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What Concepts of the Trinity (Particularly With Respect to the Relationship Between the Father and the Son), if any, Did the Ante-Nicene Fathers, Especially as Found in the Writings of Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, Have?

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It cannot be denied: the word “Trinity” is not in the Bible. Trinitarians claim that although the word itself is not found in the Bible the concept of the Trinity is. Opponents of the doctrine of the Trinity, of course, deny that even the concept of the Trinity is found in the Bible. Just what is the doctrine of the Trinity? Simply put, it is the belief in **one God** who has revealed Himself as having existed from eternity in **three Persons**, namely, the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. Some of those people who are opposed to the doctrine (e.g. Jehovah’s Witnesses) claim that the doctrine is the invention of man (or a doctrine of the devil!) and that the word “Trinity” was first used with respect to God at the Council of Nicea in AD 325 and that the doctrine did not exist until then. The question of whether the doctrine is an invention of man or the revealed truth of God can only be answered by an examination of the proposed Biblical basis for the doctrine. Such an examination is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the writings of the Church Fathers prior to the Council of Nicea can be examined to determine whether concepts of the Trinity existed and whether the word “Trinity” was used.

Christianity had extremely close ties to Judaism at its inception. Jesus was Jewish; the apostles were Jewish; the first churches were Jewish. One of the distinctives of Judaism was its monotheism (Deut. 6:4). It was this same monotheism that was “inherited” by the early Christians. J. N. D. Kelly writes, “The monotheistic idea, grounded in the religion of Israel, loomed large in the minds of the earliest fathers; though not reflective theologians, they were fully conscious that it marked the dividing line between the Church and paganism.”¹ Their problem was how to understand this monotheism in relation to the uniqueness of Christ (his pre-existence and role in creation, etc.).

¹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978) p. 83.

Ignatius was a bishop of Antioch who was martyred in Rome about AD 110-115.² Thus, his extant writings would necessarily be dated well within 50 years of the martyrdom of Paul the apostle. Ignatius was not a theologian. He was an Apostolic Father who simply witnessed to the traditions he received from the apostles. However, even this early in the history of the Church there are some remarkable phrases to be found in the writings of Ignatius. In his letter to the Ephesians Ignatius writes, “There is only one physician - of flesh yet spiritual, born yet unbegotten, God incarnate... sprung from Mary as well as God... Jesus Christ our Lord.” In the same letter he writes, “For our God, Jesus Christ, was conceived by Mary...” and “...God was revealing himself as a man...”³ In these phrases he reveals an understanding that Jesus is “God incarnate”; at the same time both man and God! He does not explain how that could be nor does he spell out all of the details or implications. He simply states what he believes to be the facts. The phrase “Jesus Christ, our God” occurs twice in his letter to the Romans.⁴ In his letter to the Smyrneans he writes, “I extol Jesus Christ, the God who has granted you such wisdom.”⁵ In his letter to Polycarp one of his concluding statements is, “I bid you farewell as always in our God, Jesus Christ.”⁶ Although he also writes about “God the Father” he never refers to the Father and the Son as if they are two different Gods, yet, at the same time he distinguishes between them. Many times he refers to “God” in the singular without any further qualification as to whether he is talking about the Father or the Son. Of Ignatius and the other Apostolic Fathers Kelly writes, “Of a doctrine of the Trinity in the strict sense there is of course no sign, although the Church’s triadic formula [the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit linked together in greetings, etc.] left its mark

² Michael A. Smith, *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity* (ed. Tim Dowley; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977) p. 80.

³ Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians 7:2, 18:2, 19:3 in *Early Christian Fathers* (ed. Cyril C. Richardson; New York, NY: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1970) p. 90-93.

⁴ Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans Introduction* in *Early Christian Fathers* (ed. Cyril C. Richardson; New York, NY: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1970) p. 103.

⁵ Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrneans 1:1* in *Early Christian Fathers* (ed. Cyril C. Richardson; New York, NY: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1970) p. 112.

⁶ Ignatius, *Letter to Polycarp 8:3* in *Early Christian Fathers* (ed. Cyril C. Richardson; New York, NY: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1970) p. 120.

everywhere.”⁷ It seems that in this period of the history of the Church, Jesus was understood to be God but there was no attempt to fully describe his (or the Holy Spirit’s) relationship to the Father.

