

*We reprint below sections III and IV of Norton's discussion of the Trinity in his Statement of Reasons. Small editorial changes have been made in punctuation and paragraphing to facilitate reading.*

## The Proposition, That Christ Is God, Proved to Be False From the Scriptures

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Let us examine the Scriptures in respect to the fundamental doctrine of Trinitarianism; I mean, particularly, the Christian Scriptures; for the evidence which they afford will render any consideration of the Old Testament unnecessary.

I. In the first place, then, I conceive, *that, putting every other part of scripture out of view, and forgetting all that it teaches, this proposition is clearly proved to be false by the very passages which are brought in its support.* We have already had occasion to advert to the character of some of these passages, and I shall now remark upon them a little more fully. They are supposed to prove that Christ is God in the highest sense, equal to the Father. Let us see what they really prove.

One of them is that in which our Savior prays; "And now, Father, glorify thou me with thyself, with that glory which I had with thee before the world was." John xvii. 5.

The being who prayed to God to glorify him CANNOT be God.

The first verse of John needs particular explanation, and I shall hereafter recur to it. I will here only observe, that if by the term *Logos* be meant, as Trinitarians believe, an intelligent being, a person, and this person be Christ, then the person who was WITH God could not have been God, except in a metaphorical or secondary acceptance of the terms, or, as some commentators have supposed, in an inferior sense of the word *θεός* (*God*),—it being used not as a proper, but as a common name.

In John v. 22, it is said, according to the common version, "The Father judgeth no man; but hath committed all judgment unto the Son." "*The Father judgeth no man*, that is, without the Son," says a noted Orthodox commentator, Gill, "which is a proof of their equality." A proof of their equality! What, is it God to whom all judgment *is committed* by the Father?

We proceed to Colossians i.15, &c, and here, the first words which we find declare that the being spoken of is the image of the Invisible God. Is it possible that anyone can believe that God is affirmed by the Apostle to have been the *image* of God?

Turn now to Philippians ii.5-8. Here, according to the modern Trinitarian exposition, we are told that Christ, who was God, as the passage is

brought to prove, did not regard his equality with God as an object of solicitous desire, but humbled himself, and submitted to death, even the death of the cross. Can anyone imagine that he is to prove to us, by such passages as these, that the being to whom they relate is the Infinite Spirit?

There is no part of the New Testament in which the language concerning Christ is more figurative and difficult than that of the first four verses of the Epistle to the Hebrews. But do these verses prove that the writer of the Epistle believed Christ to be God? Let us take the common version, certainly as favorable as any to this supposition, and consider how the person spoken of is described. He is one *appointed* by God to be heir of all things, one *by whom God made the worlds, the image of his person, one who hath sat down at the right hand of God, one who hath obtained a more excellent name than the angels.* Is it not wonderful that the person here spoken of has been believed to be God? And, if the one thing could be more strange than the other, would it not be still more wonderful that this passage has been regarded as a main proof of the doctrine?

Look next at Hebrews i. 8, 9, in which passage we find these words, “Therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.” Will anyone maintain that this language is used concerning a being who possessed essential divinity? If passages of this sort are brought by anyone to *establish* the doctrine, by what use of language, by what possible statements, would he expect it to be *disproved*?

There are few arguments on which more stress has been laid by Trinitarians, than on the application of the title “Son of God” to Christ. Yet one who had for the first time heard of the doctrine would doubt, I think, whether a disputant who urged this argument were himself unable to understand the meaning of language, or presumed on the incapacity of those whom he addressed. To prove Christ to be God, a title is adduced which clearly distinguishes him from God. To suppose the contrary is to suppose that Christ is at once God and the Son of God, that is, his own Son, unless there be more than one God.

I think it evident that the conclusion of the fifth verse of the ninth chapter of Romans, and the quotation, Heb. i.10-12, do not relate to Christ. I conceive that they relate to God, the Father. Putting these, for the present, out of the question, the passages on which I have remarked are among the principals adduced in support of the doctrine. They stand in the very first class of proof texts. Let any man put it to his conscience what they do prove.

Again, it is inferred that Christ is God because it is said that he will judge the world. To do this, it is maintained, requires omniscience, and omniscience is the attribute of divinity alone. I answer, that whatever we may think of the judgment of the world spoken of in the New Testament, St. Paul declares that God will judge the world by A MAN<sup>1</sup> (not a God) whom HE has APPOINTED.

Again, it is argued that Christ is God because supreme dominion is ascribed to him. I do not now inquire what is meant by this supreme dominion; but I answer that it is nowhere ascribed to him in stronger language than in the following passage. “Then will be the end, when he will deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father; after destroying all dominion, and all authority and power. For he must reign till He [that is, God] has put all his enemies under his feet. . . . And when all things are put under him, then will the Son himself be subject to God, who put all things under him, that God may be all in all.”<sup>2</sup>

No words, one would think, could more clearly discriminate Christ from God, and declare his dependence and inferiority; and, of necessity, his infinite inferiority. I say, as I have said before, infinite inferiority; because an inferior and dependent must be a finite being, and finite and infinite do not admit of comparison.

It appears, then, that the doctrine under consideration is overthrown by the very arguments brought in its support.

II. But further; *it contradicts the express and reiterated declarations of our Savior.* According to the doctrine in question, it was THE SON, or the second person in the Trinity, who was united to the human nature of Christ. It was HIS words, therefore, that Christ, as a divine teacher, spoke; and it was through HIS power that he performed his wonderful works. But this is in direct contradiction to the declarations of Christ. He always refers the divine powers which he exercised, and the divine knowledge which he discovered, to the Father, and never to any other person, or to the Deity considered under any other relation or distinction. Of himself, AS THE SON, he always speaks as of a being entirely dependent upon the Father.

<sup>1</sup>“A man,” so the original should be rendered, not “that man”: ἐν ἀνδρὶ ᾧ ὤρισε. Acts xvii.31.

