

An Old Controversy

I write this newsletter reluctantly, but everyone should have a basic understanding of the history behind this subject. In my research on this topic, I recognized the truth of the verse:

“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”—*1 Corinthians 2:14*.

The Bible declares the nature of Christ to be a mystery:

“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.”—*1 Timothy 3:16*.

We will examine the roots of Trinitarianism and Arianism. History shows that these false doctrines were successful in sowing strife among professed believers for nearly 600 years. The fighting only stopped as the masses became increasingly ignorant of the scriptures. Consider the fact that men have been fighting, hating, and persecuting because others don't view the God of Love as they do. These people thought themselves worthy of heaven, justified by faith, followers of God. Whose side was God really on?

“By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”—*John 13:35*.

The Pen of inspiration tells us old controversies will be revived:

“We are standing on the threshold of great and solemn events. Prophecies are fulfilling. The last great conflict will be short but terrible. Old controversies will be revived. New controversies will arise. The last warnings must be given to the world. There is a special power in the presentation of the truth at the present time, but how long will it continue—Only a little while. If ever there was a crisis, it is now.”—*3 Manuscript Release 1899*,

Ancient History

The Bible sets forth the Divinity of Christ in John 1:1-3. It consistently affirms this throughout the New Testament. The Scriptures also declare that “The Lord our God is One Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:4, Mark 12:29). These two statements seem to be in opposition, but they are both True; all scripture is truth. The mystery of unity and the mystery of God becoming man cannot be explained by finite humanity. God is too big for us to bind with human reasoning. In these instances and in many others, reason must submit

to God. After all, human reasoning is not faith. Jesus said “Flesh and blood” could not reveal or explain this truth; it must be accepted by faith (see Matt. 16:17 and John 5:18).

While the apostles were still living, these questions were considered foolish and unlearned. Only the unconverted debated the mysteries of the Gospel. But the apostles warned what would take place after their death:

For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.

Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.—*Act 20:29-30*.

“But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.”—*2 Peter 2:1*

“For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.”—*Jude 1:4*

John is perhaps the most direct in his condemnation of the “spirit of Antichrist.” We will briefly list a few of his statements:

“Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son.”—*1 John 2:22*

“And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.”—*1 John 4:3*

“For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.”—*2 John 1:7*

These deceivers were denying that God came in the flesh, which the apostle affirmed in the strongest language:

“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.”—*1 Timothy 3:16*

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”—*John 1:1*

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us”—*John 1:14*

“For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son? And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.”—*Hebrews 1:5-6*

“For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:”—*Romans 8:3*

The spirit of antichrist was active during the time of the apostles and has continued to spread through the ages. How many denominations actually affirm what Paul does in Romans 8:3? Most say Christ didn't come in the likeness of sinful flesh but in the likeness of unfallen Adam. From this, we may clearly discern that these ideas existed before any famous and influential people arose to name them after themselves and make disciples. I want to emphasize the significance of Christ coming in the likeness of sinful flesh. Paul tells us:

“Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.”—*Hebrews 2:17*

Christ had to come in the likeness of sinful flesh (yet never sin) else He could not have been a High Priest who is touched with our infirmities, nor, as Romans 8:3 states, could He have “condemned sin in the flesh.”

The Beginning of Errors

One of the first errors concerning the nature and person of Christ is commonly known as **Docetism**. This name means “to appear” in Greek. While the belief itself had various ideas, each claimed that Christ only *appeared* to have a body. **They taught that Jesus was a being without a physical body, the Word became man “in appearance only.”** This belief continued into the close of the second century. It was particularly prominent among the Jewish Christians (known as Ebionites) who clung to the rites and forms of Judaism (the people who claimed Christians must be circumcised and keep the feast days, etc). Gnostics also held a similar belief (Gnostics were gentile “converts” that weren't really converted because they clung to pagan ideas). Docetism held to the assumption that the plan of salvation didn't really happen; it only appeared to have occurred (much like some people's view of the moon landing).

Tradition holds that Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24) was the first Christian gnostic. Another famous Gnostic was **Cerinthus** (c. 50-100 A.D.), who originated in Alexandria, Egypt. He combined elements of Gnosticism and Ebionite beliefs, drawing a large class into his philosophy. These regarded Christ as

only the **literal son of Joseph**, but **selected by God as the Messiah because He distinguished Himself for piety and observance of the law**; they claimed he **wasn't God but only a man**, and was **adopted as the Son of God at baptism**. They deviated significantly from the account in the New Testament. Writing during the latter half of the 2d century, Irenaeus remarks that John wrote his Gospel with the specific purpose of refuting the Docetic views of Cerinthus.—*Irenaeus Against Heresies xi. 1, in Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, p. 426; see John 1:1-3, 14; 20:30, 31*).

