

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Denials of Orthodoxy:

Heretical Views of the Doctrine of the Trinity

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1

As this issue of SBJT explores the doctrine of the Trinity—that God eternally exists as three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, each of whom is fully God, yet there is only one God—it is good to remember that this orthodox position was hammered out amid challenges to a “Trinitarian consciousness” that arose in the early church. By this consciousness I mean a sense, grounded in the teaching of Scripture, that developed in the church as it reflected on the nature of God;¹ baptized new Christians;² prayed;³ worshipped;⁴ constructed its ecclesiology;⁵ and as it developed its apologetics against pagans.⁶ Eventually, this Trinitarian sense was articulated in explicit theological affirmations—the rule of faith,⁷ the canon of truth,⁸ and the early creeds. But this developing consciousness and theological formulation was not without its challenges. The purpose of this article is to identify, describe, and critique these denials of the orthodox view of the Trinity.⁹

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¹ Key passages prompting this consciousness were Gen 1:26–27, Prov 3:19–20 and 8:22–31, and John 10:30.

² Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (10 vols.; ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 1:183; cf. Origen, *First Principles* 1.3.2, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:252.

³ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 14, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:42.

⁴ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 6, 16, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:164, 168.

⁵ Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians* 9, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:53.

⁶ Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* 10, 12, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:133, 134.

⁷ Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, 13, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:249; idem., *Against Praxeas*, 2, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:598.

⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:330.

⁹ Much of the following is adapted from Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), chapters 11 and 17.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

MONARCHIANISM: DENYING THE DISTINCTIONS OF THE THREE PERSONS

The first significant challenge to the early church's Trinitarian consciousness was the view that later came to be called *monarchianism*, a position that emphasized "the unity of God as the only *monarchia*, or ruler of the universe."¹⁰ This error developed two forms.¹¹ *Dynamic monarchianism* was promoted by two men named Theodotus (Theodotus the Tanner, Theodotus the Money-Changer) and Paul of Samosata of Antioch.¹² Hippolytus described the key tenets of this position:

Jesus was a (mere) man, born of a virgin, according to the counsel of the Father. After he had lived indiscriminately with all men and had become preeminently religious, he subsequently—at his baptism in the Jordan River—received Christ, who came from above and descended (upon him) in the form of a dove. This was the reason, according to Theodotus, why (miraculous) powers did not operate within him prior to the manifestation in him of that Spirit which descended and which proclaims him to be the Christ.¹³

Accordingly, Jesus was just an ordinary—though particularly good and holy—man upon whom the Spirit (or Christ, the presence of God) descended at his baptism, thereby empowering him to perform miracles without rendering him divine. Additionally, the Spirit was merely a divine influence. Dynamic monarchianism, which thankfully exerted little influence in the early church, held that Jesus was not God and the Spirit was not God.

The second and much more widespread form of this error, *modalistic monarchianism*, was spread by Praxeas of Rome, Noetus of Smyrna, Zephyrinus and Callistus (both bishops of Rome), and Sabellius (hence, this error is also referred to as *Sabellianism*). Again, Hippolytus described the key tenets of this position as promoted by Callistus:

Callistus alleges that the Logos himself is Son and is himself Father. Although called by a different title, in reality he is one indivisible spirit. And he maintains that the Father is not one person while the Son is another, but that they are one and the same; and that all things are full of the divine Spirit.... And he affirms that

¹⁰ Ibid., 235.

¹¹ Novatian, *Treatise Concerning the Trinity* 30, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:642.

¹² On the two men named Theodotus, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 8, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:654.

¹³ Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies* 7.23, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:114–15. The text has been rendered clearer.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

the Spirit, which became incarnate in the virgin, is not different from the Father, but is one and the same.¹⁴

Modalistic monarchianism emphasized that the one God is designated by three different names—"Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit"—at different times, but these three are not distinct persons. Rather, they are different *modes* (hence, *modalism*) of the one God. As Creator of the world and Lawgiver, God can be called "Father;" as the incarnate Jesus Christ, God can be called "Son"; as God in the church age, he can be called "Holy Spirit." Thus, God is Father, God is Son, and God is the Holy Spirit: one God with three names or modes, but not one God who eternally exists as three distinct persons.