<sup>2</sup>1 Cor. xv. 24-28.

“If of myself I assume glory, my glory is nothing; it is my Father who glorifies me.” John viii. 54.

“As the Father has life in himself, so HAS HE GRANTED to the Son also to have life in himself.” John v. 26.

This is a verbal translation. A more intelligible rendering would be; As the Father is the source of life, so has He granted to the Son also to be the source of life.

“The works which the Father HAS GIVEN ME TO PERFORM [i.e., has enabled me to perform], these works which I do, testify of me, that the Father has sent me.” John v. 36.

“As the living Father has sent me, and I LIVE by THE FATHER,” &c. John vi. 57.<sup>3</sup>

“I have not spoken from myself, but the Father who sent me has commanded what I should enjoin, and what I should teach. . . . Whatever I speak, therefore, I speak according to the commandment which the Father has given me.” John xii. 49, 50.

“The doctrine which ye hear is not mine, but the Father’s who sent me.” John xiv. 24.

“If I perform not the works of my Father, believe me not.” John x. 37.

“The words which I speak unto you, I speak not of myself; the Father who dwells in me performs my works.” John xiv.10.

“THE SON CAN DO NOTHING OF HIMSELF, but only what he sees his Father doing.” John v. 19.

“When ye have set the Son of man on high [i. e., crucified him], then will ye know that I am HE [i. e., the Messiah], and that I do nothing of myself; but speak these things as my Father has taught me; and that he who sent me is with me.” John viii. 28, 29.

I do not multiply passages, because they must be familiar to everyone. From the declarations of our Savior, it appears that he constantly referred the divine power manifested in his miracles, and the divine inspiration by which he spoke, to the Father, and not to any other divine person such as Trinitarians suppose. According to their hypothesis, it was the divine power and wisdom of the Son which were displayed in Jesus; to him, therefore, should the miracles and doctrine of Jesus have been referred;

<sup>3</sup>In quoting the words as given, I have followed the Common Version; but the verse should be rendered thus: “As the ever-blessed Father sent me, and I am blessed through the Father, so he, whose food I am, shall be blessed through me.” ζάω, in this verse, is used in the secondary signification which it so often has, denoting, *I am blessed, I am happy.*

which they never are. No mention of such a divine person appears in his discourses. But of himself, as the Son of God, he speaks, as of a being entirely dependent upon his Father and our Father, his God and our God. These declarations are *decisive* of the controversy. Every other argument might be laid aside.

III. But in the third place, the doctrine that Christ is God *is opposed to the whole tenor of the Scriptures, and all the facts in the history of Christ.* Though conceived by a miracle, he was born into the world *as* other men are, and *such* as other men are. He did not come, as some of the Jews imagined their Messiah would come, no man knew whence.<sup>4</sup> He was a helpless infant. Will anyone, at the present day, shock our feelings and understanding to the uttermost, by telling us that Almighty God was incarnate in this infant, and wrapped in swaddling clothes?<sup>5</sup> He grew in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and men. Read over his history in the Evangelists, and ask yourselves if you are not reading the history of a man; though of one indeed to whom God had given His spirit without measure, whom He had entrusted with miraculous powers, and constituted a messenger of the most important truths. He appears with all the attributes of humanity. He discovers human affections. He is moved even to tears at the grave of Lazarus. He mourns over the calamities about to overwhelm his country. While enduring the agony of crucifixion, he discovers the strength of his filial affection, and consigns his mother to the care of the disciple whom he loved. He was sometimes excited to indignation, and his soul was sometimes troubled by the sufferings which he endured, and which he anticipated. “Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this I came—for this very hour.”<sup>6</sup> Devotion is the virtue of a created and dependent being. But our Savior has left us not less an example of piety than of benevolence. His expressions of dependence upon his Father and upon our Father are the most absolute and unequivocal. He felt the common wants

<sup>4</sup>“We know whence this man is; whereas when the Messiah comes, no one will know whence he is.” John vii.37.

<sup>5</sup>Dr. Watts in one of his Hymns says: “This infant is the MIGHTY GOD, Come to be *suckled* and *adored.*” B. I. h. 13. The language is almost too horrible to be quoted.— Dr. Watts was a man of piety and of very considerable intellectual powers; yet to this extreme point could his mind be debased by a belief of the doctrine against which we are contending. John xii.27.

<sup>6</sup>John xii.27.

of our nature, hunger, thirst, and weariness. He was in an agony, and an angel was sent to strengthen him. He suffered death, the common lot of man. He endured the cross, despising the shame, and he did this for THE JOY SET BEFORE HIM.<sup>7</sup> “Therefore God, even HIS God, has HIGHLY EXALTED HIM.” But it is useless to quote or allude to particular passages which prove that Christ was a being distinct from, inferior to, and dependent upon God. You may find them on every page of the New Testament. The proof of this fact is, as I have said, imbedded and ingrained in the very passages brought to support a contrary proposition.

But it is useless, for another reason, to adduce arguments in proof of this fact. It is conceded by Trinitarians explicitly and fully. The doctrine of the humanity of Christ is as essential a part of their scheme as the doctrine of his divinity. They allow, or to speak more properly, they contend that he was a man. But if this be true, then the only question that need be examined is whether it be possible for Christ to have been at once God and man, infinite and finite, omniscient and not omniscient, omnipotent and not omnipotent. To my mind, the propositions here supposed are as if one were to say that, to be sure, astronomers have correctly estimated the size of the earth; but that it does, notwithstanding, fill infinite space.

IV. In the next place, the doctrine is proved to be false because *it is evident from the Scriptures that none of those effects were produced, which would necessarily have resulted from its first annunciation by Christ, and its subsequent communication by his apostles.* The disciples of our Savior must, at some period, have considered him merely as a man. Such he was, to all appearance, and such, therefore, they must have believed him to be. Before he commenced his ministry, his relations and fellow-townsmen certainly regarded him as nothing more than a man. “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joseph, and of Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?”<sup>8</sup> At some particular period, the communication must have been made by our Savior to his disciples, that he was not a mere man, but that he was, properly speaking, and in the highest sense, God Himself. The doctrines with which we are contending, and other doctrines of a similar character, have

<sup>7</sup>Heb. xii.2.