Gnosticism and the Ebionites soon differed in their beliefs about Docetism. **Ebionites considered Christ as essentially a superior type of human being** (but not equal to God). Another group of Ebionites, known as the Elkesaites, taught that **Christ had been literally “begotten” of the Father in ages past**, and was thus **inferior to Him**. The **Gnostics**, generally speaking, **denied that He was a human being at all**. They said **Christ was a phantom, or “aeon,” that temporarily took possession of Jesus, who was an ordinary human being** (That sounds a lot like spiritualism!). They claimed Divinity was not truly incarnate. Concerning the tremendous impact of Gnosticism upon Christianity, the church historian Latourette suggests the possibility that “for a time the majority of those who regarded themselves as Christians adhered to one or another of its many forms”—*K. S. Latourette, A History of Christianity, p. 123*

Even the Apostles fought against these ideas. Paul wrote:

“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments (principles) of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead (Divinity) bodily.”—*Colossians 2:8-9*

Each of these heresies denied that Christ could be both fully God and fully man. This denial was not based on scripture but upon reasoning and pagan philosophy.

Differing Errors

During the first half of the 2nd century, several well-known Gnostics rose and began to plague the church with their poisonous teachings. Prominent among these were Basilides and Valentinus (both of Alexandria). But perhaps the most influential—and successful teacher of Docetic ideas was **Marcion**, during the latter half of the 2nd century. He was not a Gnostic, but his views about Christ closely resembled those of the Gnostics. **He held that the birth, physical life, and death of Jesus were not real, but merely gave the appearance of reality**. These heresies were recorded by Irenaeus, who took it upon himself to write against them. His work, “Against Heresies,” specifically on gnosticism, remains available today.

Monarchianism: As the name indicates, this belief emphasizes the singularity of God (from mono and arche, meaning “sole ruler”). This belief was a reaction against the many gods the Gnostics worshiped and the two gods of Marcion. Marcion believed that the God of the Old Testament was a lesser, vengeful deity, in sharp contrast to the benevolent God revealed through Jesus Christ in the New Testament. He rejected the Old Testament entirely, viewing it as flawed and materialistic while promoting a new understanding of God as loving and forgiving. This belief was highly effective in suppressing Gnosticism. Still, it also presented just as much of a problem because Christ was the God of the Old Testament. As the 2nd century drew to a close, Monarchianism had two distinct schools of thought. These persisted into the 3rd century.

Dynamists: (from a Greek word meaning “power”). This school of thought taught that **a divine power gave life to the human body of Jesus**, whom they supposed **had no proper deity of His own and lacked a true human soul**. This teaching exemplifies the pagan concept of Dualism, where the soul and body are considered separate, with the body serving merely as a vessel for an immortal soul. (This is also the primary and fundamental belief of the druids, who were nature-worshipping pagans around this time. They strongly promoted the idea of an immortal soul in their teachings.) To maintain the “sole rulership” of God, **Dynamists completely denied the Divinity of Christ**. They considered him to be a **mere mortal, chosen by God to be the Messiah and raised to the level of Divinity**. According to Adoptionism, one variation of this theory, the man **Jesus attained perfection and was adopted as the Son of God at His baptism**. This clearly is just an altered version of Cerinthus’ beliefs under a different name. They believed Christ was only a man, but given Divinity from God, and thus He possessed a lesser form of Divinity.

Modalists: believed in one God who had revealed Himself in different ways. They accepted the Divinity of both God the Father and God the Son. But they taught that **the names of the other beings in the Godhead were merely designations by which the same divine person performed various majestic works**. They denied that God was more than one personhood. This view is sometimes called **Patripassianism**, because it claimed that before the incarnation, the divine being of God was the Father; at the incarnation (when Jesus became human), the Father became the Son; and at the resurrection, the Son became the Holy Spirit. This theory is also known as Sabellianism, named after its most famous advocate, Sabellius.

Early in the 3rd century, Tertullian refuted Modalistic Monarchianism, emphasizing both the distinct personality of the Son of God and the unity

of the Godhead as revealed in the Bible. However, he proposed that **Christ was a subordinate order of God (a lesser God)**—this theory became known as **Subordinationism**. Once again demonstrating pagan ideas unsupported by the writings of the apostles:

“Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God”—*Philippians 2:6*

Arianism is Born

During the middle of the 3rd century, amidst all these theories grounded in human reasoning and pagan ideas, came Origen. He coined a theory called **“eternal generation.”** In this theory, the Father alone is God in the highest sense. **The Son is coeternal with the Father, but his Godhood is derived from the Father**. He believed in Dualism and applied this to **Christ, claiming, like all souls, his was pre-existent. Yet, his was different from all others because it was unfallen**. He believed that the divine “Word” and the pre-existent, unfallen human soul of Christ became completely united in the body of Jesus. He concluded that **Jesus was not the Son of God in the absolute sense** but had received **a secondary grade of Divinity**. Thus Christ was midway between God and fallen man (being unfallen), a substance altogether different from both. Origen taught that Christ was half God and Half man, unique amongst creation.

