Departure of the Church from the True Doctrine of God

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The revealed God. In the revelation of God through Jesus Christ our Lord, set forth in the last chapter, the true doctrine of God as to his nature, attributes and physical form is established from the scriptures (Old and New Testament). That vision of him on the "Mount" in Galilee, where he had appointed a meeting with his eleven apostles, is the true vision of God. The resurrected Christ, a spirit and body in human form, indissolubly united, never more to be separated, spirit and body fused into a sole being, the true God-type; and in the case of the Christ is God absolutely revealed, "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9).

This is not the revelation of God ridiculed by those who have a scorn of anthropomorphic notions of God, ~~whom~~ **who** they claim is represented as an "old man with a gray beard," and whom they scornfully reject as God. But the revelation of God presented here is the immortal and eternal, youthful Christ; resurrected at the age of thirty-three years, the heighth of gloriously developed manhood, and caught at that age and made eternal by a union of a perfect body with a perfect spirit, in eternal youth and youthfulness. God as perfected man, and manifested in the flesh for all time as the God-type of the universe, God blessed forever more!

More complete presentations of Roberts's views on departure from true doctrine can be found in his other works: *Seventy's Course in Theology* 2:152–212; 3:118–36; *The "Falling Away" or the World's Loss of the Christian Religion and Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950), which is a reprint of radio addresses given in 1929; *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (1895), part 2; *New Witness for God* (1895), 1:45–136. Two fundamental reference works for the study of early Christianity are Everett Ferguson and others, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990); and Angelo Di Berardino, *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

This is the revelation of God through Jesus Christ, of which the apostles were to bear witness to the world, of which the church is to bear witness in all ~~the world~~ ***time.*** The apostles were faithful throughout their age to make known this revelation of God to the world; but the church after the death of the apostles and those associated with them—the apostolic fathers—were not so faithful and successful. Rather like the Hebrew race, they failed to maintain the truth committed to them; and it is our business in this chapter to trace the melancholy story of the departure of the primitive church from this great doctrine of the Christ and of the apostles.

The Christian doctrine of God. The existence of God both Jesus and the apostles accepted as a fact. In all the teachings of Jesus, he nowhere seeks to prove God's existence. He assumes that, and proceeds from that basis with his mission. He declares the fact that God was his father, and frequently calls himself the Son of God (Matt. 27; Mark 14:61–62; John 10). After his resurrection and departure into heaven, the apostles taught that he, the Son of God, was with God the Father in the beginning; that he, as well as the Father, was God; that under the direction of the Father he was the Creator of worlds; that without him was not anything made that was made (cf. John 1:1–4, 14; Heb. 1:1–3; Col. 1:15–19; 2:9); that in him dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily; and that he was the express image of the Father's person (Heb. 1:2–3). Jesus himself taught that he and the Father were one (John 10:30; 17:11–22); that whosoever had seen him had seen the Father also (John 14:9); that it was part of his mission to reveal God, the Father, through his own personality, for as was the Son, so too was the Father (John 1:18; 14:1–9). Hence Jesus was God manifested in the flesh—a revelation of God to the world (1 Tim. 3:16). That is, Jesus was a revelation not only of the being of God, but of the kind of being God is.

Jesus also taught and prayed (and in doing so showed in what the "oneness" of himself and his Father consisted) that the disciples might be one with him, and also one with each other, as he and the Father were one (John 14:10–11, 19–20; 17). Not one in person, of course—not all merged into one individual, and all distinctions of personality and individuality lost—but one in mind, in knowledge, in love, in will; one by reason of the indwelling in all of the one Spirit, even as the mind and will of God the Father was also in Jesus Christ (Eph. 3:14–19).

The Holy Ghost, too, was upheld by the Christian religion to be God.[1] Jesus ascribed to him a distinct personality: proceeding from the

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[1]Acts 5:1–14. To lie to the Holy Ghost is to lie to God, because the Holy Ghost is God.

Father; sent forth in the name of the Son; feeling love; experiencing grief; forbidding; abiding; teaching; bearing witness; appointing to work; and interceding for men. All of which clearly establishes for him, too, a personality (John 14–15).

