

The Trinity before Nicea

Sean Finnegan (restitutio.org)
28th Theological Conference (April 12, 2019)
Sponsored by Restoration Fellowship

Introduction

Did Christians believe in the Trinity before A.D. 325 when the Council of Nicea established that the Lord Jesus Christ exists as one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father? In what follows, I intend to investigate the beliefs of key Christians in the second and third centuries to answer this question. However, due to the sheer volume of literary output during this period, my first order of business is to find some way to sift through everything to get to the relevant information. As a result of this methodological issue, I've decided to focus on the collected proof texts of one prominent trinitarian apologist, Matt Slick. I chose him, not because of his unassailable expertise in the field of patristics, nor because of his role as a self-appointed heresy hunter, but because his article on carm.org rises to the very top in the search engine query, "Trinity before Nicea."

Furthermore, Slick's style and attitude characterize a great many evangelicals on this issue, making his approach representative. Also, since his article is brief, citing only six sources, I can adequately interact with it in an essay of this length.

Evaluating Early Trinitarian Quotes

In what follows, I will work through Slick's brief post, "Early Trinitarian Quotes," one author at a time, analyzing each to see if the quotation is accurate and if it proves that the author believed in the Trinity. But, before delving in, I want to first specify what I mean by "the" Trinity. As Dale Tuggy has repeatedly pointed out, there is no one doctrine of "the" Trinity.¹ Rather, there are several competing ways of interpreting the creedal language of the Constantinopolitan Council of 381 (often incorrectly called the Nicene Creed). For my purposes here, when I say, "the Trinity," I'm referring to what Slick specifies in the following paragraph:

God is a trinity of persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is not the same person as the Son; the Son is not the same person as the Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit is not the same person as Father [*sic*]. They are not three gods and not three beings. They are three

distinct persons; yet, they are all the one God. Each has a will, can speak, can love, etc., and these are demonstrations of personhood. They are in absolute perfect harmony consisting of one substance. They are coeternal, coequal, and copowerful [*sic*]. If any one of the three were removed, there would be no God.

Jesus, the Son, is one person with two natures: Divine and Human. This is called the Hypostatic Union. The Holy Spirit is also divine in nature and is self aware [*sic*], the third person of the Trinity.²

From this language I can extract out the following propositions:

1. God is a trinity of persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2. Each person is distinct from the other two.
3. Each person is the one God.
4. The persons consist of one substance.
5. Each person is eternal.
6. Each person is equal to the others (presumably, in status).
7. Each person is equally powerful.
8. God does not exist without any one of the three persons.
9. Jesus has two natures in the Hypostatic Union.
10. The Holy Spirit is self-aware.

Now, if I had taken my definition for "Trinity" from another source, we would see some slight though significant differences in language, but I thought it would be most consistent to use Slick's own version of the Trinity when assessing Slick's case that Christians believed in the Trinity before Nicea. Now, if he is correct, we should find lots of references to these ten points in the quotes he cites, since he asserts that they "show that the doctrine of the Trinity was indeed alive-and-well before the Council of Nicea."³ In what follows, I'll work through each of the citations in turn. I've labelled Slick's words with numbers to make it clear when I'm quoting him.⁴

¹ For Tuggy's taxonomy, see Tuggy, Dale, "Trinity," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/trinity.

² Slick, Matt, "The Trinity Chart," carm.org/trinity, accessed on March 26, 2019.

³ Slick, Matt, "Early Trinitarian Quotes," carm.org/early-trinitarian-quotes, accessed on March 3, 2019.

⁴ Feel free to see Slick's entire post at carm.org/early-trinitarian-quotes.

1 Polycarp (70-155/160)

"O Lord God almighty . . . I bless you and glorify you through the eternal and heavenly high priest Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, through whom be glory to you, with Him and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever" (n. 14, ed. Funk; PG 5.1040).⁵

This short excerpt comes from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* when Polycarp prayed just prior to his execution (ch. 14). However, it's hard to say how trustworthy this statement is. Now, I do accept that the *Martyrdom* has a historical core, but I'm not at all convinced of the authenticity of its more cinematic scenes, such as when they tried to burn Polycarp in a great fire and it miraculously shaped itself into the form an arch and burned around him, emitting a sweet odor like frankincense, but didn't burn him (ch. 15). Nor am I certain that when they subsequently stabbed him, he bled so profusely that it put out the inferno roaring around him (ch. 16). But, even if this prayer accurately reflects Polycarp's theology, it is much more unitarian than trinitarian. Here is more context, filling in the part Slick omitted above.