These two forms of monarchianism were denounced by the leaders of the early church. Dynamic monarchianism was found wanting because it considered Jesus Christ to be a mere man, whereas Scripture portrays him as fully divine and fully human. Modalistic monarchianism was assessed as emphasizing the oneness of God while minimizing the distinctive threeness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thus losing the three in the one.

Tertullian, defending the early church's Trinitarian consciousness, argued against these heresies and articulated a precise notion of the Trinity. Speaking of the three persons, he affirmed:

All are one, by unity ... of substance; while the mystery of the economy is still guarded, which distributes the unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in appearance. Yet they are 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 Spirit.¹⁵

Tertullian's wording became the foundation for the church's definition of the Trinity: God is one in essence or substance, yet three in persons. He also affirmed the deity of the Holy Spirit (referred to as "the Paraclete" or "Comforter" in the Gospel of John), an important element in the church's developing doctrine of the Trinity:

There is the Paraclete or Comforter, for whom the Lord promises to pray to the Father and to send from heaven after he had ascended to the Father. He is called "another Comforter" indeed (John 14:16)... "He shall receive of mine," says Christ (John 16:14), just as Christ himself received of the Father's. Thus the connection of

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.7, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:130. For the similar view of Praxeas, see Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:597.

¹⁵ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 2, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:598. The text has been rendered clearer.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Paraclete, produces three coherent persons, who are yet distinct from one another. These three are one essence, not one person.¹⁶

God is one, not three, in essence; and he is three persons, not one person known by different names.

ARIANISM: DENYING THE DEITY OF THE SON

Other challenges to the Trinitarian consciousness of the early church took the form of denials of the deity of the Son. In particular, *Arianism* emphasized monotheism—the belief in only one God. Arius, the chief proponent for whom this view is named, maintained: “We acknowledge one God, the only unbegotten, the only eternal, the only one without beginning, the one true, the only one who has immortality, the only wise, the only good, the only sovereign.”¹⁷ This totally unique God could not communicate, or share, his divine essence or attributes with anything or anyone else; to do so would result in a duality of gods, which would contradict the uniqueness of the one God. Furthermore, this completely unique God created a Son: “[God] begat an only-begotten Son before eternal times.... He made him exist at his own will, unalterable and unchangeable. He was a perfect creature of God, but not as one of the creatures; he was a perfect offspring, but not as one of things begotten.... At the will of God, he was created before times and before ages, and gaining life and being from the Father.”¹⁸ Thus, the Son is a created being. Moreover, God created the universe and everything in it through his Son; therefore, “We consider that the Son has this prerogative [to be called ‘Son’] over others, and therefore is called Only-begotten, because he alone was brought into existence by God alone, and all other things were created by God through the Son.”¹⁹ Accordingly, the Son was the first of all created beings, the highest of all created beings, and the one through whom all created beings were created—but he was a created being nonetheless.

For Arius, this reality implied that there was a time when the Son did not exist: “The Son, being begotten apart from time by the Father, and being created and founded before ages, did not exist before his generation;” thus, the Son “is not eternal or co-eternal or co-unoriginate [without beginning] with the Father.”²⁰ A further implication was that the Son has a nature that is different from that of the Father; that is, the Son is *heteroousios*—

¹⁶ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 25, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:621. The text has been rendered clearer.

¹⁷ Arius, *Letter to Alexander*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series; 14 vols.; ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 4:458. The text has been rendered clearer.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* The text has been rendered clearer.

¹⁹ Athanasius, *Defense of the Nicene Council 3.7*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 4:154.

²⁰ Arius, *Letter to Alexander*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 4:458.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

of a different (*hetero*) substance or essence (*ousios*)—not *homoousios*—of the same (*homo*) substance or essence (*ousios*)—as the Father. The Son is not God.

