

Origins of the Trinity

by Rod Reynolds

The Trinity doctrine is widely (though not universally) accepted within the realm of traditional Christianity. Yet it's unlikely that the majority of nominal believers in the Trinity have really examined the doctrine closely. Exactly what is the Trinity? Is it Biblical? What are its true origins?

Although there have been and are a variety of forms to the doctrine, those most widely accepted today hold in common the view that God exists as three persons in one divine Being. The theologians who developed the Trinity doctrine wrote principally in the Greek language (some wrote in Latin), and the applicable technical terms eventually settled upon are three *hupostases* in *homoousia*. *Hupostasis* (transliterated *hypostasis*) and *ousia* are so similar in meaning that at times they have been used interchangeably. *Hypostasis* — literally, that which stands under, sometimes translated "substance" — can be defined in part as that quality or those qualities which make a thing what it is, its underlying or essential nature. In connection with the Trinity doctrine *hypostasis* relates essentially to the distinctions within the Trinity. The distinctions are: The Father is unbegotten, the Son begotten or generated, the Spirit proceeding. *Ousia* (derived from *eimi*, to be or exist) in relation to the Trinity refers to nature or being, with the emphasis on being. Hence God is defined as three distinct, eternal and co-equal hypostases in One Being. Moreover, each of the three "Persons" is equal to the entire Trinity and the entire Trinity is not more than one of the three "Persons."

If you're scratching your head about now, you're not alone. Even many of the adherents to the Trinity doctrine have criticized it as overly abstract and unrelated to the manner in which God has revealed himself in history and personal experience. In commenting on Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity, which is dominant in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, historian and theologian J. L. Neve wrote, "...his aim at harmonizing the persons with the unity results in a speculative system which is in constant danger of losing the relation to the reality of the divine revelation through history." (*A History of Christian Thought*, p. 121). And in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* we find this comment: "...most trinitarian doctrine is so abstract it is difficult to see its connection with praxis [practical affairs]" (Vol. 15, "Trinity," p. 57).

The average churchgoer is mystified by the doctrine, and it's safe to say that few actually think of God in the way he is imagined by Trinitarian theologians. Many well informed Trinitarians admit that the doctrine is unintelligible and incomprehensible. The following idea has been often stated among supporters of the Trinity doctrine, "If you try to understand the Trinity, you'll lose your mind; if you deny the Trinity, you'll lose your soul." Is that the choice we're faced with: Accept an incomprehensible, illogical, and Biblically indefensible concept of God, or lose out on salvation? Or is there a better way to understand God? Defenders of the Trinity doctrine tell us, as Augustine did, that human language is inadequate to express the nature of God. The human mind, we are told, is too feeble and limited to understand what God is like.

Yet, Scripture tells us that *we can* know and understand God; not totally, for we yet "see through a glass darkly." But we can know and understand those things he has revealed, and

he has revealed quite a lot. "...let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me..." (Jeremiah 9:24). Jesus said, "...I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own" (John 10:14). Knowing God goes hand-in-hand with having the gift of eternal life: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). To those called and chosen God has given His Spirit, "...that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God." The hidden secrets of a future age "God has revealed...to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God" (1 Corinthians 2: 12, 10). Further, through the knowledge God reveals of himself through his word, it's possible for us to have an intimate personal fellowship with the Father and Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3).

Could it be that the formulators of the Trinity doctrine were looking in the wrong places for answers to their questions about God? Were they relying on human wisdom rather than knowledge revealed through the word of God as illuminated by His Spirit? It's sometimes alleged that the patristic writers, as they are called, came up with the Trinity doctrine to combat heresy. But could it be possible that their own teachings are heresy, as far as God is concerned? Why did they develop the three-in-one God concept? Is it really taught in the Bible? And if not, where did it come from?

Mystery Religions and Greek Philosophy

It is true that some impetus was given to the development of the Trinity doctrine by various concepts propounded as to the nature of Christ and his relationship to the Father. Among these were doctrines known in history as Monarchianism, Arianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism and Monothelism.

Monarchists (2nd and 3rd centuries) exalted the concept of monotheism. One of the two groups identified as Monarchians was called the Adoptionists. They believed that Jesus Christ was merely human until his baptism, when the Holy Spirit made him the Son of God by adoption.

Another group, called the Patripassians or Modalistic Monarchians regarded the Trinity as three manifestations of a single divine Being. Distinctions within the Godhead are only apparent, not real, they taught.

Arianism (4th century) is associated with the belief that Jesus Christ has not eternally existed but is a created being who came to exist at some point in time.

Nestorianism (5th century) is based on the teaching of Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, that Jesus Christ is not a single individual embodying both human nature and the divine nature, but rather consisted of two separate persons, one divine and one human, loosely united. He maintained that God did not die, and that Mary was the mother of only the human person.

Monophysites (5th and 6th centuries) was a sect believing that Christ had only divine nature, not human. Monothelites (7th century) taught that Christ had two natures, but one will.

These views of Christ's nature — eventually deemed "heretical" by the Catholic Church — represent minority opinions in an ongoing debate about the subject which lasted into the seventh century. Remnants representing some of these groups still exist. The orthodox Catholic view, declared at the Council of Constantinople in 680, is that Christ has two wills, human and divine, the human will in him being subordinate to the divine.

Catholic conceptions of God's nature, and of how man is to relate to God and worship, did not arise, however, merely as an endeavor to develop Biblically sound responses to "heretical" ideas. Theologians and other Church leaders were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, the popular religions of the Roman Empire (especially the mystery cults), and by political considerations. The fact that all these influences affected Catholic doctrine and practice is well established historically.