Martyrdom of Polycarp 14

O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, the God of angels and powers and of all creation, and of the whole race of the righteous who live in your presence, I bless you...**I glorify you, through the eternal and heavenly high priest, Jesus Christ,** your beloved Son, through whom be glory to you, with him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages to come. Amen.⁷

Firstly, Polycarp clearly identifies the "Lord God Almighty" as the Father of Jesus Christ. Secondly, he sees Christ primarily as the mediator through whom we can know God. We find nothing about person, substance, Trinity, co-equality, co-eternity, etc. How does this quote in any way show that Polycarp believed in the Trinity? I suppose the only interesting part is when Polycarp includes the Holy Spirit as someone to be glorified alongside the Father and Son, which may indicate that Polycarp agreed with Slick's tenth point that the Holy Spirit is

self-aware. However, this point is far from certain, for in the version preserved in Eusebius' *Church History*, we read:

Church History 4.15.35

Wherefore I praise thee also for everything; I bless thee, **I glorify thee, through the eternal high priest,** Jesus Christ, thy beloved Son, through whom, with him, **in the Holy Spirit,** be glory unto thee, both now and for the ages to come, Amen.¹⁸

Now our prepositions have changed. Rather than glorifying God "along with...Jesus Christ...and the Holy Spirit," we have Polycarp glorifying God "through...Jesus Christ...in the Holy Spirit." As a result of this textual uncertainty we should not put too much weight on this as evidence of Polycarp's confession in the Spirit as a distinct person. Furthermore, from his only authentic work, he clearly distinguished between God and Jesus when he said, "Now may the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the eternal high priest himself, the Son of God Jesus Christ, build you up" (Philippians 12.2).⁹

In conclusion, Polycarp does not give us any evidence that he believed in the Trinity. He might have believed in the personality of the Spirit, but this is far from clear. Now we turn to Slick's second source, Justin Martyr.

2 Justin Martyr (100?-165?)

"For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water" (First Apol., LXI).

This obviously hearkens back to the baptismal statement of Matthew 28.19, where Jesus himself tells his disciples to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." However, Justin has added in a few words to exalt the Father over Jesus and the Spirit. He calls God "the Father and Lord of the universe." Based on this alone we may suspect that Justin does not hold that the Father and Son are equal. Furthermore, Justin's statement "the Father and Lord of the universe" is an appositive, describing "God" and distinguishing God from Christ and the Holy Spirit. Additionally, In the very

⁵ Each of these numbered quotes is directly from Matt Slick's article, "Early Trinitarian Quotes." Although the references are sometimes confusing, inconsistent, or antiquated, I have not altered them.

⁶ All bold styling in these quotations is my own emphasis.

⁷ Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations, Third Edition* (Grand Rapid: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 321-323.

⁸ Some translations render this "with him and the Holy Spirit." However, the Greek is clear: "σὲ εὐλογῶ, σὲ δοξάζω διὰ τοῦ αἰωνίου ἀρχιερέως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ σου παιδοῦς, δι' οὗ σοι σὺν αὐτῷ ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ δόξα..." *Eusebius Ecclesiastical History: Books I-V*, in *Loeb Classical Library*, vol. 153, trans. by Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1926, 2001 reprint), pp. 354-355.

⁹ Holmes, 295. Also, of note is a later line in the same verse that reads, "believe in our Lord and God Jesus Christ and in his Father." According to Holmes, the words "and God" are omitted in many ancient authorities.

next paragraph of the same chapter, Justin uses a nearly identical statement and clearly equates God with the Father.

First Apology 61

[T]here is pronounced over him who chooses to be born again, and has repented of his sins, the name of **God the Father and Lord of the universe**; he who leads to the laver the person that is to be washed calling him by this name alone. For no one can utter the name of the **ineffable God...And in the name of Jesus Christ**, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, **and in the name of the Holy Ghost**, who through the prophets foretold all things about Jesus, he who is illuminated is washed.¹⁰

Notice the difference Justin puts between the name of “God the Father and Lord of the universe” and Jesus Christ. The former’s name is ineffable, whereas he readily says the latter’s name with ease. This shouldn’t surprise anyone familiar with Justin’s other writings where he goes as far as saying that Jesus is “in the second place” next to God, clearly evidencing his subordinationism (First Apology 8). It’s no wonder the mainstream of patristics scholars conclude that Justin was not a trinitarian. Now, we turn to Ignatius, bishop of Antioch.

3a Ignatius of Antioch (died 98/117)

"In Christ Jesus our Lord, by whom and with whom be glory and power to the Father with the Holy Spirit for ever" (n. 7; PG 5.988).

This quotation is not from Ignatius, but from the *The Martyrdom of Ignatius*, which scholars generally regard as a later forgery and so exclude it from the *Apostolic Fathers* collection. Even so, this quote does not tell us very much about what the authors believed. Just mentioning Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, does not in the least prove that this author believed in the Trinity. Interestingly enough, we find “Ignatius” contradicting the Trinity earlier in the same work when he says:

Martyrdom of Ignatius 2

Thou art in error when thou callest the daemons of the nations gods. For there is but one God, who made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that are in them; and one Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, whose kingdom may I enjoy.

This statement is exclusive. He identifies the one God as someone apart from the one Jesus Christ (cf. John 17.3).

Next Slick turns to the long recension of Ignatius for another trinitarian proof text. Here is what he quotes:

3b "We have also as a Physician the Lord our God Jesus the Christ the only-begotten Son and Word, before time began, but who afterwards became also man, of Mary the virgin. For 'the Word was made flesh.' Being incorporeal, He was in the body; being impassible, He was in a passable body; being immortal, He was in a mortal body; being life, He became subject to corruption, that He might free our souls from death and corruption, and heal them, and might restore them to health, when they were diseased with ungodliness and wicked lusts." (Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The ante-Nicene Fathers*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975 rpt., Vol. 1, p. 52, Ephesians 7.)

