

# What Was the Early Church's Understanding Regarding "the HOLY SPIRIT"?

***Profound Theological Considerations Factored into the Christian Thought Stream after the Second Century. The New Testament presents a Comprehensive Picture of What the Early New Testament Church ACTUALLY Believed! (Part Two)***

© Golden Sheaves, 81520-1411 11-6-10 [ 185 ] [www.goldensheaves.org](http://www.goldensheaves.org)

In the first installment of this subject, title #184, "Regarding the Trinity", we saw from reliable historical sources, the admission that the Trinity Doctrine, as it's known today, **is not** what the early Church understood, or even conceived of in their day. Several key admissions included the fact that the Holy Spirit was not presented as a 'person' at the first ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325 AD, nor did their resulting statement represent such a position. We saw that it was Bishop Athanasius who, in the last decades of his life, (the early 370's) developed the understanding of "**the divinity and personality of the Holy Spirit**". (Wikipedia)

## **Not for 300 Years!**

In that the concept of a 'triune' Godhead wasn't developed until the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, we're forced to conclude that the **early Christians were in no way hindered from true and full conversion** by not having such a concept as an essential center-piece of their theology. That leaves us to wonder how such a teaching as the 'triune nature' of God, if it is as 'essential' as modern theologians insist, how is it essential?

We can see from the wording of the original Nicene Creed that an understanding of the existence of the Son and His relationship with God the Father was primarily the matter at issue. Sources also admit that the Nicene Creed was **altered later** to the statement we find today.

From other contemporaries, we can also see that it was the dual nature that was at issue, most importantly, the nature of the Son as a separate Person from the Father, and the matter of His eternal pre-existence and Divinity. One major persuasion saw the two Beings as distinct and

separate, but of one and the same essence, while another persuasion saw the Son as Divine, but having had no existence prior to His incarnation!

From church leaders such as Marcion, in the mid-second century, we also see the persuasion that the God of the Old Testament was a distinctly different Being than the God of the New, with Marcion assigning them different personalities, one stern and harsh, the other loving and gracious.

From these records, we can see that the early Church was very conversant with the understanding that the Father and the Son were two distinct and separate Persons. From the official statement of the first Nicene Council, we see that they regarded these two as unified in one *essence* (existing of the same Spirit), (some used the word: 'substance') not a single Being, but among some, the Son was not God, as prevailing Judaic theology would have insisted.

## **The Father and the Son**

An article, "*The Doctrine of the Father and the Son*" (#93) shows those many places where such a doctrine is referred to in the New Testament. To address the question as to the Divinity of the Son, refer to other titles on the subject, such as "*What Christ Said About Himself*" (#178); "*Who WAS the God of the Old Testament?*" (#75); and "*How Many Beings?*" (#122, also in booklet form).

We can see from many New Testament passages that the issue was WHO exactly was the Son? By the instant condemnation of the Sanhedrin, at Christ's trial, we can see what they understood Him to be alleging. That He also WAS God! This, of course, was problematical with the Jewish

persuasion, who regarded God as strictly a single Being, and also the Gnostic persuasion, who disallowed that anything Divine could ever be formed of the material world (flesh, in other words). We see a glimpse into the Gnostic views related in places such as 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:3 and 2<sup>nd</sup> John 7. In order to allow Christ's Divinity, they felt compelled to disallow His physicality. Now, one would think that this was at least in part commendable, but, no, John calls this '*the spirit of antichrist*'! Why? We must deduce that His also being **of** flesh (by what we call the incarnation) was a vital factor in His earthly manifestation, and to disregard that fact would leave a major part of His ministry, His Priesthood and essential Blood Sacrifice invalid.

But all of the **early** Nicene narratives point us toward the consideration of two Beings, with the primary question being that of the Divinity of Christ. Was Jesus God? The Jew would've said, NO!, while the Gnostic, in order to affirm that He was, would have had to insist that He didn't actually come in a physical form (in the flesh), but only appeared to have a physical body! This is the issue we read of in places such as 2<sup>nd</sup> John 7.

But how does the Church deal with the issue of Two Beings, in light of a long held 'monotheistic' tradition. This is addressed in the article #93: "*The Doctrine of the Father and the Son*".

### Regard for the Holy Spirit

Since the Holy Spirit was not originally represented as a 'third Person', separate of the Father and Son, we need to consider what they did understand to be the nature and /or function of God's Spirit. To them, the matter was not just a theological debate. Their experience was real, as opposed to our situation, or the situation among drifting 'luminaries' of the third century and beyond.

The early Church had profoundly effective experience with the visible and audible outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, (Acts 2) and a generation later at Caesarea, (Ac.10). Christ had rehearsed with them what to expect (John 20:22), explaining of His Spirit's comforting, empowering and upholding characteristic. They understood His Spirit as being an entity into which they would

become 'born' and would internalize, not just a 'person' with whom to relate.


### Questions of Logical Coherency

"Recently, there have been philosophical attempts to defend the logical coherency of Trinity, by posing a formulation free from its usual logical incoherency, but it is debatable whether this formulation is consistent with historical orthodoxy. Regarding the formulation suggested, not all philosophers would agree with its logical coherency. It has been suggested that "the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be thought of as numerically **distinct** Gods", suggesting that "a coherent statement of the doctrine is possible on the assumption that identity is "always relative to a sortal term". (Quoted from Wikipedia Encyclopedia)

Continuing..."Some Messianic groups, the Branch Davidian, and even some scholars within (but not necessarily representing) denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention view the Trinity as being **comparable to a family**, hence the familial terms of Father, Son, (with no familial term for the Holy Spirit.) The Hebrew word for "God", **Elohim, which has an inherent plurality**, has the function as a surname as in Yahweh Elohim." This is not all that different from the understanding long set forth among the Churches of God. Is the Protestant world bringing it around full circle?

### Addressing the Jewish Position

"The seeming contradiction of Elohim being "one" is solved by the fact that the Hebrew **word for "one", echad ("one"), may even describe a compound unity**, harmonious in direction and purpose; unlike **yachiyd** ("only") which **means singularity**." <sup>1</sup> With that awareness, the Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6:4, the foundation upon which Unitarianism (strict monotheism) is built, had it intended we declare God to be a **single** Being only, the latter Hebrew word, **yachiyd**, would've been used, not the former!

But it's the Council texts themselves, presented in the previous article, which reveal that the early Church had no such intent to declare a separate 'person' of Gods' Holy Spirit. 

<sup>1</sup> Strong, James (1999). *Strong's Hebrew Dictionary*. AGES Digital Library. pp. 24, 284. ISBN 0785247246. #3173