In summarizing the case we find the following statements from *A Survey of European Civilization*, by Wallace Ferguson and Geoffrey Bruun, a standard college textbook, "...as the new religion [Christianity] spread to the Jews beyond Palestine and to the other peoples of the empire, its development was influenced by Greek philosophy and by some of the concepts and practices common to the mystery cults" (Vol. 1, p. 87). As the Church grew there were introduced "non-Christian elements into its doctrine and practice" (p. 91). Many Church members "...clung stubbornly to ancient superstitions, translating them into terms of the new religion" (p. 92). "The distinction between orthodoxy and heresy, between opinions accepted or rejected by the church authorities, was often decided partly by political considerations and after a bitter struggle between opposing parties" (p. 92). Even after the successful suppression of Arianism within the empire (latter fourth century), "...other heresies arose in profusion, springing for the most part from the attempt to define further the exact nature of the union of perfect God and perfect man in Christ. Political rivalry...added bitterness to these controversies" (p. 95).

Will Durant in his *The Story of Philosophy*, while not discussing specifically concepts of God's nature, points out the profound influence Platonism had over Catholic doctrine and practice during the Middle Ages (pp. 40-41). Says he, "Much of the politics of Catholicism was derived from Plato's 'royal lies,' or influenced by them; the ideas of heaven, purgatory, and hell, in their medieval form, are traceable to the last book of the *Republic*; the cosmology [ideas of the structure and nature of the universe] of scholasticism [Catholic theology of the Middle Ages] comes largely from the *Timaeus*; the doctrine of realism (the objective reality of general ideas) was an interpretation of the doctrine of Ideas; even the educational 'quadrivium' (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) was modeled on the curriculum outlined in Plato" (p. 41).

Referring more specifically to the influence of Middle Platonism on Catholic conceptions of God we find the following comments from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: "From the middle of the 2nd century AD, Christians who had some training in Greek philosophy began to feel the need to express their faith in its terms, both for their own intellectual satisfaction and in order to convert educated pagans. The philosophy that suited them best was Platonism" ("Platonism and Neoplatonism," 15th ed., Vol. 14, p. 524). Continuing, Middle Platonism's "relatively straightforward theism and high moral tone suited their purposes excellently; and

the influence of this older form of Platonism persisted through the 4th century, and beyond, even after the works of Plotinus and Porphyry [Neoplatonists] began to be read by Christians" (p. 543). The Christian Platonists "regarded Platonic philosophy as the best available instrument for understanding and defending the teachings of Scripture and Church tradition." They believed "that all that was rationally certain in Platonic speculation would prove to be in perfect accordance with the Christian revelation. Their unhistorical approach and unscholarly method of exegesis [explaining or interpreting] of texts, both pagan and Christian, facilitated the confidence" (p. 542).

The leading Christian Platonists of the ante-Nicene period were Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Later Platonists include, among others, the Cappadocian monks (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa), Marius Victorinus, and Augustine. Each of these influenced the development of Trinity doctrine. In summing up the effects of Platonic philosophy, this source states that Platonism "has deeply influenced Christian theology" (p. 545).

Stoicism, too, had a strong bearing on the development of the Catholic religion. Of the *Dissertations* [or Discourses] of *Epictetus*, first century Stoic philosopher, written by the historian Arrian (Epictetus himself left no writings), it is said, "His book had the distinction of being adopted as a religious manual by the early Christian Church" (*The Story of Philosophy*, p. 101). As with Platonism, Stoicism's influence went beyond concepts of God's nature, but the latter was included. This will be discussed in more detail later.

Make no mistake, the Scriptures teach clearly that there is "one God" (James 2:19). But the question is *how* is God one? The true answer is contained in Scripture. Mr. Herbert Armstrong insisted on the principle of letting "the Bible interpret the Bible." I agree, and I believe all who genuinely seek to understand the Bible's teachings must apply this principle, amplified in the *Angus-Green Bible Handbook* as follows: "Theology is the whole meaning of Scripture — the sense taught in the whole of Scripture, as that sense is modified, limited, and explained by Scripture itself. It is a consistently interpreted representation of the statements of the Bible, on the various facts, doctrines, and precepts, which the book of God reveals" (p. 201). And further, "...the Spirit of God does not communicate to the mind of even a teachable, obedient, and devout Christian, any doctrine or meaning of Scripture which is not contained already in Scripture itself. He makes men wise *up to* what is written, but not beyond it" (p. 179).

The words of Scripture understood in harmonious relation to the whole of Scripture are the proper basis for interpreting Scripture. "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, Line upon line, line upon line, Here a little, there a little," is how the teachings of God's word are to be understood. The Scripture was written in such a way that ignoring this principle, "...they might go and fall backward, and be broken And snared and caught" (Isaiah 28:10, 13). Spiritual understanding is given to "babes," those who eagerly drink in of the milk of God's word, totally yielded and trusting his word implicitly (verse 9, Matthew 11:25; 1 Peter 2:2). But men of influence were not content to seek the answers to such questions in the relatively straightforward and simple statements of Scripture. Rather, they looked to other sources as the framework for their ideas about God, on which they could drape specific Scriptures wrenched out of the overall context of the entire Bible.

Faithful adherents to God's word, the Bible, must believe, in accordance with the testimony of Scripture, that, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Scripture says: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20). I, and those of like mind, believe that God's word itself, correctly understood, is the only suitable framework and acceptable source for spiritual understanding. Any teaching, tradition, or practice not in harmony with the Scriptures of the Bible must be rejected.

On the other hand, Catholic faith holds that "The Church...is infallible..." (*My Catholic Faith*, p. 146). According to Catholic teaching, Scripture derives its authority from that of Christ and the Church. The Church has the sole authority to interpret Scripture, and Church tradition, defined as "the authoritative teaching of the Church" has primacy.

The Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day also placed the authority of their interpretations and religious tradition above that of Scripture. Alfred Edersheim, a nineteenth century scholar of the Jewish religion at the time of Christ, cites Talmudic passages as follows: "'The sayings of the elders have more weight than those of the prophets' (Jer. Ber. i. 7); 'an offence against the sayings of the Scribes is worse than one against those of Scripture' (Sanh. xi. 3)" (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 68, n. 22; n. 14 to book 1, chapter 8 in the older edition). For this Jesus sternly rebuked the Jews, saying, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" Jesus went on to say, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition." By setting the authority of their own tradition above that of Scripture, Jesus said the Jews were "making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down" (Mark 7:5-13). With the foregoing in mind, it is important to understand that the *Trinity doctrine does not rest on the authority of Scripture, but on the interpretation and tradition of the Catholic Church*. Like the tradition of the Scribes, the untenable tenets of the Trinity doctrine render meaningless and of no effect many plain statements of Scripture.

The idea that God must be "one being" derives from the pagan religious-philosophical idea of the ideal of "pure being" and the associated ideal of the perfection of "oneness." These ideas were cultivated in Egyptian religion and Greek philosophy, which were closely intertwined. Greek philosophical ideas, particularly Platonic philosophy, were largely distilled from ancient Egyptian religious and philosophical teachings.¹ According to the "doctrine of Memphis," Ptah was the "*ultimate one*" and all other gods owed their existence to him. These and other attributes of Ptah (and other localized deities) were eventually transferred to Osiris whose cult became by far the most popular in Egypt and finally spread throughout the entire Mediterranean area. The most common title for Osiris was the "**good being**," uniting the concepts of pure goodness and pure being. He was also called the "**divine substance**," and "him whom one **may not name**." (James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, MacMillan one volume abridged edition, pp. 225, 236-237). The Egyptian gods were grouped in enneads, groups of nine, but the important gods usually were accompanied by a consort and child, forming *trinities*. "Gods in Egypt tended to go in threes. Most temples were built with a main sanctuary

and two subsidiary ones.... The triads usually consisted of a father, mother and son, following the example of the divine family Osiris, Isis and Horus. At Thebes the triad consisted of Amon-Ra, Mut and Khonsu. At Memphis it was Ptah, Sekhmet and Nefertem (later Imhotep)" (J.E. Manchip White, *Ancient Egypt*, p. 23). Thus both three and one became important numbers associated with theology in Egypt, and the same pattern prevailed in other ancient cultures encompassed in the Greek and Roman Empires.

If it seems confusing that polytheistic paganism could embody the idea of "one god," remember, paganism by its very nature is a mass of contradictions and confusion (Isaiah 41:29). "Babel" means confusion, as Josephus wrote, "the Hebrews mean by the word *Babel*, confusion" (*Antiquities* 1.4.3). And the false, apostate Babylonian system, initiated in Babel after the flood (Genesis 10:10, 11:9), is a system of confusion and spiritual drunkenness (cf. Revelation 17:1-5).

Hermes Trismegistos, which is Greek for interpreter-thrice-great, a Greek name for the Egyptian god Thoth, was, as stated in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (15th edition), "...acknowledged by Christianity to some degree, because he was supposed to have expounded the Trinity." It goes on to say, "Egyptian theories often found their way, in many cases newly interpreted, into the philosophy of the late classical world (Plotinus, Neoplatonism) and Gnosticism..." (Vol. 6, "Egyptian Religion," p. 509). The idea of god as both three and one became commonplace in the pre-Christian classical world.

Gnosticism

Very early in the history of the Church there arose teachers and their followers claiming the name Christian, and claiming superior knowledge. But their doctrines were derived from sources other than Scripture. The heresies they taught are today known as *Gnostic* heresies — or Gnosticism (after the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*). The treatise of Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, is a primary source of information about Gnosticism, and one of the earliest. Irenaeus traces the origin of Gnosticism to Simon Magus (I.XXIII.2; II, preface, 1), a Samaritan teacher. (Most Gnostic teachers were of Samaritan or Egyptian origin). Gnosticism is not a single doctrine because each Gnostic teacher developed his own doctrines (Irenaeus, I.XXI.1; I.XXVIII.1), so only the broadest generalizations may be made. In general, Gnosticism was a syncretistic blend of oriental mystery religion, Greek philosophy and elements of Christianity, and, sometimes, Judaism (or its Samaritan counterpart, but many Gnostic teachers were rabidly anti-Jewish). Syncretism, in this context, is the blending of pagan or mere human ideas with Biblical language and concepts.

The earliest Gnostics claimed to be Jews (often falsely) and placed emphasis on not only the burdensome Jewish traditional law, but also on theosophic [mystical, occult] Jewish fables relating to the origins and nature of the spiritual realms and the universe, eschatology [end time events], and the practice of magic (see *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, Conybeare and Howson, 1964, pp. 353-360, 691, for a discussion of the Jewish elements in Gnosticism). Cerinthus was a Judaizing Gnostic active for a long period beginning not long after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He was "educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians," according to Irenaeus (I.XXVI.1). The "wisdom of Egypt" included both its mystery religions and Greek philosophy. As discussed earlier, the Egyptian culture and its mystery religions

were a very powerful influence on Greek philosophy, especially Platonism, and they were in many respects two sides of the same coin. Egyptian and other oriental mystery religions were extremely popular in the Hellenistic (and Roman) world during the New Testament era and centuries following.

Cerinthus is also linked to the "Ebionites" by Irenaeus (I.XXVI.2), and others. "Ebionites" was an epithet applied to a remnant of the Jerusalem church that held fast to the commandments of God, and — a segment of them — to some of the traditional Jewish observances. Ebionite Gnostics (not to be confused with the Jerusalem church remnant) were Gnostics, like Cerinthus, who, in addition to teaching other confusing doctrines, laid great stress on circumcision and traditional Jewish law. It's possible that, as some scholars have believed, the heresy in Galatia, prompting Paul's epistle, was incited by Cerinthus and his followers. Later, after the Church became predominantly Gentile, Gnosticism was for the most part virulently anti-Jewish.

