnings; History's Impact on Belief*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), parts of pages 177 thru 183. BR145.2 .W5 / 71-123712.

From the very beginning, the Christian tradition had struggled with the question of Jesus' relation to God . . . Very early Christians tried to account for his extraordinary life and accomplishments and his Resurrection, and it was not long before he was called Son of God - then God. Even so, He was not God in the sense in which the Father was God - or was He? Was he creator, was he eternal, should he be addressed in prayer? These and other questions troubled thoughtful Christians for almost three centuries. During these years, most Christians vaguely thought of Jesus as God; yet they did not actually think of him in the same way that they thought of God the Father. They seldom addressed prayers to him, and thought of him somehow as second to God - divine, yes, but not fully God. . . .When the controversy over the relation of Jesus to God the Father broke out in the early fourth century, most Christians were "subordinationists," i.e. they believed that Christ was God but not precisely the Same way that the Father was God.

- 1976 Boer, Harry R. (b.?-?). *A Short History of the Early Church*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, c1976), see more information on pages 108 thru 110. BR165 .B645 / 75-025742.

The Apostolic Fathers: The Apostolic Fathers wrote between A.D. [C.E.] 90 and 140. Their discussion of the person of Jesus Christ simply repeated the teaching of the New Testament. None of the Apostolic Fathers presented a definite doctrine on this point. In this respect the New Testament, the Apostolic Fathers, and the Apostles' Creed stand in one line.

- 1978 Buckley, J. A. (b.?-?). *Second Century Orthodoxy*. (1978), pp. 114-15.

Up until the end of the second century at least, the universal Church remained united in one basic sense; they all accepted the supremacy of the Father. They all regarded God the Father Almighty as alone supreme, immutable, ineffable and without beginning. . . .With the passing of those second century writers and leaders, the Church found itself. . . slipping slowly but inexorably toward that point. . . where at the Council of Nicaea the culmination of all this piecemeal eroding of the original faith was reached. There, a small volatile minority, foisted its heresy upon an acquiescent majority, and with the political authorities behind it, coerced, cajoled and intimidated those who strove to maintain the pristine purity of their faith untarnished.

- 1979 Cupitt, Don (b.?-?), University Lecturer in Divinity and Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. *The Debate About Christ*. (London: SCM Press Limited, 1979), p. 108. ISBN: 0334003032. BT220 .C860.

But Jewish faith in God rules out any arrangement of this kind [co-equal deity of Jesus with God]. It was held that God, the God of Israel, is absolutely sole in his power, cannot be divided or co-equally shared. The New Testament writers never questioned this principle nor think of themselves as possibly infringing upon it. They never distinguish co-equal persons within one God; the idea was unthinkable. It was also unthinkable to say Jesus was identical with one God. So it was very difficult to see how they could have entertained the ideas of the divinity of Christ and the Trinity.

- 1980 *The Trinitarian Controversy*. From the Series: *Sources of Early Christian Thought*. Rusch, William G. (b.?-?), Director of the Commission of Faith and Order, National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., translator and editor. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c1980), introduction, pp. 2, 3. BT109 .T74 / 79-008889.

No doctrine of the Trinity in the Nicene sense is present in the New Testament . . . There is no doctrine of the Trinity in the strict sense in the [writings of the] Apostolic Fathers, but the trinitarian formulas are apparent. The witness of this collection of writings to a Christian doctrine of God is slight and provides no advance in synthesis or theological construction beyond the biblical materials.

- 1980 Hanson, Anthony Tyrell (b.?-?) and Hanson, Richard Patrick Crosland (b.1916-d.?). *Reasonable Belief, A Survey of the Christian Faith*. (New York; Toronto; Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), chapter iv - "The Holy Trinity," section 9 - "The Doctrine of the Trinity," subsection a - "The Development of the Doctrine of the Trinity," pp. 174, 175. BT77 .H264 / 80-40481.

[The adoption of the Trinity doctrine came as a result of] a process of theological exploration which lasted at least three hundred years. . . it would be foolish to represent the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as having been achieved by any other way. . . The Arian controversy in the fourth century tested, shook and altered [the] doctrinal tradition of the Son/Logos. This was a long, confused, process whereby different schools of thought in the Church worked out for themselves, and then tried to impose on others, their answers to the question, "How divine is Jesus Christ?" It is quite misleading to represent this controversy [of the Trinity] as a contest between self-confident, well-defined orthodoxy on the one hand and blind, perverse heresy on the other. At the beginning of the controversy nobody knew the right, most satisfactory answer. This is one reason why the controversy lasted more than sixty years and gradually involved every conceivable authority; general councils, Popes, Emperors, bishops alone or in parties, and the faithful at large (who tended to make their contribution in the form of riots). If ever there was a controversy decided by the method of trial and error, it was this one.

- 1984 Lindbeck, George A. (b.?-?), Professor of Historical Theology, Yale University. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post Liberal Age*. 1st Edition. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, c1984), p. 92. BT19 .L55 1984 / 83-027332.

In order to argue successfully for the unconditionality and permanence of the ancient Trinitarian Creeds, it is necessary to make a distinction between doctrines, on the one hand, and on the terminology and conceptuality in which they were formulated on the other. . . .Some of the crucial concepts employed by these creeds, such as “substance”, “person”, and “in two natures” are post biblical novelties. If these particular notions are essential, the doctrines of these creeds are clearly conditional, dependent on the late Hellenistic milieu.

- 1986 Grant, Robert McQueen (b.1917-d.?). *Gods and the One God*. 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, c1986), pp. 109, 156, 160 (respectively). BL785 .G69 1986 / 85-011443.

The Christology of the apologies, like that of the New Testament, is essentially subordinationist. The Son is always subordinate to the Father, who is the one God of the Old Testament. . . .What we find in these early authors, then, is not a doctrine of the Trinity. . . .Before Nicaea, Christian theology was almost universally subordinationist.

- 1987 *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*. Myers, Allen C. (b.1945-d.?), revision editor. John W. Simpson, John W., Jr. (b.?-?). . . [et al.], associate editors. Translation of: *Bijbelse Encyclopedie*. Revised Edition of 1975. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 1020. BS440 .G7613 1987 / 87-013239.

Triadic formulas in the New Testament are often regarded as implying a developed doctrine of the trinity, but this is to read too much into them. 1 Cor[inthians] 12:4-6; 2 Cor[inthians] 13:14 are implicitly subordinationist since they use the formula “Lord (i.e., Christ)-Spirit-God,” differentiating the first two from God.

- 1988 Hanson, Richard Patrick Crosland (b.1916-d.?), Catholic Historian. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, c1988), pp. xix, 64, 274 (respectively). BT1350 .H36 1988 / 89-151990.

With the exception of Athanasius virtually every theologian, East and West, accepted some form of subordinationism at least up the year 355; subordinationism might indeed, until the denouement of the controversy, have been described as accepted orthodoxy. . . .There is no theologian in the Eastern or Western church before the outbreak of the Arian controversy, who does not in some sense regard the son as subordinate to the Father. . . .Many. . . could not. . . abandon completely a subordinationism that had been hallowed by long tradition.