<sup>8</sup>Mark vi.3. I have retained the words “brother” and “sisters,” used in the common version, not thinking it important in the connection in which the passage is quoted, to make any change in this rendering; but the relationship intended I believe to be that of cousins.

so obscured and confused the whole of Christianity that even its historical facts appear to be regarded by many scarcely in the light of real occurrences. But we *may* carry ourselves back in imagination to the time when Christ was on earth, and place ourselves in the situation of the first believers. Let us then reflect for a moment on what would be the state of our own feelings, if someone with whom we had associated as a man were to declare to us that he was really God Himself. If his character and works had been such as to command any attention to such an assertion, still through what an agony of incredulity, and doubt, and amazement, and consternation, must the mind pass before it could settle down into a conviction of the truth of his declaration. And when convinced of its truth, with what unspeakable astonishment should we be overwhelmed. With what extreme awe, and entire prostration of every faculty, should we approach and contemplate such a being; if indeed man, in his present tenement of clay, could endure such intercourse with his Maker. With what a strong and unrelaxing grasp would the idea seize upon our minds. How continually would it be expressed in the most forcible language, whenever we had occasion to speak of him. What a deep and indelible coloring would it give to every thought and sentiment in the remotest degree connected with an agent so mysterious and so awful. But we perceive nothing of this state of mind in the disciples of our Savior; but much that gives evidence of a very different state of mind.

One may read over the first three Evangelists, and it must be by a more than ordinary exercise of ingenuity if he discover what may pass for an argument that either the writers, or the numerous individuals of whom they speak, regarded our Savior as their Maker and God; or that he ever assumed that character. Can we believe that, if such a most extraordinary annunciation as has been supposed had ever actually been made by him, no particular record of its circumstances and immediate effects would have been preserved?—that the Evangelists in their accounts of their master would have omitted the most remarkable event in his history and their own?—and that three of them at least (for so much must be conceded) would have made no direct mention of far the most astonishing fact in relation to his character? Read over the accounts of the conduct and conversation of his disciples with their master, and put it to your own feelings, whether they ever thought that they were conversing with their God. Read over these accounts attentively and ask yourself if this supposition does not appear to you one of the most incongruous that ever entered the human mind?

Take only the facts and conversation, which occurred the night before our Savior's crucifixion, as related by St. John. Did Judas believe that he was betraying his God? Their master washed the feet of his apostles. Did the apostles believe—but the question is too shocking to be stated in plain words. Did they then believe their master to be God, when, surprised at his taking notice of an inquiry which they wished to make, but which they had not in fact proposed,<sup>9</sup> they thus addressed him? "Now we are sure that thou knowest all things, and that there is no need for any man to question thee. By this we believe that thou camest from God."<sup>10</sup> Could they imagine that he who throughout his conversation spoke of himself only as the minister of God, and who in their presence prayed to God, was himself the Almighty? Did they believe that it was the Maker of Heaven and Earth whom they were deserting when they left him upon his apprehension? But there is hardly a fact or conversation recorded in the history of our Savior's ministry which may not afford ground for such questions as have been proposed. He who maintains that the first disciples of our Savior did ever really believe that they were in the immediate presence of their God, must maintain at the same time that they were a class of men by themselves, and that all their feelings and conduct were immeasurably and inconceivably different from what those of any other human beings would have been under the same belief. But beside the entire absence of that state of mind, which must have been produced by this belief, there are other continual indications, direct and indirect, of their opinions and feelings respecting their master, wholly irreconcilable with the supposition of its existence during any period of his ministry or of their own. Throughout the New Testament we find nothing which implies that such a most extraordinary change of feeling ever took place in the disciples of Christ, as must have been produced by the communication that their master was God Himself upon earth. Nowhere do we find the expression of those irresistible and absorbing sentiments which must have possessed their minds under the conviction of this fact. With this conviction, in what terms, for instance, would they have spoken of his crucifixion, and of the circumstances with which it was attended? The power of language would have sunk under them in the attempt to express their feelings. Their words, when they approached the subject, would have been little more than a thrilling cry of horror and indignation. On this subject, they did indeed feel most deeply; but can we think that St. Peter

<sup>9</sup>See John xvi.17-19.

<sup>10</sup>John xvi.30.

regarded his master as God incarnate when he thus addressed the Jews by whom Christ had just been crucified? "Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, proved to you TO BE A MAN FROM GOD, by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves know, him, delivered up to you in conformity to the fixed will and foreknowledge of God, ye have crucified and slain by the hands of the heathen. Him has God raised to life."<sup>11</sup>

But what have been stated are not the only consequences which must necessarily have followed from the communication of the doctrine in question. It cannot be denied by those who hold the doctrine of the deity of Christ that, however satisfactorily it may be explained, and however well it may be reconciled with that fundamental principle of religion to which the Jews were so strongly attached, the doctrine of the Unity of God, yet it does, or may, at first sight, appear somewhat inconsistent with it. From the time of the Jew who is represented by Justin Martyr as disputing with him, about the middle of the second century, to the present period, it has always been regarded by the unbelieving Jews with abhorrence. They have considered the Christians as no better than idolaters; as denying the first truth of religion. But the unbelieving Jews, in the time of the apostles, opposed Christianity with the utmost bitterness and passion. They sought on every side for objections to it. There was much in its character to which the believing Jews could hardly be reconciled. The Epistles are full of statements, explanations, and controversy relating to questions having their origin in Jewish prejudices and passions. With regard, however, to this doctrine—which, if it had ever been taught, the believing Jews must have received with the utmost difficulty, and to which the unbelieving Jews would have manifested the most determined opposition—with regard to this doctrine, there is no trace of any controversy. But, if it had ever been taught, it must have been the main point of attack and defense between those who assailed, and those who supported Christianity. There is nothing ever said in its explanation. But it must have required, far more than any other doctrine, to be explained, illustrated, and enforced; for it appears not only irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Unity of God, but equally so with that of the humanity of our Savior; and yet both these doctrines, it seems, were to be maintained in connection with it. It must have been necessary, therefore, to state it as clearly as possible, to exhibit it in its relations, and

<sup>11</sup>Acts ii.22-24.

carefully to guard against the misapprehensions to which it is so liable on every side. Especially must care have been taken to prevent the gross mistakes into which the Gentile converts from polytheism were likely to fall. Yet so far from any such clearness of statement and fullness of explanation, the whole language of the New Testament in relation to this subject is (as I have before said) a series of enigmas, upon the supposition of its truth.

