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Did the First Century Ecclesia Believe that Jesus Was Almighty God?

Various theologians and Church historians have written that Primitive (first century) Christianity neither affirmed nor taught that Jesus Christ is Almighty God (the second Person of the Trinity). Speaking on our present theme, Brunner presents a balanced and thorough discussion concerning the Trinity doctrine and its relation to first century Christianity. After careful consideration of the New Testament and ante-Nicene evidence, he concludes:

It was never the intention of the original witnesses to Christ in the New Testament to set before us an intellectual problem--that of the Three Divine Persons--and then to tell us silently to worship this mystery of the "Three in One." There is no trace of such an idea in the New Testament . . . The ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity is not only the product of genuine Biblical thought, it is also the product of philosophical speculation, which is remote from the thought of the Bible . . . Similarly, the idea of the Three Persons is more than questionable. Even Augustine felt this (cf. *De Trinitate*, V, 9). K. Barth seems to share this misgiving (*Kirchl. Dogm.*, I, I, p.703).^[14]

While Brunner finds certain aspects of the Trinity doctrine problematic, most contemporary Bible scholars and systematic theologians contend that the Primitive Christian congregation (*ecclesia*) believed Jesus the Messiah was essentially God. Some scholars even claim that the New Testament writers held divergent views about Christ or that their respective Christological systems show signs of dialectical development (Anderson 1ff). Nevertheless, at least some Protestant and Catholic theologians have candidly conceded that the Trinity is not a strict Biblical doctrine. Certain thinkers have even noted that the first century *ecclesia* did not believe that Jesus is Almighty God nor did God's Primitive Christian people think that the Son of God is consubstantial with the Father or ontologically identical to the Holy Spirit.

Martin Werner is one such writer who reports: "From a high angelic-being the Church made Christ a god in terms of the concept of deity current in Hellenistic mythology" (Werner 215). This change, avers Werner, took place in the post-apostolic era (214ff). The present writer thinks that the change Werner recounts was, in fact, a deviation from the primal tenets of first century Christianity, as we shall attempt to show in this essay. But if the triune doctrine of God is simply a speculative human dogma that does not truly represent the spirit of Jesus Christ's original teachings, it seems safe to conclude that those theologians who declare that the Son of God is ontologically equal to the Father are somewhat overstating their case. Indeed, as we examine the history of the primordial *ecclesia*, it appears doubtful that early Christians ever viewed Jesus as Almighty God qua Almighty God (Robinson 70). To buttress this point, please note the words of John L. McKenzie (S.J.):

The relation of the Father and Son as set forth in [John 5:17ff] is the foundation of later developments in Trinitarian and Christological belief and theology; it is not

identical with these later developments. Much of the discourse seems to be a refutation of the charge that Jesus claimed to be equal to God. This is met by affirming that the Son can do nothing independently of the Father. Later theology found it necessary to refine this statement by a distinction between person and nature which John did not know. (McKenzie 187)

McKenzie appears to substantiate the notion that the first century congregation of God neither taught nor believed that Jesus Christ is Almighty God (*Deus omnipotentia*). It did not make the fine subtle distinctions between "person and nature" that later students or doctors of theology would introduce, implement, and heavily depend upon to explain the supposed triune Being of God. To the contrary, the belief in the omnipotence of Christ was a much "later" development in Christian history (Youngblood 111). Fittingly, when commenting on the Greek of 1 Cor 8:5, 6, Clarence T. Craig observes that for the first century writer of Corinthians: "only one is really God, the Father of all, who is the Creator and consummation of all things" (Craig 93-94).