Though Arius's position focused on a rejection of the deity of the Son, it included a rejection of the deity of the Holy Spirit as well. "Just as he denied that the Son was of the same divine substance as the Father (and, thus, something other than fully divine), so Arius insisted that the Holy Spirit was not of the same substance of the Father and the Son (and, thus, not fully divine)."²¹ Specifically, Arius proclaimed: "The essences of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are separate in nature, and estranged, and disconnected, and alien, and without participation of each other ... utterly unlike each other in essence and glory, unto infinity."²² The Arian supporter Eusebius of Caesarea, citing John 1:3, further darkened the tragic situation by affirming that the Holy Spirit is "one of the things which have come into existence through the Son."²³

The early church's denunciation of Arianism²⁴ through deliberations at the Council of Nicea (325) not only put a damper on this Christological heresy (and, secondarily, on aberrant views of the Holy Spirit) but also contributed substantively to the formulation of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Any position that denied the full deity of the Son was a heretical viewpoint, and the affirmation of the Son's full deity supported the church's developing doctrine of the Triune nature of the Godhead. Indeed, the Creed of Nicea underscored this belief: "We believe in one God the Father all-sovereign, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God ...; and in the Holy Spirit."²⁵

This belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the Creed of Nicea's Trinitarian structure itself expressed disagreement with Arius's position—continued to face challenges after the Council disbanded. Arius was reinstated by the emperor Constantine after offering a creed that carefully avoided any controversial positions about Jesus

²¹ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 434.

²² Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, 1.2.6, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 4:309.

²³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio evangelica*, 11:20, cited in J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (rev. ed.; San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1978), 255.

²⁴ By using words and phrases of Arianism, the council anathematized, or condemned, the following views: "And those who say, 'There was [a time] when he [the Son] did not exist,' and 'Before he was begotten he did not exist,' and that 'He came into existence from nothingness,' or those who allege that the Son of God is 'of another substance or essence,' or 'created' or 'changeable' or 'alterable,' these [people] the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes." Creed of Nicea, *Documents of the Christian Church*, (3rd ed. ed. Henry Bettenson and Chris Mauzer; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28. The text has been rendered clearer.

²⁵ Creed of Nicea.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Christ. After Constantine's death in 337, his son Constantius became emperor of the eastern part of the empire; he firmly supported Arianism in his domain. While Constantine's other son, Constans, emperor of the western part of the empire, reinforced the Nicene faith during his reign, upon his death in 350 the entire empire fell to Constantius, with the result that Arianism flourished throughout the realm.

Countering this spreading heresy, Athanasius insisted that if salvation is the forgiveness of sins and the imparting of divine life into sinful people, then the Son had to be fully God in order to become human to save.²⁶ Indeed, Athanasius denounced the Arian view of the Son as a mere creature: "If the Word were a creature, how could he have power to undo God's judgment and to forgive sin, since ... this is God's prerogative only?"²⁷ He further insisted that the Son is eternal²⁸ and of the same essence as the Father: "the divinity of the Father is identical with the divinity of the Son" and, conversely, "the divinity of the Son is the divinity of the Father."²⁹ The theological defense of the Nicene faith by Athanasius in the decades following the Council finally gained the upper hand. Indeed, through the encouragement of the emperors Gratian and Theodosius I, and the theological formulation of the second general council of the church—the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of the Council of Constantinople (381)—the Nicene faith was reaffirmed and Arianism was defeated.

PNEUMATOMACHIANISM: DENYING THE DEITY OF THE SPIRIT

Contemporaneously, aberrant views of the deity of the Holy Spirit—these fourth century attacks are commonly categorized together as *Macedonianism* or *Pneumatomachian* (opponents of the Spirit) heresies—were countered by the leaders of the church. For example, Cyril of Jerusalem offered that "the only-begotten Son, together with the Holy Spirit, is a partaker of the Father's Godhead."³⁰ Additionally, he attributed deity to the Spirit, calling him "a divine and unsearchable being."³¹ Indeed, the Spirit is a person, not just a powerful force.³² Against the Arian position, Cyril argued that the Holy Spirit could never be considered a mere created being: "Nothing among created things is equal in honor to him. For the families of the angels, and all their hosts assembled together, have no equality with the Holy Spirit. The all-excellent power of the Comforter overshadows

²⁶ Athanasius, *Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia*, 3.51, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 4:477.

²⁷ Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, 2.67, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 4:385. The text has been rendered clearer.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.32, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 4:365.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.61, 3:41, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 4:341, 416.

