

Trinity

Many believers within the churches have struggled with the idea of one God in three Persons and three Persons in one God. Historically, their struggle has been resisted, ignored, trivialized, ridiculed, and even punished by authorities. Contrary to the insistence of the authorities, however, the doctrine of the Trinity is not supported by scripture. Its origin lies elsewhere.

In John 14:28, Jesus teaches that the Father is greater than him. What exactly does this imply? In the prologue to John's Gospel, the apostle presents the divine Word as having lived with God "in the beginning" (John 1:1), and the preexistent equality of the Word and God is firmly established. The whole context surrounding the Lord's words in John 14:28 are provocative, so our interest is piqued as readers of the Gospel. Jesus continues his teaching in John 14:30-31 where he says that he obeys his Father's commands. Jesus also tells his disciples that he obeys his Father because he loves Him (verse 31). So, Jesus' love for the Father is the reason for his obedience. The Lord also said previously to his disciples that if they love him, they will obey what he commands (verse 15). Here also, our love for the Lord is the reason for our obedience. But what is the relation between the Father and the Lord if Jesus obeys his Father?

Jesus addresses the Father as his God in other places in scripture (e.g. Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). The Lord served the Father as his God. In stunning fashion, Jesus also served his disciples as well (e.g. John 13:1-17). So, although Jesus Christ had lived eternally with God as His equal (John 1:1; Philippians 2:5-6a), he obeyed the commands of his God as a servant during his earthly ministry.

In Philippians 2:6b-7, Paul states that Christ Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped. Rather, He emptied Himself of His equality with God and took on humanity. According to Paul, the Son of God voluntarily laid aside His divinity. Please consider this last statement carefully. The Apostle John also states clearly that the Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). As a man, the Lord then died on the cross (Philippians 2:8).

It was necessary for the Word to lay aside His divinity because He could not possibly die as the divine Son of God. Please consider this last statement carefully. So, in the most profound act of love and humility, the Son of God laid aside His divinity for our sake. He became human and was indeed born as the child of the virgin Mary. Jesus was not simultaneously divine and human, as we often hear. He was human, having laid aside his equality with the Father. So, it is not only the doctrine of the Trinity that needs criticism, the

commonly heard doctrine of the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Jesus must come under scrutiny as well. We need to look at the biblical text. The text of Philippians 2:5-11 stresses the unfathomable servant love of Jesus Christ in laying aside his divinity for our sake. The importance of this cannot be stressed too much because it has profound influence on how we live our lives as Christians-- we are commanded to be servants like the Lord. When we see the lengths to which our Lord went for our salvation, we will understand that the goal of Christian living is to obey our Lord's commands out of our love for him.

If one looks carefully at Paul's writings, one will find repeatedly the identification of God as the Father. This occurs many times in Paul. In Ephesians 4:6, Paul identifies the one God as the Father, and he does this in the context of a deep meditation on oneness. Also, in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 Paul is addressing the problem of idolatry and the truth that there is but one God, and in this context Paul identifies the one God as the Father. He goes on to identify Jesus Christ as our only Lord. Paul also at the end of his quote of the early Christian hymn known as the "Christ Hymn" or the "Philippian Hymn" completes his words of the exaltation of Jesus Christ by identifying God as the Father (Philippians 2:6-11). The Hymn also states that Jesus Christ must be confessed as Lord (Philippians 2:11). And Jesus stressed that when we pray, we pray to our Father in heaven (Matthew 6:6-15). These texts, and many others, need to be taken at face value. The doctrine of the Trinity is not supported by the scripture.

The two theological errors that have been identified here were presented very clearly in the Athanasian Creed (c. 500 CE). That creed, accepted by many western churches (Roman Catholic, Lutheran, other protestant) as a faithful representation of scriptural teaching, presents statements that are quite clearly contradictory to scripture. After stating in quite a bit of detail the conception of the Trinity, the Creed says (at the end of the first main section) that none of the Persons of the Trinity is greater or lesser than another. This statement is in direct contradiction to John 14:28 where Jesus teaches that the Father is greater than him. The Athanasian Creed says also (toward the beginning) that the three Persons of the Trinity are equal, and this statement is repeated later (at the end of the first main section). This is a direct contradiction to Philippians 2:6-7 which says that the Lord did not regard equality with God as a thing to be grasped but emptied Himself of his equality with the Father. The Creed then specifically contradicts the concept of the transformation of the divine Son into a human being, which is the basic concept that has been presented as correct. Please look carefully at this statement toward the end of the Athanasian Creed, translated in various ways from Latin (it speaks of the "conversion of the Godhead/deity/divinity into flesh"). So, it is clear that around 500 CE, some people held the idea of Christ's eternal divinity before his conception in Mary, and his humanity after it.