Once again, Slick has very carefully chosen his quotation. Backing up just one sentence we find the following:

Ignatius to the Ephesians 7.22 (Long Recension)

But **our Physician is the only true God, the unbegotten and unapproachable, the Lord of all, the Father and Begetter of the only-begotten Son**. We have also as a Physician the Lord our God, Jesus the Christ, the only-begotten Son and Word, before time began, but who afterwards became also man, of Mary the virgin.

The contrast couldn’t be clearer. The Father is in a category all by himself as “only true God, the unbegotten and unapproachable, the Lord of all, the Father and Begetter”—all appellations not applied to the Son here. Once again, we have nothing about the Trinity, nothing about equality or essence or eternity. If anything, this text stresses the differences between the Father and the Son.¹¹ Next, we move on to consider Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons.

4 Irenaeus (115-190)

"The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: . . . one God, the

¹⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, citations are from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1896), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Philip Schaff (NY: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1894), and *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (NY: The Christian Literature Company, 1900).

¹¹ None of this should surprise us since scholars have long catalogued Ignatius’ long recension a fourth-century subordinationist edit of his middle recension. Owing to the confusion of the three Ignatian corpuses, Lamson avers, “[T]he time for quoting the Ignatian Letters, in one or another form, as genuine, in support of any point either of history or doctrine, has gone by.” See Alvan Lamson, *The Church of the First Three Centuries: Notices of the Lives and Opinions of Early Fathers, with Special Reference to The Doctrine of the Trinity; Illustrating Its Late Origin and Gradual Formation*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Walker, Fuller, and Company, 1865), p. 14.

Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father 'to gather all things in one,' and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Savior, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, 'every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess; to him, and that He should execute just judgment towards all . . . "' (Against Heresies X.I)¹²

Where is there anything about the Trinity here? In fact, this is one of Irenaeus' strongest unitarian statements! He identifies the one God as the Father and then goes on to talk about Jesus in a separate category. The Father is the almighty creator whereas the Son became (passive) incarnate for our salvation. Yes, Irenaeus does call Jesus God, but it is far from clear what he means by that. I will return to the ambiguity of the term "God" later. But for now, let's consider a few of Irenaeus' other theological statements from the same book:

Against Heresies 1.9.2

For when John, proclaiming **one God, the Almighty, and one Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten**, by whom all things were made, declares that this was the Son of God...

Against Heresies 3.6.4

Wherefore I do also call upon thee, **Lord God** of Abraham, and God of Isaac, and God of Jacob and Israel, who art **the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God** who, through the abundance of Thy mercy, hast had a favour towards us, that we should know Thee, who hast made heaven and earth, who rulest over all, who art the **only and the true God**, above whom **there is none other God**; grant, by our Lord Jesus Christ, the governing power of the Holy Spirit; give to every reader of this book to know Thee, that **Thou art God alone**, to be strengthened in Thee, and to avoid every heretical, and godless, and impious doctrine.

Against Heresies 3.9.1

[T]he Lord Himself handing down to His disciples, that **He, the Father, is the only God and Lord, who alone is God and ruler of all...**

Against Heresies 5.18.2

And thus **one God the Father** is declared, who is above all, and through all, and in all. **The Father is indeed above all, and He is the Head of Christ**; but the Word is through all things, and is Himself the Head of the Church; while the Spirit is in us all, and He is the living water, which the Lord grants to those who rightly believe in Him, and love Him, and who know that "**there is one Father, who is above all, and through all, and in us all.**"

Now to be clear, like Justin before him, Irenaeus does believe Jesus is a lesser divinity who also existed before his incarnation, but he can't be a trinitarian, since he repeatedly exalts God as superior to Jesus. We now turn to Tertullian the first major Latin author.

5 Tertullian (160-215)

"We define that there are two, the Father and the Son, and three with the Holy Spirit, and this number is made by the pattern of salvation . . . [which] brings about unity in trinity, interrelating the three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are three, not in dignity, but in degree, not in substance but in form, not in power but in kind. They are of one substance and power, because there is one God from whom these degrees, forms and kinds devolve in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit." (Adv. Prax. 23; PL 2.156-7).

Ah, there it is! We finally, by the dawn of the third century, have the word "trinity." However, doesn't it seem odd that this word is lowercase? Perhaps this is Slick's typing error, or it could reflect the understanding that Tertullian here is not affirming the later doctrine of the Trinity, but instead merely enumerating a triad or trinity of three beings: God, Jesus, and the Spirit. As for this quote, I can see how powerfully it seems to identify Tertullian as a full-blown trinitarian, especially when read anachronistically, assuming later trinitarian theology. However, this short quote is not all we have from Tertullian on this subject and we do well to make sure we aren't taking one statement out of the context of his book. He wrote quite a lot about the "trinity," so we need to read this quotation in light of his other statements. As it turns out, Tertullian held to classic subordinationism even though he elevated the Son and Spirit considerably.

In this quote from the same book, it's clear that Tertullian sees a significant difference between Father and Son in their substance, effectively denying the notion that they consist of one and the same substance.

¹² Slick's reference here is mistaken as this quotation comes from Against Heresies 1.10.1.

