

## The Evolution of God (Part II)

### His “Spirit” becomes a Person

By Tim Warner © Copyright www.4windsfellowships.net

---

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, gives us insight into the Jewish understanding of God’s Spirit in the first century. He referred to it as a non-personal thing, a limited expression of God Himself. “But *the Divine Power* departed from Saul, and removed to David; who, upon this removal of *the Divine Spirit* to him, began to prophesy.”<sup>1</sup> In quoting Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the Temple, Josephus writes: “I humbly beseech thee that thou wilt let *some portion of thy Spirit* come down and inhabit in this temple, *that thou mayst appear to be with us upon earth. As to thyself, the entire heavens, and the immensity of the things that are therein, are but a small habitation for thee, much more is this poor temple so; but I entreat thee to keep it as thine own house.*”<sup>2</sup>

The Jewish understanding of the Spirit was based on the entirety of the Hebrew Old Testament. The Jews have never understood the Spirit as a distinct Person apart from the one true God of the Shema. And that understanding was universal in the culture for the Jewish disciples of Jesus. It would be quite a radical idea indeed to present the Spirit as a distinct divine Person equal with God in that climate, one that would immediately be challenged.

At the close of the apostolic age the Christian understanding in Rome (at least by Justin’s account) was no different than the Jews. Christians understood that “the prophetic Spirit” had been at work in the prophets, speaking sometimes from the Person of the Father and at other times from the Person of the Son. They also understood that when the Son of God descended from heaven into the womb of Mary to become Son of Man, He was called by Luke “the holy Spirit” and “the Power of the Highest,” the same Person who was called “Word,” “Wisdom,” and the “Messenger of the Lord.” It is also evident in Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho that the same concept of the “the prophetic Spirit” in the Old Testament was shared by both Justin and Trypho the Jew. The “Spirit of God” was synonymous with the “prophetic Spirit,” the “Holy Spirit,” and the “Breath” of God’s mouth.<sup>3</sup> This strongly implies that the Christian

---

<sup>1</sup> Josephus, Antiquities, Bk. VI, ch. viii:2

<sup>2</sup> Josephus, Antiquities, Bk. VIII, ch. iv:3

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 33:6 was repeatedly referenced to prove that “Logos” was the Agent of creation, along with the “Breath/Spirit” which is from God’s mouth.

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

understanding of the Spirit at the close of the apostolic age was virtually identical with the Jewish view.

As was demonstrated in the previous article in this series, the thinking among the Christian assemblies established by the Apostles themselves, concerning God and His Son, was uniform at the close of the apostolic age. The assemblies from Antioch to Athens/Corinth, to Rome, to Alexandria all preserved the same teaching concerning God and His Son. Jesus Christ was the Son of the most-high God, having been begotten out of God as “the Beginning,” to be His Agent in creation, who came down from heaven to become the Son of Man through the virgin birth. This was settled apostolic dogma among the early Christian assemblies. It was neither Trinitarian nor Unitarian.

During John’s later ministry and throughout the second century the Gnostic false teachers were the main opponents of apostolic Christianity. Virtually all of the attacks against pristine Christianity revolved around the syncretism of Christianity and Platonism. All of the Gnostic sects attempted to redefine the Son in a way that did not transgress Platonic dualism, (that man is an eternal “spirit” being imprisoned by a material body of flesh, and that matter is inherently evil but “spirit” is good). Thus both “matter” and “spirit” were seen as substances. From this Greek premise came all of the various attempts to distinguish between the Son of God who came from heaven as “spirit” (non-material and thus good) and the human Jesus (material and thus corrupt). Because the Gnostic sects did not come into great conflict with Christians regarding the nature of God’s “Spirit” in Scripture, the earliest Christians did not have to define or defend the apostolic tradition regarding the Spirit of God in detail. Consequently, the focus of theological discussion and dispute was always the Son. This lack of very specific theological Christian teaching regarding God’s Spirit in the earliest writings makes the task of determining exactly how the Jewish view held by the Apostles eventually morphed into the Catholic (Trinitarian) view very difficult to prove conclusively.

The reader should also keep in mind that the term “spirit” was not only used in an impersonal way many times in the Bible, but the same word was used for angels and demons also, which are distinct beings. However, the term “spirit” in such cases is a metaphor. The Greek word itself literally means “breath” or “wind.” The application to angels and demons was metaphorical in order to attribute the qualities of “breath” or “wind” – being invisible but having power to create effects – to angels and demons. In the Greek culture, the same word used for “spirit” as non-personal substance was also used this way in regard to non-material entities (spirits). Because this term has such a

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

wide range of usage, both literally and metaphorically, both in the Bible and in Greek literature, our task is compounded as we examine the evidence in early Christian texts.

Two important statements from the Gospels concerning the Spirit would eventually become the focus of internal Christian conflict, as some Christians believed these introduced a distinct personhood for the Spirit. These are the command to baptize in Matthew 28:18-20 “*in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit,*” and Jesus’ promise of the “Helper” (Paraclete) in John 14-16.

The statement in Matthew 28:19 to baptize in the name of Father, Son, and Spirit is disputed by some textual scholars. There was a very early variant reading preserved by Eusebius that omitted it<sup>4</sup> and some early eastern Fathers also omitted the statement in their quotations. But several western early Fathers quoted or referenced it as it appears in our Bibles. Justin in his First Apology referred to Christian’s having the name of God, His Son, and the Spirit pronounced over them at the time of baptism<sup>5</sup> (assuming of course that this passage has not been altered by later Trinitarian editors).<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus also knew of the longer reading. Whichever version of Matthew 28:19 is held to be what Matthew actually wrote, the statement of Jesus itself does not require that the Spirit is a Person distinct from the Father and Son, although it may imply that to some people depending on their presuppositions.

Until Jesus’ discourse in John 14-16, the Spirit of God had been always spoken of using neuter, non-personal terminology. It was the “Breath” of God’s mouth, as David says: “*By the word of the Lord the heavens were established; and all the power of them by **the spirit of his mouth***” (Psalm 32:6 DRV). The word “spirit” is neuter, actually meaning “breath” or “wind,” terms which do not convey a distinct personality. But in this passage Jesus used a completely new and unique term found nowhere else in Scripture for the Spirit.

Jesus told His disciples that He was going away. But so that they would not grieve or panic, He announced that this vacuum would be filled by “another Helper.” The Greek noun “παράκλητος” (“Helper” or “Advocate”) is masculine in gender. And the word “Paraclete” itself usually referred to a person in common speech. So if Jesus’ reference to “another Helper” is taken literally, it could easily imply a distinct person. Yet, Jesus

---

<sup>4</sup> The variant reading most likely came from the Aramaic (original) of Matthew’s Gospel, acknowledged by several of the early Fathers, and preserved by Eusebius. This will be discussed in part IV of this series and the evidence for the shorter reading provided.

<sup>5</sup> Justin, First Apology, ch. lxi

<sup>6</sup> The writings of Ignatius are known to have been significantly altered by later Catholic editors, in part to put the language of later developed Trinitarianism in the pen of Ignatius, disciple of John. Yet nothing in his genuine works suggests Trinitarianism.

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

did not intend to introduce a completely new concept concerning an alleged third Person of the Trinity. At the end of His discourse concerning the “Helper” He said that He was using figurative language. *“These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; but the time is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but I will tell you plainly about the Father.”*<sup>7</sup> He also described the “Helper” as actually the personal invisible presence of Himself and the Father together. *“If you love Me, keep My commands. And I will ask the Father and He will give you another advocate [Paraclete] so that he may continue with you unto the age, the Breath of Truth which the world is powerless to receive because it does not see it nor know it. But you know it because it remains beside you and **will be among you**. I will not leave you orphans, **I am coming to you**.”*<sup>8</sup> ... *If anyone should love Me, he will keep My word. And My Father will love him, and **we will come toward him and will make an abode beside him**.”*<sup>9</sup> Thus the coming of “another Helper” was a figurative way of expressing the personal presence of both Jesus and the Father within the assemblies.

Earlier in John’s Gospel we have the following explanation from Jesus Himself: *“But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. **God is Spirit**, and those who **worship Him must worship in Spirit** and truth.”*<sup>10</sup> Thus the limited presence of the Father Himself is conveyed into the gathering of believers for worship. “Spirit” here is not a third Person distinct from the Father. The same was foretold by Jesus just a few chapters later: *“Yet in the last day, the great day of the Feast, Jesus having stood up, also cried out saying, ‘Have anyone who may be thirsty come to Me and drink. The one believing unto Me, according as the Scripture said, **out of His belly will flow [a spring] of living water**.’ (But **He said this about the Breath [Spirit] which the ones believing unto Him were about to receive**. For **the holy Breath** was not yet, because Jesus was not yet glorified).”*<sup>11</sup>

This “baptism” into the “Spirit” was also referenced in the other Gospels when quoting John the Baptist prophesying that *“He [Jesus] will baptize you with the holy Breath and with fire.”* Thus, the supernatural action being performed in baptism was by Christ Himself, but the thing into which one was baptized by Him was “Spirit.” And Paul later referred to this as being baptized into the assembly, which is “the Body of Christ.”<sup>12</sup> The earliest Christian writers from the first century to the middle of the second century never

---

<sup>7</sup> John 16:25

<sup>8</sup> John 14:16-18 LGV

<sup>9</sup> John 14:23 LGV

<sup>10</sup> John 4:23-24

<sup>11</sup> John 7:37-39 LGV

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor. 12:12-13 NKJV *“For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by [lit. **IN**] one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free – and have all been made to drink **into** one Spirit.”*

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

referred to the Paraclete as a distinct Person, with its own mind, will, and voice. And we infer that they had the same understanding as outlined above.

