

# Were the Early Church Fathers Trinitarians?

by Michael J. Partyka

Jehovah's Witnesses, who are organized under the leadership of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, subscribe to Arianism, a belief that Jesus Christ is not fully God (as the doctrine of the Trinity maintains) but is rather a created being, made of a different substance from that of the eternal, uncreated substance of God the Father.

While hopping around the Watchtower's official web site, I stumbled across a series of pages explaining the Jehovah's Witnesses' rejection of the Trinity. Partway through, I recall blinking several times furiously, because I literally couldn't believe what I was seeing: The Watchtower was actually quoting certain ante-Nicene Church Fathers, from Justin Martyr to Origen, in an attempt to disprove that early Christians ever subscribed to the doctrine of the Trinity. They wrote:

The ante-Nicene Fathers were acknowledged to have been leading religious teachers in the early centuries after Christ's birth. What they taught is of interest.

Justin Martyr, who died about 165 C.E., called the pre-human Jesus a created angel who is "other than the God who made all things." He said that Jesus was inferior to God and "never did anything except what the Creator...willed him to do and say."

Irenaeus, who died about 200 C.E., said that the pre-human Jesus had a separate existence from God and was inferior to him. He showed that Jesus is not equal to the "One true and only God," who is "supreme over all, and besides whom there is no other."

Clement of Alexandria, who died about 215 C.E., called Jesus in his pre-human existence "a creature" but called God "the uncreated and imperishable and only true God." He said that the Son "is next to the only omnipotent Father" but not equal to him.

Tertullian, who died about 230 C.E., taught the supremacy of God. He observed: "The Father is different from the Son (another), as he is greater; as he who begets is different from him who is begotten; he who sends, different from him who is sent." He also said: "There was a time when the Son was not....Before all things, God was alone." (The word "tri'as" appears in its Latin form of "trinitas" in Tertullian. While these words do translate to "Trinity," this is no proof in itself that Tertullian taught the doctrine of the Trinity.)

Hippolytus, who died about 235 C.E., said that God is "the one God, the first and the only One, the Maker and Lord of all," who "had nothing co-eval [of equal age] with him....But he was One, alone by himself; who, willing it, called into being what had no being before," such as the created pre-human Jesus.

Origen, who died about 250 C.E., said that "the Father and Son are two substances...two things as to their essence," and that "compared with the Father, [the Son] is a very small light."

The testimony of history makes clear that the Trinity was unknown for several centuries after biblical times.

Oh, really?

Was the Trinity "unknown" to Justin Martyr? Justin writes that "God begat before all creatures a Beginning, who was a certain rational power proceeding from Himself... which was truly brought forth from the Father, was with the Father before all the creatures, and the Father communed with Him." [1] This squares precisely with the Nicene Creed, which declares God the Son to be "begotten, not made." Justin explains further that "this power is indivisible and inseparable from the Father," [2] and that the Son was "begotten from the Father, by His power and will, but not by abscission, as if the essence of the Father were divided," [3] which means that the Son is begotten from the very same essence which the Father himself possesses – not dividing the Godhead into parts, but rather

allowing each divine person a full sharing in the Godhead – which is exactly what the doctrine of the Trinity maintains.

Was the Trinity “unknown” to Irenaeus? Irenaeus’ teaching that “the Father is Lord and the Son is Lord, and the Father is God and the Son is God, since he who is born of God is God, and in this way, according to His being and power and essence, one God is demonstrated: but according to the economy of our salvation, there is both Father and Son,” [4] couldn’t be more Trinitarian. Moreover, Irenaeus distinguishes the Son and the Holy Spirit from created beings when he says, “The Word, namely the Son, was always with the Father; and that Wisdom also, which is the Spirit, was present with Him, anterior to all creation.” [5] So, according to Irenaeus, the Son and the Spirit are co-eternal with the Father, just like the doctrine of the Trinity says.

Was the Trinity “unknown” to Clement of Alexandria? Clement calls Jesus “the Divine Word, He that is truly most manifest Deity, He that is made equal to the Lord of the universe” [6] as well as “God in the form of man, stainless, the minister of His Father’s will, the Word who is God, who is in the Father, who is at the Father’s right hand, and with the form of God is God.” [7] And Clement is decidedly adamant that “the Son of God, being, by equality of substance, one with the Father, is eternal and uncreated.” [8] Jesus, according to Clement, wasn’t created, but “existed always, without beginning.” Rather than holding Jesus to be an inferior, created being, Clement clearly teaches that Jesus is “co-eternal” and “co-existent with the Father.” Isn’t this exactly what the doctrine of the Trinity teaches?

