

INITIAL EXPRESSIONS OF THE TRINITY

The Development of the Dogma of the Trinity

INITIAL CONFESSIONS

- There is evidence of a triadic formula in 1 Clem 8, 19, 20; *Didache* 10; *Shepherd of Hermas*, Visions, 1.1.3 (Rusch, introduction)
- Christ is referred to as God; he is presented as preexistent (2 Clem 3, 9); the *Shepherd of Hermas* refers to him as a supreme angel (*Similitudes*, 8.3.3 and 9.1.1) (Rush, introduction)
- Ignatius of Antioch (d. between 98-117)
 - The prophets “were inspired by his grace to convince unbelievers that God is one, and that he has revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ, who is his Word issuing from the silence and who won the complete approval of him who sent him.” (Mag 8)
 - The unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit is mirrored in the unity of the Church (Mag 12)
 - “Our God Jesus Christ, indeed, has revealed himself more clearly by returning to the Father” (Rom 3)

APOLOGISTS

- The apologists (Aristides, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Tatian, Theophilus of Antioch) develop the understanding of the Logos as intimately related to the Father. They drew upon the Stoic idea of the *Logos indiathetos* and the *Logos prophorikos*. (Rusch, introduction)
- They were concerned to show that the expression of the word did not leave the Father without reason and that it did not involve the dividing of the divinity (Rusch, introduction)
- “The Apologists utilized a picture of a man putting forth his thought and spirit in external activity. This representation allowed them to recognize, although dimly, the eternal plurality in the Godhead and to show how the Word and the Spirit, truly manifested in space and time, could also be within the being of the Father.” (Rusch, introduction)

DEVELOPMENTS

IRENAEUS OF LYONS

Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, particularly book 3. English translation available on-line at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/irenaeus-book3.html>.

- Son is with the Father before creation (Rusch, introduction)
 - “For we could not have learned about God in any other way, if our teacher, existing as the Word, had not become a human being, since no one could have told us about the Father except his very own Son.” (Irenaeus, *Against heresies*, 5.1.1)
- Son and Spirit are the hands of the Father (4.20.2, 5.1.3)
- Importance of Tradition
 - Keeping to the Tradition and not inventing levels of divinity
 - Christ proclaimed the Father; the Son is the revelation of the Father
 - The Scripture (Old Testament) names only God the Father and his Son as God
- “There is, therefore, one God the Father, as we have shown, and one Christ Jesus our lord, who comes through a universal plan and recapitulates all things in himself. But in every way he is also a human, a creation of God; he, therefore, recapitulated humanity in

himself. The invisible became visible, the unchangeable became subject to change, and the Word became human, recapitulating everything in himself." (Irenaeus, *Against heresies*, 3.16.6)

- "The Word of God became human, in keeping with Moses' words, 'God, his works are true' (Dt. 32.4). If he only appeared as though he were flesh, without having become flesh, then his work was not true. But he actually was what he appeared to be, namely, God, recapitulating in himself the model of humanity formed long ago, in order to kill sin, destroy death, and give life to humanity. And for this reason his works are true." (Irenaeus, *Against heresies*, 3.18.7)
- "Who else can reign in the house of Jacob uninterruptedly and forever except Jesus Christ, our lord, Son of the most high God, who promised through the law and the prophets to make his own salvation visible to all flesh, so that he would become a son of man in order that the human being might become a Son of God?" (Irenaeus, *Against heresies*, 3.10.2)
- Only a Son of God who is both human and divine can save humans
 - "For if a human being had not conquered humanity's enemy, then that enemy would not have been overcome justly; but, at the same time, if God had not bestowed salvation, our possession of it would not have been secure. And if humanity had not been united to God, it could not have achieved a sharing of incorruptibility . . . For how could we share in God's filial adoption, if we had not received from God, through the Son, communion with God, and if God's word had not become flesh and shared that with us?" (Irenaeus, *Against heresies*, 3.18.7)
- He recapitulates all in himself
 - "There is, therefore, one God the Father, as we have shown, and one Christ Jesus our lord, who comes through a universal plan and recapitulates all things in himself. But in every way he is also a human, a creation of God; he, therefore, recapitulated humanity in himself. The invisible became visible, the unchangeable became subject to change, and the Word became human, recapitulating everything in himself." (Irenaeus, *Against heresies*, 3.16.6)
- God became humans so that humans might be lifted to God
- Role of the Spirit
 - The Spirit descends on the Son and is sent forth (3.17.1-2)

Adversus Praxean

"Now, from this one passage of the epistle of the inspired apostle, we have been already able to show that the Father and the Son are two separate Persons, not only by the mention of their separate names as Father and the Son, but also by the fact that He who delivered up the kingdom, and He to whom it is delivered up -- and in like manner, He who subjected (all things), and He to whom they were subjected -- must necessarily be two different Beings." (4)

"Then, therefore, does the Word also Himself assume His own form and glorious garb, His own 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 under the name of Wisdom." (7)

"It is not by way of diversity that the Son differs from the Father, but by distribution: it is not by division that He is different, but by distinction; because the Father is not the same as the Son, since they differ one from the other in the mode of their being. For the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole, ... Thus the Father is distinct from the Son, being greater than the Son, inasmuch as He who begets is one, and He who is begotten is another; He, too, who sends is one, and He who is sent is another; and He, again, who makes is one, and He through whom the thing is made is another....even as we say that the Son is also distinct from the Father; so that He showed a third degree in the Paraclete, as we believe the second degree is in the Son, by reason of the order observed in the Economy." (9)