Against Praxeas 9

[T]he Father is not the same as the Son, since **they differ one from the other in the mode of their being. For the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion** of the whole, as He Himself acknowledges: “My Father is greater than I.” In the Psalm His **inferiority** is described as being “a little lower than the angels.” Thus **the Father is distinct from the Son, being greater than the Son**, inasmuch as He who begets is one, and He who is begotten is another; He, too, who sends is one, and He who is sent is another; and He, again, who makes is one, and He through whom the thing is made is another.

We are left with no question here. Tertullian sees the Father as greater than the Son because of his origin. Trinitarians generally regard the subordinationist texts in scripture as functional necessities due to the incarnation. Tertullian, however, does not see it that way. The Son is inferior to the Father by origin and substance. It is true that Tertullian speaks of the Father and the Son as being of one substance elsewhere, but this is not in a Nicene manner. Rather it is in the sense that they are both comprised of the same divine stuff, just like two people are made of the same human stuff.

Against Praxeas 7

Then, therefore, does the Word also Himself assume His own form and glorious garb, His own sound and vocal utterance, when God says, “Let there be light.” This is the perfect **nativity of the Word**, when He proceeds forth from God—formed by Him first to devise and think out all things under the name of Wisdom—“The Lord created or formed me as the beginning of His ways;” then afterward begotten, to carry all into effect... For who will deny that God is a body, although “God is a Spirit?” For **Spirit has a bodily substance of its own kind**, in its own form. Now, even if invisible things, whatsoever they be, have both their substance and their form in God, whereby they are visible to God alone, how much more shall that which has been **sent forth from His substance** not be without substance! Whatever, therefore, was the substance of the Word that I designate a Person, I claim for it the name of Son; and while I recognize the Son, **I assert His distinction as second to the Father.**

Once again, we see that the Son is not equal to the Father, but second to him by virtue of his origin and substance. In fact, Tertullian seems to be saying that the Word (Son) came into existence when God said, “Let there be light,” since he calls this event the “nativity of the Word.”

One last statement from *Against Praxeas* makes clear that Tertullian’s speculations were far from orthodox in his time.

Against Praxeas 3

The simple, indeed, (I will not call them unwise and unlearned,) who always constitute **the majority of believers, are startled at the dispensation** (of the Three in One), on the ground that their very rule of faith withdraws them from the world’s plurality of gods to **the one only true God**; not understanding that, although **He is the one only God**, He must yet be believed in with His own οἰκονομία [economy]. The numerical order and distribution of the Trinity they assume to be a division of the Unity; whereas the Unity which derives the Trinity out of its own self is so far from being destroyed, that it is actually supported by it. They are constantly throwing out **against us that we are preachers of two gods and three gods**, while they take to themselves pre-eminently the credit of being worshippers of the **One God**;

This tantalizing statement provides evidence that the majority of believers found Tertullian’s beliefs startling and accused him of believing in two or three gods like the pagan idol worshipers, while they retained the simpler one God theology. This give us two important insights into early third century North African Christianity: (1) most believers were unitarian and (2) they considered Tertullian’s ideas to be unacceptable innovations. Tertullian provides more evidence for this unitarian majority position when he relates the “rule of faith” popular in his time.

On the Veiling of Virgins 1

The rule of faith, indeed, is altogether one, alone immoveable and irreformable; the rule, to wit, of believing in **one only God** omnipotent, the Creator of the universe, **and His Son Jesus Christ**, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised again the third day from the dead, received in the heavens, sitting now at the right (hand) of the Father, destined to come to judge quick and dead through the resurrection of the flesh as well (as of the spirit).

In conclusion, what we find with Tertullian is a kind of halfway trinity theory—he wants to affirm that the Father and Son share in the same substance, but he’s unwilling to abandon his belief in the Father’s absolute supremacy over the Son and Spirit.¹³ He clearly stands apart from later Nicene formulas, but he’s already begun to adopt language that would a century later, come to more clearly specify a truly trinitarian theory.

¹³ For a more thorough treatment of Tertullian’s unitarian tendencies, see Tuggy, Dale. “Tertullian the Unitarian.” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* vol. 8, no. 3 (2016). doi: <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v8i3.1693>.

We now turn our attention to Slick's last source, Origen of Alexandria.

6a Origen (185-254)
"If anyone would say that the Word of God or the Wisdom of God had a beginning, let him beware lest he direct his impiety rather against the unbegotten Father, since he denies that he was always Father, and that he has always begotten the Word, and that he always had wisdom in all previous times or ages or whatever can be imagined in priority . . . There can be no more ancient title of almighty God than that of Father, and it is through the Son that he is Father" (De Princ. 1.2.; PG 11.132).

Here we find the origin of the doctrine that later became known as "eternal generation," a necessary concept to affirm both the Son's begetting and his eternity. Based on this statement and others like it in the same book (*On First Principles*), Origen appears to believe the Word/Wisdom/Son is eternal. Let's move on to Slick's second Origen quote.

6b "For if [the Holy Spirit were not eternally as He is, and had received knowledge at some time and then became the Holy Spirit] this were the case, the Holy Spirit would never be reckoned in the unity of the Trinity, i.e., along with the unchangeable Father and His Son, unless He had always been the Holy Spirit." (Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975 rpt., Vol. 4, p. 253, de Principiis, 1.111.4)

Now we are getting somewhere. We've got the eternity of the Son and both the eternity and personhood of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Origen mentions "the unity of the Trinity," a strong indication that he must believe in the Trinity, right? But, wait, there's more.

