

Joel Beeke: The doctrine of the Trinity as we have it today has been profoundly shaped by the history of Christianity. The very word trinity (from Latin trinitas, "three" or "triad"), a word not found in the Bible, is a reminder that in many respects, this doctrine is the fruit of much reflection on the witness of Scripture and has been thoroughly tested and highly refined in the fires of controversy over many centuries. . . . Consider a historical Reformed statement on the Trinity taken from the Westminster Confession of Faith (2.3): "In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.'" What do we mean by persons, substance, begotten, and proceeding? Why do we use such language? To answer these questions, we must do more work in historical theology.

Polycarp's prayer, The Martyrdom of Polycar, Chapter 19: They did not nail him then, but simply bound him. And he, placing his hands behind him, and being bound like a distinguished ram [taken] out of a great flock for sacrifice, and prepared to be an acceptable burnt-offering unto God, looked up to heaven, and said, "O Lord God Almighty, the Father of thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, the God of angels and powers, and of every creature, and of the whole race of the righteous who live before thee, I give Thee thanks that Thou hast counted me worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of Thy martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption [imparted] by the Holy Ghost. Among whom may I be accepted this day before Thee as a fat and acceptable sacrifice, according as Thou, the ever-truthful God, hast foreordained, hast revealed beforehand to me, and now hast fulfilled. Wherefore also I praise Thee for all things, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, with whom, to Thee, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen.

EBIONITES -

For a summary of their views, listen to Eusebius, who, in 325, wrote: But the heresy of the Ebionites, as it is called, asserts that Christ was the son of Joseph and Mary, considering him a mere man, and insists strongly on keeping the law in a Jewish manner, as we have seen already in this history.¹

Adoptionism -

Monoarchianism-

Modalism-

¹ Church History 6.17

Patricianism -

Platonism -

Gnosticism -

Bryan Litfin: The term “Gnostic” is derived from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*. Gnosticism was not a coherent or uniform set of beliefs. Rather, it was an array of movements that shared many common tendencies and features. Central to Gnosticism is the belief that the sect’s sacred texts and teachers could provide access to secret “knowledge” about how the universe really operates. . . . [O]ne aspect of Gnosticism [was] its teaching known as “docetism”. Docetism is the belief (held by virtually all Gnostics) that Jesus did not really come to us in the flesh, but only seemed to come in a physical body. His flesh was actually a ghostly apparition. **Getting to know the Church Fathers - p. 38**

Bryan Litfin - What exactly did the Gnostics believe? Their myths seem so ridiculous to us today that we can scarcely believe anyone would ever have embraced them. But we must acknowledge that for many ancient people, Gnosticism offered an attractive alternative to orthodox Christianity. Spiritual seekers were drawn to its seeming intellectualism and mysterious insights into the cosmos. [For example,] the Valentinian Gnostics believed there was a heavenly “Fullness” which consisted of thirty angelic beings called Aeons. The Aeons always came in male-female pairs. . . . These conjugal pairs emitted lower Aeons, and the last of these emissions was Sophia (Wisdom). But Sophia became passionate, and wickedly longed for the highest Father apart from her own consort. Though she was eventually healed from her grievous action, her evil “Thought,” which had given rise to her sin, was cast out of the Fullness like an aborted fetus. This shapeless Thought took on a personified form named Mother Achamoth. She was in a hopeless state until the “Christ” came to her and enabled Achamoth to bring forth substances from within herself. One of the beings she brought forth was the Demiurge. He was the ignorant creator of the entire physical world in which we live. In many Gnostic accounts, the Demiurge was equated with Yahweh, the Jewish God of the Old Testament, who foolishly thought he was the one true God. Only the enlightened Gnostics “knew” he was actually a corrupted being, far inferior to the goddess Sophia. . . . In order to give secret wisdom to the spiritual Gnostics, the Demiurge (Yahweh) is said to have given birth to a son who was filled with the spiritual seed of Mother Achamoth. This son was the “Christ” who passed through Mary without taking a body from her. He was just like water flowing through a tube. The Gnostics often said the “Christ” inhabited the body of the man Jesus of Nazareth, but his body was not made of real flesh. . . . The docetic Christ who possessed the illusion of a body came into the world to teach spiritual precepts that only the enlightened Gnostics would be able to comprehend. Through the purging action of his revealed knowledge, the Gnostics would eventually make their way up into the Fullness as purified spirits. **Getting to know the Church Fathers - p. 85**

Docetism -

Irenaeus, AGAINST HERESIES, Chapter 1 was called “Absurd ideas of the disciples of Valentinus as to the origin, name, order, and conjugal productions of their fancied Æons, with the passages of Scripture which they adapt to their opinions.”