Gleaned from Irenaeus are some of the characteristics and teachings of Gnostics, as follows: They claimed secret, mystical knowledge of the spirit realms, and this knowledge, along with related magical incantations, is the basis of salvation (I.XII.6; I.XXI.4; I.XXIV.6; I.XXVII.3). The antinomian Gnostics (of which were the majority) taught that Jesus abolished the law and the prophets, and that being free of law, they could do as they please with impunity (I.XXIII.3; I.XXV.4; I.XXVII.2). Those who are spiritual have no need to be concerned with how they conduct themselves, because for them works or conduct has nothing to do with salvation (I.VI.2-4; I.XXIII.3). They used the name of Jesus Christ, called themselves Christian, and used terms and expressions from Scripture, distorting their true meaning, often through the device of allegory (I.Preface.2; I.III.1-6; I.VII.1; I.IX.4; I.XIX.1-2). Irenaeus said they could dress up error so that to the unwary it would seem "more true than the truth itself" (I.Preface.2).

Some of them represented the God of the Old Testament as an inferior demiurge [creative being], sometimes identical with Satan, or sometimes inferior to Satan. Jesus was sent by the "father who is above the God that made the world," (the latter the God of the Old Testament), to abolish his works and law and save those who believe (in Jesus) from his power (I.V.1-6; I.XXIV.1-4; I.XXVII.2). Jesus despised the God of the Old Testament and, though educated in Jewish practices, despised them (I.XXV.1-2). (It is true that Jesus denounced elements of Jewish traditional law and the hypocrisy of its proponents, but the Gnostics, and later others claiming to be Christian, misrepresented the Christ's sentiments as much more extreme). They taught that Christ, being spirit, the mind (*nous*) of the Father, did not die (I.XXIV.4; I.XXVI.1).

They used images of pagan deities in their worship (I.XXIII.4), and had no scruples about eating idol sacrifices, "maintaining that God does not greatly regard such matters" (I.VI.3; I.XXIV.5; I.XXVIII.2). They readily took part in the celebration of heathen festivals (I.VI.3). Some of the Gnostics were ascetics, forbidding marriage and the eating of animal flesh (I.XXIV.2).

Their doctrines concerning the divine nature are in fundamental respects very similar to the Trinity doctrine, which is not surprising, since both owe a great deal to Platonism and

Egyptian concepts of deity. Valentinus championed the concept of a *tripartite* Pleroma: "One God" consisting of an Ogdoad, Decad and a Duodecad (groups of 8, 10 and 12, respectively); altogether 30 "Aeons" (emanations from the divine substance) existing co-ordinately and co-eternally with the Deity (I.I.3). The concepts of Valentinus and his disciples regarding the nature of the Deity are very much like those of Plotinus (c. 204-270 A.D., founder of Neo-Platonism) and his successors. God is one, or unity, incomprehensible, beyond all thought, speech or nomenclature (I.II.5; I.XI.3). Only the Aeons emanating from the Deity in Valentinus' system are tetrads (groups of four), and in Neo-Platonism they are triads (or trinities, groups of three).

The apostles vigorously opposed Gnostic heresies. Numerous statements in their writings, and several books of the Bible, were written specifically to combat Gnostic heresies. Some Gnostic teachers arose within the Church of the apostles, wreaking havoc. Others maintained separate assemblies apart from the true Church, yet calling themselves Christian. Some of the early "fathers" of the "catholic" Church, Irenaeus and others, continued to fight against Gnosticism, even as its doctrines and practices were almost imperceptibly creeping into that Church. Gnosticism, as mentioned earlier, represents a syncretistic religion blending pagan religion and philosophical concepts with Christianity. Scholars (such as Hilgenfeld and Overbeck) have correctly understood it as the Hellenization of Christianity, accomplishing in the first century "a result which was only obtained by a gradual process in Catholic Christianity" (*The Triumph of Christendom in the Roman Empire*, Appendix 2, p. 359).

Three-in-One God a Popular Concept in the Pagan Roman Empire

Ramsay MacMullen in his history *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, the culture in which the Christian doctrine of the Trinity was formulated, observes, "It appears...to be a part of the intellectual heritage of the times that god might be one; all 'gods,' simply his will at work in various spheres of action..." (p. 87). By the third century "solar monotheism" (MacMullen's term) had spread from the East to become extremely popular in Italy so that "...a kind of personal equation with that one, was sought and advertised successive emperors off and on over the course of the whole third century" (MacMullen, p. 85). (Sun worship had an ancient history in Rome, but tended to be eclipsed in popularity by veneration for Saturn. By early in the second century, however, the Sun, known as Sol, Mithra, Apollo and a host of other names, had become dominant enough in Rome that Sunday displaced Saturday as the first and most honored day of the Roman week). Porphyry, a leading disciple of Plotinus (founder of Neoplatonism), wrote in his book *The Sun* that "the *potestas* [power, properties, qualities] of Apollo is triple, and it is the same being that is the Sun among the gods, Liber on earth, Apollo in the lower regions" (see citation in MacMullen, p. 187).

Neoplatonism — expressing many of the same ideas that had earlier found expression in Gnosticism — continued the ancient religious-philosophical tradition of one god manifested in threes. "God," in Neoplatonism, though beyond nomenclature or thought, transcending reality, was nevertheless designated "the One" and also "the Good." Bodies were regarded as the lowest forms, matter the principle of evil. "In the fully developed late Neoplatonic system, the first principle of reality, the ultimate One, was removed to an altogether ineffable transcendence [indescribable superior being], mitigated by two factors: (1) the presence of the expressions of manifestations of its unifying power, the 'henads' — identified with the gods

of paganism — at every level of reality, and (2) the possibility of return to absolute unification through the henad with which one is linked. Below the One a vast structure of triads or trinities reached down to the physical world..." (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th edition, Vol. 14, "Platonism and Neoplatonism," p. 542). Note that these concepts of God are virtually identical to those of the ancient Egyptian religions.