6c "Moreover, nothing in the Trinity can be called greater or less, since the fountain of divinity alone contains all things by His word and reason, and by the Spirit of His mouth sanctifies all things which are worthy of sanctification . . ." (Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, p. 255, de Principii., I. iii. 7).

This last statement brings in evidence that Origen believed in the co-equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This indeed works out to an impressive cumulative case. At this point it might be helpful to lay out Slick's original ten points over against Origen's statements.

Matt Slick	Origen of Alexandria
1. God is a trinity of persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.	1. Father, Word/Son/Wisdom, and Spirit use personal pronouns
2. Each person is distinct from the other two.	2. Father distinct from Son distinct from Spirit
3. Each person is the one God.	3. Father, Son, and Spirit reckoned in the unity of the Trinity
4. The persons consist of one substance.	4. not mentioned
5. Each person is eternal.	5. Word and Spirit are eternal
6. Each person is equal to the others.	6. nothing in the Trinity can be called greater or less
7. Each person is equally powerful.	7. not mentioned
8. God does not exist without any one of the three persons.	8. It is impious to deny the eternity of the Son since that would mean the Father wasn't always the Father
9. Jesus has two natures in the Hypostatic Union.	9. not mentioned
10. The Holy Spirit is self-aware.	10. he calls the Spirit a "He"

Now that we've moved to someone writing toward the middle of the third century, we are getting much closer to fourth century language and meanings. However, as I've repeatedly shown, it will not do to proof-text these authors. Origen wrote a lot, as many as six thousand rolls or chapters of material. At one point he had seven stenographers taking down dictation in turn, so that he could churn out books rapidly. Several of these books have survived to our own day. Out of these I would like to bring forward three statements of Origen, one from the same book Slick quoted and two more from *Against Celsus*, before showing why Slick's quotes are entirely untrustworthy.

On First Principles 1.3 (Greek Fragment 9)

The **God** and Father, who holds the universe together, is **superior** to every being that exists, for he imparts to each one from his own existence that which each one is; **the Son, being less than the Father**, is superior to rational creatures alone (for **he is second to the Father**); the **Holy Spirit is still less**, and dwells within the saints alone. So that in this way **the power of the Father is greater than that of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**, and that of the Son is more than that of the Holy Spirit, and in turn the power of the Holy Spirit exceeds that of every other holy being.¹⁴

¹⁴ For more information about this fragment from Paul Koetschau's Greek text, consult G. W. Butterworth, *Origen On First Principles* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), pp. 33-34. (See also footnote 6.) What I have quoted above is from a Greek fragment used by the emperor Justinian some centuries later when Origen was condemned for heresy. Now, some Origen defenders have dismissed these texts on the grounds that

Against Celsus 8.12

We worship, therefore, the Father of truth, and the Son, who is the truth; and these, while **they are two, considered as persons or subsistences, are one in unity of thought**, in harmony and in identity of will. So entirely are they one, that he who has seen the Son, “who is the brightness of God’s glory, and the express image of His person,” has seen in Him who is the **image of God, God Himself**.

Against Celsus 8.15

For we who say that the visible world is under the government to Him who created all things, do thereby declare that **the Son is not mightier than the Father, but inferior to Him**. And this belief we ground on the saying of Jesus Himself, “The Father who sent Me is greater than I.” And none of us is so insane as to affirm that the Son of man is Lord over God. But when we regard the Saviour as God the Word, and Wisdom, and Righteousness, and Truth, we certainly do say that He has dominion over all things which have been subjected to Him in this capacity, but not that His dominion extends over **the God and Father who is Ruler over all**.

Now if Slick’s quotes prove Origen believed in the coequality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, how is it that we find the same author expressly teaching the superiority of the Father over the Son and the Son over the Spirit elsewhere? What’s more, my first quote comes from the very same book Slick quoted, Origen’s *On First Principles*. What’s going on here?

Well, as it turns out, Origen’s magnum opus, *On First Principles*, became the subject of much controversy, especially in the fourth century, once the trinitarian controversy burgeoned. Now to be clear, Origen was always controversial even in his own lifetime, but people didn’t regard his Christology as provocative until decades after he died. The attacks on Origen for his Christology began with Methodius at the beginning of the fourth century. Although his name did not come up at Nicea in 325, subsequent Pro-Nicene and Anti-Nicene parties both claimed Origen for themselves, making his writings a major battleground in the middle of the fourth century. Then,

although they are Greek (which is the language Origen wrote in), they are from hostile parties who were seeking to undermine Origen and cast him in a bad light. However, I’m inclined to believe this quote is legitimate for three reasons: (1) we also have this fragment in Latin as well from Jerome, bolstering its claim to authenticity. (2) We have a number of other subordinationist statements from Origen’s other books. (3) The so-called “Arians” of the fourth century claimed Origen as being on their side, which would have been impossible if he didn’t have subordinationist tendencies. (4) Origen was steeped in Neo-Platonism, and more likely adopted the concept of emanations from the monad outward to lesser forms than to affirm strict coequality.

¹⁵ Panarion 64.4.4 in *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, Selected Passages*, trans. by Philip R. Amidon (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 215.

¹⁶ Butterworth, pp. xli. See also p. xlvi.