Summarizing this chapter, Stephen Nichols says: In the beginning there was the eternal Father, who dwelled alone in silence and with his thoughts--a dream world for a Platonist. This Father is incomprehensible, entirely transcendent. His silence eventually becomes realized in mind and thought, forming the first of thirty pairs of “aeons,” which are set off like a chain reaction. Eventually Sophia is produced, whose offspring is the Demiurge (Plato's word) who creates the material world. Valentinus took this Demiurge to be the God of the Old Testament. The "aeon" of Christ united with the human form Jesus to show humanity the way of salvation. While all this may sound like bad science fiction, it resonated enough with the Platonism of the day to get a following. Readers of The Da Vinci Code will immediately recognize the term Sophia. Thanks to Valentinus and others, this Sophia teaching found a home in gnosticism.

Justin Martyr: Then I replied, “Reverting to the Scriptures, I shall endeavour to persuade you, that He who is said to have appeared to Abraham, and to Jacob, and to Moses, and who is called God, is distinct from Him who made all things, — numerically, I mean, not [distinct] in will. For I affirm that He has never at any time done anything which He who made the world—above whom there is no other God—has not wished Him both to do and to engage Himself with.” **Dialogue with Trypho 56**

Just so you have the references, Justin Martyr also:

Calls Christ God - Dialogue with Trypho 34, 56, 58, 113, 126

Ascribes to Him an array of sublime characteristics - Trypho 87, 138, 2 Apol. 10, 12

Christ is a preexistent person - Trypho 128

The Father, Son, and Spirit are to be worshipped - First Apology ch. 6

Irenaeus taught

This manner of speech may perhaps be plausible or persuasive to those who know not God, and who liken Him to needy human beings, and to those who cannot immediately and without assistance form anything, but require many instrumentalities to produce what they intend. But it will not be regarded as at all probable by those who know that God stands in need of nothing, and that He created and made all things by His Word, while He neither required angels to assist Him in the production of those things which are made, nor of any power greatly inferior to Himself, and ignorant of the Father, nor of any defect or ignorance, in order that he who should know Him might become man.²

It was not angels, therefore, who made us, nor who formed us, neither had angels power to make an image of God, nor any one else, except the Word of the Lord, nor any Power remotely distant from the Father of all things. For God did not stand in need of these [beings], in order to the accomplishing of what He had Himself determined with Himself beforehand should be done, as if He did not possess His own hands. For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things, to whom also He speaks, saying, “Let Us make man after Our image and likeness;”³

² Against Heresies 2.2.4

³ Against Heresies 4.20.1

For never at any time did Adam escape the *hands* of God, to whom the Father speaking, said, “Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness.” And for this reason in the last times, not by the will of the flesh, nor by the will of man, but by the good pleasure of the Father, His hands formed a living man, in order that Adam might be created [again] after the image and likeness of God.”⁴

The Church, though dispersed through our the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father “to gather all things in one,” and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Saviour, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, “every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess” to Him, and that He should execute just judgment towards all; that He may send “spiritual wickednesses,” and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men, into everlasting fire; but may, in the exercise of His grace, confer immortality on the righteous, and holy, and those who have kept His commandments, and have persevered in His love, some from the beginning [of their Christian course], and others from [the date of] their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory.⁵

That John knew the one and the same Word of God, and that He was the only begotten, and that He became incarnate for our salvation, Jesus Christ our Lord, I have sufficiently proved from the word of John himself. And Matthew, too, recognising one and the same Jesus Christ, exhibiting his generation as a man from the Virgin, even as God did promise David that He would raise up from the fruit of his body an eternal King, having made the same promise to Abraham a long time previously, says: “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”⁶