The Athanasian Creed closes with three more erroneous statements. It says that Jesus suffered for our salvation. It then implies that Jesus descended into hell before he was raised from the dead, but after he suffered. And finally, it presents the thought that unbelievers who come under the judgment of God will be exposed to fire forever. First, Jesus suffered, died, and rose to life for our salvation. The writers' failure to identify our Lord's death and resurrection as the basis of our salvation is a frightful omission. Second, the idea that Jesus descended into hell before his resurrection is a strange speculation. The Lord's dead body was in the tomb for three days, after which he was raised from the dead. The writers of the Creed exhibit an erroneous understanding of 1 Peter 3:18-22. The Lord's preaching to the spirits in prison (verse 19) takes place through the Spirit after Jesus' resurrection, not before it. The Lord was made alive by the Spirit first (verse 18). This refers to the Lord's resurrection. And third, the assertion that unbelievers will be punished in fire forever reveals an erroneous understanding of Matthew 25:41. In this verse, Jesus teaches that eternal fire has been prepared for the devil and his angels, and that the ungodly will go into the same fire. John, in Revelation 20:10, corroborates Jesus' reference to the eternal punishment of the devil in eternal fire. Satan, along with the beast and the false prophet in John's vision, are consigned to eternal torment in the lake of burning sulfur. But the Apostle John says just after this statement, in 20:14-15, that the lake of fire is the second death for human beings. The "second death" is God's final act of judgement on all ungodly human beings, including all those who have already died in all times, who will be raised to appear before God for final judgement (Revelation 20:11-13). Consequently, the punishment for Satan and his angels is not the same as it is for human beings. The punishment for human beings is the second death, which is to be thrown into the lake of fire (verse 15). The ungodly will die in the lake of fire, but Satan and his angels will be punished forever in it. Consequently, the teaching of the Creed, that the ungodly will be exposed to fire forever, is not the teaching of the scripture. It should be noted that the beast and the false prophet of John's vision (Revelation 13) cannot be interpreted as human beings because their punishment in Revelation 20:10 is the same as Satan's. It must be concluded that these figures in John's vision are demonic beings. We conclude that the accumulated errors in the Athanasian Creed show the imprecision and even the recklessness of the authors.

The doctrine of the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Christ, as it is found in the Athanasian Creed, had an important antecedent in the Chalcedonian Creed (451 CE), which champions it. The doctrine of the Trinity, as it is presented in the Athanasian Creed, has important antecedents in the writings of Hilary and Augustine who both published works on the subject (360 CE and c. 417 CE respectively).

What is now abundantly clear is that the doctrine of the Trinity does not come from scripture. Instead, the Athanasian Creed was adopted by many western churches at

various times and was thereby propagated into the future of those churches. This is an indictment of the doctrine of the Trinity because our final authority in matters of doctrine and practice is scripture.

The Nicene Creed (c. 374 CE) was authored more than a century before the Athanasian Creed. The Nicene Creed does not present a Trinitarian doctrine or a doctrine of Christ that conceives of him as simultaneously divine and human. Please examine the text of the Nicene Creed carefully. It begins by identifying the one God as the Father, and the one Lord as Jesus Christ. It presents the Son as divine before the incarnation, of "one substance" with the Father, who then became a human being by being born of the virgin Mary. No reference to the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Christ is observed. The Nicene Creed is simpler than the Athanasian Creed. Many theologians, however, have tended to read their own Trinitarian and Christological conceptions into the text of the Nicene Creed. They do this just like they read their own conceptions into the text of scripture. The Nicene Creed is certainly a straightforwardly scriptural presentation of Christian doctrine. The Athanasian Creed, on the other hand, is a travesty, but it represents the doctrine of millions of professing Christians worldwide.

Some may point to John 10:30 as a claim by Jesus himself to being divine. When the Jews took up stones to kill him, Jesus calmly pointed to the miracles he had performed and asked them for which of those miracles were they intending to stone him (verses 31-32). The Jews replied that Jesus was claiming to be God (verse 33). Jesus answered that he was only claiming to be God's son and indeed the Messiah, a man who had performed miracles from God that confirm his identity as the Messiah (verses 34-36 and see Ps. 82:6; see also verses 24-26). Then, Jesus simply claimed to do what his Father does (verse 37), and pointed once again to his miracles as the reason the Jews should believe him (verse 38). Their response was still unbelieving, and they tried to seize him, but he eluded their grasp (verse 39). No claim of divinity by Jesus is in view at all in this passage. What Jesus claimed was that, as the Messiah, he had a oneness of purpose with his Father (verses 34-37).