Craig further elucidates this point, saying:

Paul chose his prepositions [*ex* and *dia*] carefully in order to distinguish between God the Father, who is the ultimate source of creation, and Christ, the Lord, through whom [*dia*] this activity takes place . . . it is perfectly clear what Paul wants to affirm. Neither Caesar nor Isis is Lord, but only Jesus Christ. When Paul ascribed Lordship to Christ, in contrast to later church dogma, he did not mean that Christ was God. Christ was definitely subordinated to God (Craig 93-94).^[15]

In a monograph entitled *Christianity: Essence, History and Future* Hans Kung convincingly demonstrates that the first century congregation of God did not teach that Jesus is ontologically equal to Almighty God (Kung 95-97). After a brief review of the New Testament evidence, he boldly declares that the Greek Scriptures do not teach that there is one divine nature (*physis*) common to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is, the Greek Scriptures do not teach the Nicene doctrine of *homoousion to patri*. Rather, the New Testament focuses on the Father: "from whom are all things and to whom are all things" (97). He is the One who reveals Himself through Jesus Christ and He (the Father) takes the lead in initiating,^[16] in bringing to fruition the dynamic, interpersonal divine revelatory and salvific activity gloriously manifested in human history through the person of Jesus Christ (Jn 1:18; 2 Cor 5:19; Tit 3:4-7; Heb 1:1-2; 1 Jn 5:20). God has supremely revealed Himself through (*dia*) Christ, not literally in Christ. True, the apostle Paul does use *en* to describe God's saving work *en* Christ (2 Cor 5:19). However, Paul utilizes the Greek preposition instrumentally in the aforesaid text: God was reconciling the world of humankind by means of Christ (NWT).^[17] Concluding our Biblical search for evidence of Jesus' Deity, we can heartily agree with E.P. Sanders' analysis: "Historically, it is an error to think that Christians must believe that Jesus was superhuman, and also an error to think that in Jesus' own day his miracles were taken as proving partial or full divinity" (Sanders 135).

Other theologians have also admitted this vital fact. In other words, they are well aware that the Trinity is not a New Testament teaching and they admit that the New Testament writers do not depict Jesus as Almighty God in the flesh, even if these same scholars affirm the Trinity on other grounds. For instance, Cyril C. Richardson has expressed his personal reservations about the doctrine of God's triunity being an accurate depiction of the Living and true Deity portrayed in the Bible. According to Richardson, the Trinity is "an artificial construct" (Richardson 148). As an "artificial construct," it arbitrarily tries to resolve the perennial dialectical tension between God's simultaneous absoluteness and relatedness to the world by esoterically delineating necessary and eternal threeness in the Godhead. However, Richardson writes: "There is no necessary threeness in the Godhead" (149). God's putative threefoldness, claims Richardson, is neither eternal nor

immutable nor necessary. Furthermore, the so-called "necessary threeness in the Godhead" evidently does not obtain as an actual state of affairs (*Verhalten*) "in the Godhead."

While he believes that there are immanent and necessary distinctions in the Godhead, however, Richardson contends that the Trinity does not exhaust all of the distinctions that one needs to make vis-à-vis the divine nature (*ousia*).^[18] Nor does it resolve, according to Richardson, the numerous antinomies evidently associated with the absoluteness and relatedness of God. Consequently, this theologian declares that every Trinitarian interpretation ever formulated has failed to resolve the tension between God's absoluteness and relatedness to the world. In a word, Trinitarian formulations are "artificial." Of course, Richardson obviously rejects the Trinity on other grounds that he thoroughly covers in his treatise.

Nevertheless, we must genuinely ask whether Richardson's analysis is satisfactory. Does a careful analysis of the Trinity doctrine show that it is an artificial construct, which has failed to adequately delineate the transcendent nature of God? Most importantly, does the Bible teach us that God is actually three divine Persons united in one community of substance (*substantiae per communionem*)?

