

What The Ante-Nicene Fathers Taught about the Deity of Christ

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In the Watchtower tract, "*Should You Believe In The Trinity*"¹, the argument is made that the Ante-Nicene Fathers taught that Jesus was inferior to the Father and a created being. It should be noted that the scriptures are authoritative, but the Ante-Nicene Fathers were not. However, the Ante-Nicene Fathers had the same understanding given in the N.T. scriptures concerning the deity of Christ, but in this WT tract are mis-represented by the Watchtower in an attempt to twist their words to agree to their own doctrine.

In the section "Is It Clearly a Bible Teaching?" under the subtitle "What the Ante-Nicene Fathers Taught", six early christian writers are quoted: Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Origen. Here, four of the witnesses of early christian writing which are used in the WT tract are considered to show how the "quote fragments" are used to say something that mis-represents the author.

Justin Martyr

The WT tract states that 'Justin Martyr ... 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 ...'

The quote that I found which seemed to come the closest to that given in the tract is the following: (note I have underlined the portion that I believe the WT used)

"It is not on this ground solely," I said, "that it must be admitted absolutely that some other one is called Lord by the Holy Spirit besides Him who is considered Maker of all things; not solely [for what is said] by Moses, but also [for what is said] by David. For there is written by him: 'The Lord says to my Lord, Sit on My right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool,' as I have already quoted. And again, in other words: 'Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever.'"²

The WT organization has blatantly mis-represented what Justin Martyr said. This quote shows the concept of Justin concerning the deity of Christ. Did Justin Martyr believe that the title "God" was applicable to the Christ? Consider this quote from Justin Martyr:

"Then I replied, "Reverting to the Scriptures, I shall endeavor to persuade you, that He who is said to have appeared to Abraham, and to Jacob, and to Moses, and **who is called God, is distinct from Him who made all things, — numerically, I mean, not [distinct] in will.** For I affirm that He has never at any time done anything which He who made the world — above whom there is no other God — has not wished Him both to do and to engage Himself with."³

Again, Justin speaks of the Christ as the "Angel of the Lord" who appeared to Moses as being called God:

"... even so here, the Scripture, in announcing that the Angel of the Lord appeared to Moses, and in afterwards **declaring him to be Lord and God, speaks of the same One, whom it declares by the many testimonies already quoted to be minister to God**, who is above the world, above whom there is no other [God]."⁴

Further, Justin gave the following testimony, plainly stating his views on the origin and nature of the Christ. Note that in this explanation, he uses the illustration of fire, with the object being to show that the "nature" of the Son and the "nature" of the Father are one nature. This illustration decidedly contradicts the WT claim that Justin taught that Jesus was inferior in nature to the Father.

" "I shall give you another testimony, my friends," said I, "from the Scriptures, that God begat before all creatures a Beginning, [who was] **a certain rational power [proceeding] from Himself, who is called by the Holy Spirit, now the Glory of the Lord, now the Son, again Wisdom, again an Angel, then God, and then Lord and Logos**; and on another occasion He calls Himself Captain, when He appeared in human form to Joshua the son of Nave (Nun). For He can be called by all those names, since He ministers to the Father's will, and since He was begotten of the Father by an act of will; just as we see happening among ourselves: for when we give out some word, we beget the word; yet not by abscission, so as to lessen the word [which remains] in us, when we give it out: and just as we see also happening in the case of a fire, which is not lessened when it has kindled [another], but remains the same; and that which has been kindled by it likewise appears to exist by itself, not diminishing that from which it was kindled. **The Word of Wisdom, who is Himself this God begotten of the Father of all things**, and Word, and Wisdom, and Power, and the Glory of the Begetter, ..." ⁵

Irenaeus

The WT tract states that Irenaeus 'said that the prehuman 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." '

Now it is true that Irenaeus taught that there is only one God (as also the Bible teaches), as can be seen from the following:

"... this God, the Creator, who formed the world, is the only God, and that there is no other God besides Him ..." ⁶

