



ANCIENT CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

1

We Believe
in One God

EDITED BY
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INTRODUCTION TO
ANCIENT CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

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The Ancient Christian Doctrine series continues the tradition of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture and follows up on this acclaimed series by providing patristic commentary on the Nicene Creed. The series renders primary Greek, Latin, Coptic and Syriac source material from the church fathers in lucid English translation (some here for the first time) and gives readers unparalleled insight into the history and substance of what the early church believed.

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- A growing recognition of the social relevance of classic Christian teaching and the hazards of ignoring it
- Deepening demoralization about the practical moral outcomes of supposedly scientific biblical criticism
- A dawning recognition that the ancient doctrinal consensus is already shared inwardly and actively by Christians of all continents and of vastly different times and places

In this series we are mining the prized ore of these early Christian intellectual labors. The ancient Nicene text is the most convenient and reliable basis for

holding together the whole fabric of early Christian teaching. Under each creedal phrase we present the most crucial doctrinal passages of key consensual interpreters of the early Christian centuries. A wide range of major issues of early Christian theology may be set forth as a phrase-by-phrase commentary on the Nicene Creed (The Creed of Nicaea, A.D. 325, The Constantinopolitan Creed of the 150 Fathers, A.D. 381). Therefore, the importance of the Creed and our purposes for the series can be set forth under nine headings:

1. explaining why early Christian teaching (*catechesis*) was so firmly linked with baptism
2. recalling the terrible risks of saying “credo” under violent conditions of *persecution* during the perilous times when the creedal affirmations were being tested and refined
3. showing why the Nicene Creed remains the most *authoritative* common confession of worldwide Christianity
4. setting forth the *triune* order of all basic Christian teaching
5. elucidating the basic *unity* of Christian teaching of one Lord, one faith, one baptism during this period of exponential growth
6. showing how the *new* ecumenism is today being nourished and renewed by the *ancient* ecumenical consensus
7. accounting for the widespread *readiness* of ordinary believers today to be reintroduced to basic Christian teaching
8. clarifying the criteria for editorial *selection* and dynamic equivalency translation
9. showing how nonprofessional readers might best *benefit* from this ancient wisdom

Christianity’s rich doctrinal treasures are gathered here, examined and organized as a commentary on the most respected doctrinal confession of the early church. This collection itself reflects a lively ecumenical happening. Under this classic textual umbrella, it brings together Christians who have long distanced themselves from each other by competing historical memories. These texts welcome the gathering together of traditional Catholics with Protestant evangelicals and Eastern Orthodox with Pentecostals. All of these disparate modern communities have an equal right to appeal to the earliest apostolic traditions of teaching. All of these communions can, without a sacrifice of intellect, draw modestly together to listen to the same texts common to them all: Scripture and the earliest interpreters of Scripture. These classic texts have decisively shaped every contour of the subsequent history of doctrine in global Christianity.

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WE BELIEVE IN ONE GOD

WE BELIEVE

πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεόν	<i>Credo in unum Deum</i>	<i>We believe in one God,</i>
πατέρα, παντοκράτορα,	<i>Patrem omnipotentem;</i>	<i>the Father, the Almighty,</i>
ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς,	<i>factorem coeli et terrae,</i>	<i>maker of heaven and earth,</i>
ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀοράτων.	<i>visibilia omnium et invisibilia.</i>	<i>of all that is, seen and unseen.</i>

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: It was the general belief of the church fathers, which they articulated with great force from the second century onwards, that the apostles of Jesus had left their teaching in the form of letters and memoirs. They had either sent these to, or deposited them with, the churches that they themselves founded. Those churches were therefore recognized by all as the guardians of that apostolic faith, which quickly came to be summarized in the shape of a rule. This rule did not have a fixed form at first, but it was structured according to a trinitarian pattern, and all members of the church were expected to subscribe to it. The evidence suggests that this was done publicly at baptism, but it may have been repeated periodically at other times.

The church differed from other religious and philosophical groups in that it had a precise form of teaching, which was enshrined in holy Scripture, particularly in the canonical books of the New Testament. This clarity and precision was trumpeted as a great blessing to church members, not least because possession of the written gospel made it possible for them to distinguish true from false doctrine. In a world where Christian teachings were unfamiliar and often went against commonly

received ideas, errors and corruptions were probably inevitable, and the leaders of the church were constantly trying to protect its members from distortions.