### **Evolution from Within:**

Gnosticism was a frontal attack on Christianity by “the spirit of Antichrist.” Yet Satan’s goal was not to merely start a bunch of Gnostic sects to compete against apostolic Christianity. The Gnostics held a distinct disadvantage because the apostolic assemblies had the Apostles as eyewitnesses to Jesus, and both the New Testament documents the oral tradition from the Apostles. The Gnostics only had the appeal of some agreement with popular Greek philosophy. The Gnostic attacks were met with vigorous responses from the early Christians, thus proving to be mostly unsuccessful in drawing away true believers.

Satan’s real goal was to overthrow Christianity by corrupting it from within. Frontal doctrinal attacks against the unified Christian assemblies was bound to fail as long as the apostolic assemblies remained vigilant and steadfast in defending pristine apostolic tradition. A successful attack with long lasting effects had to come from within the assemblies. And it had to be subtle. It could not directly challenge the Scriptures and the apostolic doctrinal tradition which were being defended by the apostolic assemblies. To successfully corrupt Christianity at large, an internal movement was necessary, one which appeared pious and a call for revival within the assemblies.

The Enemy of the Truth found the perfect man and the perfect message. His message would not easily or quickly be expunged from the assemblies for the following reasons:

- It did not directly challenge the main doctrines of Christianity.
- It charged that the assemblies were “worldly,” and called for a pious lifestyle.
- It appealed to apocalyptic fervor, announcing Christ’s return was imminent.
- It claimed to be the fulfillment of a prophecy of Jesus Himself.
- It claimed a renewal of the prophetic gifts, thus special divine revelation.

### **Montanus of Phrygia:**

At about the time of Justin’s martyrdom in the middle of the second century, a new sect arose among the assemblies in Phrygia, a province of Asia Minor. It very much resembled the modern Pentecostal Holiness movement featuring an alleged revival of the prophetic gifts, excessive asceticism, the ordination of women, and an apocalyptic

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

message.<sup>13</sup> The Montanists were a Christian version of the Jewish Essenes who flourished in this area of Asia Minor at the time.<sup>14</sup> They claimed to be pious because of their extreme asceticism, condemning the rest of Christianity as worldly. At the same time they claimed mystical (divine) experiences that the rest of Christianity did not experience as a badge of their superiority. The movement was called by its adherents the “New Prophecy” to distinguish it from prophecy related to Pentecost and the ministries of the Apostles.

Montanus, a new convert to Christianity, had formerly been a priest of the Oriental ecstatic cult of Cybele, the mother goddess of fertility. After converting to Christianity, Montanus almost immediately declared himself a prophet. Montanus’ and his followers were called “Phrygians” by other Christians (after the place of origin) in the same way that modern Christians refer to “Charismatics” as a segment within Evangelical Christianity. Montanism spread first as a highly disciplined sect within some of the assemblies of Asia Minor, and then began to gather adherents in assemblies in more remote places. It immediately created division within the assemblies between those who acknowledged the prophecies as from God and those who claimed the source to be demons. And this division then separated whole assemblies from one another, being either pro-Montanus or anti-Montanus.

Montanus sought to “draw away the disciples after himself”<sup>15</sup> through a very clever device – a perversion of Jesus’ promise of the coming of the “Helper” (παράκλητος “Paraclete”).<sup>16</sup> Montanus claimed that Jesus was not referring to Pentecost when “the Spirit of Truth” came upon and empowered the Apostles,<sup>17</sup> but was instead referring to another person to come after the Apostles were dead, a special person permanently filled with the “Spirit of Truth” just as Jesus Himself was.<sup>18</sup> Montanus’ claims were very much like Islam’s claim that Jesus’ prophecy of the “Helper” (Paraclete) referred to Mohammad.<sup>19</sup> Montanus claimed that the age of the Father covered the Old Testament Law, the age of the Son covered the ministry of Jesus and the Twelve, and that a third

---

<sup>13</sup> There have been several ascetic – mystic movements among both Judaism and Christianity. The Essenes, whom Paul warned the Colossians against, required very strict diets as well as dress, even forbidding marriage in some cases, and were involved in mystical-spiritual experiences. They condemned the rest of Israel as being worldly, while they claimed to be pious.

<sup>14</sup> The book of Colossians addresses the influence of the Essenes in

<sup>15</sup> Acts 20:30

<sup>16</sup> John 14-16

<sup>17</sup> Acts 1:4-5 & 2:1-4

<sup>18</sup> Luke 4:1; John 3:34; Acts 10:38

<sup>19</sup> <http://jesus-is-muslim.net/jesus-is-muslim/prophet-muhammad/prophet-muhammad-in-the-bible/the-paraclete-prophet-muhammad/>

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

age was beginning, that of the Paraclete.<sup>20</sup> This third age would last until the arrival of the Kingdom.

Montanus insisted that the “Helper” was a third person, distinct from Jesus and the Father. He claimed that Jesus prophesied about him, a person who allegedly embodied the full measure of the “Breath of Truth.” Montanus was to inaugurate the new age, the age of the Paraclete. And this new age had a higher standard of holy living beyond what was taught by Jesus and the Apostles, and signaled the imminent return of Jesus.

This sect was vehemently opposed by many in the assemblies of Phrygia, but was also embraced by many. It initially grew rather quickly because some of the leaders of the assemblies did not want to excommunicate a large number of members. Some leaders argued for stamping it out while others sought “unity” within and among the assemblies.

As the decades passed, the failed prophecies of the Montanist movement began to multiply. Also the hypocritical character of its founders became apparent. The movement was eventually officially rejected as heresy, but not before a great deal of damage had been done. The fourth century Christian historian, Eusebius,<sup>21</sup> described this early heretical sect in hindsight as follows, quoting directly from contemporary eyewitness accounts. The similarities to the modern Charismatic movement are disturbing indeed:

*“For some persons, like venomous reptiles, crawled over Asia and Phrygia, **boasting that Montanus was the Paraclete**, and that the women that followed him, Priscilla and Maximilla, were prophetesses of Montanus.”<sup>22</sup>*

Note that Montanus had two women who travelled with him as he preached and prophesied around Asia Minor – Priscilla and Maximilla – whom he claimed were his prophetesses. Montanus’ manner of prophesying was unique. All previous prophets spoke God’s message in the third person (repeating what God revealed to them through His Spirit as “Thus says the Lord”), and did so in a rational and composed manner with the prophet’s mind in full control of his faculties. However, Montanus’ prophecies were spoken in the first person as though God Himself had taken over his mouth, his body having been overcome by a spirit, causing him to convulse and lose control of his faculties.

---

<sup>20</sup> Tertullian, On the Veiling of Virgins, ch. I

<sup>21</sup> AD 265 - 340

<sup>22</sup> Eusebius, Bk V, ch. xiv

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*“We are told that Montanus claimed to be a prophet and spoke in a kind of possession or ecstasy. He held that the relation between a prophet and the Divine Being Who inspired him was the same as between a musical instrument and he who played upon it; consequently the inspired words of a prophet were not to be regarded as those of the human speaker. In a fragment of his prophecy preserved by Epiphanius he says, ‘**I have come, not an angel or ambassador, but God the Father.**’ See also Didymus (u.s.). It is clear that Montanus here did not speak in his own name, but uttered words which he supposed God to have put into his mouth.”<sup>23</sup>*

Clement of Alexandria attributed his style of prophesying in “ecstasy” to being possessed by a lying spirit.

*“But among the lies, the false prophets also told some true things. And in reality they prophesied ‘in an ecstasy,’ as the servants of the Apostate [angel]. And the Shepherd, the angel of repentance, says to Hermas, of the false prophet:<sup>24</sup> “For he speaks some truths. For the devil fills him with his own spirit, if perchance he may be able to cast down any one from what is right.”<sup>25</sup>*

Eusebius relayed from his sources what this ecstatic prophesying looked like – demon possession.

*“Montanus by name, through his unquenchable desire for leadership, gave the adversary opportunity against him. And he became beside himself, and being suddenly in a sort of frenzy and ecstasy, he raved, and began to babble and utter strange things, prophesying in a manner contrary to the constant custom of the Church handed down by tradition from the beginning. Some of those who heard his spurious utterances at that time were indignant, and they rebuked him as one that was possessed, and that was under the control of a demon, and was led by a deceitful spirit, and was distracting the multitude; and they forbade him to talk, remembering the distinction drawn by the Lord and his warning to guard watchfully against the coming of false prophets. But others imagining themselves possessed of the holy Spirit and of a prophetic gift, were elated and not a little puffed up; and forgetting the distinction of the Lord, they challenged the mad and insidious and seducing spirit, and were cheated and deceived by him. In consequence of this, he could no longer be held in check, so as to keep silence.”<sup>26</sup>*

---

<sup>23</sup> The Catholic Encyclopedia article on Montanus, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wace/biodict.toc.html?term=montanus>

<sup>24</sup> The Shepherd of Hermas was a second century Christian document purporting to contain oral tradition of earlier visions and dreams of a man named Hermas.

<sup>25</sup> Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, Bk. I, ch. xvii

<sup>26</sup> Eusebius, Bk. V, ch. xvi

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*“But the false prophet falls into an ecstasy, in which he is without shame or fear. Beginning with purposed ignorance, he passes on, as has been stated, involuntary madness of soul. They cannot show that one of the old [Testament] or one of the new [Testament] prophets was thus carried away in spirit. Neither can they boast of Agabus, or Judas, or Silas, or the daughters of Philip, or Ammia in Philadelphia, or Quadratus, or any others not belonging to them.”<sup>27</sup>*

Montanus, Priscilla, and Maximilla claimed to have been taken over by the Father, the Word, **and the Paraclete**, as the Catholic Encyclopedia explains.

