

The Sandy Foundation Shaken

WILLIAM PENN

William Penn (1644-1718), founder of Pennsylvania, was a prominent Quaker leader and friend of George Fox. His first essay, entitled Truth Exalted, urged laymen and clerics to examine the foundation of their faith. His following publication was The Sandy Foundation Shaken. The work was declared heretical as refuting the belief “that the Godhead existed as three separate persons.” Penn underwent imprisonment in the Tower of London from 1668 to 1669. The Bishop of London threatened that Penn must either recant or die, to which Penn replied that “the prison shall be my grave before I will budge a jot.” Penn subsequently wrote No Cross, No Crown and Innocency with Her Open Face. The latter pamphlet acknowledges the divinity of Christ, but not the doctrine of the Trinity. The intercession of the duke of York with the king secured Penn's release.

We reprint a section of Penn's anti-Trinitarian tract.

The Trinity of distinct and separate Persons, in the Unity of Essence, refuted from Scripture.

“And he said, Lord God, there is no god like unto thee, to whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal, saith the Holy One?¹—I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God besides me. Thus saith the Lord thy redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. I will also praise thee, O my God; unto thee will I sing—O Holy One of Israel, Jehovah shall be One—and his name One.”² Which, with a cloud of other testimonies that might be urged, evidently demonstrate, that in the days of the first covenant, and prophets, *but One was the Holy God, and God but that Holy One.*—Again, “And Jesus said unto him, why callest thou me good? there is none good but

¹1Kings viii.23. Isa. xl.25.

²Isa. xlv. 5, 6, xlvi.17. Psa. lxxi.22. Zac.xiv.9.

One, and that is God. And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee (father) the Only true God. Seeing it is One God that shall justify. There be gods many,—but unto us there is but One God, the Father, of whom are all things. One God and Father, who is above all. For there is One God. To the Only-wise God be glory now and ever.”³ From all which I shall lay down this one assertion, that the testimonies of Scripture, both under the law, and since the gospel dispensation, *declare One to be God, and God to be One*, on which I shall raise this argument:

If God, as the Scriptures testify, hath never been declared or believed, but as the *Holy One*; then will it follow, that *God is not an Holy Three*, nor doth subsist in *Three distinct and separate Holy Ones*: but the before-cited Scriptures undeniably prove that One is God, and God only is that Holy One; therefore he cannot be divided into, or subsist in an Holy Three, or three distinct and separate Holy Ones.—Neither can this receive the least prejudice from that frequent but impertinent distinction, that He is One in substance, but Three in persons or subsistences; since God was not declared or believed incompletely, or without his subsistence; nor did He require homage from his creatures as an incomplete or abstracted Being, but as God the Holy One, for so He should be manifested and worshipped without that which was absolutely necessary to himself: So that either the testimonies of the aforementioned Scriptures are to be believed concerning God, that He is entirely and completely, not abstractly and distinctly, the Holy One; or else their authority to be denied by these Trinitarians: and on the contrary, if they pretend to credit those holy testimonies, they must necessarily conclude their kind of Trinity a fiction.

REFUTED FROM RIGHT REASON

1. If there be three distinct and separate persons, then three distinct and separate substances, because every person is inseparable from its own substance; and as there is no person that is not a substance in common acceptation among men, so do the Scriptures plentifully agree herein; and since the Father is God, the son is God, and the spirit is God, (which their opinion necessitates them to confess) then unless the Father, son, and spirit, are three distinct nothings, they must be three distinct substances, and consequently three distinct gods.

³Matt.xix.17. John xvii.3. Rom. iii.30. 1 Cor. viii.5, 6. Eph. iv.6. 1 Tim.ii.5. Jude ver.25.

2. It is farther proved, if it be considered, that either the divine persons are finite or infinite. If the first, then something finite is inseparable to the infinite substance, whereby something finite is in God; if the last, then three distinct infinities, three omnipotents, three eternal, and so three gods.

