

## THE INCARNATION AND THE NICENE CREED

Ideas matter! Without doubt, the New Testament's affirmation of Christ's incarnation ultimately gave rise to the central doctrine of the Christian church, the Holy Trinity. The roots go back to the New Testament itself and what might properly be called a triadic conception of the Divine Nature. **If Jesus was the true incarnation of the Son of God, then it was entirely appropriate to worship him, to pray to him, and to recognize him as divine.**

### THE TRIADIC CONCEPTION OF GOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

For the serious reader of the New Testament, it quickly becomes clear that the faith of the earliest Christians revolved around their conception of God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This pattern of faith is what is sometimes called the triadic conception of God (not to be confused with a triple conception of God). There seems to be no perfect analogy in the physical world to illustrate the Divine Nature as such, though various models have been proposed, such as: 1) water, ice, and vapor, or 2) the musical triadic chord with a root, a third and a fifth, or 3) the sun, sunlight, and solar heat. Still, all fall short of a true analogy, though they may assist in conceptualizing the divine paradox in at least a partial way. St. Augustine's analogy of the human mind, which is capable of self-dialogue, can also be helpful. Thus, it is important to realize that the evidence in the New Testament is not so much an explanation of God as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as it is a declaration or definition of God as such. The New Testament primarily tells us "what," not "how." Later Christians would wrestle with the question of "how."

### The Synoptic Gospels

The first three gospels depict the triadic pattern of the Divine Nature in several ways. In the birth narratives, God speaks of the Holy Spirit as the active agent in the birth of Jesus, his Son (Mt. 1:20-23; cf. Lk. 1:30-35). At Jesus' baptism, the triadic pattern is clear, first in the voice of the Father from heaven, "This is my beloved Son," second in the Son over whom the divine statement was invoked, and third in the Holy Spirit who descended in the form of a dove (Mt. 3:16-17; Mk. 1:10-11; Lk. 3:21-22). In the great commission in Matthew's Gospel, Matthew 28:19 maintains both the distinction and the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The use of the singular form of the word *onoma* (= name), along with the use of separate definite articles for *the* Father, *the* Son, and *the* Holy Spirit, form a paradoxical triadic pattern. Closely connected with the great commission is the promise of the Holy Spirit (Lk. 24:49). Jesus declared that he would send what the Father promised, and without question, he was referring to the Holy Spirit.

### The Fourth Gospel

John's Gospel is, if anything, even more specific in its statement of the triadic pattern. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit underlie the reference to Jesus' baptism in which the Spirit, the Son, and John's reference to "the One who sent me" are clearly distinguished (1:32-34). Jesus, while in unity with the Father, clearly distinguishes himself from the Father, and this distinction cannot

be merely a conventional way of speaking about flesh and spirit (8:16-19; cf. 5:37-38). In the farewell discourse of the upper room, the triadic pattern becomes marked as Jesus speaks of himself as "I" and distinguishes himself from the Father and the Holy Spirit (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:15). There is clearly an "I" and "Thou" relationship between the Son and the Father which preceded the incarnation (3:13; 6:62; 16:28; 17:5, 24).

### **The Salutations and Benedictions in the New Testament Letters**

The form of the New Testament letters is similar to their secular counterparts except that instead of referring to pagan deities in the opening, the New Testament writers referred to God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is especially typical of Paul (Ro. 1:1-4, 7; 1 Co. 1:1-3; 2 Co. 1:1-3; Ga. 1:1-3; Ep. 1:1-3; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:1-3; 1 Th. 1:1; 2 Th. 1:1-2; 1 Ti. 1:1-2; 2 Ti. 1:1-2; Tit. 1:4; Phm 3). However, the same sort of salutation is to be found in other New Testament letters as well (Ja. 1:1; 1 Pe. 1:2; 2 Pe. 1:1; 2 Jn. 3; Jude 1).

Benedictions at the close of the letters also point to the early Christian confession of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Ro. 16:27; 2 Co. 13:14; Ep. 6:23; Phil. 4:19-21; He. 13:20-21; 1 Pe. 5:10-11; 1 Jn. 5:20; Jude 24-25).

#### **ADDRESSES IN ANCIENT LETTERS**

*The opening section of a letter in Greco-Roman culture often began with an intercessory remark concerning a god or the gods, a formula that became more or less fixed during Roman Period. The writer would make mention of the addressee before the gods or give thanks to the gods for the addressee.*

### **Internal References to the Triadic Pattern**

In addition, there are abundant internal passages which reflect the same triadic pattern. Some almost seem to be unconscious references, such as, those found in the narratives, sermons, and prayers in the Book of Acts (1:1-5; 2:33; 4:24-26; 5:30-32; 7:54-56). Others appear to be very deliberate formulations, such as, the description of the Father who planned (Ep. 1:3-6), the Son who performed the atoning work (Ep. 1:7-12), and the Holy Spirit who seals the salvation of believers (Ep. 1:13-14). Notice how this triadic pattern is reflected in various passages:

<b>Lord Jesus Christ</b>	<b>The Spirit</b>	<b>God</b>	<b>Ro. 15:30</b>
<b>Same Lord</b>	<b>Same Spirit</b>	<b>Same God</b>	<b>1 Co. 12:4-6</b>
<b>Son</b>	<b>The Spirit</b>	<b>God</b>	<b>Gal. 4:4-6</b>
<b>Him (Jesus Christ)</b>	<b>One Spirit</b>	<b>The Father</b>	<b>Ep. 2:18</b>
<b>One Lord</b>	<b>One Spirit</b>	<b>One God and Father</b>	<b>Ep. 4:4-6</b>
<b>Jesus Christ</b>	<b>Holy Spirit</b>	<b>God our Savior</b>	<b>Tit. 3:4-6</b>
<b>Word of Life from the beginning</b>	<b>The Son</b>	<b>The Father</b>	<b>1 Jn. 1:1-3</b>
<b>Lord Jesus Christ</b>	<b>Holy Spirit</b>	<b>God</b>	<b>Jude 20-21</b>
<b>Jesus Christ</b>	<b>Sevenfold Spirit</b>	<b>God the Father</b>	<b>Rv. 1:4-5</b>

## Mariner's Church

In the New Testament usage of this triadic language, it becomes significant that while Jesus can be called God, the Son is never addressed as the Father nor the Father as the Son. **There is one God, but there are also three personal self-distinctions within his divine inner being.**

This triadic pattern continued on in the writings of early Christian leaders. For instance, Clement of Rome (c. 96) says, "God lives, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit." Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110-115) writes to the Ephesians and says, "Like the stone of a temple, cut for a building of God the Father, you have been lifted up to the top by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, and the rope of the Holy Spirit." Justin Martyr (c. 140) wrote, "...for in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they [i.e., Christians] receive the washing with water [i.e., baptism]..." Polycarp, the disciple of the Apostle John who was martyred for his faith (c. 155), said in his dying prayer, "I praise Thee...through Jesus Christ, thy beloved Son, through whom be glory to Thee with Him and the Holy Spirit..."

## THE HERESIES

When Christianity spread into the Gentile world, which was more philosophically oriented than the Hebrew world, the task of explaining how God could be one and at the same time three became a hugely debated issue. It is fair to say that the church was worshipping God as the Trinity long before the doctrine itself was formally developed and even long before the word "Trinity" was coined early in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. Even as early as the close of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, Christians were using Mt. 28:19 as their basic baptismal



*This ancient copy of the Didache (ca. AD 95), one of the earliest Christian documents outside the New Testament, says, "Baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit..."*

### THE WORD TRINITY

*The first written mention of the word "Trinity" appears in the writings of Theophilus of Antioch (c. AD 180), when he says, "...in like manner also the three days which were before the luminaries are types of the Trinity, of God, and His Word, and His Wisdom...". The unassuming way he uses the term suggests that it was known and used earlier.*

formula, pouring water three times on the head of the candidate (*Didache* 7). The original form of what we call the Apostles Creed actually began as a series of baptismal questions to the candidate, each dealing with one of the persons of the Trinity. To these questions, the candidate would reply, "I believe in God the Father...and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord...I believe in the Holy Spirit." Still, the question of how to explain this "oneness" and "threeness" of God was not easily answered. Obviously, it was not merely a matter of

Mariner's Church

mathematics, but rather, it concerned the ontological nature of God, which is to say, the complexity of his Being.

### **Modalism**

One attempt at explanation was that in the Old Testament God was the Father, then he became the Son in the New Testament, and now, in the life of the church, he becomes the Holy Spirit. This approach suggested that God “appears” as Father, Son, and Spirit at different times, much as an actor in a classical play might wear different masks for playing different roles. The aim of Modalism (also called Monarchianism or Sabellianism after one of its proponents) was to preserve the unity of God while avoiding tritheism, which in itself is a worthy goal. Modalists taught that God manifested himself in three successive forms, as the Father in creation, as the Son in redemption, and as the Holy Spirit in sanctification. However, and this is the significant issue, these forms were not part of God's essential nature. They were only temporary phases or modes through which God acted. For a Modalist, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were essentially identical. God's Being had no internal self-distinctions. In the end, the church did not embrace this explanation, and a primary reason, among others, is that it seemed to imply that God, the Father, was crucified on the cross (called Patripassionism). Tertullian would archly say of Praxeas, one of its proponents, that he “crucified the Father and put the Spirit to flight.”

### **Arianism and the Nicene Council**

Another explanation, one that became quite popular for a time, was propounded by Arius, a popular preacher who argued that the Son was not eternal, which in turn implied that he was a created being and not fully divine. This meant that the church should not be worshipping him, even though it had done so through the earlier centuries—or else confess that they were worshipping someone who is not God. In worshipping Christ, were Christians worshipping God or falling into idolatry? The debate gendered by Arius became quite bitter, and when he was excommunicated for heresy, his followers took to the streets in protest. Constantine, the new emperor, had removed from Christianity the stigma that it was an illegal religion (c. AD 313), but now the church seemed on the verge of rupturing over differences concerning the divine nature. Hence, Constantine convened a great council of bishops from all over the Christian world, and in AD 325 they gathered in the port city of Nicaea to work out this central theological problem. They came from both the western and eastern parts of the empire, and some even from beyond the imperial borders.

After much discussion, the result was a creed (statement of faith) that was henceforth to be used by all the churches, what we now call the Nicene Creed. It continues to be central for the three great branches of Christendom: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant. While there was some further word-smithing, the critical language clearly renounces Arianism, affirming: *I believe in one God, the Father Almighty... And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God; begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; Begotten, not made; Being of one substance with the Father... I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, and Giver of life...*