*“The anonymous opponent of the sect describes the method of prophecy (Eusebius, V, xvii, 2-3): first the prophet appears distraught with terror (en parekstasei), then follows quiet (adeia kai aphobia, fearlessness); beginning by studied vacancy of thought or passivity of intellect (ekousios amathia), he is seized by an uncontrollable madness (akousios mania psyches). **The prophets did not speak as messengers of God: ‘Thus saith the Lord,’ but described themselves as possessed by God and spoke in His Person. ‘I am the Father, the Word, and the Paraclete,’** said Montanus (Didymus, “De Trin.”, III, xli); and again: “I am the Lord God omnipotent, who have descended into man,” and “neither an angel, nor an ambassador, but **I, the Lord, the Father, am come**” (Epiphanius, “Hær.”, xlviii, 11). And Maximilla said: “Hear not me, but **hear Christ**” (ibid.); and: “I am driven off from among the sheep like a wolf [that is, a false prophet – cf. Matthew 7:15]; I am not a wolf, but **I am word, and spirit, and power.**” This possession by a spirit, which spoke while the prophet was incapable of resisting, is described by the spirit of Montanus: ‘Behold the man is like a lyre, and I dart like the plectrum. The man sleeps, and I am awake’ (Epiphanius, “Hær.”, xlviii, 4). ... ‘The Lord hath sent me as the chooser, the revealer, **the interpreter of this labor, this promise, and this covenant**, being forced, willingly or unwillingly, to learn the gnosis of God.’ ... “[T]he new prophecy was of a higher order than the old, and therefore unlike it. It came to be thought higher than the Apostles, and even beyond the teaching of Christ. **Priscilla** went to sleep, she said, at Pepuza, and **Christ came to her and slept by her side in the form of a woman**, clad in a bright garment, and put wisdom into me, and revealed to me that this place is holy, and that here Jerusalem above comes down.’”<sup>28</sup>*

Montanus claimed to channel the Father and Priscilla claimed to channel Christ. After both were dead, Maximilla prophesied, “After me there shall be no prophetess, but the end,”<sup>29</sup> – that is the end of the third age of the Paraclete. This was also a reference to

---

<sup>27</sup> Eusebius, Bk. V, ch. xvii

<sup>28</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10521a.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10521a.htm>

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

Montanist prophecies of the alleged imminent arrival of the New Jerusalem from heaven, descending to Pepuza in Asia Minor. Maximillia, being the last survivor of “The Three”<sup>30</sup> as they were called, coupled with the idea that the third age was the age of the Paraclete, strongly suggests that the three “prophets” were claiming to represent three Persons of the Godhead, the Paraclete eventually speaking only through Maximillia. That the source of the prophesying was not a Trinity, but rather an evil spirit speaking through the so-called New Prophecy, can be deduced from the fruit of the Montanist cult with its list of failed predictions<sup>31</sup> and the reported suicides of both Montanus and Maximillia.<sup>32</sup>

In Montanism we first begin to see an entirely new concept within Christianity, missing from all the earlier Christian writings, that the Spirit of God is a third divine Person distinct from the Father and the Son. These three “prophets” claimed to be merely vessels for “*the Father, the Word, and the Paraclete.*” We see in these words a distinct personhood for the Spirit, a third Person of the Godhead for the first time. The Spirit of God (Paraclete) was given a distinct personality by Montanus and his prophetesses.

### **Praxeas, Noetus, Sabellius:**<sup>33</sup>

After the Montanist heresy broke out in Phrygia of Asia Minor, a strong reaction against the multiplying Persons of the Godhead implied by Montanism also arose from within the same assemblies of Phrygia. As with many reactions against gross heresy, it over-corrected by going too far in the opposite direction. It took the earlier (Jewish & early Christian) concept of the Spirit as a limited manifestation of God’s person and also applied it to the Son. This reactionary view is usually referred to as Sabellianism (named after Sabellius, one of its proponents). The new doctrine sought to stress the unity of God as one Person, but without denying the deity of the preincarnate Son. Thus, in Old Testament times, God manifested Himself through a limited aspect of His own Person, referred to as Logos, Son, Wisdom, the Messenger of the Lord, etc. (This was in contrast to the orthodox view that Logos was “begotten” by God, and thus a distinct Person). Consequently, Jesus in the flesh was also a limited manifestation of

---

<sup>30</sup> <https://orthodoxwiki.org/Montanism>

<sup>31</sup> Eusebius, Bk. V, ch. xvi; cf. Encyclopedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Montanus-religious-leader>

<sup>32</sup> Eusebius reported the suicides of Montanus and his prophetess Maximilla with these words, again quoting Asterius Urbanus: “*But by another kind of death Montanus and Maximilla are said to have died. For the report is that, incited by the spirit of frenzy, they both hung themselves; not at the same time, but at the time which common report gives for the death of each. And thus they died, and ended their lives like the traitor Judas.*” (Book V, ch. xvi). However, he adds a caveat that he has not an eyewitness to their deaths.

<sup>33</sup> Noetus & Sabellius were other notable teachers who held the same view as Praxeas. And this view is sometimes referred to as ‘Sabellianism.’

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

God Himself, having temporarily assumed flesh. The new interpretation was intended to contradict Montanus’ multiplication of the Godhead to three distinct Persons.

This extreme form of monotheism has had a revival of sorts in modern times among Oneness Pentecostals. The official modern theological term is “Modalism,”<sup>34</sup> indicating that Father, Son, and Spirit are “modes” through which God has interacted within the creation and with man. The churches which teach this view today refer to themselves as “Apostolic Churches.” Yet this concept is anything but “apostolic.” It actually appeared in apostolic times with the claims of Simon Magus whom Peter denounced in Acts 8.<sup>35</sup> Simon Magus was designated the father of Gnosticism by several of the earliest writers. Irenaeus wrote that Simon was “*glorified by many as if he were a God; and he taught that it was himself who appeared among the Jews as the Son, but descended in Samaria as the Father while he came to other nations in the character of the Holy Spirit.*” Thus Simon Magus was the real father of Modalism.

This reactionary understanding of God was imported from Phrygia to Rome by a man named Praxeas in an attempt to counter the spread of Montanism in the Roman assembly. The current bishop of Rome, Eleutherus, had initially given his blessing to the New Prophecy and the claims of Montanus and his followers, sending letters of approval and unity to the Montanist assemblies in Phrygia. But when Praxeas came to Rome he persuaded the Roman bishop to change his mind and recall his letters of blessing. The Roman bishop then became favorable to Praxeas’ modalism as a defense against Montanism’s three-person Godhead which was seen by many as polytheism.

### **Tertullian of Carthage:**

Tertullian, a Latin writer from Carthage in North Africa, was a contemporary of Praxeas. He wrote during the later decades of the second century and beginning of the third. Tertullian was not a pastor, nor did he hold any known official office in the assembly at Carthage. He was trained in the legal profession and was an expert at debating. He was apparently self-taught as a theologian. He was an interesting character, arguing for apostolic tradition and against the Gnostic heresies in his early years. But in his senior years, Tertullian switched sides and became a staunch defender of Montanus and the New Prophecy. At the same time Tertullian became a true Trinitarian, even inventing the word “Trinity” itself. It is interesting to observe Tertullian’s shift in views concerning the Godhead from his earlier works before his conversion to Montanism to his later writings which defended the New Prophecy and

---

<sup>34</sup> Modern adherents to this teaching call themselves “Apostolic,” but no connection can be made historically to the Apostles.

<sup>35</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. I, ch. xxiii

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

its three-Person Trinity. Tertullian also attributed the origin of the idea of a third Person to divine revelation through the New Prophecy.

### **Tertullian, the Early Years:**

Tertullian’s pre-Montanist writings display the same views concerning God, His Son, and God’s Spirit found in Barnabas of Alexandria, Aristides of Athens, Justin of Rome, and Tatian and Theophilus of Antioch, Syria. This indicates that even in North Africa the Christian assemblies were united with Rome, Athens, and Syria in their view of the Godhead. Tertullian did not distinguish the Spirit of God as a distinct Person. Like Justin, he identified the Spirit as active through the preincarnate Son, being an extension of God’s own essence in the Son.

*“And we, in like manner, hold that the Word, and Reason, and Power, by which we have said God made all, have Spirit as their proper and essential substratum, in which the Word has inbeing to give forth utterances,<sup>36</sup> and reason abides to dispose and arrange, and power is over all to execute. We have been taught that He proceeds forth from God, and in that procession He is generated; so that He is the Son of God, and is called God from unity of substance with God. For God, too, is a Spirit. Even when the ray is shot from the sun, it is still part of the parent mass; the sun will still be in the ray, because it is a ray of the sun — there is no division of substance, but merely an extension. Thus Christ is Spirit of Spirit, and God of God, as light of light is kindled. The material matrix remains entire and unimpaired, though you derive from it any number of shoots possessed of its qualities; so, too, that which has come forth out of God is at once God and the Son of God, and the two are one. In this way also, as He is Spirit of Spirit and God of God, He is made a second in manner of existence — in position, not in nature; and He did not withdraw from the original source, but went forth. This ray of God, then, as it was always foretold in ancient times, descending into a certain virgin, and made flesh in her womb, is in His birth God and man united. The flesh formed by the Spirit is nourished, grows up to manhood, speaks, teaches, works, and is the Christ.”<sup>37</sup>*

Like Justin, Tertullian viewed God as subsisting of “Spirit,” thus His Son was also “Spirit of Spirit.” This “Spirit” of the Father Himself came to dwell within the Son after He became Man through the incarnation at His baptism.

---

<sup>36</sup> The earlier writers referred to the Spirit as “the prophetic spirit,” that essence of God and His Son which visited the prophets. See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Bk. III, ch. x:9

<sup>37</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, ch. xxi

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*“**Who is this Christ** with his fables? Is he an ordinary man? Is he a sorcerer? Was his body stolen by his disciples from its tomb? Is he now in the realms below? Or is he not rather up in the heavens, thence about to come again, making the whole world shake, filling the earth with dread alarms, making all but Christians wail — **as the Power of God, and the Spirit of God, as the Word, the Reason, the Wisdom, and the Son of God?** Mock as you like, but get the demons if you can to join you in your mocking; let them deny that Christ is coming to judge every human soul which has existed from the world’s beginning.”<sup>38</sup>*

Tertullian used the same arguments put forward by Justin and the other early writers concerning the begetting of the Son at the beginning of creation as a distinct Person. Like Justin, he cited Proverbs 8’s description of the “begetting” of Wisdom as referring to the Son, through whom God created all things.