The doctrine, then, is never defended in the New Testament, though unquestionably it would have been the main object of attack and the main difficulty in the Christian system. It is never explained, though no doctrine could have been so much in need of explanation. On the contrary, upon the supposition of its truth the apostles express themselves in such a manner that, if it had been their purpose to darken and perplex the subject, they could not have done it more effectually. And still more, this doctrine is never insisted upon as a necessary article of faith; though it is now represented by its defenders as lying at the foundation of Christianity. With a few exceptions, the passages in which it is imagined to be taught are introduced incidentally, the attention of the writer being principally directed to some other topic; and can be regarded only as accidental notices of it. It appears, then, that while other questions of far less difficulty (for instance, the circumcision of the Gentile converts) were subjects of such doubt and controversy that even the authority of the apostles was barely sufficient to establish the truth, this doctrine, so extraordinary, so obnoxious, and so hard to be understood, was introduced in silence, and received without hesitation, dislike, opposition, or misapprehension. There are not many propositions, to be proved or disproved merely by moral evidence, which are more incredible.

I wish to repeat some of the ideas already suggested, in a little different connection. The doctrine, that Christ was God Himself appearing upon earth to make atonement for the sins of men, is represented by those who maintain it as a fundamental doctrine of Christianity, affecting essentially the whole character of our religion. If true, it must indeed have affected essentially the whole character of the writings of the New Testament. A truth of such awful and tremendous interest, a fact “at which reason stands aghast, and faith herself is half confounded,”<sup>12</sup> a doctrine so adapted to

<sup>12</sup>Such is the language of Bishop Hurd in defending the doctrine. “In this awfully stupendous manner, at which REASON STANDS AGHAST AND FAITH HERSELF IS HALF CONFOUNDED, was the grace of God to man at length manifested.” *Sermons*, Vol. ii, 289. London, 1785.

seize upon and possess the imagination and the feelings, and at once so necessary and so difficult to be understood, must have appeared everywhere in the New Testament in the most prominent relief. Nobody, one would think, can seriously imagine it any answer to this remark to say that “the apostles doubtless expected to be believed when they had *once* plainly asserted anything”; or to suggest that their veracity might have been suspected if they had made frequent and constant asseverations of the truth of the doctrine.<sup>13</sup> What was the business of the apostles, but to teach and explain, to enforce and defend, the fundamental doctrines of Christianity? I say to *defend* these doctrines; for he who reads the Epistles with any attention will not think that the mere authority of an apostle was decisive in bearing down at once all error, doubt, and opposition among believers. Even if this had been the case, their converts must still have been furnished with some answer to those objections with which the unbelieving Jews would have assailed a doctrine so apparently incredible and so abhorrent to their feelings.—From the very nature of the human mind, if the minds of the apostles at all resembled those of other men, the fact that their master was the Almighty, clothed in flesh, must have appeared continually in their writings, in direct assertions, in allusions, in the strongest possible expressions of feeling, in a thousand different forms. The intrinsic difficulty of the doctrine in question is so great, and such was the ignorance of the first converts, and their narrowness of conception, that the apostles must have continually recurred to it for the purpose of explaining it and guarding it against misapprehension. As a fundamental doctrine of our religion, it is one which they must have been constantly employed in teaching. If it were a doctrine of Christianity, the evidence for it would burst from every part of the New Testament in a blaze of light. Can anyone think that we should be left to collect the proof of a fundamental article of our faith, and the evidence of incomparably the most astonishing fact that ever occurred upon our earth, from some expressions scattered here and there, the greater part of them being dropped incidentally; and that really one of the most plausible arguments for it would be found in the omission of the Greek article in four or five texts? Can anyone think that such a doctrine would have been so taught, that, putting out of view the passages above referred to, the whole remaining body of the New Testament, the whole history of our Savior,

<sup>13</sup>See Professor Stuart’s Letters, 128.

and the prevailing and almost uniform language of his apostles should appear, at least, to be thoroughly irreconcilable with it?

I speak, it will be remembered, merely of the proposition that Christ is God. With regard to the doctrine of his double nature, or the doctrine of the Trinity, it cannot, as I have said, be pretended that either of these is anywhere directly taught. The whole New Testament, the Gospels and the Epistles, present another aspect from what they must have done, if the doctrines maintained by Trinitarians were true. If true, it is incredible that they should not have appeared in the Scriptures in a form essentially different from that in which alone it can be pretended that they do at present.

