

## The Original, Christian, Biblical Trinity Part 1 - Theophilus of Antioch

[Brendan Paul Valiant · Thursday, March 1, 2018](#)

In this two-part study, we will explore the first use of the term 'Trinity' both in Greek (τριάς) and Latin (trinitas). This first part explores the view of Theophilus of Antioch, while the second part will explore the view of Tertullian of Carthage.

Antioch was the bastion of pure apostolic Christianity for centuries. It was here that the pure unaltered Scriptures were preserved as adulterated texts became prevalent in other parts of Christendom. It was here that the historico-grammatical school of interpretation flourished as a bulwark to the increasing allegorical schools of Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Key figures in this school include Theophilus and Lucian.

Theophilus is credited with being the first known writer (c. 180 A.D.) to use the word "trinity", the Greek τριάς, in a theological sense. As the first known user of the word "trinity" we should look carefully to see what he believed about God. Theophilus' "trinity" is as follows:

*"In like manner also the three days which were before the luminaries, are types of the Trinity, of God, and His Word, and His wisdom. And the fourth is the type of man, who needs light, that so there may be God, the Word, wisdom, man" (Letter to Autolycus, Book II, Chapter XV).*

So Theophilus saw a trinity consisting of (1) God, (2) His Word, and (3) His wisdom. To this could be added man as bearing the image of God. The trinity were likened to the first three days of Creation. Again, these three are listed in relation to the creation of the world:

*"Who is the Physician? God, who heals and makes alive through His word and wisdom. God by His own word and wisdom made all things; for 'by His word were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.' Most excellent is His wisdom. By His wisdom God founded the earth; and by knowledge He prepared the heavens; and by understanding were the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the clouds poured out their dews. If thou perceivest these things, O man, living chastely, and holily, and righteously, thou canst see God" (Op Cit, Book I, Chapter VII).*

But what did Theophilus specifically believe about this Trinity? This is important to determine what this original conception of the Trinity looked like within early Christianity. We will examine this through his own words. Here is what Theophilus had to say on the nature of God:

*"You will say, then, to me, 'Do you, who see God, explain to me the appearance of God.' Hear, O man. The appearance of God is ineffable and indescribable, and cannot be seen by eyes of flesh. For in glory He is incomprehensible, in greatness unfathomable, in height inconceivable, in power incomparable, in wisdom unrivalled, in goodness inimitable, in kindness unutterable. For if I say He is Light, I name but His own work; if I call Him Word, I name but His sovereignty; if I call Him Mind, I speak but of His wisdom; if I say He is Spirit, I speak of His breath; if I call Him Wisdom, I speak of His offspring; if I call Him Strength, I speak of His sway; if I call Him Power, I am*

*mentioning His activity; if Providence, I but mention His goodness; if I call Him Kingdom, I but mention His glory; if I call Him Lord, I mention His being judge; if I call Him Judge, I speak of Him as being just; if I call Him Father, I speak of all things as being from Him; if I call Him Fire, I but mention His anger. You will say, then, to me, 'Is God angry?' Yes; He is angry with those who act wickedly, but He is good, and kind, and merciful, to those who love and fear Him; for He is a chastener of the godly, and father of the righteous; but he is a judge and punisher of the impious." (Op Cit, Book I, Chapter III)*

Theophilus had a comprehensive understanding of the majesty of God. He clearly understood "Wisdom" to be the offspring of God. He understood the Spirit to be the breath of God and God's Power to refer to divine activity. This view is essentially biblical. In discussing the attributes of God, Theophilus wrote:

*"And He is without beginning, because He is unbegotten; and He is unchangeable, because He is immortal. And he is called God on account of His having placed all things on security afforded by Himself; and on account of His divinity, for divinity means running, and moving, and being active, and nourishing, and foreseeing, and governing, and making all things alive. But He is Lord, because He rules over the universe; Father, because He is before all things; Fashioner and Maker, because He is creator and maker of the universe; the Highest, because of His being above all; and Almighty, because He Himself rules and embraces all. For the heights of heaven, and the depths of the abysses, and the ends of the earth, are in His hand, and there is no place of His rest. For the heavens are His work, the earth is His creation, the sea is His handiwork; man is His formation and His image; sun, moon, and stars are His elements, made for signs, and seasons, and days, and years, that they may serve and be slaves to man; and all things God has made out of things that were not into things that are, in order that through His works His greatness may be known and understood." (Letter to Autolycus, Book I, Chapter IV)*

God is seen as the Highest and the Source of all being. Theophilus uses a play on words whereby Divinity (θεός) is interchanged with a word (θέειον) meaning activity or movement. We see here also statements in common with other early Christians about God being unbegotten. We already saw that "Wisdom" was called the Offspring of God, a subject that Theophilus picks up in more detail. In discussing Christ, the Logos, Theophilus wrote of what he was taught by those prior to him:

*"And first, they taught us with one consent that God made all things out of nothing; for nothing was coeval with God: but He being His own place, and wanting nothing, and existing before the ages, willed to make man by whom He might be known; for him, therefore, He prepared the world. For he that is created is also needy; but he that is uncreated stands in need of nothing. God, then, having His own Word internal within His own bowels, begat Him, emitting Him along with His own wisdom before all things. He had this Word as a helper in the things that were created by Him, and by Him He made all things. He is called 'governing principle', because He rules, and is Lord of all things fashioned by Him. He, then, being Spirit of God, and governing principle, and wisdom,*