*“If any material was necessary to God in the creation of the world, as Hermogenes supposed, God had a far nobler and more suitable one in His own **Wisdom** — one which was not to be gauged by the writings of philosophers, but to be learnt from the words or prophets. This alone, indeed, knew the mind of the Lord. For “who knoweth the things of God, and the things in God, **but the Spirit, which is in Him?**” Now **His Wisdom is that Spirit**. This was His counselor, the very way of His wisdom and knowledge. Of this He made all things, making them through It, and making them with It. “When He prepared the heavens,” so says (the Scripture), “I was present with Him; and when He strengthened above the winds the lofty clouds, and when He secured the fountains which are under the heaven, I was present, compacting these things along with Him. I was He in whom He took delight; moreover, I daily rejoiced in His presence: for He rejoiced when He had finished the world, and amongst the sons of men did He show forth His pleasure.” ... Indeed, as soon as He perceived It to be necessary for His creation of the world, **He immediately creates It, and generates** it in Himself. “The Lord,” says the Scripture, “possessed me, the beginning of His ways for the creation of His works. Before the worlds He founded me; before He made the earth, before the mountains were settled in their places; moreover, before the hills **He generated me**, and prior to the depths was I **begotten**.” Let Hermogenes then confess that **the very Wisdom of God is declared to be born and created**, for the especial reason that we should not suppose that there is any other being than God alone who is unbegotten and uncreated. For if that, which from its **being inherent in the Lord** was of Him and in Him, was yet not without a beginning, — **I mean His Wisdom, which was then born and created**, when in the thought of God It began to assume motion for the arrangement of His creative works, — how much*

---

<sup>38</sup> Tertullian, Apology, ch. xxiii

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*more impossible is it that anything should have been without a beginning which was extrinsic to the Lord! **But if this same Wisdom is the Word of God**, in the capacity of Wisdom, and (as being He) without whom nothing was made, just as also (nothing) was set in order without Wisdom, **how can it be that anything, except the Father, should be older**, and on this account indeed nobler, than **the Son of God, the only-begotten and first-begotten Word**? Not to say that what is unbegotten is stronger than that which is born, and what is not made more powerful than that which is made. Because that which did not require a Maker to give it existence, will be much more elevated in rank than that which had an author to bring it into being.”<sup>39</sup>*

It is abundantly clear, by comparing Tertullian’s early works (as quoted above) with the views of Barnabas, Aristides, Justin, Tatian, and Theophilus, that he did not view God as a Trinity of persons, but one eternal, uncreated, unbegotten Being. God consisted of “Spirit.” He begat for Himself a “Son” who is referred to as “Wisdom” and “Word,” who consisted of “Spirit” along with His Father. Thus, in Tertullian’s orthodox view the Godhead consisted of two Persons only, the Father being truly unbegotten and self-sufficient God, and the only-begotten pre-incarnate Son being inferior in rank because He derived origin, existence, and substance from the Father. He was thus necessarily and voluntarily subject to Him. The Spirit was the divine nature or substance shared between them, through which they spoke to the prophets.

Like Justin<sup>40</sup> and Theophilus<sup>41</sup> before him, Tertullian originally interpreted the “Holy Spirit” and the “Power of the Highest” coming upon and overshadowing Mary<sup>42</sup> as references to the preincarnate Son Himself entering her womb and becoming flesh.

*“As **‘the Spirit of God,’** however, and **‘the Power of the Highest,’** can He be regarded as lower than the angels, — He who is verily God and the Son of God?”<sup>43</sup>*

Again:

*“Whom was he so afraid of as not plainly to declare, **‘God shall come upon thee, and the Highest shall overshadow thee?’** Now, by saying **‘the Spirit of God’** (although the Spirit of God is God,) and by not directly naming God, he wished that portion of the whole Godhead to be understood, **which was about to retire into the designation of***

---

<sup>39</sup> Tertullian, Against Hermogenes, ch. xviii

<sup>40</sup> Justin Martyr, First Apology, ch. xxxiii

<sup>41</sup> Theophilus, To Autolytus, Bk. II, ch. x

<sup>42</sup> Luke 1:35

<sup>43</sup> Tertullian’s On the Flesh of Christ, ch. xiv

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*‘the Son.’ The Spirit of God in this passage must be the same as the Word. For just as, when John says, ‘The Word was made flesh,’ we understand the Spirit also in the mention of the Word: so here, too, we acknowledge the Word likewise in the name of the Spirit. For both the Spirit is the substance of the Word, and the Word is the operation of the Spirit, and the Two are One (and the same).* Now John must mean One when he speaks of Him as “having been made flesh,” and the angel Another when he announces Him as “about to be born,” if the Spirit is not the Word, and the Word the Spirit. For just as the Word of God is not actually He whose Word He is, so also the Spirit (although He is called God) is not actually He whose Spirit He is said to be. Nothing which belongs to something else is actually the very same thing as that to which it belongs. Clearly, when anything proceeds from a personal subject, and so belongs to him, since it comes from him, it may possibly be such in quality exactly as the personal subject himself is from whom it proceeds, and to whom it belongs. And thus the Spirit is God, and the Word is God, because proceeding from God, but yet is not actually the very same as He from whom He proceeds. Now that which is God of God, although He is an actually existing thing, yet He cannot be God Himself (exclusively), but so far God as He is of the same substance as God Himself, and as being an actually existing thing, and as a portion of the Whole. Much more will ‘the power of the Highest’ not be the Highest Himself, because It is not an actually existing thing, as being Spirit — in the same way as the wisdom (of God) and the providence (of God) is not God: these attributes are not substances, but the accidents of the particular substance. Power is incidental to the Spirit, but cannot itself be the Spirit. These things, therefore, whatsoever they are — (I mean) the Spirit of God, and the Word and the Power — having been conferred on the Virgin, that which is born of her is the Son of God.”<sup>44</sup>

And again:

*“However, another refutation awaits them on this point of their heresy. See, say they, it was announced by the angel: ‘Therefore that Holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.’ Therefore, (they argue,) as it was the flesh that was born, it must be the flesh that is the Son of God. Nay, (I answer,) this is spoken concerning the Spirit of God. For it was certainly of the Holy Spirit that the virgin conceived; and that which He conceived, she brought forth. That, therefore, had to be born which was conceived and was to be brought forth; that is to say, the Spirit, whose ‘name should be called Emmanuel which, being interpreted, is, God with us.’ Besides, the flesh is not God, so that it could not have been said concerning it, ‘That Holy Thing shall be called the Son of God,’ but only that Divine Being who was born in the*

---

<sup>44</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxaes, ch. xxvi

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*flesh, of whom the psalm also says, ‘Since God became man in the midst of it, and established it by the will of the Father.’ Now what Divine Person was born in it? The Word, and the Spirit which became incarnate with the Word by the will of the Father. The Word, therefore, is incarnate; and this must be the point of our inquiry:”<sup>45</sup>*

And again:

*“Again, although denying His birth from such cohabitation, the passage<sup>46</sup> did not deny that He was born of real flesh; it rather affirmed this, by the very fact that it did not deny His birth in the flesh in the same way that it denied His birth from sexual intercourse. Pray, tell me, why the Spirit of God descended INTO a woman’s womb at all, if He did not do so for the purpose of partaking of flesh from the womb. For He could have become spiritual flesh without such a process, — much more simply, indeed, without the womb than in it. He had no reason for enclosing Himself within one, if He was to bear forth nothing from it. Not without reason, however, did He descend into a womb. Therefore He received (flesh) therefrom; else, if He received nothing therefrom, His descent into it would have been without a reason, especially if He meant to become flesh of that sort which was not derived from a womb, that is to say, a spiritual one.”<sup>47</sup>*

### **Tertullian, the latter years as a Montanist:**

After Tertullian became a strong proponent of Montanism’s “New Prophecy” and new age of the Paraclete, we find a dramatic shift in his view. He wrote explicitly of the Spirit as a third Person, and stated plainly that this was an “**addition**” to what the orthodox assemblies were teaching. Tertullian originated the term “Trinity” to refer to the “three Persons.”

As a convert to Montanism, Tertullian was eager to stamp out the oneness view that had been imported from Phrygia to Rome by Praxeas in opposition to Montanus. In it, Tertullian ridiculed the majority of Christians who rejected Montanus and the New Prophecy, calling them “carnally minded.” Tertullian was especially hostile to Praxeas because he was responsible for getting the bishop of Rome to reject Montanism after he had first given his blessing. Tertullian wrote:

*“For he [Praxeas] was the first to import into Rome from Asia this kind of heretical pravity, a man in other respects of restless disposition, and above all inflated with the pride of confessorship simply and solely because he had to bear for a short time the*

---

<sup>45</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. xxvii

<sup>46</sup> John 1:13

<sup>47</sup> Tertullian, On the Flesh of Christ, XIX

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*annoyance of a prison; on which occasion, even ‘if he had given his body to be burned, it would have profited him nothing,’ not having the love of God, whose very gifts he has resisted and destroyed. For after the Bishop of Rome had acknowledged the prophetic gifts of Montanus, Prisca, and Maximilla, and, in consequence of the acknowledgment, had bestowed his peace on the churches of Asia and Phrygia, he, by importunately urging false accusations against the prophets themselves and their churches, and insisting on the authority of the bishop’s predecessors in the see, compelled him to recall the pacific letter which he had issued, as well as to desist from his purpose of acknowledging the said gifts. By this Praxeas did a twofold service for the devil at Rome: he drove away prophecy, and he brought in heresy; he put to flight the Paraclete, and he crucified the Father.”<sup>48</sup>*

While Tertullian is the first of the early Church Fathers who clearly taught a three-Person “Trinity,” his view had little in common with what is called Trinitarianism today – three co-equal and co-eternal persons. Regarding the Father and Son, Tertullian’s view remained exactly the same as Barnabas’, Aristides’, Justin’s, Tatian’s and Theophilus’. The Father alone was the eternal God, unbegotten, self-sufficient, immortal, invisible, Almighty, the sole and supreme authority, the sole supreme Monarch of all creation. The Son was “begotten” as “the Beginning” of God’s acts in time on the first day of creation. Tertullian continued to express this crucial point unchanged in his “Trinitarian” (Montanist) work, *Against Praxeas*.

