

## What First Generation Christians Taught About the Trinity

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What did first generation Christians believe about the Trinity? If we can find out, it is only by asking the question, as we read the early epistles, what is the author assuming that his audience already knows? In the first epistle to the Thessolonians, Paul says that we are children of God and that Jesus is the son of God. There must have been away that they would have distinguished these two senses of being children of God, and Paul is assuming that the Thessolonians are aware of that way. And that way must have been more specific than a vague "Jesus is God's son in a special way." (So sometime before 1 Thes, . . . .)

Another principle we can now invoke, having established something about what the early Christians believed is that there must be some evidence for, some vestige of, that way of distinguishing Jesus from other children of God in the epistles, whether or not they are the earliest epistles. In the epistle to the galatians, Paul says that we are adopted children of God. So Jesus must have been a child of God in a sense opposed to adoption. Jesus is a natural child of God. But what does this mean? (Again, before Galatians and probably before 1 Thessolonians, because this is the only one we can find in the early epistles.)

Using our concepts of person and nature, we can truthfully say that the first Christians believed that Jesus is one person in two natures. To say this does not imply that the first Christians possessed our concepts of person and nature, or even that they could have understood them. It only says that certain concepts that we possess can truthfully describe concepts that they possessed. But what concepts that they possessed, or could have acquired with ease, express what they believe about Jesus's sonship?

In the first epistle to the Corinthians, we get some evidence. In chapter three, there is teaching about the spirit. That teaching appears to be something new to the Corinthians. At least, Paul gives the impression in the way he writes that he is giving information to the Corinthians that they may not have had before. On the other hand, that information presupposes that the Corinthians already believed certain things about the spirit.

In particular, that information would not have made any sense if the Corinthians did not already believe that the spirit was part of the life of God. "Part of the life of God" uses concepts that the Corinthians either could have had or could have acquired in away that was not anachronistic. "Part of the life of God" means that the spirit belongs to God not the way creation belongs to him, as something exterior to him, but as something interior to him.

"Interior" could be further clarified, using concepts of which they were at least capable, as compared to the way God's power, knowledge, love, beauty, etc. belongs to him and as opposed to the way the things he is made belong to him. Our metaphysics would want to distinguish the way an attribute of God's nature, such as power, belongs to him from the way the divine persons belong to him. But without a lot of explanation, it would be in anachronistic to read that distinction into the phrase "interior part of God's life", or "part of God's interior life," at this point.

Likewise, "life" in our metaphysics can refer to an attribute of God's nature rather than an attribute of the divine persons. But it would be unnecessary and anachronistic to read that distinction into the phrase "part of God's interior life" in describing the early Christians' beliefs about Trinity. Believers know that the early Christians were experiencing the life of the Trinity. So they could have acquired and used the concept of God's interior life to express what they believe about Trinity.

Again, they must have believed that the spirit belongs to God's interior life. So why can we not say that they knew that the spirit belonged to God's interior life as something uncreated, unmade? We get that from the first epistle to the Corinthians. That same epistle describes Jesus as he through whom we exist. And as we look for further vestiges of, evidence of, the earliest beliefs about the Trinity in perhaps later epistles, we again find beliefs that can be described by saying that Jesus is part of the interior life of God, Jesus belongs to the interior life of God, and he belongs to it not as something created but as something uncreated, unmade.

So it would be irrational to say that the earliest Christians could use such descriptions of the spirit but not use such descriptions of Jesus who gave them the spirit, and who earned the spirit for them. The epistle to the Philippians uses the phrase "equal to God." Can we say that that phrase describes the earliest Christians belief about Jesus? Why not? Now that we know that Jesus is part of God's interior life, and uncreated part of God's interior life.