

"Who do you say that I am?"
Matthew 16:15

"Keeping silent about dogma means denying dogma."
Maximus the Confessor

A
Short
History
of
Christian
Doctrine

BERNHARD LOHSE

translated by F. ERNEST STOEFFLER

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decided upon a common basis for their preaching, so they would not proclaim different doctrines because of the great distances that would separate them from one another. Hence they set down the Apostles' Creed as a norm for their teachings, each apostle contributing a portion. Thereafter they decided that this creed should be transmitted to later generations as a criterion for faith. This legend, which obviously reconstructs in idealized form the historical process of the origin of the creed, nevertheless hits the mark in one respect, namely, the relative antiquity as well as the importance of the creed. Next to the biblical canon it was, so to speak, the second dogma of the church.

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The Doctrine of the Trinity

Beginnings

IN THE PRECEDING chapter the rule of faith and the creed were presented as a criterion for the church's preaching and teaching. Both of these, the rule of faith and the creed, constitute an important step in the direction of the development of the church's doctrine of the Trinity, because they summarize briefly the faith of Christianity. It was still a long time, of course, well into the fourth century, before the doctrine of the Trinity was dogmatically clarified. How did this come about? What were the reasons which moved the church to express its faith in God and in Jesus Christ, as well as its experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit, in the form of the doctrine of the Trinity? Is it essential for one who wants to be a Christian to accept this doctrine also?

First, it is important to note that the doctrine of the Trinity does not go back to non-Christian sources, as has sometimes been supposed in the past. There has been no lack of attempts to find the initial form of the doctrine of the Trinity in Plato, or in Hinduism, or in Parsiism. All such attempts may be regarded today as having floundered. It is another question, of course, whether or not the church, in developing the doctrine of the Trinity, had recourse to certain thought forms already present in the philosophical and religious environment, in order

that, with the help of these, it might give its own faith clear intellectual expression. This question must definitely be answered in the affirmative. In particular cases the appropriation of this concept or that can often be proved. Unfortunately, however, it is true that particularly in reference to the beginnings of the doctrine of the Trinity there is still much uncertainty. In this area final clarity has not yet been achieved.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, one does not find in it an actual doctrine of the Trinity. This does not mean very much, however, for generally speaking the New Testament is less intent upon setting forth certain doctrines than it is upon proclaiming the kingdom of God, a kingdom that dawns in and with the person of Jesus Christ. At the same time, however, there are in the New Testament the rudiments of a concept of God that was susceptible of further development and clarification, along doctrinal lines.

Judaism, which constituted the environment in which the early Christians lived and from which they themselves had come, has always been an austere monotheistic religion. From it Christianity inherited monotheism. Over against pagan polytheism Christians and Jews have always had monotheism in common, though their understanding of it differs.

From the very beginning, of course, Christians not only believed in God in the sense in which the Jews did, but they also believed in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit, too, was mentioned more frequently by them, and in a different way. Speaking first of the person of Jesus Christ, it should be observed that Christians expressed their faith in him in a great variety of ways. For the primitive church Jesus Christ was the Messiah. As the Gospel of John emphasizes again and again, his early followers regarded him as standing in an incomparably close and indissoluble union with the Father. In other places he is called the likeness of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). In the prologue of the Gospel of John we are told that the divine Logos, who was in the beginning with God, became flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:1-18). Here the pre-existence of Christ before his earthly life is asserted. In doing so it was possible for the church to begin with certain conceptions which pre-Christian Judaism had formed about the pre-existence of the figure of Wisdom. But what had been only an ideal within

Judaism was regarded within Christianity from the standpoint of the decisive fact of the incarnation.

Other passages, too, speak of the pre-existence of Christ, or at least presuppose it (e.g., Phil. 2:5-11; Rom. 8:32; 2 Cor. 8:9). A number of passages go so far as to call Christ God. It is disputed, of course, whether in Romans 9:5, for example, the word "God" actually has reference to Christ, or whether the last words in this verse represent a benediction which speaks of God the Father. Most of the objections which are raised against the conception that Paul here calls Christ God are based only on the general consideration that the strict monotheism which Paul inherited from Judaism would keep him from making such an assertion. In reply to these objections it may be said that Paul was able to pray to the exalted Lord. It would follow, therefore, that he could also use the word "God" for Christ. In other passages of the New Testament the predicate "God" is without a doubt applied to Christ.¹ With these affirmations, which for Jewish monotheism were utterly offensive, Christians expressed their faith that it was not merely some heavenly being which encountered them in Jesus Christ, but God himself, and that because of this, his coming, especially his cross and his resurrection, had meaning for the entire world.