*“I am led to other arguments derived from God’s own dispensation, in which He existed before the creation of the world, up to the generation of the Son. For before all things God was alone – being in Himself and for Himself universe, and space, and all things. Moreover, He was alone, because there was nothing external to Him but Himself. Yet even not then was He alone; for He had with Him that which He possessed in Himself, that is to say, His own Reason. For God is rational, and Reason was first in Him; and so all things were from Himself. This Reason is His own Thought (or Consciousness) which the Greeks call ‘logos,’ by which term we also designate Word or Discourse and therefore it is now usual with our people, owing to the mere simple interpretation of the term, to say that the Word was in the beginning with God; although it would be more suitable to regard Reason as the more ancient; because God had not Word from the beginning, but He had Reason even before the beginning; because also Word itself consists of Reason, which it thus proves to have been the prior existence as being its own substance. Not that this distinction is of any practical moment. For although God had not yet sent out His Word, He still had Him within Himself, both in company with and included within His very Reason, as He silently planned and*

---

<sup>48</sup> Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, ch. i

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*arranged within Himself everything which He was afterwards about to utter through His Word. Now, whilst He was thus planning and arranging with His own Reason, He was actually causing that to become Word which He was dealing with in the way of Word or Discourse.”<sup>49</sup>*

**“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.”<sup>50</sup> 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;”<sup>51</sup> then afterward begotten, to carry all into effect — “When He prepared the heaven, I was present with Him.”<sup>52</sup> Thus does He make Him equal to Him: for by proceeding from Himself He became His first-begotten Son, because begotten before all things; and His only-begotten also, because alone begotten of God, in a way peculiar to Himself, from the womb of His own heart — even as the Father Himself testifies: “My heart,” says He, “hath emitted my most excellent Word.”<sup>53</sup> The Father took pleasure evermore in Him, who equally rejoiced with a reciprocal gladness in the Father’s presence: “Thou art my Son, today have I begotten Thee;”<sup>54</sup> even “Before the morning star did I beget Thee.”<sup>55</sup> The Son likewise acknowledges the Father, speaking in His own person, under the name of Wisdom: “The Lord formed Me as the beginning of His ways, with a view to His own works; before all the hills did He beget Me.”<sup>56</sup> For if indeed Wisdom in this passage seems to say that She was created by the Lord with a view to His works, and to accomplish His ways, yet proof is given in another Scripture that “all things were made by the Word, and without Him was there nothing made;”<sup>57</sup> as, again, in another place (it is said), “By His Word were the heavens established, and all the powers thereof by His Spirit”<sup>58</sup> — that is to say, by the Spirit (or Divine Nature) which was in the Word: thus is it evident that it is one and the same power which is in one place described under the name of Wisdom, and in another passage under the appellation of the Word,**

---

<sup>49</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. v

<sup>50</sup> Gen. 1:3

<sup>51</sup> Prov. 8:22-26 (cf. 1 Cor. 1:24,30)

<sup>52</sup> Prov. 8:27-31

<sup>53</sup> Psalm 45:1 LXX

<sup>54</sup> Notice that Psalm 2:7 was understood by Tertullian to refer to the begetting of the preincarnate Son, not to the incarnation through the womb of Mary.

<sup>55</sup> Psalm 110:3 LXX

<sup>56</sup> Prov. 8:22

<sup>57</sup> John 1:1-2

<sup>58</sup> Psalm 33:6 The Hebrew and LXX read, “by the breath of His mouth.”

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*which was initiated for the works of God which “strengthened the heavens;” “by which all things were made,” “and without which nothing was made.”<sup>59</sup>*

Here Tertullian speaks of the “*Spirit which was in the Word*” at the time of creation as a reference to the divine nature, divinity, or substance, as taught by the earlier writers. This is consistent with what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, “*God is Spirit.*”<sup>60</sup> It is apparent that Tertullian’s introduction of a “third Person” – the Holy Spirit – in this same work to form a “Trinity” does not mean he abandoned the previous ideas articulated by earlier writers and contained in his own earlier works, that the Father and Son shared “Spirit” between them as the divine essence or “*substratum.*” Rather, Tertullian began to speak of the “Spirit” of God in a second sense, as a distinct third Person, the “Helper,” as will be shown shortly. He maintained what he previously taught, but **added** to this a third Person called the “Holy Spirit.” Tertullian was careful not to contradict what Christians in general held to be true, as articulated by the earlier writers. Rather, the “New Prophecy” was thought by Tertullian to add new (previously unknown) revelation and nuance of understanding without explicitly contradicting previous revelation.

Tertullian then drew a clear distinction between the orthodox view concerning the Son and Praxaes’ oneness view.

*“But you will not allow Him to be really a substantive being, by having a substance of His own; in such a way that He may be regarded as an objective thing and a person, and so be able (as being constituted second to God the Father,) to make two, the Father and the Son, God and the Word. ... 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.”<sup>61</sup>*

That Tertullian did not view the Father and Son as co-equal and co-eternal persons is shown by the fact that the Father alone is the source of the generation of the preincarnate Son, a view consistent with earlier writers which Tertullian continued to hold as part of his proto-Trinitarianism.

*“I should not hesitate, indeed, to call the tree the son or offspring of the root, and the river of the fountain, and the ray of the sun; because every original source is a parent, and everything which issues from the origin is an offspring. Much more is (this true of) the*

---

<sup>59</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. vii

<sup>60</sup> John 4:24

<sup>61</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. vii

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*Word of God, who has actually received as His own peculiar designation the name of Son. But still the tree is not severed from the root, nor the river from the fountain, nor the ray from the sun; nor, indeed, is the Word separated from God. Following, therefore, the form of these analogies, I confess that I call God and His Word — the Father and His Son — two. For the root and the tree are distinctly two things, but correlatively joined; the fountain and the river are also two forms, but indivisible; so likewise the sun and the ray are two forms, but coherent ones. Everything which proceeds from something else must needs be second to that from which it proceeds, without being on that account separated.”<sup>62</sup>*

Thus, the Son was inferior to the Father because He owes His very existence and the source of His being to the One who preceded Him and gave Him existence. Again, Tertullian’s view **concerning the Son** remained absolutely unchanged after adopting Montanism, in harmony with the apostolic assemblies.

Tertullian even did a commendable job defending monotheism, showing why Scripture calls both the Father and the Son “Lord” and “God,” yet they should never be spoken of as two “Lords” or two “Gods,” since there is a single divine Monarchy. The Father is the sole authority of that Monarchy and the sole source for everything even though He delegates certain authority to His Son.

*“I will therefore not speak of gods at all, nor of lords, but I shall follow the Apostle; so that if the Father and the Son, are alike to be invoked, I shall call the Father “God,” and invoke Jesus Christ as “Lord.” But when Christ alone (is mentioned), I shall be able to call Him “God,” as the same Apostle says: “Of whom is Christ, who is over all, God blessed forever.” For I should give the name of “sun” even to a sunbeam, considered in itself; but if I were mentioning the sun from which the ray emanates, I certainly should at once withdraw the name of sun from the mere beam. For although I make not two suns, still I shall reckon both the sun and its ray to be as much two things and two forms of one undivided substance, as God and His Word, as the Father and the Son.”<sup>63</sup>*

Yet, while acknowledging two “Persons” in complete unity, the Son being completely subject to the supreme authority of His Father, it is extremely important to notice that in all these early writers monotheism is maintained exclusively by stressing the PRIORITY of the Father, the singular ultimate authority and source of everything. Thus, “one God” means **one divine Person who is the ultimate authority, self-sufficient, and the source**

---

<sup>62</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. viii

<sup>63</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. xiii

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

of everything else, even the source of His own Son’s existence and His authority. Tertullian defended this kind of monotheism against the perverted monotheism of Praxeas in the opening chapters of his essay, repeatedly referring to the one God as a singular “Monarchy” (from “mono” – one and “arche” – ruler). He then went on to show that a human monarchy is not disturbed at all if the monarch has a son who acts as his authorized agent and is given full authority to act on his behalf. Thus, the divine Monarchy (monotheism) is not disturbed by God’s begetting a Son that shared in His attributes. The oneness of the Monarchy – singular authority – is preserved because the Father is that sole authority, and His Son always acts in accordance with the Father’s will as His faithful Agent. In doing this, Tertullian showed why the modalism of Praxeas was a defective solution to a problem that did not exist.

On these points Tertullian remained totally consistent with the writers before him. However, the real effect of his embrace of Montanism’s “New Prophecy” began to take shape as Tertullian introduced something completely foreign to the Christian writings that preceded him.

*“Where, however, there is a second, there must be two; and where there is a third, there must be three. Now the Spirit indeed is third from God and the Son; just as the fruit of the tree is third from the root, or as the stream out of the river is third from the fountain, or as the apex of the ray is third from the sun. Nothing, however, is alien from that original source whence it derives its own properties. In like manner the Trinity, flowing down from the Father through intertwined and connected steps, does not at all disturb the Monarchy, whilst it at the same time guards the state of the Economy. Bear always in mind that this is the rule of faith which I profess; by it I testify that the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit are inseparable from each other, and so will you know in what sense this is said. Now, observe, my assertion is that the Father is one, and the Son one, and the Spirit one, and that They are distinct from Each Other.”<sup>64</sup>*

Tertullian’s later writings are the first clear reference to the Spirit as a distinct Person. Notice that this “rule” is not said to be handed down from Apostolic times, but was Tertullian’s “rule” after adopting Montanism’s “Paraclete.” Tertullian continues:

*“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. Happily the Lord Himself employs this expression of the person of the Paraclete, so as to signify not a division or severance, but a disposition (of mutual*

---

<sup>64</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. viii

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*relations in the Godhead); for He says, “I will pray the Father, and He shall send you another Comforter .... even the Spirit of truth,” thus making the Paraclete distinct from Himself, even as we say that the Son is also distinct from the Father; so that He showed a third degree in the Paraclete, as we believe the second degree is in the Son, by reason of the order observed in the Economy.”<sup>65</sup>*

In Tertullian’s subordinate Trinity the Father alone was the supreme authority and the source of the Son and the Spirit. The Son was inferior to the Father and subject to Him. The Spirit was inferior to the Son and subject to Him. Both the Son and the Spirit were subject to the Father in all things, thus maintaining the “Monarchy” (one God and supreme sovereign).

