

A SCRIPTURAL STARTING POINT

“Having therefore obtained help from God, I continue to this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those that the prophets and Moses said should come...” (Acts 26:22)

In limiting his defense to the law and the prophets, the apostle Paul elevated Scripture above tradition. We who teach the Creed of Jesus as the basis of our belief in the One God are content to do the same.

Those who put Tradition on a par with Scripture may in Festus-like manner protest that we are over-studious and out of balance; and to them we have little to say: if not *sola scriptura* – what then? We present our case to those who are willing to limit discussion to what the Bible makes clear. In Paul’s case this was that the Messiah was to suffer and be the first to be raised from the dead, and that he would enlighten both the Jews and the Gentiles.

Taking our cue from Paul, we present our belief that the Father alone is God on the basis of clear scriptural statements, asking only that those who differ from us do the same by laying aside traditions encased in historical creeds – the Nicene and Athanasian creeds in particular. Despite the fact that both are separated by centuries from the apostles’ doctrine, they have come to be seen as equating tradition with Scripture, which was hardly the intent of those who formulated them.

The elevation of Scripture above tradition in any discussion on the Deity requires that unscriptural terms be dropped, among them the traditional “God the Son” and “the Eternal Son”. Terms such as “equally co-existent with the Father”, “the Second Member of the Trinity” – and even the word “trinity” itself – are also unscriptural.

We need to dispense with the idea that the forms of water, ice, and steam explain the Godhead. Which of the three forms – liquid, solid, vapour – fit which “person”? In short: no non-biblical words, phrases, creeds or examples.

The second century Apostles’ Creed was the first to be issued by a church council, and was formulated to counter Gnostic claims. It pre-dated by a century the further claim that Jesus Christ was God, and the bitter dispute which followed that claim.

It is a matter of biblical record that the first-century church quoted sayings commonly accepted among them as truths. (Cf. 1 Timothy 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:11) These sayings were quoted by the apostle Paul in his inspired epistles, which form a great part of the New Testament. They predate the Nicene Creed by two centuries and the Athanasian Creed by an estimated 460 years.

When the starting point of such a discussion is based on the Bible rather than on traditional creeds, the conclusion is inescapable: God is the Father, and He is not Three Persons but One. We could say that the truth of the One God became the Doctrine of the Trinity in much the same way that “believable” became “incredible”. Once opposites, these words now have much the same meaning. (Which word do you use?)

Paul was very clear in saying to Agrippa and Festus only what Moses and the prophets had said. His words drew animated reactions from both men. The pagan Festus interjected with a statement that too much study had driven Paul out of his mind! The more learned Agrippa interrupted the apostle with a revealing exclamation that in but a short time Paul had sought to make him (or had almost persuaded him to become) a Christian! If we say only what Jesus said about God and about himself – nothing more, nothing less – we’re sure to draw from unconvinced or half-convinced hearers some very animated reactions.

Festus and Agrippa ended the audience at that point, but in private agreed that Paul was innocent of the charges that had been brought against him. Given a reasonable hearing – notwithstanding an interruption or two – any defense of the truth will be equally convincing – but only if it has a scriptural starting point.

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