As we examine the Scriptural evidence we cannot help but conclude that the Trinity is an anachronistic doctrine that is neither explicitly nor clearly taught in Scripture: "The New Testament writers could not have said that Jesus Christ is God: God meant the Father. They could and did say that Jesus is God's Son" (McKenzie 188). A close look at McKenzie's entire work *Light on the Gospels* will reveal that he is not simply arguing that early Christians did not identify Jesus with the Father (a position called modalism or monarchianism). Rather, his observation is very clear when considered in its context. "God meant the Father" for first century Christians, writes McKenzie. Thus, we seem warranted in concluding that Jesus was immanently subordinate to God the Father in the eyes of Primitive Christians. Further elucidating this point are the following words of McKenzie: "It is altogether impossible to deduce the Nicene Creed, and still less the dogmatic statements of the Council of Chalcedon from the Synoptic Gospels . . . The word 'consubstantial' had not even been invented yet: far from defining it, the evangelists could not even have spelled it. No, they did not know and they did not care" (188). The words of John L. McKenzie again sound a distinct and unambiguous tone: the Primitive ecclesia did not consider Jesus Christ "fully God and fully man" (*vere deus et vere homo*). In truth, Jesus did not "become God" until the fourth century (Rubenstein 211-231).

How the Belief that Jesus Is Equal to God Developed

Exactly how did the belief that Christ is ontologically equal to God the Father develop? What factors were behind its organic and prolific growth in Christian theology? We shall now briefly review the historical events associated with the development of the Trinity doctrine.

The historical evidence shows that a major shift in Christianity resulted in the uncomplicated Christian gospel acquiring extensive and complex metaphysical baggage. At one point in the life of the Christian Church, disciples of Jesus were willing to accept by faith, the life, death and resurrection of the only-begotten Son of God (1 Cor 2:1-16).^[19] Though he talks exaltedly about "Gnostic" Christians (advanced believers), Clement of Alexandria explicitly states that a simple faith (*pistis*) is the primary requisite for eternal salvation through Christ: "To the Gnostic [Christian] 'are prepared what eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath entered into the heart of man;' but to him who has exercised simple faith He testifies a hundredfold in return for what he has left, a promise which has turned out to fall within human comprehension" (*Stromata* 4.18.4).

Unfortunately, this early Church father did not follow his own advice: his theological ideas are largely the result of abstruse Stoicism and Neo-Platonism (Brown 87). Stanley Burgess informs us of this fact, noting:

When referring to God, Clement follows Neoplatonic doctrine which makes heavy use of negative theology: nothing can be said directly of God, for He cannot be defined. This does not lead Clement to attempt any formal definition of the Trinity nor any Member thereof. (70)

Backing Burgess' observation are these words from Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* (4.24.156):

The God, then, being indemonstrable, is not the object of knowledge, but the Son is Wisdom, and Knowledge, and Truth, and whatever else is akin to these, and so is capable of demonstration and definition. All the powers of the Divine Nature gathered into one complete the idea of the Son, but He is infinite as regards each of his powers. He is then not absolutely One as Unity, nor Many as divisible, but One as All is one. Hence He is All. For He is a circle, all the powers being orb'd and united in Him.

Commenting on this significant Clementine passage, Charles Bigg declares the dynamic implication of these words:

Clement it will be seen, though Philo is before his eyes, has taken the leap from which Philo recoiled. He has distinguished between the thinker and the thought, between Mind and its unknown foundation, and in so doing has given birth to Neo-Platonism. It is essentially a heathen conception, and can be developed consistently only on heathen principles. (Bigg 64-65)

Clement 'heathenized' Christianity, to be sure. He was not alone in this practice, however, for other second century believers also began to rationally investigate the nature (*ontos*) of our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus.^[20] These professed Christians earnestly endeavored to plumb the unfathomable depths of the Logos' seemingly mysterious enfleshment, all the while ardently desiring to make sense of the supposed ontological relationship obtaining between the transcendent Omnipotent Deity and "the Son of His love" (Col 1:13). As a result, second century Christians subsequently began to formulate numerous speculative notions about God and His beloved Son that have continued to shape Christendom's doctrinal framework up to this very day (Hatch 133-137).