*and power of the highest, came down upon the prophets, and through them spoke of the creation of the world and of all other things. For the prophets were not when the world came into existence, but the wisdom of God which was in Him, and His holy Word which was always present with Him. Wherefore He speaks thus by the prophet Solomon: 'When He prepared the heavens I was there, and when He appointed the foundations of the earth I was by Him as one brought up with Him.' And Moses, who lived many years before Solomon, or, rather, the Word of God by him as by an instrument, says, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.' First he named the 'beginning,' and 'creation,' then he thus introduced God; for not lightly and on slight occasion is it right to name God. For the divine wisdom foreknew that some would trifle and name a multitude of gods that do not exist. In order, therefore, that the living God might be known by His works, and that [it might be known that] by His Word God created the heavens and the earth, and all that is therein, he said, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' Then having spoken of their creation, he explains to us: 'And the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God moved upon the water.' This, sacred Scripture teaches at the outset, to show that matter, from which God made and fashioned the world, was in some manner created, being produced by God." (Op Cit, Book II, Chapter X)*

Christ is referred to interchangeably as the Word, Wisdom, Power and Spirit of God that was "internal" to and then "begat" by God. Proverbs 8 is used as well as allusion to Christ being the Spirit that inspired the prophets. So while there is a distinction seen in some instances (such as the first statement about Trinity where "Word" and "Wisdom" are distinct, there is also a singularity of identity in others such as here where they are one and the same. Theophilus wrote that God and Christ together created mankind:

*"But as to what relates to the creation of man, his own creation cannot be explained by man, though it is a succinct account of it which holy Scripture gives. For when God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness,' He first intimates the dignity of man. For God having made all things by His Word, and having reckoned them all mere by-works, reckons the creation of man to be the only work worthy of His own hands. Moreover, God is found, as if needing help, to say, 'Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness.' But to no one else than to His own Word and wisdom did He say, 'Let Us make.' And when He had made and blessed him, that he might increase and replenish the earth, He put all things under his dominion, and at his service; and He appointed from the first that he should find nutriment from the fruits of the earth, and from seeds, and herbs, and acorns, having at the same time appointed that the animals be of habits similar to man's, that they also might eat of the seeds of the earth." (Op Cit, Book II, Chapter XVIII)*

These sentiments show that Theophilus understood God and His Word/Wisdom were the agents of the creation of man. In one instance, Theophilus uses similar language to Solomon in exclaiming God's omnipresence and the futility of His being confined to a place on earth writing, "But this is the attribute of God, the Highest and Almighty, and the living God, not only to be everywhere present, but also to see all things and to hear all, and by no means to be confined in a place; for if He were, then the place containing Him would be greater than He; for that which

contains is greater than that which is contained. For God is not contained, but is Himself the place of all" (Op Cit, Book II, Chapter III). So Theophilus identifies Christ as the "Voice of God" that appeared to humanity, first having walked in the garden of Eden after the fall:

*"You will say, then, to me: 'You said that God ought not to be contained in a place, and how do you now say that He walked in Paradise?' Hear what I say. The God and Father, indeed, of all cannot be contained, and is not found in a place, for there is no place of His rest; but His Word, through whom He made all things, being His power and His wisdom, assuming the person of the Father and Lord of all, went to the garden in the person of God, and conversed with Adam. For the divine writing itself teaches us that Adam said that he had heard the voice. But what else is this voice but the Word of God, who is also His Son? Not as the poets and writers of myths talk of the sons of gods begotten from intercourse [with women], but as truth expounds, the Word, that always exists, residing within the heart of God. For before anything came into being He had Him as a counsellor, being His own mind and thought. But when God wished to make all that He determined on, He begot this Word, uttered, the first-born of all creation, not Himself being emptied of the Word [Reason], but having begotten Reason, and always conversing with His Reason. And hence the holy writings teach us, and all the spirit-bearing men, one of whom, John, says, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,' showing that at first God was alone, and the Word in Him. Then he says, 'The Word was God; all things came into existence through Him; and apart from Him not one thing came into existence.' The Word, then, being God, and being naturally produced from God, whenever the Father of the universe wills, He sends Him to any place; and He, coming, is both heard and seen, being sent by Him, and is found in a place." (Op Cit, Book II, Chapter XXII)*

So Theophilus saw Christ as both equal and self-existent ("always exists") with and begotten of God. Before He was begotten, the Word was internal "residing within the heart of God" and from there was "begotten" and "His Son". Discussing more completely on the Holy Spirit

*"For as the soul in man is not seen, being invisible to men, but is perceived through the motion of the body, so God cannot indeed be seen by human eyes, but is beheld and perceived through His providence and works. For, in like manner, as any person, when he sees a ship on the sea rigged and in sail, and making for the harbour, will no doubt infer that there is a pilot in her who is steering her; so we must perceive that God is the governor [pilot] of the whole universe, though He be not visible to the eyes of the flesh, since He is incomprehensible. For if a man cannot look upon the sun, though it be a very small heavenly body, on account of its exceeding heat and power, how shall not a mortal man be much more unable to face the glory of God, which is unutterable? For as the pomegranate, with the rind containing it, has within it many cells and compartments which are separated by tissues, and has also many seeds dwelling in it, so the whole creation is contained by the spirit of God, and the containing spirit is along with the creation contained by the hand of God. As, therefore, the seed of the pomegranate, dwelling inside, cannot see what is outside the rind, itself being within; so neither can man, who along with the whole creation is enclosed by the hand of God, behold God. Then again, an earthly king is believed to exist, even though he be not seen by all; for he*

*is recognised by his laws and ordinances, and authorities, and forces, and statues; and are you unwilling that God should be recognised by His works and mighty deeds?" (Book I, Chapter V)*

So here we see that God's Spirit is said to contain His creation and yet His Spirit itself is contained by His hand. Thus the Spirit is the power and activity of God, personally at work in all Creation, invisible but known through its activity. This caps off what is preserved of Theophilus' picture of the Trinity, a view which is inherently Biblical and unlike the speculative trinitarian creeds.