Meanwhile, in the same century that Neoplatonism became popular, Origen, steeped in Greek philosophy and Egyptian culture, having studied philosophy in Alexandria, Egypt with Plotinus, founder of Neoplatonism, developed the formative ideas of the Christian Trinity doctrine. He sought to unite the religious and philosophical concepts of his culture with Scripture. Ostensibly rejecting pagan religion, he embraced the essential elements of its religious philosophy, as had Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria before him, and others to follow. He did not find the Trinity doctrine in Scripture. Rather he found Scriptures he could "interpret" to fit into the intellectual mold of pagan religion-philosophy. Origen and others who followed his lead to further develop the doctrine found Scriptures they could pull out of their Biblical context and use to support the idea of a Trinity God in one being because these were intellectually appealing, popular and accepted concepts of their time and culture, not because such a teaching truly exists in Scripture. They operated from the premise that the tenets of Platonic speculation harmonized perfectly with Scripture, and that *it* was the basis on which Scripture should be understood and interpreted. As mentioned earlier, "Their unhistorical approach and unscholarly method of exegesis of texts, both pagan and Christian, facilitated the confidence" (*Britannica*, "Platonism and Neoplatonism," p. 542). The "Fathers" based their speculations on a pagan philosophical system featuring the three-in-one god concept, so their conclusions were foregone.²

Of Justin Martyr (c. 105-165) it's said, "From [Justin's] point of view, Greek philosophy and Christian revelation appear as two moments of one and the same revelation of the divine Word..." (Etienne Gilson, cited in Vol. 1, *The Intellectual Tradition of the West*, p. 228). Clement (c. 150-c. 215) had been a pagan philosopher before embracing Christianity. Historian A. E. Welsford remarks that "St Clement's conception of the nature of God was coloured by his early studies in philosophy" (*Life in the Early Church A.D. 33-313*, p. 273). And that "he attempted in his own writings to harmonize Greek with Christian thought" (p. 196).

Origen (c. 185-254) was a student of Clement's in the latter's school in Alexandria. Origen wrote his *First Principles*, in which he discusses the nature of God, not primarily in response to any perceived heresy, but in a conscious effort to combine philosophy and Scripture. Rejecting what he considered the "crude anthropomorphism" of the Old Testament, i.e., rejecting the revelation of the Old Testament concerning God, he adopted Platonistic notions of God's nature. "Origen was Platonic in his abstract conception of God" (*History of Christian Thought*, p. 86). In his conception of how Jesus related to the Father, "Origen followed Neo-Platonism" (*ibid.*, p. 86). Developing the idea common to Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism, and the philosophical tradition which preceded them, of the *nous* (mind, thought, will) proceeding from the Divine Being, he dreamed up the idea of the *eternal generation* of the Son, a feature of Trinity doctrine nowhere hinted at in Scripture. Like his teacher, Clement, Origen was heavily influenced also by Gnosticism, and exalted what he called "Christian gnosis," which shared many of the essential ideas of prior Gnostic heresy. He viewed the "souls" of men as

eternal spirits which participated in a falling into sin, but not as deeply as Satan and the demons. Because of preincarnate sin the souls of men are polluted and in need of redemption. According to Origen, Jesus offered his soul not to God, but to the devil as a ransom for sin. Christ, the *Logos*, did not really die, but his body did, to fool Satan. Some specifics of Origen's theological speculations have been viewed as heresy by his successors in the Catholic tradition, yet his ideas concerning God's nature were relied upon by others who followed in refining the Christian Trinity doctrine.

The historian Lamson, cited in *A History of the True Religion* (Dugger and Dodd, p. 63), aptly commented on these speculators as follows: "Many of them were learned, but few of them knew how to apply their learning to any good purpose.... The theology of most of them exhibited a strange and unnatural union of Christian doctrines with the philosophy taught in the Platonic schools of Alexandria, the most worthless that ever tasked the speculative intellect; and they were, almost without exception, addicted to the fanciful modes of interpretation, and particularly the allegorizing spirit, which characterized the same schools. There is no species of absurdity, in the interpretation, reasoning, faith, or opinion, of which their writings do not furnish abundance of examples" (*Church of the First Three Centuries*, pp. 331, 332).

In the West, Tertullian (c. 150-c. 225) denounced Greek philosophy as a snare and a delusion, yet scholars have noted the strong influence in his writings of the Stoic philosophy in which he was raised (*History of Christian Thought*, p. 93; *Life in the Early Church*, p. 294). His concepts concerning the Trinity, though not developed as fully as Origen's, reflect the speculative tendencies of the Greek Apologists.³ Platonism was the basis for the Trinitarian doctrines of other influential Western theologians such as Marius Victorinus, Boethius and the most influential of all, Augustine. Of Augustine (354-430) it is remarked in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Perhaps the most distinctive influence of Plotinian Neoplatonism on his thinking about God was in his Trinitarian theology" (Vol. 14, "Platonism and Neoplatonism," p. 543). In fact, there's scarcely a theologian of note in the history of the development of Trinitarianism (and there are some I've not mentioned), who's thinking is not recognized to have been shaped by Platonism. Trinitarianism, it is plain, is not founded on Scripture, but on Platonistic philosophy which was distilled out of the pagan religious-philosophical matrix of the ancient world.