The third Person concept in Tertullian’s thinking came from Montanism’s entirely new interpretation of the “Paraclete” in John 14-16. This was the primary source for Tertullian’s redefining the Godhead as three distinct Persons – a Trinity. Tertullian went on to repeatedly ascribe unique personhood to the Spirit (apart from the Son), writing:

*“Observe also the Spirit speaking of the Father and the Son, in the character of a third Person.”<sup>66</sup> “Nay, it was because He had already His Son close at His side, as a second Person, His own Word, and a third Person also, the Spirit in the Word, that He purposely adopted the plural phrase, ‘Let us make;’ and, ‘in our image;’ and, ‘become as one of us.’”<sup>67</sup>*

Tertullian became quite bold in defining his new “Trinity” of three Persons. “... while the mystery of the dispensation is still guarded, which distributes the Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three Persons — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost:”<sup>68</sup>

Because of the disagreement with the orthodox congregations concerning the New Prophecy and the alleged personhood of the Paraclete, Tertullian preferred to associate himself only with Montanist congregations by withdrawing from the majority of congregations which rejected the New Prophecy and its third divine Person. He writes:

*“We indeed, on our part, subsequently withdrew from the carnally-minded on our acknowledgment and maintenance of the Paraclete.”<sup>69</sup>*

---

<sup>65</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. ix

<sup>66</sup> Against Praxeas, ch. xi.

<sup>67</sup> Against Praxeas, ch. xii.

<sup>68</sup> Against Praxeas, ch. ii

<sup>69</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. i

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

This statement shows both that the Montanists and their assemblies acknowledged the Paraclete as a third Person, but also that other assemblies did not since he withdrew from fellowship with them. The corruption of Tertullian’s brilliant mind by Montanist sympathies caused him to reject the congregations founded by the Apostles themselves, calling them “carnally minded” because they did not accept the New Prophecy and his view of the Paraclete.

In his later writings, Tertullian liked to refer to the Christians in the assemblies that rejected the New Prophecy as “Psychics” (carnal) but to those who aligned themselves with the New Prophecy as “Spiritual,” appealing to Paul’s terminology of the flesh striving against the spirit. For example, in his book on monogamy, Tertullian spoke of the rigorous piety of the Montanist congregations regarding marriage in contrast to the orthodox assemblies. The Montanists offered a more rigorous “piety” than did Jesus Himself. While Jesus and Paul held up monogamy as the highest ideal, both allowed for divorce and second marriages under certain circumstances. However, consistent with the idea that the third age, that of the Paraclete, had a higher standard than Jesus and His Apostles which was necessary to inherit the Kingdom of God. Thus, Tertullian ridiculed the apostolic assemblies on the grounds that they allowed certain second marriages, those who divorced due to infidelity, and widows.

*“Heretics do away with marriages; **Psychics accumulate them.** The former many not even once; the latter not only once. **Among us, however, whom the recognition of spiritual gifts entitles to be deservedly called ‘Spiritual,’** continence is as religious as license is modest; since both the one and the other are in harmony with the Creator. Continence honors the law of marriage, license tempers it; the former is not forced, the latter is regulated; the former recognizes the power of free choice, the latter recognizes a limit. **We admit one marriage, just as we do one God.** The law of marriage reaps an accession of honor where it is associated with shamefastness. **But to the Psychics, since they receive not the Spirit, the things which are the Spirit’s are not pleasing.** Thus, so long as the things which are the Spirit’s please them not, the things which are of the flesh will please, as being the contraries of the Spirit.”<sup>70</sup>*

This illustrates the appeal of Montanism to those seeking a more rigorous form of piety than what was preached in the apostolic assemblies. And this extreme form of piety and asceticism was linked to the New Prophecy. The apostolic assemblies were ridiculed by Tertullian as “Psychics” (carnal), claiming that “they receive not the Spirit” because they rejected the third Person concept of the Paraclete and the third age.

---

<sup>70</sup> Tertullian, On Monogamy, ch.

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

Tertullian talked out of both sides of his mouth. He claimed to staunchly follow and defend apostolic tradition.<sup>71</sup> And in certain respects he was an excellent apologist. Yet at the same time his adoption of the New Prophecy meant that he was willing to **add** to what had been preserved from apostolic tradition. His willingness to accept continued divine revelation after the Apostles through the New Prophecy appears throughout his later writings.

His acceptance of post-apostolic divine revelation after the Apostles proves that he believed the Old and New Testaments were not sufficient, that the Apostles themselves did not have the benefit of the later revelations contained in the New Prophecy. Other Christian writers, such as Clement<sup>72</sup> of Rome and Irenaeus,<sup>73</sup> taught that the Apostolic Faith had been completely settled by the Apostles, and that the role of the Christian assemblies was to defend the established Apostolic Christian Faith, adding nothing to it. Jesus’ promise of further revelation through the Paraclete was understood to have been completely fulfilled beginning with Pentecost, through God’s Spirit progressively teaching and guiding the Apostles themselves until their deaths. These men had, before their deaths, deposited and entrusted “*the Faith once for all delivered to the saints*”<sup>74</sup> to the ordained elders in the local assemblies both orally and through their written epistles. The last Apostle, John, relayed a warning from Jesus Himself not to add to the prophecy contained in the last book of the Bible.<sup>75</sup>

Yet Tertullian stated plainly that the Christian Faith was not mature, not fully understood through the ministry of the Apostles. Only with the arrival of the Paraclete through the New Prophecy of Montanus was Christianity becoming “mature” according to Tertullian.

*“The rule of faith, indeed, is altogether one, alone immovable 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). This law of faith being constant, the other succeeding points of discipline and conversation admit the “novelty” of correction; the grace of God, to wit, operating and advancing even to the end. For what kind of (supposition) is it, that, **while***

---

<sup>71</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. ii

<sup>72</sup> Clement of Rome, Epistle to the Corinthians, ch. xlii; ch. xlv;

<sup>73</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. I, ch. X; Bk. III, ch. iii-vi; ch. xii; Bk. V, preface; ch. xxxiii

<sup>74</sup> Jude 1:3

<sup>75</sup> Rev. 22:18-19

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*the devil is always operating and adding daily to the ingenuities of iniquity, the work of God should either have ceased, or else have desisted from advancing?* Whereas the reason why the Lord sent the Paraclete was, that, since human mediocrity was unable to take in all things at once, discipline should, little by little, be directed, and ordained, and carried on to perfection, by that Vicar of the Lord, the Holy Spirit. ‘Still,’ He said, ‘I have many things to say to you, but ye are not yet able to bear them: when that Spirit of truth shall have come, He will conduct you into all truth, and will report to you the supervening (things).’ But above, withal, He made a declaration concerning this His work. What, then, is the Paraclete’s administrative office but this: the direction of discipline, the revelation of the Scriptures, the reformation of the intellect, the advancement toward the “better things?” Nothing is without stages of growth: all things await their season. In short, the preacher says, “A time to everything.” Look how creation itself advances little by little to fructification. First comes the grain, and from the grain arises the shoot, and from the shoot struggles out the shrub: thereafter boughs and leaves gather strength, and the whole that we call a tree expands: then follows the swelling of the germen, and from the germen bursts the flower, and from the flower the fruit opens: that fruit itself, rude for a while, and unshapely, little by little, keeping the straight course of its development, is trained to the mellowness of its flavor. So, too, righteousness — for the God of righteousness and of creation is the same — was first in a rudimentary state, having a natural fear of God: from that stage it advanced, through the Law and the Prophets, to infancy; from that stage it passed, through the Gospel, to the fervor of youth: now, through the Paraclete, it is settling into maturity. He will be, after Christ, the only one to be called and revered as Master; for He speaks not from Himself, but what is commanded by Christ. He is the only prelate, because He alone succeeds Christ. They who have received Him set truth before custom. They who have heard Him prophesying even to the present time, not of old, bid virgins be wholly covered.”<sup>76</sup>

Tertullian’s words above might seem to an average modern Trinitarian to be perfectly fine unless he understands that he was speaking about the Paraclete’s alleged prophesying exclusively through the Montanist prophets several decades after the close of the Apostolic age. Tertullian believed that the work of the Paraclete in clearly defining Christian doctrine was not accomplished through the Apostles’ ministries, but was being brought to completion after their deaths in the latter half of the second century through the New Prophecy.

---

<sup>76</sup> Tertullian, On the Veiling of Virgins, ch. i

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

Tertullian acknowledged that his new Trinitarian (third Person) understanding was a direct result of further revelation through the New Prophecy of Montanus allegedly shedding new light, fuller understanding of God of which the Apostles themselves were ignorant.

*“We, however, as we indeed always have done and more especially since we have been better instructed by the Paraclete, who leads men indeed into all truth, believe that there is one only God, but under the following dispensation, ‘οικονομια’ as it is called, that this one only God has also a Son, His Word, ... who sent also from heaven from the Father, according to His own promise, the Holy Ghost, the Paraclete, the sanctifier of the faith of those who believe in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Ghost.”<sup>77</sup>*

Again, Tertullian claimed that the Montanists were Trinitarians because “the New Prophecy” included the revelation of the alleged third Person.