V. In treating of the argument from Scripture, I have thus far reasoned *ad hominem*; as if the doctrine that Christ is God, in the Trinitarian sense of the words, were capable of proof. But I must now advert to the essential character of the doctrine. *It admits of being understood in no sense which is not obviously false; and therefore it is impossible that it should have been taught by Christ if he were a teacher from God.*

From the nature of the Trinitarian doctrines, there is a liability to embarrassment in the whole of our reasoning from Scripture against them; it being impossible to say *definitely* what is to be disproved. I have endeavoured, however, to direct the argument in such a manner as to meet those errors in any form they may assume. That so many have held, or professed to hold, them (a phenomenon, one of the most remarkable in the history of the human mind), is principally to be explained by the fact that the language in which they are stated, taken in its obvious sense, expresses propositions so utterly incredible. Starting off from its obvious meaning, the mind has recourse to conceptions of its own, obscure, undefined, and unsettled; which, by now assuming one shape and then another, elude the grasp of reason. In disproving from the Scriptures the proposition that Christ is God, the arguments that have been urged, I trust, bear upon it in any Trinitarian sense which it may be imagined to express. But what does a Trinitarian mean by this proposition? Let us assume that the title "Son of God," applied to Christ, denotes, in some sense or other, proper essential divinity. But the Son is but *one of three* who constitute God. You may substitute after the numerals the word *person* or *distinction*, or any other; it will not affect the argument. God is a being; and when you have named Christ or the Son, you have not, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, named all which constitutes this being. The Trinitarian

asserts that God exists in three persons; or, to take the wholly unimportant modification of the doctrine that some writers have attempted to introduce, that "God is three in a certain respect." But Christ, it is also affirmed, is God, the Son is God. Does he, then, exist in three persons? Is he three in a certain respect? Unquestionably not. The word "God" is used in two senses. In one case, as applied to the Supreme Being, properly, in the only sense which a Christian can recognise as the literal sense of the term; in the other case, as applied to Christ, though professedly in the same, yet clearly and necessarily in a different signification, no one can tell what.

Again, the Father is God. Nothing can be added to His infinity or perfections to complete our idea of God. Confused as men's minds have been by the doctrine we are opposing, there is no one who would not shrink from expressly asserting anything to be wanting to constitute the Father, God, in the most absolute and comprehensive sense of the term. His conceptions must be miserably perplexed and perverted who thinks it possible to use language on this subject too strong or too unlimited. In the Father is all that we can conceive of as constituting God. And there is but one God. In the Father, therefore, exists all that we can conceive of, as constituting the One and Only God. But it is contended that Christ also is God. What, however, can anyone mean by this proposition, who understands and assents to the perfectly intelligible and indisputable propositions just stated? Is the meaning that Christ, as well as the Father—or if the Father be God, we must say, as well as God—is the One and Only God? Is it that we are in error about the unity of God, and that Christ is another God? No one will assent to either of these senses of the proposition. Does it imply, then, that neither the Father nor the Son is the One and Only God, but that together with another, the Holy Spirit, they constitute this mysterious Being? This seems at first view more conformed to the doctrine to be maintained; but it must be observed that he who adopts this sense asserts not that Christ is God, but that he is not God; and asserts at the same time that the Father is not God.

Once more, if Christ be God, and if there be but one God, then all that is true of God is true of Christ, considered as God; and, on the other hand, all that is true of the Son is true of God. This being so, open the Bible, and where the name of God occurs substitute that of the Son; and where the name of the Son occurs, that of God. "The Son sent his beloved Son"; "Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son that thy Son also may glorify Thee." I will not, for the sake of confuting any error, put a change on this most solemn and affecting passage. I have felt throughout the painful

incongruity of introducing conceptions that ought to be accompanied with very different feelings and associations into such a discussion, and I am not disposed to pursue the mode just suggested of exemplifying the nature of the errors against which I am contending. But one who had never seen the New Testament before would need but to read a page of it to satisfy himself that “the Son of God” and “God” are not convertible terms, but mean something very different.

But a Trinitarian may answer me, that the word “God” in the New Testament almost always denotes either the Trinity or the Father; and that he does not suppose it to be applied to the Son in more than about a dozen instances. One would think that this state of the case must, at the first view of it, startle a defender of the doctrine that Christ is God. It is strange that one equal to the Father in every divine perfection should so rarely be denoted by that name to which he is equally entitled. But passing over this difficulty, what is the purport of the answer? You maintain that Christ is God, that the Son is God. If so, are not all the acts of God his acts? Is not all that can be affirmed of God to be affirmed of him? You hesitate perhaps; but there is no reason why you should. If there be any meaning in the New Testament, these questions must be answered in the negative. It is clear, then, that whatever you may imagine, you do not use the term “God” in the same sense when applied to the Son as when applied by you to what you call the Trinity or to the First Person of the Trinity; or as when applied either by you or us to the Supreme Being. But, as regards the question under discussion, the word admits of no variety of signification. The proposition, then, that Christ is God is so thoroughly irreconcilable with the New Testament that no one could think of maintaining it except through a confused misapprehension of its meaning.

Here, then, I close the argument from Scripture, not because it is exhausted; but because it must be useless to pursue it further. I will only add a few general remarks, founded in part on what has been already said, concerning the passages adduced by Trinitarians in support of their doctrines.

In the first place, it is to be recollected that the passages urged to prove that Christ is God are alone sufficient evidence against this proposition. A large portion of them contain language which cannot be used concerning God, which necessarily distinguishes Christ from God, and which clearly represents him as an inferior and dependent being.

In the next place, I wish to recall another remark to the recollection of my readers. It is that the doctrines maintained by Trinitarians, upon the

supposition of their possibility and truth, must have been taught very differently from the manner in which they are supposed to be. Let anyone recollect, that THERE IS NO PRETENCE THAT ANY PASSAGE IN SCRIPTURE AFFIRMS THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY, OR THAT OF THE DOUBLE NATURE OF CHRIST; and then let him look over the passages brought to prove that Christ is God; let him consider how they are collected from one place and another, how thinly they are scattered through the New Testament, and how incidentally they are introduced; let him observe that, in a majority of the books of the New Testament, there is not one on which a wary disputant would choose to rely; and then let him remember the general tenor of the Christian Scriptures and the undisputed meaning of far the greater part of their language in relation to this subject. Having done this, I think he may safely say, before any critical examination of the meaning of those passages, that their meaning must have been mistaken; that the evidence adduced is altogether defective *in its general aspect*; and that it is not by such detached passages as these, taken in a sense opposed to the general tenor of the Scriptures, that a doctrine like that in question can be established. We might as reasonably attempt to prove, in opposition to the daily witness of the heavens, that there are three suns instead of but one, by building an argument on the accounts which we have of parhelia.

