

## C. Systematic Summary

### 1. Historical Survey of the Doctrine

#### a. The Difficulty of Expression

In summary, we have strong scriptural grounds for affirming that

(1) There is exactly one God,

and

(2) There are exactly three distinct persons who are properly called God.

Now “A Trinity doctrine is commonly expressed as the statement that the one God exists as or in three equally divine ‘Persons’, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> It therefore follows that the NT teaches a doctrine of the Trinity. I’ll refer to this as the biblical doctrine of the Trinity.

We now want to turn to a historical survey of how great Christian thinkers have sought to formulate this doctrine into a systematic package.

#### b. Logos Christology

We are going to begin with the early Greek apologists of the second century. These were men like Justin Martyr (100-165), Tatian (12-180), Theophilus (d. 183), Athenagoras (133-190), and so on. You might not have ever heard of these men but these were

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<sup>1</sup> *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Trinity,” by Dale Tuggy, November 20, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/>.

some of the earliest Christian authors writing in defense of the Christian faith during the second century. Since they wrote in Greek they are known collectively as the Greek apologists.

These thinkers sought to connect the divine Word of the prologue of John's Gospel – the *Logos* – who John says was in the beginning with God and who was God – with the *Logos* as it plays a role in the thought of the Jewish Hellenistic philosopher Philo of Alexandria. He lived in Alexandria in Egypt during the same time as Jesus. He was born in 25 BC and died in AD 40.

When we say that Philo was a Hellenistic Jew we mean is that he was heavily influenced in his thinking by Greek thought.

Hellenistic comes from the Greek word *hellene* which means “Greek.” As a Hellenistic Jew, Philo’s thinking is pervaded by the categories of Greek philosophy, particularly, middle Platonism.

The Christian apologists attempted to use the work of Philo in connection with the Gospel of John to articulate a sort of Logos Christology, or a doctrine of Christ, based on Philo's thinking. For Philo, the *Logos* is the reason or the mind of God who created the world and who imbued the world with its rational structure.

Similarly, these Greek apologists also believed that the Father existing alone before the creation of the world had within himself (immanent within himself) his reason or Word which existed in him prior to creation. Then somehow this Word proceeded forth from God the Father, rather as a spoken word proceeds forth from someone who utters that word, and it becomes a distinct individual from the Father. It was through this individual – through the *Logos* – that the Father created the world, and the *Logos* then ultimately became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth.

This procession of the *Logos* from the mind of the Father could be conceived to take place at the moment of creation when God created the world – that was the moment at which the *Logos* proceeded from the Father's mind. Or else, alternatively, it could be thought to be an eternal procession that never had a beginning. The church fathers were fond of using the analogy of the sun's rays proceeding from the sun. As long as the sun exists – even if the sun had existed eternally – the light beams would always be proceeding from the sun. It is not as though they had a beginning to their procession. It was an eternal procession.

Let me read to you a statement by Athenagoras of this doctrine of the procession of the *Logos*, or the Son, from the Father. Here is what Athenagoras writes:

The Son of God is the Word of the Father in Ideal Form and energizing power; for in his likeness and through him all things came into existence, which presupposes that the Father and the Son are one. Now since the Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son by a powerful unity of Spirit, the Son of God is the mind and reason of the Father . . . He is the first begotten of the Father. The term is used not because he came into existence (for God, who is eternal mind, had in himself his word or reason from the beginning, since he was eternally rational) but because he came forth to serve as Ideal Form and Energizing Power for everything material. . . . The . . . Holy Spirit . . . we regard as an effluence of God which flows forth from him and returns like a ray of the sun.

This is from his treatise entitled *A Plea for the Christians*, chapter 10.

According to the *Logos* doctrine, there is only one God, but this God is not an undifferentiated unity. Rather certain aspects of his mind become expressed as distinct individuals.

The *Logos* doctrine of the Greek apologists thus involves a fundamental reinterpretation of the fatherhood of God. God is seen to be not merely the Father of all mankind or the Father of Israel or even simply the Father of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather he is the Father from whom the *Logos* is begotten before all worlds. The *Logos* is begotten of the Father from eternity. So Christ is not merely the only begotten Son of God in virtue of his incarnation. You might say that the reason Jesus is the only begotten Son of God is because he was born of a virgin, as in the Gospel of Luke. But what these Christian apologists were saying is that the Son is begotten of the Father even in his pre-incarnate deity. He proceeds out of the Father from eternity.

This *Logos* doctrine of the Greek apologists was taken up into Western theology by the great church father and theologian Irenaeus (130-202) in his treatise *Against Heresies*. Irenaeus identifies God's Word, or *Logos*, with the Son and he identifies God's Wisdom with the Holy Spirit. So God's Word is the Son; his Wisdom is the Holy Spirit. This then will be taken up into Western theology.

For better or worse, like it or not, the *Logos* doctrine of the Greek Apologists is one of the clearest examples of the influence of philosophical thinking upon theology because this doctrine (which then gets canonized at the Council of Nicaea later on) is formed out of a kind of synthesis between John's Gospel and the thought

of Philo of Alexandria and the Middle Platonism that he represented.