However, like the New Testament writers, Irenaeus understood that the Son eternally co-exists with the Father:

"But the **Son, eternally co-existing with the Father**, from of old, yea, from the beginning, always reveals the Father to Angels, Archangels, Powers, Virtues, and all to whom He wills that God should be revealed."⁷

In addition, the following quote shows that, like the New Testament writers, he also recognized that the one true God consists of a triune nature as the following shows:

"Therefore neither would the Lord, nor the Holy Spirit, nor the apostles, have ever named as God, definitely and absolutely, him who was not God, unless he were truly God; nor would they have named any one in his own person Lord, except God the Father ruling over all, and His Son who has received dominion from His Father over all creation, as this passage has it: "The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit Thou at my right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool." Here the [Scripture] represents to us the Father addressing the Son; He who gave Him the inheritance of the heathen, and subjected to Him all His enemies. **Since, therefore, the Father is truly Lord, and the Son truly Lord, the Holy Spirit has fitly designated them by the title of Lord.** And again, referring to the destruction of the Sodomites, the Scripture says, "Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah fire and brimstone from the LORD out of heaven." For it here points out that the Son, who had also been talking with Abraham, had received power to judge the Sodomites for their wickedness. And this [text following] does declare the same truth: "Thy throne, O God; is for ever and ever; the scepter of Thy kingdom is a right scepter. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity: therefore God, Thy God, hath anointed Thee." **For the Spirit designates both [of them] by the name, of God** — both Him who is anointed as Son, and Him who does anoint, that is, the Father."⁸

Clement of Alexandria

According to the WT tract, Clement 'called Jesus in his prehuman 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.'

Clement certainly understood the Word (who is the Christ) as being of the same nature, i.e. deity, as the Father as is shown here:

"This is the New Song, the manifestation of the Word that was in the beginning, and before the beginning. The Savior, who existed before, has in recent days appeared. He, who is in Him that truly is, has appeared; for the Word, who "was with God," and by whom all things were created, has appeared as our Teacher. **The Word**, who in the beginning bestowed on us life as Creator when He formed us, taught us to live well when **He appeared as our Teacher; that as God** He might afterwards conduct us to the life which never ends."⁹

Clement leaves no doubt that he believes in the deity of Christ:

"This Word, then, the Christ, the cause of both our being at first (for He was in God) and of our well-being, this very Word has now appeared as man, **He alone being both, both God and man ...**"¹⁰

And again Clement states plainly the deity of Christ and adds the He is not inferior to the Father:

"For it was not without divine care that so great a work was accomplished in so brief

a space by the Lord, who, though despised as to appearance, was in reality adored, the expiator of sin, the Savior, the clement, **the Divine Word, He that is truly most manifest Deity, He that is made equal to the Lord of the universe; because He was His Son,** and the Word was in God, not disbelieved in by all when He was first preached, nor altogether unknown when, assuming the character of man, and fashioning Himself in flesh, ..."¹¹

And yet another statement of the deity of Christ:

"Now, O you, my children, our Instructor is like His Father God, whose son He is, sinless, blameless, and with a soul devoid of passion; **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.**"¹²

Here, Clement even quotes John 1:1 as justification for his understanding of the deity of Christ (remember that the Watchtower denies this understanding from John 1:1):

'For both are one — that is, God. For He has said, "In the beginning the Word was in God, and the Word was God."¹³

Not only does Clement have an understanding of the deity of the Christ, he also makes a plain statement of his understanding of the Trinity!

"I understand nothing else than the **Holy Trinity** to be meant; for the third is the Holy Spirit, and the Son is the second, by whom all things were made according to the will of the Father."¹⁴

The WT tract uses quote fragments to attempt to show that Clement denied the Trinity, and denied the deity of Christ. However, it is plain from the quotes shown, that Clement supports both of these statements just as the New Testament writers did, and in fact denies the false doctrine that the Watchtower teaches.

Tertullian

In the WT tract, the argument is made that Tertullian taught that the Son is inferior to the Father and the Son was created. Notice in the quotes that the implication is that the Son is inferior in nature.