- The Spirit leads one to the Son, who presents him to the Father (5.36.2)
- The Spirit keeps the Church in the truth
- The Spirit seals and makes possible the unity expressed in the liturgy (3.17.2)
- The Spirit sanctifies the person, making them into the dwelling place of God (Bobrinskoy, 208-209)

TERTULLIAN OF CARTHAGE

- God is one, but there is also a threeness in God (*trinitas*)
- The unity of God is economically Three; unity does not mean that the three are one person. (2)
- There is a unity of substance, condition, power and three in form, degree, and aspect (2)
- There is number in God without division (2)
- Threeness in God does not contradict unity; it actually supports it (3)
- True monarchy is the monarchy of the Father, with the Son and the Spirit always acting in union with the Father (3)
- The Son derives from the substance of the Father; the Spirit from the substance of the Father through the Son (4)
- The three are three separate persons, three separate beings (4)
- Before creation, God was alone, but always with his reason; he begot the Word just as our reason brings forth words in its operation within us (5)
- The Son and Spirit are not separate from the Father (8)
 - Father→Son→Spirit
 - Root→tree→fruit
 - Source→river→stream
 - Sun→ray→apex of the ray
- The Son is a derivation of the Father's substance and a portion of the whole while the Father is the entire substance (9)
- The one substance is God; there are three coherent persons: "But although I must everywhere hold one only substance in three coherent and inseparable (Persons), yet I am bound to acknowledge, from the necessity of the case, that He who issues a command is different from Him who executes it." (12)
- Scripture speaks of two as God, but never of gods; therefore the three are God not gods (13)

ATTEMPTS AT PRECISION

- Economic Trinitarianism
 - Examples
 - Justin Martyr, at times Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian
 - Common outlook
 - God is one yet he is also three in relation to the economy

Adversus Praxean

This heresy thinks that "one cannot believe in One Only God in any other way than by saying that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are the very selfsame Person. As if in this way also one were not All, in that All are of One, by unity (that is) of substance; while the mystery of the dispensation is still guarded, which distributes the Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three Persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God, from whom these degrees and forms and aspects are reckoned, under the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. How they are susceptible of number without division, will be shown as our treatise proceeds." (2)

"Although He is the one only God, He must yet be believed in with His own *oikonomia*. The numerical order and distribution of the Trinity they assume to be a division of the Unity; whereas the Unity which derives the Trinity out of its own self is so far from being destroyed, that it is actually supported by it." (3)

"But as for me, who derive the Son from no other source but from the substance of the Father, and (represent Him) as doing nothing without the Father's will, and as having received all power from the Father, how can I be possibly destroying the Monarchy from the faith, when I preserve it in the Son just as it was committed to Him by the Father?"

The same remark (I wish also to be formally) made by me with respect to the third degree in the Godhead, because I believe the Spirit to proceed from no other source than from the Father through the Son." (4)

- Strengths
 - Upholds the biblical witness of a threeness in God
 - Does not reduce the threeness to mere appearance or time
 - Suggests that the threeness precedes creation
- Weaknesses
 - The Son and Spirit are the agents of the Father
 - The Son and the Spirit solve the problem of the Father's relationship to creation
 - It is unclear whether the Son and Spirit are as fully God as the Father is
 - It is unclear whether the Son and Spirit are eternally distinct from the Father
- Subordinationism
 - Radical Subordinationism
 - Examples
 - Dionysius of Alexandria
 - Common outlook
 - Only the Father is God
 - The Son is subordinate, not eternal, thus perhaps a creature
 - Platonist Subordinationism
 - Examples
 - Clement of Alexandria
 - Origen of Alexandria
 - Common outlook
 - The Father is the fullness of God, beyond all access by creatures
 - The Son mediates the Father to creatures
 - The Spirit mediates the Son in sanctification
 - The Son and Spirit are divine and eternal but not as fully divine as the Father

ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA

- God is beyond being; he is alone and ingenerate
- God brings an immaterial creation into being; this is only possible through the mediation of the Son
 - The Son mediates between unity and plurality
 - The expressed Word is eternal
 - The Son and Spirit participate in the divinity of the Father, which means they are not the fullness of God, like the Father. This does not mean, though, that they are somehow subordinate to the Father in being.
- The generation of the Son is like the emergence of the will from the mind; he exists by a continuous exercise of the Father's will
- They exist in a union of love
- The Father and Son are other in subsistence (hypostasis)
- The Father is truly God, the Son is a second God
- The Holy Spirit is also an active, personal subsistence; he is originated by the Father through the Son
- The Father relates to creation as a whole; the Son to rational creatures; the Spirit to holy creatures
- Origen introduces into Trinitarian discourse the important distinction between words about Christ and the reality of the Son. While the Valentinians held that different words referred to different realities—and thus Word, Wisdom, Son refer to different divinities—Origen developed the idea that the names are *epinoiai*: they are ways that our language refer to the

Son but are incomplete in our perception. For this reason, different names can refer to the same reality. (See Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*).

- “The believers see that the divine and human natures began to be interwoven in Jesus, so that the human nature, by its participation in the divine, becomes divine, not only in Jesus, but also in all who, with faith, take up the life which Jesus taught, a life that leads everyone who lives according to Jesus’ commands to a loving relationship with God and union with Jesus.” (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 3.28)
- “The one whom we think and believe to be God and Son of God from the beginning is the true Word, absolute wisdom, and absolute truth; we say that his mortal body and the human soul that is in him received the highest dignity, not only through fellowship with him, but also through union and blending with him, and that, by participating in his divinity, they were transformed into God.” (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 3.41)