³⁰ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 6.6, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 7:34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16.3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 7:115.

³² *Ibid.*, 17.5, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 7:125.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

all of these. Indeed, angels are sent forth to serve (Heb 1:14), but the Spirit searches even the deep things of God (1 Cor 2:10–11)."³³

Similarly, Athanasius expressed the orthodox view of the Holy Spirit, affirming that the Spirit “belongs to and is one with the Godhead which is in the Triad.”³⁴ Athanasius reasoned that because this Triad is eternal, and because the Holy Spirit is included in the Triad, then he must be eternal and share the same essence as the Father and the Son. He further supported the deity of the Spirit from the fact that Christians become “partakers of God” (2 Pet 1:4) through him: “If the Holy Spirit were a creature, we would have no participation in God through him; we would be united to a creature and alien [separated] from the divine nature.... If he makes men divine, his nature must undoubtedly be that of God.”³⁵ As Athanasius affirmed and defended the truth that “the Son is *homoousios*—of the same substance—with the Father,” so he affirmed and defended the truth that the Holy Spirit is *homoousios* with the Father and the Son.³⁶ In 362, at the Council of Alexandria and through the urging of Athanasius, the church agreed to “anathematize those who say that the Holy Spirit is a creature and separate from the essence of Christ.... For we believe that there is one Godhead, and that it has one nature, and not that there is one nature of the Father, from which that of the Son and of the Holy Spirit are distinct.”³⁷ The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of the Council of Constantinople (381) further affirmed belief in the Holy Spirit, “who with Father and Son is worshipped together and glorified together.”³⁸

Ultimately, then, the early church denounced aberrant views with regard to the Son of God and the Spirit of God, thereby leading to the demise of heresies such as Arianism and paving the way for the orthodox formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. God is one in essence yet three in persons. Further development included greater sophistication with regard to the notion of the *economic Trinity*—the three persons are distinct in terms of the roles or activities in which they engage in the works of creation, preservation, and salvation³⁹—and the idea of the *ontological Trinity*—the three persons are distinct in terms of their eternal relationships,⁴⁰ with the Father being unbegotten, the Son being eternally

³³ Ibid., 16.23, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 7:121. The text has been rendered clearer.

³⁴ Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion*, 1.21, in Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 257.

³⁵ Ibid., 1.24, in Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 257–58.

³⁶ Ibid., 1.27, in Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 25.

³⁷ Athanasius, *Letter to the Church of Antioch*, 3.6, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 4:484, 485.

³⁸ Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, in Bettenson and Mauer, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 29.

³⁹ For example: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.20.6 and 4.38.3, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:489 and 521–22; Hippolytus, *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*, 3, 8, and 14, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:224, 226, and 228.

⁴⁰ For example: Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 29.2*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 7:301; Basil of Caesarea, *Letters*, 125.3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 8:195.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

begotten or generated by the Father,⁴¹ and the Holy Spirit proceeding from both the Father⁴² and the Son.⁴³

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Except for an occasional denial or misformulation,⁴⁴ this doctrine would go without significant challenge until the modern period. One manifestation of the modern period's materialism, agnosticism, and atheism was simply a neglect of the doctrine of the Trinity, exemplified in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher. "As a result of his reformulation of theology in line with his view that religion is essentially a feeling of absolute dependence on God, Schleiermacher dispensed with abstract Christian dogmas."⁴⁵ One of these doctrines was the Trinity, which he regarded as unessential to the Christian faith: "The assumption of an eternal distinction in the Supreme Being is not an utterance concerning the religious consciousness, for there it never could emerge."⁴⁶ In other words, because the personhood and relationality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could never be experienced by human beings and thus could have nothing to do with their sense of complete dependence on God, this doctrine is unimportant. Indeed, Schleiermacher relegated his brief discussion of the Trinity to the end of his influential theological work, *The Christian Faith*.