"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."¹⁵

An investigation into Tertullian's writings reveal that Tertullian taught not that the Son was inferior in nature, but that He was inferior in the sense that he did not represent the totality of the Father. Take for example this which is the basis for the pieces which the Watchtower tract quotes:

"... it is not by division that He is different, but by distinction; because the Father is not the same as the Son, since they differ one from the other in the mode of their being. For the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole, as He Himself acknowledges: "My Father is greater than I." In the Psalm His inferiority is described as being "a little lower than the angels." Thus the Father is distinct from the Son, being greater than the Son, inasmuch as He who begets is one, and He who is begotten is another; He, too, who sends is one, and He who is sent is another; ..."¹⁶

With regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, Tertullian says:

"As if in this way also one were not All, in that All are of One, by unity (that is) of substance; while the mystery of the dispensation is still guarded, which distributes the **Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three Persons — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost**: three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; **yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God, from whom these degrees and forms and aspects are reckoned, under the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.**"¹⁷

With regard to the origin of the Word, Tertullian says:

"For before all things **God was alone** — being in Himself and for Himself universe, and space, and all things. Moreover, He was alone, because there was nothing external to Him but Himself. **Yet even not then was He alone; for He had with Him that which He possessed in Himself, that is to say, His own Reason.** For God is rational, and Reason was first in Him; and so all things were from Himself. **This Reason is His own Thought (or Consciousness) which the Greeks call λόγος, by which term we also designate Word** or Discourse and therefore it is now usual with our people, owing to the mere simple interpretation of the term, to say that the **Word was in the beginning with God;**"¹⁸

Notice how the Watchtower only presents a partial quote pulled out of context in each of these to twist Tertullian's words to seem to support their own argument. Tertullian plainly says that the Word was in the beginning with God and although in one sense God was alone, he says "Yet even not then was He alone", but acknowledges that even then the Word was with Him! Notice that each of these quotes denies the things that the WT tract attempts to make Tertullian say. This is a significant mis-representation.

A quote in the center of the page in the Watchtower tract says "There is no evidence that any sacred writer even suspected the existence of a [Trinity] within the Godhead."¹⁹ This is patently false, as the quotes from Tertullian demonstrate (Against Praxeas, by Tertullian, pg. 1085).

Summary

The conclusion is simple without continuing on to Hippolytus and Origen. Yes, the early christian writers did have the same understanding that the New Testament writers did concerning the deity of Christ and even the concept of the Trinity. The WT tract has mis-

represented this just as they mis-represent the teachings of the New Testament writers.

1 WatchTower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, copyright 1989

2 The Master Christian Library, AGES Digital Library, "Dialog of Justin with Trypho, a Jew", chapter 56, Pg 429

3 Ibid., "Dialog of Justin with Trypho, a Jew", chapter 56, Pg 429

4 Ibid., "Dialog of Justin with Trypho, a Jew", chapter 60, Pg. 436

5 Ibid., "Dialog of Justin with Trypho, a Jew", chapter 60, Pg. 437

6 The Master Christian Library, AGES Digital Library, Irenaeus, Book 2, chapter 16, Pg 758.

7 Ibid., Book 2, chapter 30, Pg. 811

8 Ibid., Book 3, chapter 6, pg. 835

9 The Master Christian Library, AGES Digital Library, Clement, "Exhortation To The Heathen", chapter 2, pg 331

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., chapter 10, Pg 394

12 Ibid., "The Instructor", Book 1, chapter 2, Pg 406

13 Ibid., "The Instructor", Book 1, chapter 8, Page 437

14 Ibid., "The Stromata", Book 5, chapter 14, pg. 934

15 *Should You Believe In The Trinity*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, pg. 7

16 *Against Praxeas*, by Tertullian, Ages Library, pg. 1095

17 Ibid., pg. 1085

18 Ibid., pg. 1089

19 *Should You Believe In The Trinity?*, Watchtower Bible And Tract Society, pg. 7, quoted from "The Triune God"

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