Another remark of some importance is that, as Trinitarians differ much in their modes of explaining the doctrine, so are they not well agreed in their manner of defending it. When the doctrine was first introduced, it was defended, as Bishop Hersley tells us, “by arguments drawn from Platonic principles.”<sup>14</sup> To say nothing of these, some of the favorite arguments from Scripture of the ancient Fathers were such as no Trinitarian at the present day would choose to insist upon. One of those, for instance, which was adduced to prove the Trinity, is found in Ecclesiastes, iv. 12. “A threefold cord is not soon broken.” Not a few of the Fathers, says Whitby, explain this concerning the Holy Trinity.<sup>15</sup> Another passage often adduced, and among others by Athanasius, as declarative of the generation of the Son from the substance of the Father, was discovered in the first verse of the 45th Psalm. The argument founded upon this disappears altogether in our common version, which renders it: “My heart is inditing

<sup>14</sup>Charge IV, section 2, published in *Horsley's Tracts in Controversy with Dr. Priestley*.

<sup>15</sup>*Dissertatio de Scripturarum Interpretatione secundum Patrum Commentarios*, 95, 96.



a good matter.” But the word in the Septuagint, corresponding to *matter* in the common version, is Logos: and the Fathers understood the passage thus; My heart is throwing out a good *Logos*.<sup>16</sup> A proof, that the second person in the Trinity became incarnate, was found in Proverbs ix. 1. “Wisdom hath builded her house”;<sup>17</sup> for the second person, or the Son, was regarded in the theology of the times as the Wisdom of the Father. These are merely specimens taken from many of a similar character, a number more of which may be found in the work of Whitby just referred to in the margin. Since the first introduction of the doctrine, the mode of its defence has been continually changing. As more just notions respecting the criticism and interpretation of the Scriptures have slowly made their way, one passage after another has been dropped from the Trinitarian roll. Some which are retained by one expositor are given up by another. Even two centuries ago, Calvin threw away or depreciated the value of many texts which most Trinitarians would think hardly to be spared. There are very few of any importance in the controversy, the Orthodox exposition of which has not been abandoned by some one or more of the principal Trinitarian critics among Protestants. Among Catholics, there are many by whom it is rather affirmed than conceded, that the doctrine of the Trinity is not to be proved from the Scriptures, but rests for its support upon the *tradition of the Church*.

Whence, then, was the doctrine of the Trinity derived? The answer to this question is important. Reason and Scripture have borne their testimony against the doctrine; and I am now about to call another witness, Ecclesiastical History.

#### ON THE ORIGIN OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

*We can trace the history of this doctrine, and discover its source, not in the Christian revelation, but in the Platonic philosophy*<sup>18</sup> which was the prevalent philosophy during the first ages after the introduction of

<sup>16</sup>*Dissertatio de Scripturarum Interpretatione secundum Patrum Commentarios*, 75.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>18</sup>I state the proposition in this general form in which the authorities to be adduced directly apply to it. But it is to be observed that the doctrine of the personality of the Logos and of his divinity in an inferior sense of that term, which was the germ of the Trinity, was immediately derived from Philo, the Jewish Plato, as he has been called, which fact I shall hereafter have occasion to advert to.

Christianity; and of which all the more eminent Christian writers, the Fathers, as they are called, were, in a greater or less degree, disciples. They, as others have often done, blended their philosophy and their religion into one complex and heterogeneous system; and taught the doctrines of the former as those of the latter. In this manner, they introduced errors into the popular faith. “It is an old complaint of learned men,” says Mosheim, “that the Fathers, or teachers of the ancient church, were too much inclined to the philosophy of Plato, and rashly confounded what was taught by that philosopher with the doctrines of Christ, our Saviour; in consequence of which, the religion of Heaven was greatly corrupted, and the truth much obscured.”<sup>19</sup> This passage is from the Dissertation of Mosheim, *Concerning the Injury Done to the Church by the Later Platonists*. In the same dissertation, after stating some of the obstructions thrown in the way of Christianity, by those of the later Platonists who were its enemies, he proceeds to say: “But these evils were only external, and although they were injurious to our most holy religion, and delayed its progress, yet they did not corrupt its very nature, and disease, if I may so speak, its vitals. More fatal distempers afflicted Christianity, after this philosophy had entered the very limits of the sacred city, and had built a habitation for herself in the minds of those to whom the business of instruction was committed. There is nothing, the most sacred in our faith, which from that time was not profaned, and did not lose a great part of its original and natural form.”<sup>20</sup> “Few of the learned,” he adds in another place, “are so unacquainted with ecclesiastical history, as to be ignorant what a great number of errors, and most preposterous opinions, flowed in from this impure source.”<sup>21</sup> Among the false doctrines thus introduced from the Platonic philosophy, is to be reckoned, preeminently, that of the Trinity. Gibbon says, with a sneer, that “the Athenian sage [Plato] marvellously anticipated one of the most surprising discoveries of the Christian revelation.” In making this assertion, Gibbon adopted a popular error for which there is no foundation. Nothing resembling the doctrine of the Trinity is to be found in the writings of Plato himself.<sup>22</sup> But there is no question that, in different forms, it was a

<sup>19</sup>Mosheim, *De turbatâ per recentiores Platonicos Ecclesiâ Commentatio*, section vi.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, section xxxiii.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, section xlvi.