This tendency to neglect the doctrine of the Trinity came to an abrupt halt with Karl Barth who, in accordance with the historic position of the church, considered it to be crucial to a right understanding and formulation of Christian doctrine. Accordingly, in his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth placed "the doctrine of the Trinity at the head of the whole of

⁴¹ For example: Tatian, *Address to the Greeks*, 5, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:67; Origen, *First Principles*, 1.2.2 and 1.2.6, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:246 and 248; Athanasius, *Statement of Faith*, 1, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 4:84

⁴² For example: Origen, *First Principles*, 3.5.8 and 4.28, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:344 and 377; Athanasius, *Statement of Faith*, 4, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 4:8; Basil of Caesarea, *On the Spirit*, 18:46, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 8:29; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 32.8*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 7:320.

⁴³ For example: Basil of Caesarea, *On the Spirit*, 18:45, 47, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 8:28–29; Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Spirit against the Followers of Macedonius*, 2, 11, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series), 5:314–15, 319; Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 15.17.29, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (first series), 3:216; Third Council of Toledo (Spain; 589).

⁴⁴ For example, sub-orthodox views of the Trinity were expressed by Abelard, Rosellinus, Joachim of Fiore, and Gilbert de La Porrée in the medieval period and, at the time of the Reformation and post-Reformation, by Michael Servetus and the Socinians.

⁴⁵ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 248.

⁴⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (ed., H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 739.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

dogmatics.”⁴⁷ Indeed, because this doctrine “fundamentally distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian,”⁴⁸ it has to hold first place in theology.

This doctrine must hold together both the “oneness in threeness”⁴⁹ and the “threeness in oneness.”⁵⁰ While preferring to use the expression “mode of being” instead of “person” — thus, for Barth, there are “three ‘modes’ of being in God”⁵¹ — this affirmation was not the modalism of earlier heresy, because Barth used “mode of being” in a way that was synonymous with the traditional word “person.” While affirming the distinctions between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he also insisted on the unity of the Godhead. Accordingly, he preferred the expression “three-in-oneness” in discussing this unfathomable mystery: “In the doctrine of the Trinity our concern is with God’s oneness in threeness and threeness in oneness. Past these two obviously one-sided and unsatisfactory formulations we cannot get.... The concept of ‘three-in-oneness’ must be regarded as the conflation of both these formulas.”⁵² Importantly, Barth’s emphasis that in the Godhead itself, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in eternal, dynamic, “social” relationship with one another, has given rise to the prominence of what is now called the *social Trinity*.⁵³

This turn toward interest in the social Trinity does not mean that further development of the ontological (or immanent) and economic Trinity did not occur in the modern period. Indeed, Karl Rahner formulated one of the most important axioms for doing Trinitarian theology. “Rahner’s Rule” is “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.”⁵⁴ Understood in a certain way, Rahner’s Rule is a key axiom for the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity:

If the axiom is held to reflect the fact that God’s self-revelation as triune in the work of creation, providence, and grace is a true revelation of who he is eternally, then it expresses a truth at the heart of the Christian faith. It points to the faithfulness of God. It demonstrates that there is only one Trinity. God is free and did not need to create us, nor to make himself known to us. But, having chosen to do so, his own faithfulness requires that he reveal himself in a manner that reflects

⁴⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [CD], (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; trans. T. H. L. Parker et al. Edinburgh: T&T Clark), I/1, 345.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 406.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 407.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 423.

⁵³ Karl Barth, *CD*, III/1, 185–86.

⁵⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, (trans. Joseph Donceel New York, NY: Herder & Herder, 1970, Crossroad, 1997), 22.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

who he is. A bifurcation between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity undermines our knowledge of God. Our salvation depends on God's revelation of himself in the history of salvation being true and faithful to who he is in himself.⁵⁵

Understood in another way, Rahner's Rule reverses the proper direction for obtaining knowledge of God from necessarily beginning with God's free self-revelation to taking its starting point in human experience. As Paul Molnar warned: "As long as it is thought that our self-transcending experiences provide a point of departure for knowing the true God, Christian theologians will always have difficulty actually distinguishing God from their ideas about God."⁵⁶ Such development is particularly verified in the theology of those who emphasize the second part of the axiom, resulting in a collapse of the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity.⁵⁷ This error seems to lurk in contemporary discussions and formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity.