*“Meanwhile He [Christ] has received from the Father the promised gift, and has shed it forth, even the Holy Spirit – the Third Name in the Godhead, and the Third Degree of the Divine Majesty; the Declarer of the One Monarchy of God, but at the same time the Interpreter of the Economy, to everyone who hears and receives the words of the New Prophecy; and “the Leader into all truth,” such as is in the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, according to the mystery of the doctrine of Christ.”<sup>78</sup>*

Thus, the addition of a third Person to the divine Monarchy forming a Trinity was not the result of carefully handling the Scriptures of the Prophets and of the Apostles. It was not derived from apostolic tradition, but was a reinterpretation of the Scriptures (particularly John 14-16) as viewed through the lens of the New Prophecy. The spirit speaking through Montanus became “the Interpreter of the Economy [the Godhead as a Trinity] to everyone who hears the words of the New Prophecy.”

Tertullian advanced some good arguments against Praxeas to show that the Father and the Son were two distinct persons. For example, he appealed to Psalm 2, “You are My Son, today I have begotten you,” arguing that the Father spoke to the Son as a distinct person from Himself.<sup>79</sup> He offered several other similar examples of the Father addressing the Son, and the Son addressing the Father, thus proving two Persons in

---

<sup>77</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. ii

<sup>78</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. xxx

<sup>79</sup> Against Praxeas, ch. xi

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

opposition to Praxaeus’ Modalism. Yet, when he attempted to do the same with the Holy Spirit, his arguments all break down. Here is his attempt:

*“Observe also the Spirit speaking of the Father and the Son, in the character of a third Person: “The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit Thou on my right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool.” Likewise in the words of Isaiah: “Thus saith the Lord to the Lord mine Anointed.” Likewise, in the same prophet, He says to the Father respecting the Son: “Lord, who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? We brought a report concerning Him, as if He were a little child, as if He were a root in a dry ground, who had no form nor comeliness.” These are a few testimonies out of many; for we do not pretend to bring up all the passages of Scripture, because we have a tolerably large accumulation of them in the various heads of our subject, as we in our several chapters call them in as our witnesses in the fullness of their dignity and authority. Still, in these few quotations the distinction of Persons in the Trinity is clearly set forth. For there is the Spirit Himself who speaks, and the Father to whom He speaks, and the Son of whom He speaks. In the same manner, the other passages also establish each one of several Persons in His special character — addressed as they in some cases are to the Father or to the Son respecting the Son, in other cases to the Son or to the Father concerning the Father, and again in other instances to the (Holy) Spirit.”<sup>80</sup>*

Tertullian’s glaring error in the above quotations amounts to circular reasoning. He assumed that the “Spirit” which inspired the prophets to write these words was a Person distinct from the Father Himself, and that the prophecies were from the perspective of this supposed third Person. Yet in each case, the words are those of the human prophet speaking from his own perspective. That is, the personality involved is that of the prophet alone. Yes, the words were inspired by God through the Spirit of God. But the personage behind the words, and the perspective of the writer, is that of the prophet himself who was given divine revelation, not of a third divine Person.

Tertullian made the mistake of assuming that the kind of prophesying that Montanus did (God allegedly taking over the mouth of the prophet, and speaking from His own perspective in the first person) was the norm for the Old Testament prophets. That was a fatal mistake on his part. That the prophets spoke **from their own person and perspective** what had been revealed to them can be proven conclusively by Peter’s interpretation of David’s words in Psalm 16.

---

<sup>80</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, xi

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

Acts 2:29-31

29 “Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, 31 he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption.”

It is clear from Peter’s words that David spoke from his own knowledge, from his own perspective, even though the knowledge he had was supernatural. Similarly, in citing Psalm 110:1, “The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool,’” Tertullian’s point was that this was spoken from the perspective of a third Person of the Trinity, speaking about the other two persons of the Trinity. That is, the third Person of the Trinity said Himself, “the LORD [the Father] said to MY Lord [the Son who is allegedly “Lord” of the Holy Spirit third Person], ‘Sit at My right hand ...’”. This makes the Son the “Lord” of the Holy Spirit. That is, the Spirit called God’s Son “My Lord.” But even the staunchest Trinitarian today recognizes that this Psalm was written from David’s perspective. That is David called the Son his “Lord,” even though Jesus was to be David’s Son. Jesus Himself confirmed this.

Luke 20:41-44

41 And He said to them, “How can they say that the Christ is the Son of David? 42 Now David himself said in the Book of Psalms: ‘The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, 43 Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’” 44 Therefore David calls Him ‘Lord’; how is He then his Son?”

Jesus said that in this passage David called the Son his “Lord.” But Tertullian argued that it was a third Person (Paraclete) who called the Son his “Lord.” Tertullian was a brilliant writer. And in many things he was a good apologist for apostolic Christianity. But, his whole-hearted acceptance of Montanism’s New Prophecy infected his mind. In defending it, he used very crafty arguments that on the surface seemed logical yet disguised subtle sleight of hand. He began to see his “Paraclete” speaking as a distinct Person in passages of Scripture where no such third Person existed.

In Tertullian’s mind, Christians who rejected the New Prophecy (which constituted the vast majority of Christian assemblies including those founded by the Apostles) were “simple” and “carnally minded.” His writings are peppered with sarcasm and advice for Christians to accept the New Prophecy.

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*“He has accordingly now dispersed all the perplexities of the past, and their self-chosen allegories and parables, by the open and perspicuous explanation of the entire mystery, through the New Prophecy, which descends in copious streams from the Paraclete. If you will only draw water from His fountains, you will never thirst for other doctrine.”<sup>81</sup>*

Again, Tertullian stated plainly that the doctrine of the Trinity (including a third divine Person) came directly from the Montanist teachings, that the third Person was **an addition** to what had previously been considered orthodox.

*“For we, who by the grace of God possess an insight into both the times and the occasions of the Sacred Writings, especially we who are followers of the Paraclete, not of human teachers, do indeed definitively declare that Two Beings are God, the Father and the Son, and, with the addition of the Holy Spirit, even Three, according to the principle of the divine economy.”*

Tertullian acknowledged that in Old Testament times there was no such revelation concerning a third Person.

*“[N]ot as if it were untrue that the Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, and each is God; but because in earlier times Two were actually spoken of as God, and two as Lord, that when Christ should come He might be both acknowledged as God and designated as Lord, being the Son of Him who is both God and Lord.”<sup>82</sup>*

For Tertullian, God was known through the Old Testament Scriptures, but the “Son” was made known in cloaked language so that when He came in Person, the supernatural nature of His origin could be recognized. Likewise, he applied this to the Paraclete, that only through Jesus’ prophecies of the coming of the Paraclete would Christians discover (when He arrived) that there was a “third Person” in the Godhead. In this way the Montanists and Tertullian excused the fact that the Apostles themselves had revealed no such thing as a third Person in the assemblies they founded.

It is evident that the evolution of the Godhead in early Christian theology is directly linked to the concept of further divine revelation after the ministry of the Apostles. This was contrary to the earlier writers who insisted that the Faith delivered to the saints by

---

<sup>81</sup> Tertullian, On the Resurrection of the Flesh, ch. lxiii

<sup>82</sup> Tertullian, Against Praxeas, ch. xiii

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

the Apostles was the fixed and final form of Christianity, meant to be preserved unchanged by the local assemblies until Christ returns.

### Tertullian as the source of “Hypostatic Union”

There was a second impure seed in the mind of Tertullian which came from Greek philosophical presuppositions. This seed eventually grew beyond Tertullian, was cultivated by Origen, and eventually became the foundation of the later Roman Catholic doctrine of “Hypostatic Union.” This is the illogical theory that Jesus Christ was fully “God” and fully “Man” at the same time, having two natures that are mutually exclusive.

In contemporary Greek philosophical thinking there was a debate among the followers of Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, and others concerning the nature of the creation in general and matter in particular. One primary question was whether the material creation always existed or whether it had a beginning, and whether the underlying matter was eternal. The Stoics claimed that matter, the raw material of the universe, always existed and was eternal. Plato, and the Gnostics who followed his philosophy, claimed that matter itself was evil, and was created by a defective god. The debate turned on the concept of “change” and “motion.” Since the physical universe and everything in it is obviously subject to change and thus decay, it was argued by some that it must have a beginning, and that everything changeable has a beginning and cannot be eternal. Below is Tertullian’s argument against Hermogenes, who had adopted some of these concepts, claiming that matter was eternal, always existing along with God Himself.

*“But bear in mind that Matter has once for all been determined to be eternal, as being unmade, unborn, and therefore supposedly of an unchangeable and incorruptible nature; and this from the very opinion of Hermogenes himself, which he alleges against us when he denies that God was able to make (anything) of Himself, on the ground that what is eternal is incapable of change, because it would lose — so the opinion runs — what it once was, in becoming by the change that which it was not, if it were not eternal. But as for the Lord, who is also eternal, (he maintained) that He could not be anything else than what He always is. Well, then, I will adopt this definite opinion of his, and by means thereof refute him. I blame Matter with a like censure, because out of it, evil though it be — nay, very evil — good things have been created, nay, “very good” ones: “And God saw that they were good, and God blessed them” — because, of course, of their very great goodness; certainly not because they were evil, or very evil. Change is therefore admissible in Matter; and this being the case, it has lost its condition of eternity; in short, its beauty is decayed in death. Eternity, however, cannot be lost, because it cannot be eternity, except by reason of its immunity from loss. For the same*

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*reason also it is incapable of change, inasmuch as, since it is eternity, it can by no means be changed.*<sup>83</sup>

Within this philosophical climate Christians seized upon this kind of speculation as an opportunity to argue that the creation is changing, thus it had a beginning, and the first cause was the God of the Bible. But by adopting this without qualification, it also implied that since God is eternal, having no beginning, God (His essence) cannot be subject to change in any sense.