The next group of influential writers are known as the “Apologists” and includes Justin Martyr (who wrote *The First Apology* about AD 155 and *Dialogue with Trypho* between AD 132 and 135) and Athenagoras (who wrote *A Plea Regarding Christians* between AD 176 and 177).⁸

Kelly writes concerning them,

“The Apologists were the first to try to frame an intellectually satisfying explanation of the relation of Christ to God the Father. They were all, as we have seen, ardent monotheists, determined at all costs not to compromise this fundamental truth. The solution they proposed, reduced to essentials, was that, as pre-existent, Christ was the Father’s thought or mind, and that, as manifested in creation and revelation, He was its extrapolation or expression.”⁹

In verbalizing this doctrine they made use of the concept of the Logos, or Word of God that was borrowed both from the apostle John, Judaism, and Stoicism. Through this approach they attempted to show the oneness of Christ and the Father, and at the same time, to show that they are distinct. The following quote is Kelly’s representation of Justin with reference to 1) *The First Apology* 63:15, 2) *Dialogue with Trypho* 63:5, and 3) *the Second Apology* 13:4:

“So the Logos, ‘having been put forth as an offspring from the Father, was with Him before all creatures, and the Father had converse with Him’. And He is divine: ‘being Word and first-begotten of God, He is also God’. ‘Thus, then, He is adorable, He is God’; and ‘we adore and love, next to God, the Logos derived from the increate and ineffable God, seeing that for our sakes He became man’.”¹⁰

Through the writings of these Apologists can be seen the first attempts to define more precisely the relationship between the Father and the Son. It might not be as precise as one would like but considering the enormity of the task they made a good start. Even though they did not go very far, some of this foundational work in attempting to understand the Godhead would have to be re-

⁷ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978) p. 95.

⁸ Cyril C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (ed. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1970) p. 230, 291.

⁹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978) p. 95.

¹⁰ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978) p. 97.

done. Kelly informs us that for the Apologists, “the description ‘God the Father’ connoted, not the first Person of the Holy Trinity, but the one Godhead considered as author of whatever exists” and also that they all “dated the generation of the Logos, and so His eligibility for the title ‘Son’, not from His origination within the being of the Godhead, but from His emission or putting forth for the purpose of creation, revelation and redemption.”

Another limitation of the Apologists was the fact “that they lacked a technical vocabulary adequate for describing eternal distinctions within the Deity”. However, this did not keep them from apprehending such distinctions. Kelly summarizes the Apologist’s teachings:

“Long before creation, from all eternity, God had His Word or Logos, for God is essentially rational; and if what later theology recognized as the personality of the Word seems ill defined in their eyes, it is plain that they regarded Him as one with Whom the Father could commune and take counsel. Later orthodoxy was to describe His eternal relation to the Father as generation; the fact that the Apologists restricted this term to His emission should not lead one to conclude that they had no awareness of His existence prior to that. Similarly, when Justin spoke of Him as a ‘second God’ worshipped ‘in a secondary rank’, and when the Apologists stressed that His generation or emission resulted from an act of the Father’s will, their object was not so much to subordinate Him as to safeguard the monotheism which they considered indispensable. The Logos as manifested must necessarily be limited as compared with the Godhead Itself; and it was important to emphasize that there were not two beings of initiative within the Divine Being. That the Logos was one in essence with the Father, inseparable in His fundamental being from Him as much after His generation as prior to it, the Apologists were never weary of reiterating.”¹¹

Polycarp, as might have been noticed above, was a contemporary of Ignatius. Polycarp was a bishop of Smyrna and was martyred there about AD 155 or 156. Since he had been a Christian for 86 years (according to his final speech recorded for us by Eusebius) he could not have been born any later than AD 69 or 70. Eusebius also tells us that Polycarp knew the apostle John and received his teachings from him.¹² This is possible, but even if it is not true it seems likely that Polycarp would have at least known people who did have direct contact with some of the apostles and maybe even with the Lord himself when he was on earth. Nevertheless, Polycarp had a

¹¹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978) p. 100-101.

¹² Cyril C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (ed. Cyril C. Richardson; New York, NY: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1970) p. 121-122.

disciple named Irenaeus. By AD 177 Irenaeus was the bishop of Lyons. As a writer in the second century, Irenaeus became one of the first Christian theologians.¹³ His position in the succession of the teachings of the Faith makes his writings very significant.