REVIVING OLD HERESIES

Though anti-Trinitarian positions were soundly defeated in the early church, similar heresies arose again in the modern period. Examples of major religious movements that deny the doctrine of the Trinity include the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormonism), the Unitarian Universalist Church, and Oneness Pentecostalism.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the doctrine has no explicit basis in Scripture, was not held by the early church, was derived from paganism, and cannot be true because it is contrary to reason. Specifically, the Bible affirms only that God is one (Deut 6:4; Gal 3:20; 1 Cor 8:4–6); Jehovah's Witnesses believe in radical monotheism that does not allow for a plurality of persons in the Godhead. Denying the deity of Jesus Christ, they hold instead that he is a created spirit being, "the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15), who never claimed to be God and who was always inferior to God. Denying the deity of the Holy Spirit, they maintain that it is an impersonal force controlled by God to accomplish his purposes; it is not equal, but always subordinate, to God.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 296.

⁵⁶ "Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 85.

⁵⁷ Letham lists Gordon Kaufmann, Robert Jenson, Jürgen Moltmann, Catherine LaCugna, and Elizabeth Johnson as examples of those who embrace a form of pantheism through Rahner's influence.

⁵⁸ For further presentation, see their official website: <http://www.watchtower.org/e/ti/index.html>.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

MORMONISM

The first article of faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormonism) is “We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.” While sounding like an affirmation of the Triune nature of God, this article does not embrace the doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, Mormons believe that the Godhead consists of three distinct beings who are one in purpose but not in nature. Indeed, God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are three separate gods: God the Father is named Elohim, while Jesus is named Jehovah. But the plurality of gods does not stop with these three: Mormonism affirms the existence of many gods, because human beings can become gods. Indeed, God was once a human being who achieved godness. At the same time, the Mormon notion of God is that of an exalted being who has a body of flesh and bones (this affirmation denies the omnipresence of God); indeed, gods can father spirit children who worship them. Strangely, while affirming the existence of a Heavenly Father, Mormonism also affirms the existence of a Heavenly Mother.

This dual reality comes into focus with regard to Mormon teaching about Jesus, who is the spirit child of the Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother as well as the physical offspring of sexual intercourse between God the Father and Mary. Strangely, Mormons continue to hold that Mary was a virgin, but they do so by redefining virginity: it applies only to those who have not engaged in sexual intercourse with a human being. Given that God the Father is not a mortal, but immortal, being, Mary’s sexual activity with him did not violate her virginity. So God the Father had a son Jesus, but not only him: Lucifer was a second son of God and thus the brother of Jesus.⁵⁹

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

The Unitarian Universalist Church, by its transparent title, denies the doctrine of the Trinity. Drawing inspiration and belief from many different religious persuasions and sacred texts, this church, even in its varieties that show a greater “Christian” influence, gives no attention to the Triune nature of the Godhead, the deity of Jesus Christ, the deity of the Holy Spirit, and so forth.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ For further presentation, see their official websites: <http://www.lds.org> and <http://www.Mormon.org>.

⁶⁰ For further presentation, see the official website: <http://www.uua.org>.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

ONENESS PENTACOSTALISM

More obviously Christian yet also opposed to the doctrine of the Trinity is Oneness Pentecostalism.⁶¹ Built around a first key tenet that God's name reveals God's nature, Oneness Pentecostalism moves from the various names of God in the Old Testament to concentration on the particular name of Yahweh as that by which God makes himself known in revelation, with the result that the unity of God is emphasized: "The unity of God is sustained by the absolute unity or oneness of His name."⁶² A second key tenet follows: the only distinction in God is that of transcendence and immanence. The transcendence of God is designated by "Spirit;" God's immanence or personhood (and "person" refers to an embodied human being) is his incarnate presence in Jesus. "This 'Spirit-Person' dialectic is the principle by which Oneness theology understands the incarnation. It is the one Spirit, the fully-undifferentiated Deity, not the Second Person of the Trinity, who becomes incarnate in the human person from Nazareth. In Oneness terms, the Father (deity) indwells the Son (humanity)."⁶³

A third key tenet addresses the threeness of God: Father, Son, and Spirit are three "manifestations" — and by the term "manifestation" is meant a self-revelation — of the one Spirit in Jesus. Accordingly, Oneness Pentecostalism embraces a type of modalism.