Adopting this concept created a problem with John’s claim that *“the Word became flesh.”* If so, and if the Son was also “God,” of the same essence as His Father, then “God” (being eternal) would be subject to change and could therefore not be eternal. Certain Scriptures were employed to support this claim including Malachi 3:6 *“For I am the LORD, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.”*<sup>84</sup> This was a very big problem for Christian theologians within the Greek culture. They had two possible solutions they could argue for: (a) challenge the widely accepted philosophy that “change” necessarily precludes eternity concerning God Himself, since His inherent nature cannot be judged by material substance, or (b) argue that the “change” involved in the Son of God becoming flesh was not really “change” but rather His ADDING flesh to what He already was, with nothing of His essence or Person being diminished in the process. Tertullian first acknowledged the Greek philosophical principle.

*“Without doubt, the nature of things which are subject to change is regulated by this law, that they have no permanence in the state which is undergoing change in them, and that they come to an end from thus wanting permanence, whilst they lose that in the process of change which they previously were.”*<sup>85</sup>

He then attempted to argue that this principle does not apply to God Himself.

*“But nothing is equal with God; His nature is different from the condition of all things. If, then, the things which differ from God, and from which God differs, lose what existence they had whilst they are undergoing change, wherein will consist the difference of the Divine Being from all other things except in His possessing the contrary faculty of theirs, — in other words, that God can be changed into all conditions, and yet continue*

---

<sup>83</sup> Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes*, ch. xii

<sup>84</sup> This passage actually refers to God’s faithfulness to keep His covenants, not to a philosophical question concerning His substance or essence.

<sup>85</sup> Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, ch. III

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*just as He is? On any other supposition, He would be on the, same level with those things which, when changed, lose the existence they had before.”<sup>86</sup>*

However, in reality, Tertullian then conceded the point, and in fact argued that when the Son of God became Man He did not lose anything of His previous existence. He continues as follows:

*“You have sometimes read and believed that the Creator’s angels have been changed into human form, and have even borne about so veritable a body, that Abraham even washed their feet, and Lot was rescued from the Sodomites by their hands; an angel, moreover, wrestled with a man so strenuously with his body, that the latter desired to be let loose, so tightly was he held. Has it, then, been permitted to angels, which are inferior to God, after they have been changed into human bodily form, nevertheless to remain angels? And will you deprive God, their superior, of this faculty, as if **Christ could not continue to be God after His real assumption of the nature of man?** Or else, did those angels appear as phantoms of flesh? You will not, however, have the courage to say this; for if it be so held in your belief, that the Creator’s angels are in the same condition as Christ, then Christ will belong to the same God as those angels do, who are like Christ in their condition. If you had not purposely rejected in some instances, and corrupter in others, the Scriptures which are opposed to your opinion, you would have been confuted in this matter by the Gospel of John, when it declares that the Spirit descended in the body of a dove, and sat upon the Lord. When the said Spirit was in this condition, He was as truly a dove as He was also a spirit; nor did He destroy His own proper substance by **the assumption of an extraneous substance.** But you ask what becomes of the dove’s body, after the return of the Spirit back to heaven, and similarly in the case of the angels. **Their withdrawal was effected in the same manner as their appearance had been. If you had seen how their production out of nothing had been effected, you would have known also the process of their return to nothing.** If the initial step was out of sight, so was also the final one. Still there was solidity in their bodily substance, whatever may have been the force by which the body became visible. What is written cannot but have been.”<sup>87</sup>*

The careful reader should notice that in this last paragraph Tertullian was making a major concession to Marcion and his Gnostic dualism. He was actually arguing that Christ’s humanity was only a temporary condition of His assuming flesh, while in reality underneath He remained unchanged regarding what He actually was.

---

<sup>86</sup> ibid

<sup>87</sup> ibid

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

Furthermore, by using this argument to validate his view of Christ, he was implying that in the ascension Christ’s human form and nature vanished into nothing as He shed His temporary shell. This is in direct opposition to John’s statement that Logos “became flesh”<sup>88</sup> (not assumed flesh), and Paul’s statement that Christ was formerly “in the form of God” but then “emptied Himself” in order to come “in the likeness of men,”<sup>89</sup> and that “in all things He had to be made like His brethren,”<sup>90</sup> and John’s statement that Jesus Christ “has come [perfect tense]<sup>91</sup> in the flesh,”<sup>92</sup> and Peter’s statement that the same “flesh” from the seed of David must sit upon the Throne of David in order to fulfill the Davidic Covenant.<sup>93</sup> Finally, many Scriptures refer to the second coming of Christ as the coming of the “Son of Man,” indicating His humanity. At His ascension in the flesh, the angels said “this same Jesus” would come again in like manner.<sup>94</sup>

Tertullian’s “two nature” Christ was no doubt spawned by a mental concession to Platonism’s dualism regarding the nature of man, as a spirit/ghost imprisoned by a material flesh body. With this presupposition, it was merely a baby-step to have Christ merely assuming a flesh body as a covering rather than “become flesh.”

### **Tertullian’s use of the word “God” in reference to Substance**

Tertullian also made a critical mistake concerning the meaning of the word “God” which colored how he interpreted certain passages, such as John’s prologue. The word “God” as used in the Bible in both Hebrew and Greek is a relational term. It refers to one who is the sole Sovereign over a dominion, as does the word “king” or “master.” It describes His relationship to that dominion. However, Tertullian began to define the term “God” as referring to “kind,” the divine substance or essence which possessed certain impersonal qualities such as immutability or immortality.

*“He [Hermogenes] adds also another point: that as God was always God, there was never a time when God was not also Lord. But it was in no way possible for Him to be regarded as always Lord, in the same manner as He had been always God, if there had not been always, in the previous eternity, a something of which He could be regarded as evermore the Lord. So he concludes that God always had Matter co-existent with Himself as the Lord thereof. Now, this tissue of his I shall at once hasten to pull abroad. I have been*

---

<sup>88</sup> John 1:14

<sup>89</sup> Phil. 2:5-8

<sup>90</sup> Heb. 2:17

<sup>91</sup> The perfect tense requires that Jesus Christ must still be “in the flesh” when John wrote this decades after Jesus’ ascension.

<sup>92</sup> 1 John 4:2-3

<sup>93</sup> Acts 2:30

<sup>94</sup> Acts 1:11

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

*willing to set it out in form to this length, for the information of those who are unacquainted with the subject, that they may know that his other arguments likewise need only be understood to be refuted. **We affirm, then, that the name of God always existed with Himself and in Himself** – but not eternally so the Lord. Because the condition of the one is not the same as that of the other. **God is the designation of the substance itself, that is, of the Divinity; but Lord is (the name) not of substance, but of power. I maintain that the substance existed always with its own name, which is God;** the title Lord was afterwards added, as the indication indeed of something accruing. For from the moment when those things began to exist, over which the power of a Lord was to act, God, by the accession of that power, both became Lord and received the name thereof.”<sup>95</sup>*

Tertullian was wrong as any honest examination of the Scriptures will show. The term “God” in Scripture is not only applied to the God of Israel, but also to the pagan deities and even to the rulers of Israel.<sup>96</sup> These did not possess the impersonal properties of God, and are not of the same substance or essence as God. Also, the term “God” is frequently used in a relational way, such as “*the God of Abraham,*” or “*the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Just as “Father” describes a personal relationship, so also does the term “God,” meaning sole Sovereign over a dominion. This understanding makes perfect sense in every occurrence of the term in the Bible. But Tertullian’s definition creates a host of absurdities in various texts. He and later writers used Tertullian’s definition in order to argue for Christ being of the same substance or essence as the Father, since He is also called “God” occasionally. Yet, applying the same logic to the pagan “gods” completely backfires. Furthermore, Jesus prayer to His Father referring to Him as “*the only true God*”<sup>97</sup> and Paul’s statement that “*for us there is one God, the Father, ... and one Master, Jesus Christ,*”<sup>98</sup> and Paul’s statement, “*for there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,*”<sup>99</sup> cannot work in Tertullian’s definition of the word “God.” And his early but faulty definition of “God” is at the core of much of the error of both Unitarianism and Trinitarianism.

Thus Tertullian’s errors and departure from the Apostolic tradition involved two major influences: (a) his concession to Montanism’s “New Prophecy” which came from a dubious source to say the least, and (b) his own unconscious concessions to Greek philosophy. These two influences caused Tertullian to depart from pristine Christian

---

<sup>95</sup> Tertullian, Against Hermogenes, ch. iii

<sup>96</sup> Psalm 82:1,6; John 10:34-36

<sup>97</sup> John 17:3

<sup>98</sup> 1 Cor. 8:8

<sup>99</sup> 1 Tim. 2:5

## The Evolution of God – His “Spirit” becomes a Person

---

Monotheism on three major points: (a) the personification of the Breath of God as a third Person creating a Trinity, and (b) the claim that the Son of God was merely cloaked in flesh rather than becoming flesh, and (c) redefining the term “God” to be an impersonal substance instead of a personal, relational term. All three of these errors are at the root of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Trinity that was eventually codified in the Roman Catholic creeds.

In the later decades of the second century there were three major divisions among “Christians” (excluding the Gnostic sects) concerning the Godhead:

- **Pristine Christian Monotheism:** The earliest view articulated by Barnabas, Aristides, Justin, Tatian, Theophilus, and Tertullian (before he adopted Montanism), that there is one eternal, unbegotten, uncreated, God who is the source of all that exists. That He begat a “Son” from His own essence (of Spirit) who then became a mediator between Himself and mankind. He also extended Himself in power into the creation as “Spirit.”
- **Modalism:** The oneness view of Praxeas, Noetus, and Sabellius – one eternal, unbegotten, uncreated, God who has interacted with creation and humanity through limited manifestations of Himself as “Spirit” and “Son.”
- **Subordinate Trinitarianism:** The Montanist view which included a third Person, systematized and popularized by Tertullian, with the addition of his dualistic nature and temporary humanity for Christ (hypostatic union).