<sup>22</sup>Mosheim says, ironically, “Certainly the three famous hypostases of the later Platonists may be discovered in the *Timæus* of Plato, as easily and readily as the three principles of the chemists, salt, sulphur, and mercury.” “*Certe tres illas celeberrimas*

favorite doctrine of the later Platonists, equally of those who were not Christians as of those who were. Both the one and the other class expressed the doctrine in similar terms, explained it in a similar manner, and defended it, as far as the nature of the case allowed, by similar arguments; and both appealed in its support to the authority of Plato. Clement of Alexandria, one of the earliest of the Trinitarian and Platonizing fathers (he flourished about the commencement of the third century) endeavours to show that the doctrine was taught by that philosopher. He quotes a passage from one of the epistles ascribed to him,<sup>23</sup> in which mention is made of a second and third principle, beside the “King of all things.” In this passage, he observes, he “can understand nothing to be meant but the Sacred Trinity; the third principle being the Holy Spirit, and the second principle being the Son, by whom all things were created according to the will of the Father.”<sup>24</sup> A similar interpretation of the passage is referred to by Eusebius<sup>25</sup> and in the oration which he ascribes to Constantine as addressed “To the Assembly of Saints,” Plato is eulogized as teaching, conformably to the truth, that “there is a First God, the Father, and a Second God, the Logos or Son.”<sup>26</sup> Augustine tells us in his Confessions that he found the true doctrine concerning the Logos in a Latin translation of some Platonic writings which the providence of God had thrown in his way.<sup>27</sup> Speaking of those ancient philosophers, who were particularly admired by the later Platonists, he says; “If these men could revive, and live over again their lives with us, with the change of a few words and sentences, they would become Christians, as very many Platonists of our own time have done.”<sup>28</sup> Basnage had good reason for observing that the Fathers almost made Plato to have been a Christian before the introduction of Christianity. Immediately after this remark, Basnage quotes a writer of the fifth century, who expresses with honest

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hypostases Platoniorum in Timaeo Platonis ostendere, aequae facile et promptum est, atque tria chymicorum principia, sal, sulphur, et mercurium ex hoc dialogo eruere.” (See his Notes to his Latin Translation of *Cudworth’s Intellectual System*. 2 Ed. Tom. I., 901.) The doctrine of the Trinity is as little to be discovered in any other genuine writing of Plato, as in the Timaeus.

<sup>23</sup>The second epistle to Dionysius; which, with all the other epistles ascribed to Plato, is now generally regarded as spurious.

<sup>24</sup>*Stromat. Lib. V.*, 710. Ed. Potter.

<sup>25</sup>*Praeparatio Evangelica. Lib. XI. cap. xv.*

<sup>26</sup>Cap. ix.

<sup>27</sup>*Tu, Domine—procurasti mihi—quosdam Platoniorum libros, &c. Opp. I.*, 128. Basil. 1556.

<sup>28</sup>*Lib. de Vera Religione. Opp. I.*, 704.

zeal his admiration at the supposed fact that the Athenian sage should have so marvellously anticipated the most mysterious doctrines of revelation.<sup>29</sup>

I will produce a few passages from modern *Trinitarian* writers to show the near resemblance between the Christian and Platonic Trinity. The very learned Cudworth, in his great work on the Intellectual System, has brought together all that antiquity could furnish to illustrate the doctrine. He institutes a long and minute comparison between the forms in which it was held by the Heathen Platonists, and that in which it was held by the Christian Fathers. Toward the conclusion of this we find the following passages:

“Thus have we given a true and full account, how, according to Athanasius, the three divine hypostases, though not *monoousious*, but *homoousious* only, are really but one God or Divinity. In all which doctrine of his, there is nothing but what a true and genuine Platonist would readily subscribe to.”<sup>30</sup>

“As the Platonic Pagans after Christianity did approve of the Christian doctrine concerning the Logos, as that which was exactly agreeable with their own; so did the generality of the Christian Fathers before and after the Nicene council, represent the genuine Platonic Trinity as really the same thing with the Christian, or as approaching so near to it, that they differed chiefly in circumstances, or the manner of expression.”<sup>31</sup>

In proof of this, Cudworth produces many passages similar to those which I have quoted from the Fathers. Athanasius, he observes, “sends the Arians to school to the Platonists.”<sup>32</sup>

Basnage was not disposed to allow such a resemblance between the Christian and Platonic Trinity, as that which Cudworth maintains, and has written expressly in refutation of the latter. It is not necessary to enter into this controversy. The sentence with which he concludes his remarks<sup>33</sup> on the subject is enough for our purpose. “Christianity, in its triumph, has

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<sup>29</sup>Basnage, *Histoire des Juifs. Liv. IV. ch. iv. section 20.*

<sup>30</sup>Page 620.

<sup>31</sup>Page 621.

<sup>32</sup>Page 623. The study of Cudworth is strongly recommended by Bishop Horsley for the information which his work contains respecting the tenets of the Platonists. See his Charge, before quoted, V. section 5. I would recommend it also, with particular reference to the subject before us; for I know no other work from which so much information can be derived concerning the origin of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

<sup>33</sup>*Histoire des Juifs. Liv. IV. ch. iii. iv.*

often reflected honor on the Platonists; and as the Christians took some pride in finding the Trinity taught by a philosopher, so the Platonists were proud in their turn to see the Christians adopt their principles.”

I quote the authorities of learned Trinitarians, rather than adduce the facts on which they are founded, because the facts could not be satisfactorily stated and explained in a small compass. It is to be observed that Trinitarians, in admitting the influence of the Platonic doctrine upon the faith of the early Christians, of course do not regard the Platonic as the original source of the Orthodox doctrine, but many of them represent it as having occasioned errors and heresies, and particularly the Arian heresy. Such was the opinion of Petavius, who in his *Theologica Dogmata*,<sup>34</sup> after giving an account of the Platonic notions concerning the Trinity, thus remarks:

“I will now proceed to consider the subject on account of which I have entered into so full an investigation of the opinions of the Platonists concerning the Trinity; namely, in what manner this doctrine was conceived of by some of the ancients, and how the fiction of Plato concerning the Trinity was gradually introduced into Christianity, by those of the Platonists who had become converts to our religion, or by others who had been in any way indoctrinated in the Platonic Philosophy. They are to be separated into two classes. One consists of such as, properly speaking, were unworthy the name of Christians, being heretics. The other of those who were true Christians, Catholics, and saints; but who, through the circumstances of their age, the mystery not yet being properly understood, threw out dangerous propositions concerning it.”

