

EDITORIAL

Evangelical Candor and the Trinity

Prodigious amounts of energy have been expended by evangelicals in an effort to demonstrate that the doctrine of the Trinity, enshrined at Nicea in 325 AD, is implied in the canon of the New Testament, though not explicitly stated. The Apostles are often portrayed as would-be Trinitarians struggling to express their faith in Jesus and his Father in a way which did not contradict the heritage of Israel and its belief in One God. And yet, so the argument goes, the Oneness of God is no longer, as in the Old Testament, a Oneness of unipersonal monotheism.

This Journal is dedicated, amongst other things, to demonstrating that such harmonization of Jesus and the Apostles with the creeds of the 4th and 5th century is impossible. The battery of subtle arguments proposed by evangelicals is suspect at every point. When all is said and done, the Old Testament has been abandoned, and the New Testament is said to have produced a radically new view of the Godhead.

But is such a thing credible? Where in the New Testament is there the faintest hint that the cardinal tenet of Judaism, the belief attested by the presence of thousands and thousands of singular pronouns to describe the One God, has been drastically modified to include two further distinct Persons in the Deity?

The *New Bible Dictionary*¹ represents a showcase of contemporary evangelical scholarship, a mine of valuable information on biblical topics. The article on the Trinity proceeds as follows:

Without the titanic disclosure of the Christ event no one would have taken the Old Testament to affirm anything but the *exclusive, i.e.*, unipersonal monotheism that is the hallmark of Judaism and Islam. It was the New Testament writers exploring the implications of the revelation of God in the Son, who first provided the basis for interpreting this monotheism *inclusively*.

¹I. Howard Marshall, A.R. Millard, J.I. Packer, D.R. Wiseman, eds., IntersVarsity Press, 1996, 1209-1211.

Now does that thesis really hold up under investigation? Firstly Jesus committed himself to belief in the age-old creed of Judaism, and is found affirming it as the basis of true religion (Mark 12:28ff.). If Jesus had secretly thought of a modification and alteration of this creed to include himself and a third Person, the evidence is entirely lacking. To imply, as evangelicals do, that Jesus authorized a departure from the strict monotheism of his heritage is to do violence to the divine records.

The argument creeps on. We next learn of a “few hints” in the Old Testament that God was in fact more than one Person, although “no one would have taken the Old Testament to affirm anything but exclusive unitary monotheism.” So then, those poor Jews: they failed to see the hints which would have undermined their cardinal tenet, the conviction for which they were prepared to die! Furthermore, Jesus gave every impression of strengthening them in their concept of God, yet at the same time clandestinely held to a different view of God.

What then will modern evangelicals make of the awkward fact that “Son of God” is as our article states “a Messianic title, rather than an ascription of divinity in the synoptic gospels, though filial uniqueness of some kind is indicated in Matt. 11:27; Mark 12:6; 13:32; Luke 1:35”?

A glance at the verses which are supposed to push Jesus’ sonship beyond Messiahship (the category of Messiahship was entirely sufficient for the whole purpose of John in writing his book, 20:31) shows them to be inadequate to the task. “Filial uniqueness” is already rooted in the concept of the Messiah, and Luke 1:35 expressly makes the *begetting of the Son in history*, not eternity, the reason why Jesus is entitled to be God’s Son.

Our article then cites a number of further descriptions of the Savior and concludes that they are

consistent with Trinitarian (or, at least binitarian) thinking. But taken on their own, they stop somewhat short of a claim to eternal divine Sonship. The claims above are thus overpressed when taken (with the resurrection) as hard “proofs” of Jesus’ divinity. It needs to be remembered that the disciples too worked miracles, were given the authority to forgive sins (John 20:23), and were called to share in the sort of unity with the Father and the Son, that the Son himself had evinced (so John 17:21, 22).

It is interesting to find our writer’s candor at this point aligning him with precisely the argument used by Jehovah’s Witnesses to show that “I and the

Father are one” (John 10:30) gives no support at all to the Trinity. But there is more honest concession to come. “Even Jesus’ claim to pre-exist Abraham (John 8:58) does not itself ‘prove’ eternal divinity.” Yet John 8:58 continues to be submitted as out and out demonstration of the “Deity” of Jesus by scores of evangelical tracts. It is heartening to find that argument now undermined by a distinguished evangelical writer. Our writer has recognized that John 8:58 says nothing of an eternal Son, because “the angels and other heavenly creatures were considered to preexist the world.”

Our writer, despite his admission about the weakness of traditional Trinitarian argument, goes on to find Jesus’ distribution of the spirit from heaven a decisive proof of his Deity. Of course, it could easily be replied that the God who authorizes the man Jesus to resurrect the dead and conduct the judgment can equally well empower him to pour out the Father’s spirit on the church.

The fatal flaw which continues to confuse the church into thinking that Jesus “is God” rather than the appointed *agent* of God, His unique Son, involves a demonstrably false deduction from the facts of Psalm 110:1. Our article claims that Psalm 110:1 is one of those telling hints of at least a duality in the Godhead: “The Lord said to my Lord . . .”

This argument fails immediately when the original text is consulted. The Psalm assigns Deity and humanity respectively to the two exalted person-ages. Yahweh is the speaker and the one addressed is *adoni*, a title which in every one of its 195 occurrences designates a human or angelic superior *as distinct from* the One God who is 449 times *adonai*.

Psalm 110:1, whose influence pervades the New Testament (it is cited or alluded to some 23 times), should have blocked any suggestion that the Messiah is God himself. On the contrary the Messiah in both Testaments is a unique man, who is mentioned separately and distinctly from the one God of Israel. In the classic creedal statement of Paul, where evangelicals hope at last to find the Apostle in support of their post-biblical creed, Paul is explicitly loyal to his Jewish unipersonal monotheism. In contrast to the many gods and lords of the pagan world, Paul holds to the view that for us Christians “there is One God, the Father, and no one besides him” (1 Cor. 8:4-6). The typical exclusive language describing the One God of Israel in the Old Testament is here applied to the Father *only* and not to “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Paul believed of course in “one Lord Jesus Christ,” but he has already defined the One God as *the Father*. Once again the controlling influence of

Psalm 110:1 and the whole of the rest of Scripture come into play. The One God is the Father alone, and Jesus is the One Lord *Messiah*, the *adoni* of the oracle uttered by Yahweh (Ps. 110:1).

The source of Trinitarianism is not the Bible, but the failed attempts of Gentile church fathers to comprehend Judaism's and Jesus' crowning doctrine of One God in One Person. The promotion of Jesus to coequal deity undermined the great unifying doctrine of the Bible, the sacred treasure of Israel. Demoting the Father in the interests of elevating the Son is a theological disaster in need of urgent repair.