How though could these Christians express in terms that would appeal to the public at large, the seeming transcendent relationship obtaining between God and His only-begotten Son? Ultimately, these believers decided to utilize Greek ontology to describe the apparent exalted ontological relationship between the Father and the Son (Copleston 17-22). Nevertheless, they did not carry out this determination without encountering certain unexpected consequences.^[21]

The Grecian view of ontology was faulty and riddled with inadequate philosophical concepts and notions of being as such.^[22] Indeed, it is now apparent that the early Church Fathers placed too much trust in Grecian metaphysics when they worked out their respective theological systems (Wolterstorff 126-127). As various these spiritual forebears of modern-day Christendom began to lean inordinately on the Greek science of being qua being (metaphysics), adulterated notions of God and Christ started to slowly appear in the writings of such men as Irenaeus (quasi-Platonism), Ignatius (possible binitarianism or ditheism), Justin Martyr (Platonism and Stoicism) as well as Origen (paganistic syncretism).^[23]

Again, we need to stress that none of the aforementioned individuals taught

Trinitarianism per se. Nevertheless, it seems accurate to attribute the pioneering of the Trinity doctrine to these early Church Fathers (Barnard 100-105). That is, the pre-Nicenes previously discussed in this work laid the groundwork for the Trinity by positing metaphysical theories about God that went well beyond the rightful boundaries long ago established by Scripture (1 Cor 4:6).

To further substantiate these charges, please note the following comments:

No single philosopher has contributed as much to Christian theology as Plato has. Indeed, for many early Christian thinkers it was a perceived affinity between Platonism and Christianity that allowed Christian thought to accommodate Greek philosophy. In turn, it was Plato who gave Christianity crucial conceptual tools needed to articulate its doctrines. (Allen and Springsted 1)

Notice that "early" Christian thought accommodated "Greek philosophy." Christian history itself shows that this 'accommodation' involved more than simply borrowing Greek philosophical terms or methods as "conceptual tools." Not only did Plato give Christianity "conceptual tools," as it were, he provided an entire interpretive framework that Christians subsequently implemented to shape their views about God and Christ. The inimitable historian of philosophy, Frederick C. Copleston, even unabashedly admits that early Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr or Theophilus of Antioch "naturally made some use of terms and ideas taken from Greek philosophy" (Copleston 18). It is therefore no wonder that the Good of Plato in time became the God of Christendom *mutatis mutandis* (Allen and Springsted 1).

Robert Wilken writes about the change that eventually took place in Christianity regarding its attitude toward philosophy and Scripture. He informs us of the shift in the following way:

Justin Martyr, a Christian writing in mid-second century, took the initial step of presenting Christianity not as an exclusive religious tradition derived largely from Judaism, but as a new philosophical way of life in competition with Stoics, Platonists, Cynics, and the other ruling 'ways' of his day. What would Paul, whose scorn for philosophy only served to support Justin's critics, have thought of Christianity as a philosophical sect? The term 'philosophy' appears only seldom in Christian writings up to this time, and where it appears it is usually regarded with contempt . . . No one before him [Justin Martyr] had really thought seriously of presenting Christianity as a philosophy, but this 'innovation,' after much opposition, came to be tolerated, accepted, and finally celebrated by Christians of every stripe—from learned theologians to the cobblers, washer-women, and wool-workers Celsus made fun of. (Wilken 177-183)

Concerning Origen, Stanley M. Burgess further observes:

In his understanding of the Trinity, Origen is deeply influenced by Neoplatonic thought. Neoplatonism recognized the One, the unspeakable being from which all other beings emanate . . . Throughout Origen's writings one can see a tension between the recognition of the equality of members of the Trinity, and a more Neoplatonic position which distinguished between the Father and the other members of the Godhead by making the Son and the Holy Spirit subordinate beings. Swete (p. 131) correctly has pointed out that Origen's teaching is not consistent throughout his writings. (Burgess 73)