The New Testament affirmations about the Holy Spirit are not so clear and univocal as those about Jesus Christ. It was known that the Spirit had spoken through the prophets and that he had descended at the baptism of Jesus in order to equip him for his work. The Johannine affirmations about the Spirit are especially far-reaching. For the period after his departure Jesus promises his people the Paraclete (NEB, "Advocate"; RSV, "Counselor"), who is purposely called "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17), or "the Holy Spirit" (John 14:26). Since it is asserted of the Spirit that he is "another Paraclete" (John 14:16), it could be supposed that the Spirit is here conceived to be another person distinct from Jesus Christ. But this is hardly the case. The meaning, rather, is that in the Spirit Jesus himself comes to his disciples as the Paraclete. It is noteworthy, of course, and very important for the development of dogma, that Christ and the Paraclete are not simply equated, but that the

¹ At John 1:18 the best manuscripts read, "the only (or, only begotten) God" (*monogenēs theos*). Cf. 1 John 5:20, "This is the true God and eternal life."

tiated from one another in terms of gradations. In Arius' doctrine of God, therefore, that which had long been present in theology as a latent danger, namely, the strict subordination of the Son to the Father, was now openly expressed. At an earlier period, as a result of the appropriation of certain ideas from Jewish apocalyptic, a so-called angel Christology had actually been developed in which Jesus Christ appeared as an especially exalted angelic being. Prior to Arius this notion had been held in rather naïve form, since no one had yet thought it through to the end. In Arius' doctrine of God, however, which drew upon philosophical concepts and ideas and was more fully developed than earlier notions of a similar cast, the peril of a subordinationist Christology appeared. The dangerous consequence of the Arian doctrine is found in the assertion that Christ, since he is not God, cannot truly know the Father. Hence not even revelation can give a full knowledge of God. This inadequate doctrine of God, therefore, leads necessarily to an entirely inadequate doctrine of revelation.

If one desires to adhere to the uniqueness of God, as well as to the validity of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the path Arius took is certainly not the one to follow. It leads to a new form of polytheism. It is praiseworthy that Arius did not seek to preserve the unity of God at the cost of revelation. Yet to follow the path he took means either that one must deny the revelation of God in Jesus Christ or that one must assume there is more than one God. One thing Arius did accomplish, however. With an urgency that could not be ignored, he posed the question for the church whether, according to its faith, Jesus Christ is a creature standing on a level far beneath God or whether he is God himself. This is the basic question in the Arian controversy.

The Council of Nicaea

Arius was pastor of the Church of St. Baucalis in Alexandria. Alexandria had long been the center not only of intellectual life in general, but also of theology. Here Origen, the most famous Greek theologian of the ancient church, had long been active. Thus the opinions of Arius, having been expressed in this city, were bound to attract attention. At first it seemed that perhaps no controversy would arise. Arius' bishop, Alexander of Alexan-

dria, was a peace-loving man who, as far as he himself was concerned, would have preferred to avoid an argument. But things had progressed too far for that. Behind Arius stood many people in all parts of the Greek East who shared his opinions.

When in the year 324 Constantine the Great, after his victory over Licinius, had become ruler also of the eastern part of the Roman Empire, he found the Eastern church embroiled in bitter controversy. The first emperor to become a Christian, Constantine had basically no understanding whatsoever of the questions that were being asked in Greek theology. In the controversy over the doctrine of the Trinity he saw nothing more than unnecessary bickering of theologians, which might best be avoided by eschewing all speculation and by living together in love and harmony. At the same time Constantine was concerned about keeping or restoring ecclesiastical peace. After all, the church had an important service to perform in his empire. It was to rid the people of the immoralities which had made broad inroads among them and to guide men into law and order; it was to be concerned about the extension of the pure worship of God; and above all else, it was to ask and to obtain God's blessing for the emperor and his realm by discharging responsibly its tasks as a church. The emperor therefore stepped into the controversy and extended invitations for a great council to be held at Nicaea (325), the imperial residence not far from the sea of Marmara in Asia Minor.