¹⁷ *On First Principles*, Preface of Rufinus 3, quoted from Butterworth, p. lxiii.

after the dust had settled from the Roman Emperor Theodosius officially banning all non-trinitarian Christianity in 381, Epiphanius of Salamis, a heresy hunter, fixed his sights on any who would defend Origen’s works. Epiphanius fought against him because Origen taught, “the Son is not from the Father’s essence, but presents him as entirely foreign to the Father, and a creature to boot.”¹⁵ He traveled to Palestine and there confronted Jerome, Rufinus, and John the bishop of Jerusalem in a scathing sermon delivered at the Church of the Resurrection. After this, Jerome reversed his position and turned on Origen, no longer translating his works from Greek into Latin. However, in the year 397, Rufinus took a different tack and set out in earnest to exonerate the reputation of his master (never mind the fact that Origen had been dead for over 140 years). So convinced was Rufinus that Origen was orthodox that he adjusted anything questionable in Origen’s *On First Principles* in his Latin translation. Rufinus justified his bowdlerizing on the unsubstantiated claim that some evil heretics had corrupted Origen’s book. Scholar and translator G. W. Butterworth, on the other hand, finds it altogether distressing that Rufinus gave the world such “a garbled version of Origen’s work,” preferring instead an accurate and honest translation. Butterworth exposes Rufinus, saying, “fear of heresy is with him a stronger motive than love of truth...he has shown himself willing to alter the text, or to omit portions of it, on no evidence whatever, and for no purpose except to conciliate the prejudices of his readers and to give greater authority to his translation.”¹⁶ Butterworth is particularly frustrated with Rufinus because apart from his Latin translation all of the Greek fragments extant comprise only about one sixth of the book. Amazingly, Rufinus freely admits that Jerome was in the habit of smoothing over statements that were likely to cause offence and that he would follow the same method of “taking care not to reproduce such passages from the books of Origen as are found to be inconsistent with and contrary to his true teaching.”¹⁷ Rufinus continues even more explicitly:

On First Principles, Preface of Rufinus 3

Wherever, therefore, I have found in his books anything contrary to the reverent statements made by him about the Trinity in other places, I have either omitted it as a corrupt and interpolated passage, or reproduced it in a

form that agrees with the doctrine which I have often found him affirming elsewhere.

This is why in the surviving Greek fragments of Origen's *On First Principles*, as well as his *Against Celsus*, we find subordinationism, whereas the parts Slick quoted above sound uncannily trinitarian. Simply put, Slick's quote is from a source that Rufinus adjusted to be trinitarian. To conclude our foray into Origen's world, let us consider Joseph Trigg's summary about Origen's beliefs.

A corollary to Origen's identification of Christ with the second divine hypostasis of Platonism is the Son's inferiority to the Father. As an emanation outward from the utter simplicity of the Father toward the utter multiplicity of the world, the second hypostasis is, necessarily, less perfect than the first...Because of this, Origen, although he insisted on Christ's divinity and utter difference from all lesser beings, was unwilling to ascribe to the Son the same dignity he ascribed to the Father. The Son as a mediating hypostasis is inferior to the Father and represents a lower stage in the cosmological scale. Only the Father, Origen said, is truly God; the Son is God only by participation in the Father. He found in the opening verse of the Gospel of John a grammatical construction that confirmed his evaluation of the Son's lesser divinity. There the biblical author makes use of the Greek definite article in referring to God but leaves off the article in referring to Christ, the Word, as God...This tendency to subordinate the Son to the Father caused Origen no trouble theologically during his lifetime since most Christians took such a subordination for granted. Later, when the development of trinitarian theology in the fourth century made subordinationism untenable, it brought Origen's theology into disrepute.¹⁸

Thus, we conclude Origen was not a trinitarian although he certainly did develop some necessary components that later trinitarian theorists would find indispensable.

Summarizing the Results

After analyzing Slick's six alleged trinitarian authors before Nicea, we are left utterly empty-handed. Polycarp did not believe in the Trinity nor did Justin, Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian, or Origen. Now, of course, this doesn't mean that no one believed in the Trinity before Nicea, but it shows that something is deeply flawed in Slick's methodology. Perhaps an analogy will help to explain the fallacy here. If someone in 2019 says, "I love using Instagram," we know that such a person is

referring to the social media app that takes pictures, applies filters, and shares those images with their network of followers. However, if a lady in 2005 says, "I love using Instagram," we would be right to question her statement, since the app we know as Instagram didn't exist until 2010. Perhaps she referred to an instant way to cook chickpeas, which are also called grams. Maybe she married and instantly got a grandmother as a result—an insta-gram. Or, maybe there's some other explanation, but we know that whatever a 2005 person means by "Instagram," it could not possibly refer to the social media network. But, what if someone had a theory that Instagram really did exist in 2005 and wanted to go about proving this? How would he go about it? He could find quotes from people that year talking about taking digital pictures, applying filters, and instantly sending them to friends. However, we had all those capabilities in digital cameras, Photoshop, and instant messaging services since the 1990s. This wouldn't be enough to prove that Instagram existed in 2005. Furthermore, he could even find quotes about people uploading their images to social media, but that still wouldn't prove anything since both Myspace and Facebook already existed then and people readily shared images on them. No, we would need evidence that these components (taking photos, adding filters, and sending them) were done as part of the Instagram service. Perhaps there was an early beta test of Instagram five years before the real version came out? It would be a tough, but not impossible case to prove, and the burden of proof would be on the person positing the existence of Instagram before 2010.