Was the Trinity “unknown” to Tertullian? On the contrary, Tertullian loudly proclaims, “Bear always in mind that this is the rule of faith which I profess; by it I testify that the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit are inseparable from each other... [9] and that the Father is one, and the Son one, and the Spirit one, and that They are distinct from Each Other.” He continues, “All are of One, by unity of substance; while the mystery of the dispensation distributes the Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three Persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: three, yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God.” [10] He finishes, “All the Scriptures attest the clear existence of, and distinction in, the Persons of the Trinity, and indeed furnish us with our Rule of faith,” [11] and, “I must everywhere hold one only substance in three coherent and inseparable Persons.” [12] To reproduce here all that Tertullian says in support of the Trinity would probably take up another page or two. Suffice it to say that in his declaration, “The Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God,” we have a nice, simply-rendered summary of the Trinity doctrine.

Was the Trinity “unknown” to Hippolytus? Hippolytus says, “The Logos alone of this God is from God himself; wherefore also the Logos is God, being the substance of God. Now the world was made from nothing; wherefore it is not God.” [13] So Hippolytus, too, sets the Logos of God, a.k.a. Jesus, apart from all creation and all created beings. He further declares of Jesus that “by nature He is God,” [14] and that Jesus, “who was co-existent with His Father before all time, and before the foundation of the world, always had the glory proper to Godhead.” [15] According to Hippolytus, Jesus “was in essential being with His Father” [16] and “is co-eternal with His Father,” just as the doctrine of the Trinity says. And, with regard to the Trinity as a whole, Hippolytus says, “We cannot otherwise think of one God, but by believing in truth in Father and Son and Holy Spirit,” [17] and, “Whosoever omits any one of these, fails in glorifying God perfectly. For it is through this Trinity that the Father is glorified. For the Father willed, the Son did, the Spirit manifested. The whole Scriptures, then, proclaim this truth.” [18] Clearly, Hippolytus is a Trinitarian.

Was the Trinity “unknown” to Origen? Origen teaches, “God is the Father of His only-begotten Son, who was born indeed of Him, and derives from Him what He is, but without any beginning, not only such as may be measured by any divisions of time, but even that which the mind alone can contemplate within itself, or behold, so to speak, with the naked powers of the understanding. And therefore, we must believe that Wisdom was generated before any beginning that can be either comprehended or expressed.” [19] Likewise, Origen says, “We have been able to find no statement in Holy Scripture in which the Holy Spirit could be said to be made or created.” [20] He therefore concludes that “all things which exist were made by God, and that there was nothing which was not made, save the nature of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” [21] and that “the Father generates an uncreated Son, and brings forth a Holy Spirit, not as if He had no previous existence, but because the Father is the origin and source of the Son or Holy Spirit, and no anteriority or posteriority can be understood as existing in them.” [22] Accordingly, “the Holy Spirit is reckoned in the Unity of the Trinity along with the unchangeable Father and His Son.” [23] In all of Origen’s teachings we have, once again, the doctrine of the Trinity proclaimed loud and clear.

Given the overwhelming evidence, we must conclude that the doctrine of the Trinity was not “unknown” for several centuries after biblical times, as the Watchtower would have us believe. We must additionally conclude that, contrary to the Watchtower’s implications, the ante-Nicene Church Fathers cited by them – Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Origen – were all Trinitarians, as all of them believed that Jesus is of the same substance as God, thereby making him co-equal and co-eternal with the Father.

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- [1] Dialogue with Trypho Ch. 61, 62
- [2] *ibid* Ch. 128
- [3] *ibid* Ch. 128
- [4] On Apostolic Preaching 2:1:47
- [5] Against Heresies 4:20:3
- [6] Exhortation to the Heathen Ch. 10
- [7] The Instructor Bk. 1, Ch. 1
- [8] Comments on the First Epistle of John
- [9] Against Praxeus Ch. 8, 9
- [10] *ibid* Ch. 2
- [11] *ibid* Ch. 11
- [12] *ibid* Ch. 12
- [13] Refutation of all Heresies Bk. 10, Ch. 29
- [14] On Genesis, Gen 49:16-20
- [15] *ibid*, Gen 49:26
- [16] On Luke Ch. 23
- [17] Against the Heresy of One Noetus Section 14
- [18] *ibid* section 14
- [19] First Principles 1:2:2
- [20] *ibid* 1:3:3
- [21] *ibid* 4:3:5
- [22] *ibid* 2:2:1
- [23] *ibid* 1:3:4

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