In order to follow the course of the discussions at the Council of Nicaea, it is necessary to keep in mind the entirely new situation in which the church found itself at this point in its history. After having been persecuted for three hundred years, with only an occasional brief respite, the church was now confronted with an emperor who professed the Christian faith. To add to the novelty, Constantine's conversion had come on the heels of the Diocletian persecution, which had been the most ruthless the ancient church had ever known. For the first time in its history Christianity in the Roman Empire was no longer the persecuted religion; now officially tolerated and recognized, in some respects it was even fostered by the empire. From a purely external point of view the change in the situation was evident to the bishops in the fact that they no longer needed to move about secretly nor did they have to use the normal means of

travel to visit one another. They now had the privilege of coming to the council by means of transportation provided by the state, i.e., means which were intended for use by ranking state officials. At Nicaea the emperor provided lodging for the bishops in his palace. It was there, too, that the discussions took place, and in the presence of the emperor at that. The changed situation could not have been brought home more forcefully. It is understandable if the bishops showed their gratitude by generous efforts to oblige the emperor.

In the course of the long discussions which now took place at Nicaea the emperor intervened personally several times. Even though he had a general antipathy to the controversies, and even though he himself had only a rudimentary "theology," he was still not entirely without sympathy for the problems which arose. In any case, he permitted himself to be more fully instructed about many things by his episcopal counselors. The decisive catchword of the Nicene confession, namely, *homoousios* ("of one substance"), comes from no less a person than the emperor himself. To the present day no one has cleared up the problem of where the emperor got the term. It seems likely that it was suggested to him by his episcopal counselor, Bishop Hosius (Ossius) of Cordova, and it was probably nothing more than a Greek translation of a term already found in Tertullian, who used it to express the idea that Father and Son are of one substance.

At the council a solemn confession of faith was formulated, which embodied the results of the discussions. The basis of it was a confession which came from the area of Syria-Palestine, and which probably stems from Jerusalem. This confession of Nicaea must not be confused with the confession which in today's services of worship is often called the Nicene Creed. Actually the latter should be referred to as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381). The Nicene confession of 325 reads as follows:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things

on earth, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead;

And in the Holy Spirit.

Immediately upon this confession follow the anathemas upon heretical opinions. They read as follows:

But as for those who say, There was when He was not, and, Before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or is created, or is subject to alteration or change—these the Catholic Church anathematizes.⁸

Most of the bishops who were present at the council signed this creed. Among the signers were those who, judging by their theological presuppositions, could not do so, or could hardly do so, such as Eusebius of Caesarea. What seemed especially objectionable to many bishops and theologians of the East was the concept put into the creed by Constantine himself, the *homoousios*, which in the subsequent strife between orthodoxy and heresy became the object of dissension. Even most of the Arians put their names to the creed. Only Arius and two of his friends refused to sign, for which they were excommunicated.

What was the exact meaning of this creed which had been signed by theologians of such divergent opinions and which, strangely enough, at first served as a formula of concord, only to generate ever new controversy later? It is not easy to ascertain the original meaning of the confession of Nicaea. The reason for this difficulty is not to be found in the paucity of sources, although it is true that the records of the individual discussions at the council are no more available. The real reason it is not so easy to establish the original meaning of the Nicene decision lies in the fact that the church could not stop with this decision, but was virtually forced to move toward further clarifications of its doctrine of God. As a result the decision of Nicaea was given a progressively new and deeper meaning. This later interpretation of the Nicene confession is therefore not necessarily inconsistent with its original meaning. Quite

⁸ For the text of the Nicene confession and a detailed commentary on it see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (2nd ed.; London: Longmans, Green, and New York: McKay, 1960), pp. 205-230; also his *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A. and C. Black, and New York: Harper, 1958), pp. 231-237. Translation used with permission of the publishers.