The very Orthodox Gale, in his *Court of the Gentiles*, says; “The learned Christians, *Clemens Alexandrinus, Origen, &c.*, made use of the *Pythagorean* and *Platonic* philosophy, which was at this time wholly in request, as a *medium* to illustrate and prove the great mysteries of faith, touching the Divine *λόγος*, *word*, mentioned John i. 1. hoping by such *symbolisings*, and claiming kindred with these philosophic notions and traditions (originally Jewish) touching the Platonic *λόγος, νοῦς*, and *τριάς*, [the Platonic trinity,] they might gain very much credit and interest amongst these *Platonic Sophistes*.”<sup>35</sup>

Beausobre, in his *History of Manichaeism*, adverts to this subject. His opinion concerning the resemblance of the Platonic and Christian Trinity appears in the following passage:

<sup>34</sup>*De Trinitate. Lib. I. cap. iii. section 1.*

<sup>35</sup>Part III. B. II. c. i. section 9.

“Such, according to Chalcidius,<sup>36</sup> was the Platonic Trinity. It has been justly regarded as defective. 1. It speaks of a *first*, a *second*, and a *third God*; expressions which Christianity has banished. Still, as appears from what I have said, Plato really acknowledged but a single God, because he admitted, properly speaking, but a single First Cause, and a single Monarch. 2. This theology is still further censured for the division of the Divine Persons, who are not only distinguished but separated. The objection is well grounded. But this error may be pardoned in a philosopher; since it is excused in a great number of Christian writers, who have had the lights of the Gospel. 3. In the last place, fault is found with this theology on account of the inequality of the Persons. There is a supreme God, to whom the two others are subject. There was the same defect in the theology of the Manichaeans. They believed the consubstantiality of the Persons, but they did not believe their equality. The Son was below the Father, and the Holy Spirit below the Father and Son. But if we go back to the time when Manichaeus lived [about the middle of the third century], we shall be obliged to pardon an error which was then very general. . . . Huet, who acknowledges that Origen has everywhere taught that the Son is inferior to the Father, excuses him on the ground, that this was the common doctrine of those writers who preceded the Council of Nice. And Petavius not only does not deny it, but proves it at length in his First Book on the Trinity.”<sup>37</sup>

There has been no more noted defender of the doctrine in modern times than Bishop Horsely. The following is a quotation from his *Letters to Dr. Priestley*:

“I am very sensible, that the Platonizers of the second century were the Orthodox of that age. I have not denied this. On the contrary, I have endeavoured to show that their Platonism brings no imputation upon their Orthodoxy. The advocates of the Catholic faith in modern times have been too apt to take alarm at the charge of Platonism. I rejoice and glory in the opprobrium. I not only confess, but I maintain, not a perfect agreement, but such a similitude, as speaks a common origin, and affords an argument in confirmation of the Catholic doctrine [of the Trinity] from its conformity to the most ancient and universal traditions.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Chalcidius was a Platonic philosopher who lived before the close of the fourth century.

<sup>37</sup>*Histoire du Manichéisme. Tom. I. 560, 561.*

<sup>38</sup>*Letters to Dr. Priestley, Letter 13.*

In another place he says: "It must be acknowledged that the first converts from the Platonic school took advantage of the resemblance between the Evangelic and Platonic doctrine on the subject of the Godhead, to apply the principles of their old philosophy to the explication and confirmation of the articles of their faith. They defended it by arguments drawn from Platonic principles, and even propounded it in Platonic language."<sup>39</sup>

I might produce more authorities in support of the facts which have been stated. But I conceive it to be unnecessary. The fair inference from these facts, every reader is able to draw for himself. The doctrine of the Trinity is not a doctrine of Christ and his apostles, but a fiction of the school of the later Platonists, introduced into our religion by the Fathers, who were admirers and disciples of the philosophy taught in this school. The want of all mention of it in the Scriptures is abundantly compensated by the ample space which it occupies in the writings of the heathen Platonists, and of the Platonizing Fathers.

But what has been stated is not the only evidence which Ecclesiastical History affords against this doctrine. The conclusion to which we have just arrived is confirmed by other facts. But these, however important, I will here but barely mention. They are the facts *of its gradual introduction; of its slow growth to its present form; of the strong opposition which it encountered; and of its tardy reception among the great body of common Christians.*<sup>40</sup>

Cudworth, after remarking "that not a few of those ancient Fathers, who were therefore reputed Orthodox because they zealously opposed Arianism," namely Gregory Nyssen, Cyril of Alexandria, and others, entertained the opinion that the three persons in the Trinity were three distinct individuals, "like three individual men, Thomas, Peter, and John"; the divine nature being common to the former as the human nature is to the latter; observes that "some would think that the ancient and genuine Platonic Trinity taken with all its faults is to be preferred before this Trinity." He then says: "But as this Trinity came afterwards to be decried for tritheistic; so in the room thereof, started there up that other Trinity of persons numerically the same, or having all one and the same singular existent essence; a doctrine which seemeth not to have been

<sup>39</sup>Charge IV. section 2.

<sup>40</sup>On these subjects, see Dr. Priestley's *History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ*.

owned by any public authority in the Christian church, save that of the Lateran council only."<sup>41</sup>

This is the present Orthodox form of the doctrine of the Trinity. Cudworth refers to the fourth general Lateran council, held in 1215, under Pope Innocent the Third. The same council which, in the depth of the dark ages, established the modern doctrine of the Trinity, established, likewise, that of Transubstantiation; enforced with the utmost rigor the persecution of heretics, whom it ordered to be sought out and exterminated; and prepared the way for the tribunals of the Inquisition, which were shortly after established.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup>*Intellectual System*, 603-604.

<sup>42</sup>See Fleury, *Histoire Ecclésiastique*. An. 1215.