In *Against Heresies* Irenaeus writes,

“For I have shown from the Scriptures, that no one of the sons of Adam is as to everything, and absolutely, called God, or named Lord. But that He [Christ, the Son of the living God] is Himself in His own right, beyond all men who ever lived, God, and Lord, and King Eternal, and the Incarnate Word, proclaimed by all the prophets, the apostles, and by the Spirit Himself, may be seen by all who have attained to even a small portion of the truth. Now, the Scriptures would not have testified these things of Him, if, like all others, He had been a mere man. But that He had, beyond all others, in Himself that pre-eminent birth which is from the Most High Father, and also experienced that pre-eminent generation which is from the Virgin, the divine Scriptures do in both respects testify of Him: also, that He was a man... and that He is the holy Lord, the Wonderful, the Counsellor, the Beautiful in appearance, and the Mighty God... - all these things did the Scriptures prophesy of Him.”¹⁴

In this passage it is evident that Irenaeus was sure that he had demonstrated from the Scriptures that Jesus is God. In the same passage he also says that the Scriptures “testify” that Jesus was a man. The length of this passage as well as its content seems to indicate that the author’s intent was specifically to address the issue of the Son’s deity. He had purposefully applied effort towards proving from the Scriptures that Jesus is God.

Other clear references can be found in Irenaeus just a few pages later. Commenting on Habakkuk 3:3-5 he writes, “... the Son of God shall come, who is God, and who was from Bethlehem... Thus he indicates in clear terms that He is God, and that His advent was [to take place] in Bethlehem...”; and on Isaiah 7:14 he writes, “God, then, was made man, and the Lord did Himself save us, giving us the token of the Virgin.”¹⁵ Although not expressed in technical

¹³ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978) p. 104.

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies Ante-Nicene Christian Library* Vol. 5 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868) p. 345-346.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies Ante-Nicene Christian Library* Vol. 5 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868) p. 351.

language, what else could be more clear than to say that God became a man?! A few more pages later as he comments on Isaiah 7:10-17 Irenaeus writes,

“Carefully, then, has the Holy Ghost pointed out, by what has been said, His birth from a virgin, and His essence, that He is God (for the name Emmanuel indicates this). And He shows that He is a man, when He says, ‘Butter and honey shall He eat;’ and in that He terms Him a child also, [in saying,] ‘before He knows good and evil;’ for these are all the tokens of a human infant. But that He ‘will not consent to evil, that He may choose that which is good,’ - this is proper to God; that by the fact, that He shall eat butter and honey, we should not understand that He is a mere man only, nor, on the other hand, from the name Emmanuel, should suspect Him to be God without flesh.”¹⁶

Here is what seems to be another purposeful attempt by Irenaeus to demonstrate from the Scriptures that Jesus is God. Another remarkable thing about this passage is that Irenaeus seems to be aiming it at two other views which he finds himself in disagreement: 1) a view that claims that Jesus was “a mere man only” and so not God, and 2) a view that claims that Jesus was “God without flesh” and so not a man. As the title of his book suggests (i.e. *Against Heresies*), he would undoubtedly have considered both of these views to be heresies. It is important to notice that as divergent views developed, writers were forced to think more deeply and write more thoroughly and more explicitly. From this process doctrines “evolved.”

Irenaeus made some major advances in formulating a doctrine of the Trinity. He approached the subject of the Godhead from two different angles,

“... envisaging Him both as He exists in His intrinsic being, and also as He manifests Himself in the ‘economy’, i.e. the ordered process of His self-disclosure. From the former point of view God is the Father of all things, the ineffable one, and yet containing in Himself from all eternity His Word and His Wisdom. In making Himself known, however, or in exerting Himself for creation and redemption, God extrapolates or manifests these; as the Son and the Spirit.”¹⁷

With such concepts established Irenaeus was able to write, “by the very essence and nature of His being there is but one God”, and at the same time that “according to the economy of our

¹⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library* Vol. 5 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868) p. 355.