It is plain, then, that Paul knew no other Christ besides Him alone, who both suffered, and was buried, and rose again, who was also born, and whom he speaks of as man. For after remarking, “But if Christ be preached, that He rose from the dead,” he continues, rendering the reason of His incarnation, “For since by man came death, by man [came] also the resurrection of the dead.” And everywhere, when [referring to] the passion of our Lord, and to His human nature, and His subjection to death, he employs the name of Christ, as in that passage: “Destroy not him with thy meat for whom Christ died.” And again: “But now, in Christ, ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.” And again: “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth upon a tree.” And again: “And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died;” indicating that the impassible Christ did not descend upon Jesus, but that He Himself, because He was Jesus Christ, suffered for us; He, who lay in the tomb, and rose again, who descended and ascended,—the Son of God having been made the Son of man, as the very name itself doth declare. For in the name of Christ is implied, He that anoints, He that is anointed, and the unction itself with which He is anointed. And it is the Father who anoints, but the Son who is anointed by the Spirit, who is the unction, as the Word

⁴ Against Heresies 5.1.3

⁵ Against Heresies 1.10

⁶ Against Heresies 3.16.2

declares by Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me,” — pointing out both the anointing Father, the anointed Son, and the unction, which is the Spirit.”⁷

Tertullian taught:

Our heretic must now cease to borrow poison from the Jew — “the asp,” as the adage runs, “from the viper” — and henceforth vomit forth the virulence of his own disposition, as when he alleges Christ to be a phantom. Except, indeed, that this opinion of his will be sure to have others to maintain it in his precocious and somewhat abortive Marcionites, whom the Apostle John designated as antichrists . . . they had started with assuming the incredibility of an incarnate God. . . . On this principle, too, the sufferings of Christ will be found not to warrant faith in Him. For He suffered nothing who did not truly suffer; and a phantom could not truly suffer. God’s entire work, therefore, is subverted. Christ’s death, wherein lies the whole weight and fruit of the Christian name, is denied although the apostle asserts it so expressly as undoubtedly real, making it the very foundation of the gospel, of our salvation and of his own preaching. “I have delivered unto you before all things,” says he, “how that Christ died for our sins, and that he was buried, and that He rose again the third day.” Besides, if His flesh is denied, how is His death to be asserted; for death is the proper suffering of the flesh, which returns through death back to the earth out of which it was taken, according to the law of its Maker? Now, if His death be denied, because of the denial of His flesh, there will be no certainty of His resurrection. For He rose not, for the very same reason that He died not, even because He possessed not the reality of the flesh, to which as death accrues, so does resurrection likewise. Similarly, if Christ’s resurrection be nullified, ours also is destroyed. If Christ’s *resurrection* be not realized, neither shall that be for which Christ came. For just as they, who said that there is no resurrection of the dead, are refuted by the apostle from the resurrection of Christ, so, if the resurrection of Christ falls to the ground, the resurrection of the dead is also swept away. And so our faith is vain, and vain also is the preaching of the apostles. Moreover, they even show themselves to be false witnesses of God, because they testified that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise. And we remain in our sins still. And those who have slept in Christ have perished; destined, [indeed], to rise again, but [perhaps] in a phantom state, just like Christ.⁸

Ignatius taught:

Ignatius, who is also called Theophorus, to the holy Church which is at Tralles, in Asia, beloved of God, the Father of Jesus Christ, elect, and worthy of God, possessing peace through the flesh, and blood, and passion of Jesus Christ, who is our hope, through our rising again to Him, which also I salute in its fulness, and in the apostolical character, and wish abundance of happiness.⁹

Stop your ears, therefore, when any one speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born, and did eat and drink. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and [truly] died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He was also truly raised from the dead, His Father quickening Him, even as after the same manner His Father will so raise up us who believe in Him by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we do not possess the true life.¹⁰

⁷ 3.18.2

⁸ Against Marcion 3.8

⁹ The Epistle to the Trallians Introduction

¹⁰ The Epistle to the Trallians Chapter 9

Seeing then that in the aforementioned persons I beheld your whole people in faith and embraced them, I advise you, be ye zealous to do all things in godly concord, the bishop presiding after the likeness of God and the presbyters after the likeness of the council of the Apostles, with the deacons also who are most dear to me, having been entrusted with the diaconate of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father before the worlds and appeared at the end of time.¹¹

Hasten to come together all of you, as to one temple, even God; as to one altar, even to one Jesus Christ, who came forth from One Father and is with One and departed unto One.¹²

Hippolytus taught:

In order, however, that He might not be supposed to be different *from us*, He even underwent toil, and was willing to endure hunger, and did not refuse to feel thirst, and sunk into the quietude of slumber.¹³

For Christ is the God above all...¹⁴

¹¹ To the Magnesians 6.1

¹² To the Magnesians 7.2

¹³ The Refutation of All Heresies 10.29

¹⁴ The Refutation of All Heresies 10.30