The distinct personality of these three individual deities (united however into one Godhead, or divine council), was made apparent at the baptism of Jesus; for as he, God the Son, came up out of the water from his baptism at the hands of John, a manifestation of the presence of the Holy Ghost was given in the sign of the dove which rested upon Jesus, while out of the glory of heaven surrounding the personage in the scene, the voice of God the Father was heard saying, "This," referring to Jesus, "is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:16–17).

The distinctness of the personality of each member of the Godhead is also shown by the commandment to baptize those who believe the gospel in the name of each person of the Holy Trinity, that is, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:19). And again, in the apostolic benediction, viz., "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14).

The Christian Godhead. These three personages constitute the Christian Godhead, the Holy Trinity. In early Christian theology they were regarded as the supreme governing and creating power in heaven and in earth. Of this Trinity, the Father was worshipped in the name of the Son, while the Holy Ghost bore record of both the Father and the Son. And though the Holy Trinity was made up of three distinct personages as being individuals, yet did they constitute but one Godhead, or supreme governing power.

This outline of the doctrine of God derived from the New Testament represents God as being anthropomorphic, that is, like man in form; or, rather, it reaffirms the old doctrine found in the book of Genesis, viz., that man is created in the image of God, and after his likeness. The outline of New Testament doctrine also ascribes to God what are called human mind qualities and feelings. But as in the foregoing, we first say that God is represented as being in human form, and then to get the exact truth say: or, rather, man was created in the image and likeness of God. So in this latter case, when we have said that the doctrine of the New Testament ascribes human mind qualities and feelings to God, to get the exact truth we should say: or, rather, man possesses in lower degree the mind qualities of God—the power of knowing, willing, judging, loving, etc.—though it should be stated, of course, that man does not possess these attributes in their perfection,

as God does. The same may also be said of the physical perfections. While man has been created in the image and very likeness of God, yet our bodies in their present state of imperfection—sometimes stunted in growth, deformed, diseased, subject to sickness, wasting decay, and death—can not be said to be like God's glorious, perfect, physical, but also spiritual body. Yet we have the divine word that our bodies finally shall be made like unto his body:

> For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself. (Philip. 3:20–21)

So also the attributes of the spirit of man—the attributes of the mind—now imperfect and limited in the range of vision ~~and~~ apprehension of things, owing largely to the conditions in which man finds himself placed in this earth life (and all for a wise purpose in God's economy); yet the time will come that it will be with the mind as with the body; for God shall change our perhaps vile mind that it may be fashioned like unto his own glorious mind, "according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself." That whereas "now we may see only as through a glass darkly," but when that more perfect state is come, we shall see as we are seen; that whereas now we know but in part, then we shall know even as we are known (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12).

First authoritative formula on doctrine of God. Perhaps the finest formula of an expression of faith as to God and which was a truly authoritative Christian creed came from the famous conversation of St. Peter with the Christ. "Whom ⟨do ye say⟩ [say ye] that I am?" inquired Jesus of the apostles, and Simon Peter answered, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Whereupon the Master declared that his Father had revealed this truth to the apostle, and upon that truth he would build his church. The Christ's benediction also went with St. Peter's confession: "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 16:15–17). Incidentally it should be noted here that the Christ not only accepts this declaration of himself as the "Son of the Living God," but proclaims that "Living God" as his "Father in Heaven."

As an instance of the felt need of some form of a confession as warranting entrance into the church, we may take the case of the

officer of the court of Queen Candace, instructed from the scriptures on the redemptive mission of the Christ by Philip, one of the seven evangelists:

Officer: "What doth hinder me to be baptized?"
Philip: "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest."
Officer: "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

The chariot was halted straightway and the baptism performed (Acts 8:36–38).