¹⁷ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978) p. 104-105.

redemption there are both Father and Son”.¹⁸ Harold O. J. Brown makes an interesting point when he writes that “Irenaeus’ contribution to our understanding of the relationship of Christ to the godhead lies primarily in the things he rejected: Christ is not an emanation; the Logos did not emerge at a point in time. The Logos is neither an attribute nor an expression of God, who is an utterly simple essence and does not change.”¹⁹

The third century brought a new generation of theologians and religious thinkers to the forefront. Perhaps the best know of these men is Tertullian (about AD 145-220). “Tertullian was the first major Christian author to write in Latin.”²⁰ Born in Rome, he later moved to Carthage and became a bishop by about AD 190. Before AD 208 Tertullian had written a work against a man named Praxeas who apparently taught that there was no distinction to be made between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (i.e. Modalism). The work is called *Against Praxeas* and in it he developed the most complete doctrine of the Trinity up to that time. He states his thesis very succinctly:

“We... believe that there is one only God, but.. that this one only God has also a Son, His Word, who proceeded from Himself, by whom all things were made, and without whom nothing was made. Him we believe to have been sent by the Father into the Virgin, and to have been born of her - Being both Man and God, the Son of Man and the Son of God, and to have been called by the name Jesus Christ...”²¹

With respect to Praxeas and his own teachings he writes, “That this rule of faith has come down to us from the beginning of the gospel, even before any of the older heretics, much more before Praxeas, a pretender from yesterday, will be apparent both from the lateness of date which marks all heresies, and also from the absolutely novel character of our new-fangled Praxeas.”²² By these remarks Tertullian outlines his own teachings and the fact that he believes that they can be

¹⁸ Irenaeus cited in J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978) p. 105.

¹⁹ Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1984) p. 83.

²⁰ Everett Ferguson, *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity* (ed. Tim Dowley; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977) p. 111.

²¹ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 3 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925) p. 598.

²² Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 3 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925) p. 598.

traced back in orthodoxy to the “beginning of the gospel.” He also states that by the same criteria Praxeas and his heresy is made evident.

Tertullian’s significant contributions to the understanding of the Godhead can be seen in the following passage:

“... All are One, by unity of substance; while the mystery of the dispensation is still guarded, which distributes the Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three Person - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost... yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God...”²³

By this and similar statements Tertullian first utilized the technical language that seems necessary to fully develop the doctrine of the Trinity. It should also be noticed that, as the first one to use the Latin word for “Trinity”, he did so well over one hundred years **before** the Council of Nicea! In response to the heresy of the Modalists Tertullian emphasized that the threeness of the “economy” of the Trinity was in no way incompatible with God’s essential unity.²⁴ The distinction between the three Persons need not involve any division or separation which would lead to polytheism. Tertullian is concerned about this possibility as he writes about his critics,

“They are constantly throwing out against us that we are preachers of two gods and three gods, while they take to themselves pre-eminently the credit of being worshippers of the One God; just as if the Unity itself with irrational deductions did not produce heresy, and the Trinity rationally considered constitute the truth.”²⁵

Tertullian used much Scripture to support the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Against the Monarchians he writes, “... all the Scriptures attest the clear existence of, and distinction in, (the Persons of) the Trinity...” He uses the plural pronouns of Genesis 1:26, 3:22 to show that “two are God.” He uses Psalm 45:6-7, and John 1:1 to show not that there are two Gods but that two are God. He says that there are only two ways to understand Psalm 110:1:

²³ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 3 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925) p. 598.

²⁴ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978) p. 113.

²⁵ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 3 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925) p. 599.

either 1) there are two Gods, or 2) two Beings are God “with the addition of the Holy Spirit, even Three.”²⁶ To further this point he writes,

“For we... do indeed declare that two Beings are God, the Father and the Son, and, with the addition of the Holy Spirit, even Three... That there are, however, two Gods or two Lords, is a statement which at no time proceeds out of my mouth: not as if it were untrue that the Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, and each is God; but because in earlier times Two were actually spoken of as God, and two as Lord, that when Christ should come He might be both acknowledged as God and designated as Lord, being the Son of Him who is both God and Lord... I will... not speak of gods at all, nor of lords, but I shall follow the apostle; so that if the Father and the Son, are alike to be invoked, I shall call the Father ‘God,’ and invoke Jesus Christ as ‘Lord.’ [Romans 1:7] But when Christ alone (is mentioned), I shall be able to call Him ‘God,’ as the same apostle says: ‘Of whom is Christ, who is over all, God blessed for ever. (Romans 9:5).”²⁷

Many more passages from these early fathers could be cited and many more fathers, as well. The more that adequately testify to the fact although the doctrine of the Trinity may not have been fully understood nor fully elucidated, the concept was present “from the beginning of the gospel.” The development of the doctrine as can be traced through the writings of the fathers seems to be even one more argument against the claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is an invention of man.

²⁶ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 3 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925) p. 606-607.

²⁷ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* in “*Ante-Nicene Fathers*” Vol. 3 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925) p. 608.

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