Arianism. Early in the 4th century, Arius, an Elder of the church in Alexandria, adopted Origen’s theory, except that he denied the existence of a substance between God and man. **He deduced that the Son is not divine in any sense of the word, but strictly a creature**. He claimed **Christ was the first and highest of all creatures, but there was a time when He was not**. Arius taught that **only one being had timeless existence, God the Father. The Son was created by an act of the Father’s will**, and before this, He did not exist. To Arius, **Christ did not have the essence and attributes of God, nor did He possess a human soul. Jesus was chosen only because God foreknew His triumph**, and thus, He was elected to be the Christ. He also taught that Christ was changeable and could be affected by both good and evil. After a close inspection, this is a combination of Ebionite beliefs, with some Dynamist Monarchianism, seasoned with a pinch of Gnosticism. It creates the unique view that Jesus was neither God nor Man, in any degree.

Meeting the Error

The Council of Nicaea convened in A.D. 325 for the purpose of dealing with heresies about the Divinity of Christ. And what better way to meet a heresy than with a different one? Please note that the Greek word ‘heresy’ literally means a faction or group of individuals that sets itself apart by its choices, specifically those contrary to the teachings of scripture. The Pharisees were a heretical sect, and so were the

Sadducees (see Acts 5:17 and 15:5 in the Greek text).

4 At the council, Athanasius stepped forward as “the father of orthodoxy.” He maintained that Christ did not come from nonexistence but was brought forth from the essence of the Father. Before the personhood of Christ existed, He was in the Father; therefore, He always existed. They applied the term *homoousios*, “one substance,” to Christ. The council affirmed its belief that He is of one and the same essence as the Father. Thus the Nicene Creed states that the Son is “begotten of the Father [... the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father” (cited in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 1, p. 29). This creed became the crucial test of Trinitarian orthodoxy.

Ironically, the Council of Nicaea was not about whether Christ was created, a lesser God, or a man, but about where He came from and how He came into existence. They took for granted the erroneous view that Jesus was not self-existent, and argued in what way He wasn't self-existent; this was done even though Jesus calls Himself “Jehovah” (meaning self-existent) in the Old Testament.

“And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them.”—*Exodus 6:3*

The council reworded Arius' belief from “created” to the more biblical “begotten,” while maintaining a definition that was more or less the same. The exception was that the council claimed Jesus came forth from Father without any thought from God (else He would have been “created”). Arius believed it was an “act of the will of God.” As far as reason goes, I think Arius' idea was less insulting. He at least admitted that God had supreme power and authority, as well as conscious control of things that came into existence. However, both views are unsupported by scripture. The council's denial of Christ's self-existence was a denial of His Divinity.

“In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, undervived.”—*Desire of Ages 530*

Christ has always been, and He was begotten into the world in humanity, not created, not two souls inhabiting one body, not a soulless body being possessed; the Self-Existent Almighty was begotten into something which had a beginning—God became a human being.

“For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son? And again, when he bringeth

in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.”—*Hebrews 1:5-6*.

I don't understand how God became a man, but this is what the Bible teaches. Great is the mystery of Godliness! Here is a fact that should humble the human ego: We don't need to know how something works for it to function effectively. Your car works without you knowing how; so does electricity, the Internet, Wi-Fi, Cellphones, ocean currents, thunder, evil spirits, angels, unfallen worlds, every Atom in the universe, and every substance God has created, both visible and invisible. Man can't even explain what substance angelic beings are made of, yet they think they can explain God? Do they think they can explain mysteries that the angels desire to look into? Can a baby explain nuclear physics? Neither does man have the capacity to explain God.

“Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? Deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.”—*Job 11:7-9*.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the controversy between Arianism and Trinitarianism is just a more advanced form of Ebionites and Gnostics arguing about how Jesus wasn't really the Saviour of mankind. They were just vain philosophers drawing disciples after themselves. Interestingly enough, most of these ideas all have something in common; they came from Alexandria, Egypt. Adventists hold the truth about the Godhead. Though in recent years the name has been changed from “Godhead to “Trinity,” it does not reflect the trinitarian belief. Let's not go back to Egypt because of a word. Arianism and Trinitarianism came about because people rejected the writings of the Apostles and belittled God through their reasoning. Let's not make the same mistake.

For a finished work,



Jonathan Taylor

Wisdom is justified of all her children. -Luke 7:35

More Food for the Little Flock —