St. Paul represented the "word of faith" which we preach to be that, "if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

The Apostles' Creed. According to a tradition in the early Christian church, before the apostles dispersed to go upon their worldwide mission they met and formulated what stands in ecclesiastical history as the "Apostles' Creed."[a] The genuineness, however, of this tradition is doubted, indeed it is strongly denied by respectable authority. Dr. Mosheim doubts of the apostles' formulating it in the following language: "There is indeed extant, a brief summary of Christian doctrines, which is called the *Apostles' Creed;* and which, from the fourth century onward, was attributed to *Christ's* ambassadors themselves. But at this day, all who have any knowledge of antiquity, confess unanimously that this opinion is a mistake, and has no foundation."[2]

To this also substantially agrees Dr. Neander. The creed itself is as follows:

> I believe in God, the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Ghost, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, buried, arose from the dead on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and sits at the right hand of the Father; whence he will come, to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Church; the remission of sins; and the resurrection of the body.[3]

While in the face of the historical evidence to the contrary we may not believe this "creed" was formulated by a council of the apostles; and

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[a]For basic background and bibliography on the Apostles' Creed, see *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity,* 73–75.

[2]Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History* 1:79; italics in original.

[3]Neander, *General History of the Christian Religion* 1:306–7 [quote not found].

also certain inconsistencies therein would bar one from believing this "creed" to be of apostolic origin, still, emphasizing as it does, belief in God, the Father Almighty, and on Jesus Christ his only begotten Son, our Lord, . . . and in the Holy Spirit (i.e., the Holy Ghost)—in all this, since it became so widely accepted by the church during the early Christian centuries, it is a valuable Christian document on the belief in God, especially as expressed in the Holy Trinity.

The Apostolic Fathers (Christian writers contemporaneous with some of the Apostles) attempted no speculative construction of the doctrine of the Trinity.[b] They merely repeated the biblical phraseology without endeavoring to collect and combine the data of revelation into a systematic form. They invariably speak of the Christ as Divine and make no distinction in their modes of thought and expression between the deity of the Son and that of the Father. These immediate pupils of the apostles enter into no speculative investigation of the doctrine of the logos (the "Word") but contented themselves with the simplest and most common expressions respecting the Trinity.[4]

The Patristic view of the divinity of Christ. The following brief excerpts from the early Fathers of the church will be sufficient to indicate the freedom with which the Fathers apply the term of God to the second person, who is most commonly conceived of as the God-man and called Jesus Christ by them. "Brethren," says Clement of Rome (and bishop, lived 30–100 A.D.), "we ought to conceive of Jesus Christ as of God, as of the Judge of the living and the dead."[5] Ignatius addresses the church at Ephesus as "united and elected by a true passion, according to the will of the Father, and to Jesus Christ our God."[c] Writing to the church, Clement of Rome describes the saints there in his greeting as

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[b]For a basic survey of ideas on the Trinity among early Fathers, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600),* vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 172–277; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), 83–162. See also *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity,* 911–17; *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* 2:851–53 (for a Catholic perspective).

[4]Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine* 1:261–65 [Greek terms omitted].

[5]Clement, *Epistle* 2, 1:1. [All passages quoted by Roberts in this paragraph are found in Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine,* 265–67.]

[c]The writings of the Apostolic Fathers are conveniently collected in Maxwell Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers,* 2d ed. (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1987); and Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers,* 2 vols. (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1912–13). Information on the individual Apostolic Fathers, their writings and recent studies can be found in articles under each individual's name in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* and *Encyclopedia of the Early Church.*

"illuminated by the will of Him who willeth all things that are according to the love of Jesus Christ our God." In somewhat like manner he makes reference to the Holy Trinity: "Have we not one God, and one Christ? Is there not one Spirit of grace, who is poured out upon us . . . ?" Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna, lived 69–155 A.D.) closed his prayer at the stake by saying: "for this, and for all things, I praise thee, I bless thee, I glorify thee ⟨God, the Father⟩, together with the eternal and heavenly Jesus, thy beloved Son; with whom to thee, and the Holy Ghost, be glory, both now, and to all succeeding ages."[6]

The foregoing doctrine of God, taught to the Christians in Apostolic times, awakened their pious reverence without exciting their curiosity. They dealt with no metaphysical abstractions, but were contented to accept the teachings of the apostles in humble faith, and believed that Jesus Christ was the complete manifestation of deity, and the express image of God, his Father; and hence a revelation to them of God; while the Holy Ghost they accepted as God's witness and messenger to their souls for the truth about God and the gospel.