In the minds of many, the Lord's brief encounter with Thomas as recorded in John 20:24-30 seems to include a clear statement, on Thomas' part, of the Lord's simultaneous humanity and divinity, "My Lord and my God!" The account of the confession, it should be noted, is found in John but not in the Synoptic Gospels, and it is also John alone among the Gospel writers who states explicitly that the Lord was with God in the beginning and was Himself divine (John 1:1). John's record of Thomas' confession, at the end of his Gospel, is consistent with John's purpose of explicitly identifying the Lord. The confession itself may be taken as implying the simultaneous humanity and divinity of the Lord if the reader is already committed to that idea, but the interpretation is not a necessary one and it is just

as natural to understand the confession as a dual statement of Jesus' lordship over creation as a man as well as his glorious preincarnate existence as God's equal from eternity, both of which are fundamental perspectives within the Gospel of John. It may even have been the case that Thomas' confession precipitated John's own realization of the divine preexistence of the Lord. John, after all, states explicitly that he is writing for the purpose of sharing his own discoveries with others (John 20:31). So, John begins his Gospel with a pithy statement about the divinity of the Word who was with God "in the beginning" using language that alludes to the opening of the mysterious and brilliant Book of Genesis. John also, at the end of the stunning revelation given to him as recorded in the Book of Revelation, presents Jesus' final words to him, "I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright morning star." (Revelation 22:16.) This is in essence what Thomas confessed much earlier, by the revelation that was given to him through the Holy Spirit when the Lord appeared to him after the resurrection. Indeed, it should be remembered that, before his crucifixion, Jesus gave his disciples detailed teaching about the Holy Spirit (John 14, 16). Jesus calls the Spirit "the Counselor" (John 14:16, 16:7). He also calls Him "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17, 16:13) and says that the Spirit will guide the disciples into all truth (John 16:13). What we observe in Thomas' confession after Jesus' resurrection is the outworking of the Spirit's revelatory work in the heart and mind of Thomas, because in the moments just prior to his confession, Thomas was refusing to believe that the Lord had been seen by the disciples (John 20:25). Suddenly, Thomas' understanding of the Lord even exceeded that of the other disciples; he understood Jesus' full identity as the divine Son from eternity. This new knowledge came by revelation through the Spirit, just as Jesus had promised the Spirit would do. Thomas saw the truth of Jesus' preexistent divinity first, before any of the other disciples. What a stunning and unexpected reversal. Doubting Thomas was thus given, by the Spirit, the highest knowledge of the Lord's identity that any of the apostles had up to that point in time, and the Lord clearly approved of Thomas' confession. We observe this same level of knowledge in the Apostle John at a much later time when he wrote his Gospel (John 1:1, 1:14), and in the Apostle Paul when he wrote the Epistle to the Philippians (Philippians 2:6-11), but Doubting Thomas was the first to have this knowledge, by the Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a distraction. The writers of scripture point to the one God because the ancients had a propensity for idolatry. This is what the oneness of God in scripture addresses-- in both Testaments (Deuteronomy 5:6-10, 6:4-9, 11:13-21, 11:26-29; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6). Obscuring this fact is most hurtful to the individual and to the churches because we moderns have the same propensity as the ancients. Our idols consist of things like power, prestige, pleasure, personal attainments, knowledge, wealth, and sexual desires, among others. Idolatry is participation with demons according to Paul

(1 Corinthians 10:20). This is certainly true for us; the demons have not gone on vacation at this time, nor have they gone to sleep. We should not obscure this problem. Both Testaments put great emphasis on the one God who is a jealous God. According to Paul, we must flee from idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:14). The urgency of these words alludes to Joseph's response to the sexual advance of Potiphar's wife, when Joseph just ran (Genesis 39:12).

The Creed says at the beginning that nobody can be saved unless they adhere to the teaching of the Creed in its entirety. So, the writers claim that their teaching is completely correct and that God's final judgement is linked to belief in the Athanasian Creed. This assertion is foolish. The writers of the Athanasian Creed erred on four theological points besides the doctrines of the Trinity and the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Christ. These four points are: The frightfully truncated statement of the basis for our salvation; the speculative teaching of the Lord's preaching to the spirits in prison before the resurrection; the erroneous view of the eternal punishment of human beings in fire; and the claim that the writers' teaching is completely correct and that God's final judgement is linked to belief in the Athanasian Creed. We will leave it to others to explain how such esteemed theologians and ministers as Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, embraced the doctrine of the Trinity.

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