The three manifestations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit function in much the same way as persons do in Trinitarian theology. Personality is attributable to all three. The difference is that for OPs [Oneness Pentecostalism] there is only one divine being who is revealed as Father *in* the Son and as Spirit *through* the Son. The theological center is Christocentric in that as a human being Jesus *is* the Son, and as Spirit (i.e., in his deity) he reveals, indeed, *is* the Father, and sends, indeed *is*, the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the risen Jesus who indwells the believer. Because God is one, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all present in the manifestation of each.⁶⁴

Accordingly, Oneness Pentecostalism is a species of modalism, with this difference from its earlier formulation: the three are not different names for God in successive periods — Father in the Old Testament, Son in the New Testament, Spirit in the church age — but are simultaneous manifestations of the entire Godhead.

⁶¹ The following is adapted from D. A. Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism," in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (rev. and exp. ed; ed. Stanley M. Burgess; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 936–44.

⁶² Frank Ewart, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 21, cited in Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism," 941.

⁶³ Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism," 941.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 941–42.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

In summary, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormonism), the Unitarian Universalist Church, and Oneness Pentecostalism all deny, in different ways, the traditional formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity: God eternally exists as three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, each of whom is fully God, yet there is only one God. This doctrine arose from the Trinitarian consciousness of the early church, which also fiercely defended its developing belief against attacks from dynamic monarchianism, modalistic monarchianism, Arianism, Macedonianism (the Pneumatomachian heresies), and the like. Believing this early church engagement in formulating a consensus doctrine of the Trinity to be an excellent summary of all the biblical affirmations on the Triune nature of God, the contemporary church does well to heed, embrace, and follow this traditional doctrine.

CONCLUSION: UPHOLDING AN ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE

But why does this doctrine matter so much? Why should the church identify and critique denials of the orthodox view? Let me conclude this article by underscoring three important truths that flow from the historic doctrine of the Trinity.

First, the God whom Christians worship is the one and only Triune God. This truth means that all other religions of the world — Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the like — because they deny the Trinity, worship false gods. This truth is also why baptism into the name of the Triune God (Matt 28:19) is so important, as it distinguishes Christians from everyone else.

Second, divine revelation bears a Trinitarian shape: the Son does not speak on his own authority, but speaks on the Father's authority and says only what the Father told him.⁶⁵ Thus, Jesus' teaching is not his own but is that of the Father who sent him. The Holy Spirit does not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears — from the Son, who hears it from the Father — the Spirit declares. The apostles receive the Holy Spirit so that the testimony they bear to Jesus is true and authoritative; furthermore, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they receive divine revelation and impart that revelation in words taught by the Spirit. This revelation becomes inscripturated in the Bible. Non-Christians do not accept this divine revelation; indeed, it seems foolishness to them and they cannot understand it, because understanding comes through the Holy Spirit. By contrast, Christians led by the Spirit grasp and live this divine revelation. The Trinitarian shape of divine revelation means that only Christian Scripture is the true and authoritative Word

⁶⁵ For biblical support for this discussion, see: John 7:16–18; 8:28; 12:47–50; 14:10, 24–26; 16:12–15; 1 Cor 2:10–16.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

of God; such is not true of the Quran, the Vedas, the Tipitaka, and the other holy books of other religions.

Third, salvation is the work of the Triune God and reflects a Trinitarian order: the Father commissions and sends the Son to rescue fallen human beings, the Son joyfully obeys the Father and embarks on his mission to become incarnate as the God-man Jesus of Nazareth so as to accomplish salvation from sin, and the Holy Spirit serves the Father and Son by applying the Son's accomplished work to human lives. This Trinitarian work means that only Christianity—not Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the like—offers the hope of forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

In these and many other ways, the Trinity is seen as an essential Christian doctrine. The church must do all it can to further explore, embrace, and defend this truth against any and all challenges and attacks. True worship, true revelation, and true salvation are at stake.¹

¹ Allison, G. R. (2012). "Denials of Orthodoxy: Heretical Views of the Doctrine of the Trinity". *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 16(1), 18–25.