Paganization of the New Testament doctrine of God. But primitive Christianity, as is well known, came in contact with other doctrines concerning deity. It was almost immediately brought in touch with the mysticism of the Orient, and also with the philosophy of the Greeks, who took so much delight in intellectual subtleties. In the Oriental philosophies, and in the Greek, there was conceived the idea of a trinity in deity; an idea which possibly may have come down from the doctrines revealed to the patriarchs concerning the godhead, but which had been corrupted and rendered unintelligible by the vain philosophizings of men. In some of the Oriental systems the trinity or trimurti consisted of Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Siva, the Destroyer. It will be seen, however, that this trinity is not necessarily one of persons, or individuals, but may be one of attributes, qualities, or even a trinity of functions in one being; and in this way it is usually understood.[7]

Doctrine of trinities. Plato's trinity is sometimes stated in the terms, "First Cause; Reason, or Logos; and Soul of the Universe"; but more commonly in these: "Goodness, Intellect, and Will."[d] The nature of the Greek trinity has long been a matter of contention among the learned,

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[6]Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine* 1:267. [In the Roberts typescript, this text was not quoted precisely; the discrepancies were insignificant and have been corrected.]

[7]See Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine* 1:342–43 and note.

[d]The basic discussion of Plato's "Trinity" is in *Timaeus* 27c–69a.

and one indeed that is not settled to this day. Is there indicated in his system "a true and proper tri-personality, or merely a personification of three impersonalities," a trinity of attributes or functions? The answers to these questions are varied, and would require too much space for consideration here. Christians having been taught to accept the New Testament doctrine of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as constituting one Godhead, no sooner came in contact with the philosophies of the Greeks and Egyptians than there was an effort made to identify the Christian trinity with that of the Greek and other philosophies.

The temptation to do this was very great. Christianity was a proscribed religion and its followers detested. Whenever it could be shown, therefore, that under new symbols the church was really teaching the same doctrines that the old philosophers did, it was regarded as a distinct gain to Christianity. The mere fact of Christianity teaching a trinity of any kind was a sufficient basis of comparison, under the temptation offered, and hence in a short time we have the alleged followers of Christ involved in all the metaphysical disputations of the age. The chief difficulty in those speculations was to define the nature of the "Logos," or "Word" of God—a title that is given to our Savior by the Apostle St. John, be it remembered (John 1:1–5, 14).

The nature and relations of the Christ. Adopting absolute "being" as the postulate of their conception of God, absolute oneness, and therefore absolute singleness, their difficulties arose in trying to reconcile the existence of three persons in the Godhead to the postulate of unity. The disputations were carried on chiefly concerning the Christ, the "Word," in his relationship to the Godhead; and the disputants concerned themselves with such questions as these: "Is Jesus the Word?" "If he be the Word, did he emanate from God in time, or before time?" "If he emanated from God, is he coeternal and of the same, that is, identical substance with him, or merely of a similar substance?" "Is he distinct from the Father, that is, separate from him, or is he not?" "Is he made or begotten?" "Can he beget in his turn?" "Has he paternity, or productive virtue without paternity?"

Similar questions were asked as to the other person of the Godhead, the Holy Ghost. These questions were violently agitated at Alexandria by the bishop of that city, Alexander, and one of the presbyters, Arius, 318–321 A.D.;[c] thence the contention spread throughout

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[c]Arius lived from A.D. 260–336; see *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity,* 92–94; for Arianism, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity,* 84–90; and *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* 1:76–78.

Christendom, and culminated finally in the Council of Nicea, 325 A.D. Arius held the doctrine that the Logos or "Word" was a dependent or spontaneous production created out of nothing by the will of the Father; hence the Son of God, by whom all things were made, begotten before all worlds; but there had been a time when the Logos was not; and also he was of a substance, however similar it might be, different from the Father. This doctrine, in the minds of the opponents of Arius, detracted from the divine nature of Christ; in fact, denied him true deity, and relegated him to the position of a creature (i.e., a created being) against which the piety of a large number of Christians rebelled. After six years of hot disputation and frequent appeals by the contestants to the emperor Constantine, the Council of Nicea was assembled and the mysteries of the Christian faith submitted to public debate, a portion of the time, at least, in the presence of the emperor, who, to some extent, seemed to exercise the functions of president over the assembly.[f] The doctrine of Arius was condemned, and after "long deliberations, among struggles, and scrupulous examinations," the following "creed" was adopted:

> *The Nicene Creed.*
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> We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Creator of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, only begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of the same substance with the Father, by whom all things were made in heaven and in earth, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate, was made man, suffered, rose again the third day, ascended into the heavens and he will come to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Ghost. Those who say there was a time when He was not, and he was not before he was begotten, and he was made of nothing (he was created), or who say that he is of another hypostatis, or of another substance (than the Father), or that the Son of God is created, that he is mutable, or subject to change, the Catholic church anathematizes.[8]

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[f]On Constantine, see *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* 1:193; *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity,* 225–27. On the Council of Nicaea, see *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity,* 648–51; *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* 2:594–95. For a collection of representative primary sources on Arius and the Council of Nicaea, see James Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church to A.D. 337*, revised by W. H. C. Frend (Cambridge: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1987), 317–65. The most complete study is R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1988).

[8]Modified version cited in Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History,* 171–72.

Arius himself was condemned as a heretic and banished into one of the remote provinces, Ilyricum, his friends and disciples branded by law, with the odious name of "Porphyr***ians" because it is supposed that Arius like Porphyry*** had sought to injure Christianity. His writings (i.e. of Arius) were condemned to the flames and a capital punishment was pronounced against those in whose possession they should be found. Three years later, however, through the influence of the women at the imperial court, Constantine softened in his demeanor towards Arius and his followers. The exiles were recalled and Arius himself was received at court and his faith approved by a synod of prelates and presbyters at Jerusalem; but on the day that he was to be publicly received in the cathedral church at Constantinople, by the order of the emperor, who by the way, received the sacrament at the hands of Arians, he expired under circumstances which have led many to believe that other means than the prayers of the orthodox against him were the cause of his death. The leaders of the orthodox party—Athanasius, of Alexandria; Eustathius, of Antioch; and Paul, of Constantinople—were now to feel the wrath of the first Christian emperor. They were deposed on various occasions and by the sentence of numerous councils, and banished into distant provinces. In fact, so far from the adoption of the Nicene Creed ending the conflict which had arisen, it was more like the opening of that controversy which agitated Christendom for so long, and resulted in so many shameful conflicts. Councils were arrayed against councils, and though they never could convince one another of error, they never failed, in the spirit of such Christian charity as was then extant, to close their decrees with anathemas. Votes were bartered for and purchased in those councils, and the facts justify the latent sarcasm in Gibbon's remark that "the cause of truth and justice was promoted by the influence of gold."[9] There were persecutions and counter-persecutions, as now one party and then the other prevailed; there were assassinations and bloody battles over this doctrine of Deity, the accounts of which fill, as they also disgrace, our Christian annals. The creed which was adopted at Nicea, however, became the settled doctrine of orthodox Christendom, and remains so to this day.

It may be thought that this historical setting has no place in this writing, but how else than by the setting down of these historical facts—well attested by the highest authority—shall the spirit of this controversy be known?

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[9]See generally, Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* chapter 21.

The Athanasian Creed. It is doubtful if the creed called Athanasian was really formed by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, and in the fourth century. The more authoritative opinion seems to be that ~~it was composed by~~ ***"the creed used in the Catholic, Lutheran, and English churches, and*** called the *Nicene* creed, is in reality the ***creed set forth by the council of Constantinople"***[10] in the fifth century, but however much doubt may be thrown upon its authorship, no one hesitates to accept it as the explanation of the orthodox Christian doctrine of Deity; and, in fact, it is accepted as one of the important symbols of the Christian faith, and is as follows:

> We worship one God in trinity, and trinity in unity; neither confounding the persons, nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, is all one; the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet there are not three eternals, but one eternal. As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated; but one uncreated and one incomprehensible. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Ghost almighty, and yet there are not three almighties, but one almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God; and yet there are not three Gods, but one God.[11]

As already stated, this creed of St. Athanasius is quite generally accepted as one of the symbols of the orthodox Christian faith. It is understood that these creeds—the Apostles', the Nicene, and Athanasian—teach that God is incorporeal, that is to say, an immaterial being. The Catholic church says: "There is but one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Supreme, incorporeal, uncreated Being, who exists of Himself, and is infinite in all His attributes."[12] While the Church of England teaches in her articles of faith that "there is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body,[13] parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness."[14] This view of God as an incorporeal,

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[10]Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History* 1:291.