While Burgess commendably admits that Neo-Platonism influenced Origen, he nevertheless goes on to maintain that the Alexandrian theologian does not seem consistent as one peruses his theological treatises. In his *Commentary on John*, for example, Origen contends that the Logos created the Holy Spirit (2.6). However, in *Peri Archon* 1.1.3, he purportedly contradicts what he explicitly declares about the Logos in *Commentary on John* 2.6. Nevertheless, I do not think it is accurate to say

that the famed Alexandrian thought the Holy Spirit was an uncreated being. Nor did Origen express such a notion in *Peri Archon*. Origen simply notes that the Church of his time had not found a passage in Scripture that forthrightly declared the Holy Spirit is a creature (*Peri Archon* 1.1.3). This does not mean that Origen believed the Holy Spirit was not created, however. For elsewhere in *Commentary on John* he writes: "There are three hypostases, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; and at the same time we believe nothing to be uncreated but the Father" (Burgess 73). Therefore, Origen clearly held that God created the Holy Spirit through the Logos (Compare *Peri Archon* 4.4.1). Despite this fact, we must concede that Origen consistently espoused a Neo-Platonic worldview that subordinated the Son and Spirit to the Father while in some way construing each Person in the Trinity as God in some sense of the word. This is not to say that Origen taught the Trinity per se. Nevertheless, the divine hierarchy of being notion that characterizes Middle/Neo-Platonism evidently influenced his Christology and special theology (Bigg 152-234). Appropriately, Hans Kung concludes that "as a Christian one can speak of Father, Son and Spirit, without having to follow Origen in taking over the Middle Platonic/Neo-Platonic doctrine of hypostases" (Kung "Christian Thinkers" 67-70).

The previous reflections bring us back to the astute words of Emil Brunner:

From the time of Origen's doctrine of the Logos . . . speculation was rife in the sphere of theology; thus men's interest were deflected from the historical centre to the eternal background, and then severed from it. People then began to speculate about the transcendent relation of the Three Persons of the Trinity within the Trinity. (Brunner 224)

Ergo, despite the vehement dogmatism employed in the modern proclamation (*kerygma*) of the Trinity, a closer look at Christian history helps us to appreciate that Primitive Christians simply did not think God is threefold nor did they believe that Jesus was Almighty God. Contrariwise, the first century Christians affirmed that Christ Jesus was ontologically subordinate to God the Father (1 Cor 15:24-28). The Trinity is a fourth century innovation, pioneered by earlier developments involving speculations regarding the peerless Deity of Judaism and Christianity (Hatch 332-333).

RELEVANT FOOTNOTES TO THIS SECTION:

[14] Brunner 1949:226-239.

[15] Interestingly, Hans Conzelmann provides evidence that "The Christian use of *kurios* cannot be derived from the LXX. The reverse is in fact the case" (Conzelmann 1969:83-84). His comments suggest that when the early Christians called Jesus "Lord" (*kurios*), they did not mean that he is God or YHWH.

[16] Besides Jn 3:16, other passages such as Jude 25 and Rv 19:6-9 indicate that God the Father initiates and "takes the lead" in the revelatory and soteriological works predicated of God in Scripture. The Son serves as God's minister or agent. He is Savior in that God effects salvation through the Son.

[17] For a discussion of the causal or instrumental use of *en*, consult BAGD 260. Clear examples of the instrumental *en* are Mt 12:24; Jn 1:4; Rom 3:24; Phil 4:7; Heb 1:2.

[18] Richardson thinks that the two primary distinctions we need to make vis-à-vis God's Being are the divine distinctions of absoluteness and relatedness.

[19] Finley Hooper details these developments in his *Roman Realities*. See 1979:498-500.

[20] Tertullian attempts to analyze the *generatio* of the Son in *Adversus Praxean* 5-8. Furthermore, he discusses the two substances that allegedly constitute the one person of Christ, in the same work (Consult § 27 of *Adversus Praxean*).

[21] Interestingly, existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger lamented the theological use of philosophy based on the apostolic words found in 1 Cor 1:20ff. Cf. Allen and Springsted 1992:259

[22] An example of such "inadequate notions of being as such" is the Platonic Doctrine of Forms. Alasdair MacIntyre discusses the problematic features of Plato's doctrine in MacIntyre 1998:26-56. See also Wolterstorff 1970:263-293.

[23] Origen's syncretism is well documented. For a discussion of texts that imply some early Christian writings contained elements of binitarianism, see Pelikan 1:184-186.