So it is with the Trinity. We know this idea did not emerge fully formed until the fourth century, and it wasn't codified until the Creed of Constantinople in 381. We need someone to show that Christians were not just using various components of the Trinity theory, but that they understood them to relate to each other in a trinitarian way. Otherwise, we are left with a late Trinity. It will not do to merely assert along with Slick that, "the Trinity is a biblical doctrine, and it was taught before the council of Nicea in 325."¹⁹ It won't do to quote a smattering of church fathers who made statements compatible with later Trinitarianism. It won't do to even find people using the word "Trinity" in their writings. We need to see the whole set of beliefs that comprise a minimal understanding of the Trinity. In all the cases above, not only did we fail to see a single example of that, but we also saw that each author made statements incompatible with any Trinity theory. We simply cannot presuppose the Trinity and then read it into second and third century authors.

¹⁸ Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), pp 98-99.

¹⁹ See Matt Slick's conclusion on <https://carm.org/early-trinitarian-quotes>, accessed March 29, 2019.

Now, some apologists have tried to argue the much more basic point that the ante-Nicene fathers believed Jesus was God, listing out a catena of proof texts to that effect. However, we know all kinds of theories included this belief from Arianism to Modalism to the Gnostics. No, we need to see an author calling Jesus God in a trinitarian way. They need to mean Jesus is God in that he is equal to the Father and the Spirit, eternal like the Father and the Spirit, consubstantial with the Father and the Spirit, and not merely a part or portion of God. Furthermore, the ancient world had several more categories of deity than are prevalent today. For example, the Hebrew mindset had no problem applying the word God in a secondary sense to Moses (Exodus 7.1), angels (Psalm 8.5; cf. Hebrews 2.7), the divine council (Psalm 82.1, 6), Israel's judges (Exodus 21.6, 22.8), the Davidic king (Psalm 45.6), the belly (Philippians 3.19), those who receive the word of God (John 10.34-35), and even Satan (2 Corinthians 4.4).²⁰ Furthermore, in the Greco-Roman world, they called a wide range of beings Gods, including the pantheon of high Gods, regional Gods, deceased emperors, and a whole host of other lower-level divinities. In other words, God was a flexible word during the early centuries of Christianity and we need to take that into account when trying to prove this or that about patristic authors.

One last methodological issue I want to address, before moving on to discuss Nicea briefly, is the tendency among church historians to assume the inevitability of a fourth-century Trinitarianism. Instead of telling us what this or that person believed in his own time, we get vague statements about how someone was trying to articulate the Trinity, but just didn't have the language or philosophy or intellect to quite get there yet. This is not a helpful way of doing history. Now, it's fine to measure someone based on what became a later dominant theory, but we should not presume that he was trying to articulate that later idea and just fell short. For example, Tertullian did not believe in the Trinity. He had a trinity theory, but it contradicted the coequality of the later versions, since it featured the Father as the sole supreme God who had more divine substance than the Son. So, it's dishonest for us to label Tertullian a trinitarian. Besides, no one is pressuring us to agree with what any particular author says. It's not like the bible, where the text carries God's inspiration and authority. No, church fathers contradict each other all the time, and that is totally normal. Think about Christian books written today. Do they ever contradict each other? Of course they do, because authors are fallible people who are trying to figure out this or

that aspect of theology. So, rather than squeezing everyone into our predetermined mold, let's allow each to speak on his own, whether he is orthodox or not.

Although it would be quite a task, the best scenario would be for a team of fair-minded researchers to wade through, systematically and objectively, all the Christian literature prior to 381 to locate and categorize all the relevant triadic, Christological, and pneumatological statements. Then we can see who believed what and discern the overall trajectory of theology in the period. But, even if this task looms in the future for those willing to take up the charge, we can still depend on previous investigations like that of Alvan Lamson. His words, though encased in the stolid style of nineteenth century literary sensibilities, reveal earth-shattering truths that bear directly on our inquiry.

After what has been said in the foregoing [395] pages, we are prepared to re-assert, in conclusion, that the modern doctrine of the Trinity is not found in any document or relic belonging to the Church of the first three centuries. Letters, art, usage, theology, worship, creed, hymn, chant, doxology, ascription, commemorative rite, and festive observance, so far as any remains or any record of them are preserved, coming down from early times, are, as regards this doctrine, an absolute blank. They testify, so far as they testify at all, to the supremacy of the Father, the only true God; and to the inferior and derived nature of the Son. There is nowhere among these remains a co-equal Trinity. The cross is there; Christ is there as the Good Shepherd, the Father's hand placing a crown, or victor's wreath, on his head; but no undivided Three,—co-equal, infinite, self-existent, and eternal. This was a conception to which the age had not arrived. It was of later origin."²¹

Now, I'm willing to dismiss Lamson's findings, if someone brings out evidence to the contrary, but until that happens, his conclusion stands.