Theologians Agree — Trinity is Not a Biblical Doctrine

Few informed theologians contend that the Trinity is a Biblical doctrine. Most candidly admit that it is an extra-biblical doctrine and derives its authority from tradition. Hence, Yale University theologian Jaroslav Pelikan writes, "Strictly speaking, the Trinity is not a biblical doctrine, but a church doctrine that tries to make consistent sense of biblical language and teaching." In defending the premise that church tradition apart from clear biblical teaching is an acceptable basis for faith, he goes on to say, "...if...it was good and proper for the church in 325 to go on from the scattered statements of the New Testament about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to the full-blown doctrine of the Trinity, which is not explicitly taught in the Bible, then both the concept of development of doctrine and the concept of tradition have to be accorded a place in Christian doctrine" (*The Melody of Theology*, pp. 257, 254). Note the *assumption* that the adoption of the Trinity doctrine "was good and proper", though admittedly

not taught in the Bible. We find in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* the following: "Exegetes and theologians today are in agreement that the Hebrew Bible does not contain a doctrine of the Trinity, even though it was customary in past dogmatic tracts on the Trinity to cite texts like *Genesis* 1:26, 'Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness' (see also *Gn.* 3:22, 11:7; *Is.* 6:2-3) as proof of plurality in God. Although the Hebrew Bible depicts God as the father of Israel and employs personifications of God such as Word (*davar*), Spirit (*ruah*), Wisdom (*hokhmah*), and Presence (*shekhinah*), it would go beyond the intention and spirit of the Old Testament to correlate these notions with later Trinitarian doctrine.

"Further, exegetes and theologians agree that the New Testament also does not contain an explicit doctrine of the Trinity. God the Father is the source of all that is (*Pantokrator*), and also the father of Jesus Christ; 'Father' is not a title for the first person of the Trinity but a synonym for God. Early liturgical and creedal formulas speak of God as 'Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'; praise is to be rendered to God through Christ (see opening greeting in Paul and deuterio-Paul). There are other binitarian⁴ texts (e.g., *Rom.* 4:24, 8:11; *2 Cor.* 4:14; *Col.* 2:12; *1 Tm.* 2:5-6, 6:13; *2 Tm.* 4:1), and a few triadic texts (the strongest are *2 Cor.* 13:14 and *Mt.* 28:19; others are *1 Cor.* 6:11, 12:4-6; *2 Cor.* 1:21-22; *1 Thes.* 5:18-19; *Gal.* 3:11-14). Christ is sent by God and the Spirit is sent by Christ so that all may be returned to God" (Vol. 15, "Trinity," p. 54). If you examine the "triadic" texts referred to, you'll find that only a forced interpretation would suggest anything remotely resembling the Trinity doctrine.

In 2 Corinthians 13:14, one of the "strongest" triadic texts, the natural understanding relates the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit" not to a "third person" of an imagined Trinity, but to the Spirit given by God through Christ (Acts 2:33) to his followers, the sharing of which unites them into a fellowship, one body, many members (1 Corinthians 12:12-14). When we think and speak of a group of people "sharing the same spirit," we do not normally or naturally consider the shared spirit as a "person" in its own right, and neither does the Bible.

Some scholars have questioned the authenticity of the phrase "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" in Matthew 28:19, the second of the two "strongest" triadic texts, citing an alleged lack of support in early Christian literature (E.W. Bullinger, *Word Studies on the Holy Spirit*, p. 47 ff. n.). Yet this criticism does not hold up under close scrutiny. The phrase is said to be found in every extant Greek manuscript of the book of Matthew. Moreover, contrary to what some scholars have alleged, it is found quoted or paraphrased in several second and third century sources where genuineness is not in doubt. Included in these are Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, III.XVII.1), Justin Martyr (*First Apology*, cap. 61), Tertullian (*On Baptism*, cap. 13), Hippolytus (*Against the Heresy of One Noetus*, par. 14), Origen (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 12.20), and Cyprian in several of his works (e.g., *Epistles* 24, 62, 72, *Concerning the Baptism of Heretics*, et al.; see *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 5, pp. 622, 750, 785, 1156, 1160, 1162).

Nevertheless, the fact that Matthew 28:19 (along with one or two other isolated verses in the New Testament) would be considered the major proof of the Trinity doctrine shows how really threadbare and lacking in clear Biblical support the idea is. Some commentators leap to the conclusion that because the Father, Son and Holy Spirit share the same "name," the Trinity doctrine, the idea of three persons in one being, is affirmed. But in reality, the fact that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all share the name of God proves nothing regarding the

Trinity. Israel (Jacob) said in blessing Joseph's two sons, "Let my name be named upon them..." (Genesis 48:16). Does that mean the three, all bearing the name "Israel," were three persons in one being? The notion is absurd. In a larger sense, all of Israel's many millions of descendants bear his name (Genesis 35:9-11; 49:28). Does that imply all these millions are one being? Ridiculous!

Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:14-15 that the whole family in heaven and earth — all whose Father is God — are named after him. This certainly demonstrates that bearing the name of the Father in no way implies the concept of the Trinity. There are a couple of ways "baptizing them in the name of" is commonly understood. The Greek word translated "in" by the King James translators, is the Greek preposition *eis*. The word commonly means into, and some believe the emphasis is that disciples are baptized *into* the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit — that is, what is represented by the name borne alike by them. The Scripture says we are "baptized into [Greek: *eis*] Christ" (Romans 6:3), that is, into the likeness of his death and resurrection, to walk after his example. It was said that Jesus Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16). On the day of Pentecost immediately after Christ's death and resurrection the New Testament Church received its initial baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). On that day the Holy Spirit "filled the whole house where they were sitting" (Acts 2:2). They were immersed in it, as it were. "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (verse 4). The receiving of the Holy Spirit, which accompanies water baptism (Acts 2:38), is the prophesied baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:16-17).

It's also true that "name," *onoma*, is often used in the Septuagint and the papyri for power or authority. "*Eis*," as used in Matthew 28:19, it is said by some authorities, does not mean into (as it often does), but in, same as the Greek "*en*" (See Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, and compare Matthew 10:41). This appears to be the sense in which Paul used it when he wrote, "lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name" (1 Corinthians 1:15). A similar Hebrew term used often in the Old Testament and translated into the English "in the name [of]" is also used in the sense of power or authority (e.g., Deuteronomy 18:5, 7 et al.).