[11]Talmage, *Articles of Faith,* 47–48. [On Athanasius and the Athanasian Creed, see *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity,* 110–12; *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* 1:93–95; see also Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God.*]

[12]Fàa di Bruno, *Catholic Belief,* 1.

[13]I.e., without materiality—non-material.

[14]*Book of Common Prayer,* Articles of Religion, Article 1.

immaterial, bodiless, partless, passionless being is now, and has been, from the days of the great apostasy from God and Christ in the second and third centuries, the doctrine of Deity generally accepted by Christendom. The simple doctrine of the Christian Godhead, set forth in the New Testament is corrupted by the jargon of these creeds and their explanations. The learned who profess a belief of them are wandering in the darkness of the mysticisms of the old pagan philosophies. No wonder that Athanasius himself, whom Gibbon with a quiet sarcasm calls the most sagacious of the Christian theologians, candidly confessed that whenever he forced his understanding to meditate on the divinity of the Logos (and which, of course, involved the whole doctrine of the Godhead), his "toilsome and unavailing efforts recoiled on themselves; that the more he thought, the less he comprehended; and the more he wrote, the less capable was he of expressing his thoughts!" It is a fine passage with which Gibbon closes his reflections upon this subject, and hence I shall give it place here:

> In every step of the inquiry, we are compelled to feel and acknowledge the immeasurable disproportion between the size of the object and the capacity of the human mind. We may strive to abstract the notions of time, of space, and of matter, which so closely adhere to all the perceptions of our experimental knowledge. But, as soon as we presume to reason of infinite substance, of spiritual generation; as often as we deduce any positive conclusions from a negative idea, we are involved in darkness, perplexity, and inevitable contradiction.[15]

Recurrence to the New Testament doctrine of God, and a comparison of it with the doctrine of Deity set forth in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, will exhibit the wide departure—the absolute apostasy—that has taken place in respect of this most fundamental of all doctrines of religion—the doctrine of God. Truly "Christians" have denied "the Lord that bought them" (2 Pet. 2:1), and turned literally to fables. They have enthroned a conception of a negative idea of "being," which can stand in no possible relationship to man, nor man to it; and to this they ascribe divine attributes and give it title, knee and adoration and worship which belong to God alone.

One does not have far to seek to find the origin of those ideas which led the early Christians away from the plain anthropomorphism of the New Testament revelation of God through Jesus Christ. It has already been referred to in this chapter, but further consideration of it is deemed necessary to a full presentation of the case.

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[15]Gibbon, *Decline and Fall,* chapter 21, before I.

Pagan origin of the creedal doctrine of God conceded. In his great work on the *History of Christian Doctrine,* Mr. William G. T. Shedd says:

> The early Fathers, in their defences of Christianity against the pagan opponent, contend that the better pagan writers themselves agree with the new religion in teaching that there is one Supreme Being. Lactantius (*Institutiones* 1, 5), after quoting the Orphic Poets, Hesiod, Virgil, and Ovid, in proof that the heathen poets taught the unity of the supreme deity, affirms that the better pagan philosophers agree with them in this. "Aristotle," he says, "although he disagrees with himself, and says many things that are self-contradictory, yet testifies that one supreme mind rules over the world. Plato, who is regarded as the wisest philosopher of them all, plainly and openly defends the doctrine of a divine monarchy, and denominates the supreme being, not ether, nor reason, nor nature, but as he is, *god;* and asserts that by him this perfect and admirable world was made. And Cicero follows Plato, frequently confessing the deity, and calls him the supreme being, in his treatise on the Laws."[16]

It is conceded by Christian writers that the Christian doctrine of God is not expressed in New Testament terms, but in the terms of Greek and Roman metaphysics, as witness of following from the very able article in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on "Theism" by the Reverend Dr. Flint, Professor of Divinity, University of Edinburgh:

> The proposition constitutive of the dogma of the Trinity—the propositions in the symbols of Nice, Constantinople and Toledo, relative to the immanent distinctions and relations in the Godhead—were not drawn directly from the New Testament, and could not be expressed in New Testament terms. They were the product of reason speculating on a revelation to faith—the New Testament representation of God as a Father, a Redeemer and a Sanctifier—were only formed through centuries of effort, only elaborated by the aid of the conceptions, and formulated in the terms of Greek and Roman metaphysics.

