

[1975. In *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*. Howard Vos, Charles Pfeiffer and John Rea, eds. Chicago: Moody Press.]

TRINITY. The early church, opposing polytheism with the OT teaching that there is only one God, was soon forced to ask, Who is Jesus Christ? Was He a mere man? Is He an angel? Or is He God? And if He is God, are there two Gods?

Near the beginning of the 4th cen. a strong party in the church, under the leadership of Arius, maintained that Christ was a created angel. Athanasius championed orthodoxy and secured the condemnation of Arianism at the Council of Niceae in A.D. 325. The decision was repeated and the Nicene Creed received its final form at the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381.

The debate in the council centered on the meaning of the title Son of God. The Arians held that the Son had not always existed; the Son or Word is a creature and a work, not the same in substance with the Father, and therefore not true God.

Athanasius, on the contrary, drew a disjunction between moral sonship, in which sense every believer is a son of God, and a natural sonship, as Isaac was the son of Abraham. Now, if Christ was son only in a moral sense, He would not differ from us and would not be the only begotten Son.

To this the Arians replied that Christ is only begotten because He came into being from the Father alone, while all others are begotten by the Father through the Son. But this construction, Athanasius claimed, would make us sons of Christ instead of sons of God. Christ then would separate us from God rather than unite us to God.

The debate went into great detail. Arius used Prov 8:22, “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work” (RSV), to prove that Christ was a creature. Athanasius referred the verse to Christ’s human nature.

The council finally rejected Arius’ assertion that the Son is like the Father, as tin is like silver, and adopted the Nicene Creed in which the Son is said to be one in substance with the Father.

Some critics ridicule theology and the council for having quarreled so violently over nothing more important than the letter “i.” The point of debate was whether Jesus Christ was of the “same substance” (*homoousios*) as the Father (and hence fully God) or

of “like substance” (*homoiousios*) to the Father (and hence something less than God). The difference the “I” makes is greater than the difference between silver and tin; it is the difference between God and a creature.

The doctrine of the Trinity is also attacked on the ground that it introduced into Christianity pagan themes from Gr. Philosophy. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the first place, Athanasius’ arguments use neither the language nor the concepts of Gr. Philosophy, but are completely biblical. Second, it was Arius, rather than Athanasius, who held pagan principles, in that he allowed divine honors to be paid to a being whom he regarded as less than God. And third, the Nicene Creed removed pagan elements that had appeared in Origen and other early theologians.

For example, the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, indicated in the Nicene words, “Begotten of His Father before all worlds,” avoids the error that the Logos, instead of being an eternal Son, is a voluntary production by which God insulates Himself from contamination in creating the world. As the emphasis on *eternal* generation avoids this error, so emphasis on eternal *generation* shows that the Son is not a step in a descending series of emanations, and that while generation filiation is a necessary relationship, creation is a voluntary act.

For active Christians today the question of the Trinity most often takes the form of defending the deity of Christ and the personality of the Spirit. This defense is called for in two cases. Liberal theology tends toward a purely human Christ, and Jehovah’s Witnesses resurrect Arianism in making Christ a created angel. The scriptural material is the same, regardless of which group is envisaged, though Jehovah’s Witnesses are more likely to pay attention to the Scripture than the liberals are.

The first verse of John’s Gospel is frequently quoted by a Jehovah’s Witness. He inevitably argues that it should be translated, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and *the Word was a god.*” The Christian’s answer starts right with the verse. Here we find a particular Gr. idiom, the *anarthous* use of the noun, i.e., the use of the noun without the definite article. In Gr. when the speaker wanted to point out or designate a person or object, he used the article; but when he wanted to bring out the inherent quality or nature of the same he left it out. A literal translation of Jn 1:1 would therefore be, “and the Word was of the very nature or quality of God” (cf. the same idiom

in Heb 1:2, where the KJV has correctly translated “his Son,” though the Gr. says merely “son”).

Further evidence to prove that John could not teach that Christ was a created being upon whom the title “God” was honorifically bestowed, is clearly found in the verses immediately following Jn 1:1. Other passages directly state His deity, such as Heb 1:5-8. “Unto which of the angels said he at any time. Thou art my Son?... But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever” (cf. Tit 2:13). Another supportive verse, whose two parts liberals have tried to separate by inserting a period between them, is, “Christ, who is over all, God blessed forever” (Rom 9:5). Other well-known assertions of the deity of Christ are contained in the apostolic benediction (II Cor 13:14) and the baptismal formula (Mt 28:19). Additional references, selected from a great number, are: Mt 11:27; Jn 5:23; Acts 10:36; 20:28; Rom 10:9; Col 2:9; I Thess 3:11; I Pet 1:2.

The fact that the term Lord is the Gr. translation for the OT Yahweh is in itself an evidence of the deity of Christ and also invites us to compare OT and NT passages; e.g., Isa 40:3 with Mt 3:3; Ps 24:7, 10 with I Cor 2:8; Jer 23:5-6 with I Cor 1:30; and Prov 16:4 with Col 1:16.

One may also suppose that the OT anticipates the doctrine of the Trinity in the plural *Elohim* of Gen 1:26, and more clearly in the angel of the Lord in Gen 16, 18, 19.

In the case of the Holy Spirit, it is not so much His deity that is called in question as His distinct personality. That the Spirit is a person is seen first of all in the fact that although the noun Spirit is neuter in Gr., the pronouns referring to the Spirit are masculine (contrary to the mistranslation of Rom 8:16 in the KJV). That He is a person distinct from both the Father and the Son is clear in Mt 3:16; Lk 4:18; Jn 15:26; 16:7; Acts 4:32; Heb 9:14; etc.

Sometimes the doctrine of the Trinity is rejected on the grounds that it is not explicitly spelled out in Scripture (I Jn 5:7 is not in the best Gr. texts). But the doctrine is clearly implicit in that Scripture testifies to the full and real deity of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit while maintaining a distinction of persons; in other words, three persons, one God.

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