The Spirit of God is an aspect of God's Divine nature, and it is through his Spirit that God works his will (Genesis 1:2; Job 26:13; Zechariah 4:6). It's to be expected, therefore, that the Holy Spirit should be associated with God's name. And this fact in no way warrants jumping to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit is a separate person from the Father and the Son. Thus it is admitted in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, "The 'Spirit of God,' whose name is found so constantly, and whose operations are so various and vital in the religion of Israel, is not distinct from God, nor does the phrase imply a distinction in the Godhead. The Spirit of God is God Himself, breathing, living, active, energizing in the world — 'God at work.' The Spirit is personal because God is personal.... God possesses life in Himself, and is the spring of all life in the universe; and, when the fullness of His vital power as in any way communicating itself is dwelt upon, the Spirit of God is expressly named" (Vol. VI, p. 255).

To attempt to defend the Trinity doctrine on the basis of Scripture is futile, since the doctrine is not consistent with the plain teachings of many specific Scriptures, and is not consistent with the overall picture of God presented in the Bible.

But, doesn't the Bible picture God as "one"? And did not Jesus say, "I and my Father are one"? (John 10:30). Yes, but again, it's important to understand *how* God is one. *How* the Father and Christ are one. And it's important to understand that God is *not* pictured in the Bible as limited to only one being.

God is presented as one God, in the sense of a compound unity, or kind, or, if you please, family. The phrase, "The LORD our God is one LORD" (Deuteronomy 6:4) ought to be understood in the immediate context, as various commentators have pointed out, in reference to the alternative of turning from his laws and of worshiping foreign gods. *Yahweh* designates most often the One who was dealing directly with the Israelites, namely, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4). But it can also designate God in the sense of a compound unity, i.e., the one God consisting of the Father and Christ. That would explain the use of the word *`echad*, which is derived from the word *`achad* (meaning to unite) and which properly means united. It can also have any of a number of other meanings, but elsewhere it refers to the people as one, the dreams of Pharaoh as one, the people answer with one voice, etc. (see Genesis 11:6; 41:25; Exodus 24:3). While the primary message of this phrase is a warning against apostasy and idolatry, the wording lends itself to the idea of *Yahweh* as a compound unity, not of three persons in one being, which contradicts logic and what the Scriptures reveal, but as a unified Godhead consisting of more than one being.

Paul tells us clearly, emphatically and in no uncertain terms that the one God does indeed consist of the Father and of Jesus Christ. Notice: "...we know that {there is} no God other except one." Note how Paul delineates the one God: "...but to us one God the Father, of whom all things, and we for Him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things, and we by Him" (1 Corinthians 8:4, 6, Literal Translation). The one God, as Paul clearly states, is made up of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. There are two personalities, as we will see two individual beings, in the Godhead. Conspicuously missing in Paul's explanation of the meaning of one God is the Holy Spirit, an omission beyond comprehension if the Holy Spirit were indeed a third person of a Trinity. The Holy Spirit is not mentioned, because the Holy Spirit is not a person but is an aspect of God's nature, which I will comment on further later.

Some have questioned whether Jesus is really fully God. The Jews accused Jesus of blasphemy when he confirmed the claim that he was *the* Son of God, which they understood implied that he was also the Messiah, and was therefore *equal with God!* (Matthew 26:63-68; 27:41-43; John 5:18). The pre-Christian Jewish concepts of the nature of the Messiah were not as fully developed as those we find in the New Testament, but Jewish writings (especially the Old Testament) reveal his existence was conceived of as before the moon, before the morning star, eternal. He was in the presence of God in heaven, at his right hand. To him were ascribed the divine name, *Yahweh*, and divine titles such as "*Yahweh* is a Man of War," and "*Yahweh* our Righteousness" (see a discussion of Jewish views and expectations concerning the Messiah in Alfred Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, pp. 113-126, or 1.160-1.179). Contrary to popular belief then, while the Jews recognized one God, they conceived of two separate individuals who bore the name of God, the one being the Messiah. This is of particular interest because the idea that God is "one being" has often been defended on the basis of the "strict monotheism" of the Jews which supposedly precluded more than one member of the Godhead.

Jesus commented on the meaning of Psalm 110:1. He said "'What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?' They said to Him, 'The Son of David.' He said to them, 'How then does David in the Spirit call Him "Lord," saying: "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies your footstool"'? 'If David then calls Him "Lord," how is He his Son?'" (Matthew 22:42-45). The Eternal ("LORD," *Yahweh*), called the Messiah "Lord" (Hebrew *`adown* translated into the Greek *kurios*). In the book of Hebrews we find that the subject of Psalm 102, the one to whom it is addressed, *Yahweh* (verses 1,12,16), God (Hebrew *`el*, verse 24), is none other than the Son (Hebrews 1:8, "But to the Son He says...."; verses 10-12 is a rendering of Psalm 102:25-27). Hebrews says of the Son, Jesus Christ, "You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands; They will perish, but You remain; And they will all grow old like a garment; Like a cloak You will fold them up, And they will be changed. But You are the same, And Your years will not fail." John wrote, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" (John 1:1-3). One of the names applied to Jesus Christ is *Immanuel*, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). In Romans 9:5 Christ is specifically referred to as God (Greek, *theos*): "...Christ...who is over all, the eternally blessed God." In a prophecy concerning the Messiah, Isaiah wrote: "For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given.... And His name will be called...Mighty God..." (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus referred to himself as "the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8). While God (*theos*) most often refers in the New Testament specifically to the Father, make no mistake, Jesus Christ is also God. He is, of course, often referred to as "Lord" (*kurios*), the most common name for God in the Septuagint.