A Word about Nicea

Before wrapping up, I want to offer one more historical corrective, this time, about Nicea in 325. The story typically goes like this: Christians always believed in the Trinity, but when the radical innovator, Arius, began preaching that the Son was created rather than eternal, it caused a great controversy. The hotshot theologian attacked the body of

²⁰ For a detailed explanation of these texts see my article, "Jesus is God: Exploring the Notion of Representational Deity," 2008 One God Seminar, The Association for Christian Development, June 2008, Seattle, Washington, at <https://restitutio.org/2016/01/11/explanations-to-verses-commonly-used-to-teach-that-jesus-is-god/> or my Restitutio podcast, "163 Jesus, God's Agent," February 10, 2019, at <https://restitutio.org/2019/02/10/163-jesus-gods-agent/>.

²¹ Alvan Lamson, *The Church of the First Three Centuries: Notices of the Lives and Opinions of Early Fathers, with Special Reference to The Doctrine of the Trinity; Illustrating Its Late Origin and Gradual Formation*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Walker, Fuller, and Company, 1865), p. 396.

Christ from without like a virus, but the heroic antibodies of Alexander, Athanasius, and the Cappadocians fended “Arianism” off, saving the church from heresy. Then today, when someone dares to question the validity of the Trinity, she gets dismissed with a wave of the hand, “Oh, we’ve already faced that and dealt with it.” Nevertheless, history will not lie dormant, buried beneath centuries of dust in our information age. We now have access to the records and can see for ourselves what really happened in the early fourth century.

The truth is that Arius was modest, intelligent, disciplined, and persuasive.²² He wasn’t ordained a deacon until his late forties, and he was already in his mid-fifties when he became a presbyter in Alexandria. By the time the controversy with his bishop, Alexander, broke out, he was already sixty-two years old and highly respected by everyone. This is evidenced by the fact that when Alexander deposed and excommunicated him, eighty-nine others left with him.

Arius was not young and impulsive, nor was he progressive or liberal. To the contrary, he was a conservative, intent on retaining the faith he had received. In a letter to Alexander after his banishment, Arius claimed that his faith was “received from our forefathers and learned from you as well.”²³ He goes on to detail the faith he learned from Alexander that there is one unbegotten and eternal God who is above all others—even the Son. Interestingly enough, Arius was careful to avoid heretical understandings of Christ.

Letter to Alexander of Alexandria

He begot him not in appearance, but in truth...neither was the offspring of the Father a projection, as Valentinus taught, nor, as Mani introduced, was the offspring a consubstantial [*homoousios*] part of the Father, nor was he, as Sabellius said, dividing the Monad, a Son-Father, nor, as Hieracas taught, a lamp kindled from a lamp...as you also, blessed pope, in the midst of the church and in council often refuted those who introduced these ideas.

Arius clearly did not think he was inventing anything new and had no problem saying so right to the man who was persecuting him. This then begs the question, what happened? How did Arius get fired by his bishop, Alexander, if he was a conservative? Apparently at some big meeting, Alexander made a public declaration. Socrates the historian, reports the following:

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He [Alexander], in the fearless exercise of his functions for the instruction and government of the church, attempted one day in the presence of the presbytery and the rest of his clergy, to explain, with perhaps too philosophical minuteness, that great theological mystery—the unity of the Holy Trinity.

Upon hearing Alexander’s exposition, Arius thought Alexander was teaching Sabellianism (an idea that the Son was the Father). Before long, word of Arius’ disagreement got back to Alexander who asked Arius to meet with him. Once it was clear that he could not convince Arius, Alexander called together a council of presbyters and some bishops to officially examine him in 318.²⁴ Arius and many others (including some bishops) refused to sign the confession of “orthodoxy,” so the council, led by Alexander, publicly excommunicated nearly one hundred of their brothers and sisters in Christ. Bishop Alexander’s dogged insistence on the eternity of the Son not only resulted in Arius’ excommunication, but in the council of Nicea seven years later when the emperor Constantine pushed through an understanding of the Son’s eternal nature, using the word *homoousios* (of the same being or substance, the same word previously associated with heresy). However, instead of ending controversy about the Son’s relation to the Father, Nicea launched a war between pro-Nicene and anti-Nicene Christians that raged on for nearly sixty years until the powerful emperor Theodosius put an end to the question in 381.

Now my purpose in relating this is not to convince anyone to believe in Arius’ doctrine, but simply to show that all this name-calling and heresy labelling is not only ungodly, but it ends up distorting history, which doesn’t serve to help anyone. It’s time for the Matt Slicks of the world to drop this myth of trinitarian primacy and just admit that Trinity theories evolved slowly over the first three hundred years after Christ until we ended up with the language of Constantinople in 381. That doesn’t mean the Trinity is wrong, but it does move it from apostolic tradition to one of several models of understanding. Is the credal language of Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed the best explanation of the bible’s teaching about God? Sadly, this question brings us beyond the scope of this little essay, but I encourage you to research the question, reading the bible with fresh eyes. After all, the truth has nothing to fear.

²² See Eusebius’ *Panarion* 69.3.1, Socrates’ statement in Eusebius’ *Church History* 1.5.

²³ Arius of Alexandria, *Letter to Alexander of Alexandria in Christianity in Late Antiquity* by Bart Ehrman and Andrew Jacobs (NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 167.

²⁴ For a more detailed chronology see R.P.C. Hanson’s nine-point outline. R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic 2007), pp. 134-135.