The same authority says: "The massive defense of theism, erected by the Cambridge school of philosophy, against atheism, fatalism, and the denial of moral distinctions, was avowedly built on a Platonic foundation."

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[16]Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine* 1:55. [For notes on Lactantius' (c. 250–325) pagan, poetic, and philosophical sources, see *Divinarum Institutionum,* ed. Pierre Monat (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1986), 1, 5. For an English translation, see M. F. McDonald, trans., *Lactantius: The Divine Institutes, Books 1–7* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1964), vol. 49 in *Fathers of the Church.* See also *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity,* 524–25; and *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* 1:469–70.]

Guizot, the eminent statesman and historian of France, in one of his lectures of which this is a subdivision of the title, "Of the Transition from Pagan Philosophy to Christian Theology," says, in concluding his treatment of this theme:

> I have thus exhibited the fact which I indicated in the outset, the fusion of Pagan philosophy ***with*** Christian theology, the metamorphosis of the one into the other. And it is remarkable, that the reasoning applied to the establishment of the spirituality of the soul is evidently derived from the ancient philosophy rather than from Christianity, and that the author seems more especially to aim at convincing the theologians, by proving to them that the Christian faith has nothing in all this which is not perfectly reconcilable with the results derived from pure reason.[17]

In method of thought also, no less than in conclusions, the most influential of the Christian fathers on these subjects followed the Greek philosophers rather than the writers of the New Testament. Platonism, and Aristotelianism, says the author of the *History of Christian Doctrine*:

> exerted more influence upon the intellectual methods of men, taking in the whole time since their appearance, than all other systems combined. They certainly influenced the Greek mind, and Grecian culture, more than all the other philosophical systems. They reappear in Roman philosophy,—so far as Rome had any philosophy. We shall see that Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero exerted more influence than all other philosophical minds united, upon the greatest of the Christian Fathers; upon the greatest of the Schoolmen; and upon the theologians of the Reformation, Calvin and Melancthon. And if we look at European philosophy, as it has been unfolded in England, Germany and France, we shall perceive that all the modern theistic schools have discussed the standing problems of human reason, in very much the same manner in which the reason of Plato and Aristotle discussed them twenty-two centuries ago. Bacon, Des Cartes, Leibnitz, and Kant, so far as the first principles of intellectual and moral philosophy are concerned, agree with their Grecian predecessors. A student who has mastered the two systems of the Academy and the Lycaeum, will find in Modern philosophy (with the exception of the department of Natural Science) very little that is true, that may not be found for substance, and germinally, in the Greek theism.[18]

It is hoped that enough is said here to establish the fact that the conception of God as "pure being," "immaterial," "without form," "or parts or passions," as held by orthodox Christianity, has its origin in pagan philosophy, not in Jewish nor Christian revelation.

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[17]Guizot, *History of Civilization* 2:140.

[18]Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine* 1:52.

The call—"Back to God." In view of all this that is here set forth, we can understand how it is that to St. John, when given the vision of an angel in the hour of God's judgment, in the last days, coming with the "everlasting gospel" to be preached to every nation and kindred and tongue and people, would make as part of that message this ringing call of back to God: "Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters" (Rev. 14:7).

Evidently in the hour or time of God's judgment men would not be worshipping God "that made heaven and earth and the sea"—hence an angel warning them and calling upon them to the worship of the true, and living, and personal God; the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; three personal beings united in one Godhead, or Divine Council, in which all fullness and perfection dwells.

Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: "All the standard church and ecclesiastical histories"; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History;* Milman, *History of Christianity;* Milner, *History of the Church of Christ;* Brueck, *History of the Catholic Church;* Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History.* For a discussion about Roberts's conception of the Godhead, see pages 624–26 below.