But are the Father and Jesus Christ the same being, or are there two beings who together are God? Jesus Christ in the flesh was, by definition, a human *being*. A being is one who exists. Jesus existed as a human being. He was not the Father. The Father also existed at the same time. He therefore was, and is, also a being. Hence we have two beings. Jesus had a will, hence a mind, in harmony with the Father's, yet separate. He said, "Not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42; see also John 6:38). Two wills imply two separate beings. Jesus is rewarded with supreme exaltation because he humbled himself, obeying God to the point of dying on the cross. We are told to follow his example (Philippians 2:5-11). If Jesus and the Father are the same being, the obedience is a fraud, and there is no lesson for us who are separate beings from God. Jesus said to the Pharisees, "It is also written in your law that the testimony of two men is true. I am One who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me" (John 8:17-18). Implicit in this statement is that the Father and Jesus are two independent witnesses. If they were the same being there would be only one witness. But Jesus said he and the Father are two, comparable to two men witnessing independently to establish the truth in a trial. Jesus prayed to the Father that his disciples would "be one as We are" (John 17:11). He prayed "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (verse 21). We are separate beings from God, and from one another. There is no way we could be one with one another as they are unless they, too, are separate beings united in spirit. There is no way we could be one with Christ and the Father, as they are with one another, unless they, too, are separate beings united in spirit. These are but a few Scriptures rendered meaningless by the doctrine of a three-in-one being.

The question arises, why, if the Holy Spirit is not a person, is it referred to as speaking,

being lied to, etc.? (See Acts 1:16; 5:3; Hebrews 3:7). First, it's noteworthy that the Jews often wrote of the Holy Spirit in such terms, without conceiving of the Spirit as a person. "The mention of the 'Holy Spirit,' as speaking to individuals, is frequent in Rabbinic writings. This, of course, does not imply their belief in the Personality of the Holy Spirit..." (Edersheim, p. 139 n.). If the Rabbis could write of the Spirit in such a way, without implying that the Spirit is a person distinct from the Father and Christ, so could the authors of the New Testament. Let's revisit in this vein a statement quoted earlier from the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*: "The 'Spirit of God,'...is not distinct from God, nor does the phrase imply a distinction in the Godhead. The Spirit of God is God Himself, breathing, living, active, energizing in the world — 'God at work.' The Spirit is personal because God is personal..." (Vol. VI, p. 255). The Holy Spirit is found in Scripture to be the instrumentality through which God expresses and accomplishes His will. It is not a separate person but an aspect of his nature.

In conclusion, the Bible clearly teaches that there are two Divine personalities, separate Beings, who currently constitute the Godhead, unified as a Divine family — Father and Son. The Holy Spirit is not a separate "Person," but an aspect of God's nature, the agency through which God works everywhere in the Universe. The Trinity doctrine of popular Christianity is contrived, merely an adaptation of popular ancient pagan concepts to suit the fanciful imaginations of men. It is foreign and alien to what the Bible teaches about God's nature. The Trinity fable is a deception that effectively hides not only the real nature of God, but also the true destiny of mankind — to become one with God as Jesus Christ is, higher than the angels, sharing the Divine nature of the God family as children born into his Kingdom.

Notes

¹ The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (15th edition) points out that while "...some Hellenistic ideas [during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods] seem to have been adopted and combined with native ideas by the Egyptian priests. *The influence of the Egyptian on the Hellenistic mind was undoubtedly stronger than the reverse influence*" (italics added, Vol.6, "Egyptian Religion," p. 509). Herodotus asserted that the Greeks borrowed many of their notions from the Egyptians, notably religious ideas and geometry (*Persian Wars*, II, 4, 51, 52, 58, 66, 109, 167). The historian Will Durant noted that after the death of Socrates, Plato traveled widely, "He seems to have gone first to Egypt; and was somewhat shocked to hear from the priestly class which ruled that land, that Greece was an infant-state, without stabilizing traditions or profound culture, not yet therefore to be taken seriously by these sphinxly pundits of the Nile. But nothing so educates us as a shock; the memory of this learned caste, theocratically ruling a static agricultural people, remained alive in Plato's thought" (*The Story of Philosophy*, p. 13). Durant remarks further that Plato's plan for a Utopian society, set forth in the *Republic*, was "derived largely from actual practice as seen on his travels. He had been impressed by the Egyptian theocracy; here was a great and ancient civilization ruled by a small priestly class; and compared with the bickering and tyranny and incompetence of the Athenian *Ecclesia* Plato felt that the Egyptian government represented a much higher form of state (*Laws*, 819)" (*ibid.* p. 42). Egypt was not the only influence on Plato, of course, but it was a major influence. As Platonism developed in the centuries following Plato, Egyptian religion and culture continued to influence it profoundly.

² It shouldn't be surprising then that, as is stated in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and*

Ethics, "...the doctrine of God implied in the Sermon on the Mount seems to be removed by a wide interval from that of the Triune Deity worshipped and defined at Nicaea and Chalcedon" [Vol. VI, "God (Biblical and Christian)," p. 253]. The two reflect opposing concepts of God derived from radically different sources.

³ The most influential "Greek Apologists," active about 130-180 A.D., are Marcianus Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras, and Theophilus of Antioch.

⁴ "Binitarian" derives from (1) the Latin word *bini*, meaning two, double or a pair, (2) the suffix "ate," meaning in this case "possessing or characterized by," and (3) the connecting suffix "ian." Related English words include "binary": made up of two; and "binate": being in pairs. Neither binitarian nor trinitarian necessarily implies one being. However, Trinitarian, with a capital T, in the context of Christianity usually implies belief in one form or another of the Catholic-Protestant Trinity.

Afternote

The message of the Bible is God's word to mankind (Acts 10:34-35; Revelation 14:6). It's a timeless message for all ages (Psalm 100:5; 105:8; 1 Peter 1:25). It answers the most important questions of life, answers available from no other source. What is the purpose of human existence? What is the state of the dead? What will become of mankind if the world continues on its present course? Is there a real God?

Most don't know what the Bible itself really teaches about these and other questions of greatest importance to every human being. Confusion, doubt and plain deception have clouded the understanding of nearly all of mankind through false religious teachings, secular philosophies, bogus "science," and the like.

However, you can learn the true answers to these and other questions vital to your present happiness and your future, and that of your family, nation and the entire world. Visit our website cogmessenger.org.

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