3. If each person be God, and that God subsists in three persons, then in each person are three persons or gods, and from three they will increase to nine, and so *ad infinitum*.

4. But if they shall deny the three persons or subsistences to be infinite, (for so there would unavoidably be three gods) it will follow that they must be finite, and so the absurdity is not abated from what it was; for that of one substance having three subsistences is not greater than that an infinite being should have three finite modes of subsisting. But though that mode which is finite cannot answer to a substance that is infinite; yet to try if we can make their principle to consist, let us conceive that three persons, which may be finite separately, make up an infinite conjunctly; however this will follow, that they are no more incommunicable or separate, nor properly subsistences, but a subsistence; for the infinite substance cannot find a bottom or subsistence in any one or two, therefore, jointly. And here I am also willing to overlook finiteness in the Father, Son, and Spirit, which this doctrine must suppose.

5. Again, if these three distinct persons are one, with some one thing, as they say they are with the Godhead, then are not they incommunicable among themselves; but so much the contrary, as to be one in the place of another: for if that the only God is the Father, and Christ be that only God, then is Christ the Father. So if that one God be the son, and the spirit that one God, then is the spirit the son, and so round. Nor is it possible to stop, or that it should be otherwise, since if the divine nature be inseparable from the three persons, or communicated to each, and each person have the whole divine nature, then is the son in the Father, and the spirit in the son, unless that the Godhead be as incommunicable to the persons, as they are reported to be amongst themselves; or that the three persons have distinctly allotted them such a proportion of the divine nature, as is not communicable to each other: which is alike absurd. Much more might be said to manifest the gross contradiction of this Trinitarian doctrine, as vulgarly received; but I must be brief.

INFORMATION AND CAUTION

Before I shall conclude this head, it is requisite I should inform thee, reader, concerning its original. Thou mayst assure thyself, it is not from the Scriptures, nor reason, since so expressly repugnant; although all broachers of their own inventions strongly endeavour to reconcile them with that holy record. Know then, my friend, *it was born above three hundred years after the ancient gospel was declared*; and that through the nice distinctions and too daring curiosity of the Bishop of Alexandria, who being as hotly opposed by Arius, their zeal so reciprocally blew the fire of contention, animosity, and persecution, till at last they sacrificed each other to their mutual revenge.

Thus it was conceived in *ignorance*, brought forth and maintained by *cruelty*; for though he that was strongest imposed his opinion, persecuting the contrary, yet the scale turning on the Trinitarian side, it has there continued through all the Romish generations; and notwithstanding it hath obtained the name of Athanasian from Athanasius, (a stiff man, witness his carriage towards Constantine the emperor) because supposed to have been most concerned in the framing that creed in which this doctrine is asserted; yet have I never seen one copy void of a suspicion, rather to have been the results of Popish schoolmen; which I could render more perspicuous, did not brevity necessitate me to an omission.

Be therefore cautioned, reader, not to embrace the determination of prejudiced councils for evangelical doctrine; which the Scriptures bear no certain testimony to, neither was believed by the primitive saints, or thus stated by and I have read of in the first, second, or third centuries; particularly Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, with many others who appear wholly foreign to the matter in controversy. But seeing that private spirits, and those none of the most ingenious, have been the parents and guardians of this so generally received doctrine; let the time past suffice, and be admonished to apply thy mind unto that light and grace which brings salvation; that by obedience thereunto, those mists tradition hath cast before thy eyes may be expelled, and thou receive a certain knowledge of that God, whom to know is life eternal, not to be divided, but *One pure, entire and eternal Being*; who in the fulness of time *sent forth his Son*, as the true light which enlighteneth every man; that whosoever followed him (the light) might be translated from the dark notions and vain conversations of men to this holy light, in which only

sound judgment and eternal life are obtainable: who so many hundred years since, in person, testified the virtue of it, and has communicated unto all such a proportion as may enable them to follow his example.