The early Christians accepted that God spoke to people through the natural order, but they did not rate this very highly because it had failed to convert pagans to the truth. Only the Scriptures were capable of doing this. The Jews of the Old Testament who had believed the teaching of Scripture were saved in Christ, even though they had no direct knowledge of him. Since the coming of Jesus, however, conscious belief in him was essential for salvation, and this was the unanimous teaching of the New Testament. By the middle of the second century, it was generally accepted that there were four authentic Gospels, which lost none of their divine authority for being slightly different from one another in form and content. The Pauline corpus was also accepted as canonical, along with the epistle to the Hebrews, although there were some who questioned this last book because it did not appear to come from the apostle Paul.

The early Christians were uncertain whether to ascribe 2 and 3 John to the author of the Gospel that bears his name (as well as of 1

John), and there were also doubts expressed about the Johannine authorship of the book of Revelation. The Petrine corpus was regarded as being especially complex, because there was so much that circulated under the name of Peter but was clearly inauthentic. Only his first epistle was universally recognized as genuine, though the second one was gradually admitted to the canon as time went on. Some also questioned Jude, though it was eventually included in the canon as well. The reason for these doubts was that the apostolic origins of these books were uncertain, and it was universally agreed that only apostolic writings could form part of the New Testament. This meant that no new books could be written once the apostles had died, and after about 200 it was generally accepted that there were no books of genuinely apostolic origin that were still waiting to be discovered. Even before that time, Irenaeus and others had insisted that the church already possessed the fullness of the apostles' teaching, so that there was no secret doctrine of theirs that was still waiting to be revealed.

The ancient church never admitted any doctrinal authority other than that of holy Scripture. The role of the bishops and clergy was to protect and expound the sacred texts correctly, and the great councils of the church were called to pronounce on what the authentic biblical message was whenever controversies about it arose. There was no sign that any individual bishop or small group of bishops had the authority to make definitive pronouncements on matters of doctrine, something that could be done only by a council of all the bishops. Even after that, their statements were submitted to the judgment of the church as a whole, and only those that were found to be in agreement with the teaching of Scripture were retained as authoritative.

The Fathers were reluctant to grant authority to any nonbiblical traditions, though they recognized that there were certain rituals and liturgical practices that had probably come

down to them from the apostles and could therefore claim a legitimate place in worship. However, it must be stressed that this did not affect matters of doctrine, which could be decided only on the basis of the biblical text. This was generally recognized to be the Hebrew Old Testament and the indisputably genuine books of the New Testament, which by the fourth century had been fixed at the present twenty-seven in number. The Greek Septuagint was widely used and preferred by some, notably by Augustine, but the weight of scholarly authority was against it. It is particularly interesting to note that Jerome, the great translator of the Bible into Latin, insisted that the Hebrew text was the only authentic one, and he used it as the basis of his own version, which formed most of the standard Latin Vulgate in the Middle Ages.

OVERVIEW: Our faith is grounded in the teachings of the Lord (IGNATIUS). A common apostolic faith is found in all the churches where the apostles preached, and it is summarized in the rule of faith. It is the duty of church leaders to maintain the purity of that faith by rejecting new and unbiblical doctrines (IRENÆUS, TERTULLIAN).

The distinctive heart of Christianity is its faith in the Trinity (ATHANASIUS), which is itself the ultimate rule of faith (PHOEBADIUS) on which the creed is based (EPIPHANIUS). Faith is the necessary prelude to understanding (BASIL, RUFINUS) and the witness of the church to this faith is crucial to our acceptance of it (AUGUSTINE). At stake is the question of truth, which only the church and the gospel proclaim (FULGENTIUS).

It is possible to know that there is a God by contemplating nature, because he created it (ORIGEN, EUSEBIUS, AMBROSE, JEROME, AUGUSTINE, JOHN OF DAMASCUS). The order of the universe points to a rational being as its creator (ORIGEN, EPHREM, BASIL), and only a fool would deny this (HILARY). Yet what we

see in nature is only a shadow of the divine reality (GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS). God dwells beyond the limits of mere nature, which we must transcend if we are ever to know God (ARNOBIUS, LACTANTIUS, DIDYMUS, AUGUSTINE). Human beings possess a soul that knows God by its nature (TERTULLIAN), and they also have a conscience, which is an important means of knowing God (CHRYSOSTOM).

True and complete revelation is found only in the Word of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ and written down for us in holy Scripture. The Bible is the ultimate proof of the truth of our faith (CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, ORIGEN). Christ is both the author of Scripture and its subject (AUGUSTINE). It contains the teachings of Christ, faithfully transmitted by his disciples (CYPRIAN). Holy Scripture is inspired by God the Holy Spirit (CLEMENT OF ROME, ATHENAGORAS). This inspiration took many forms, but all of them are equally valid (EPIPHANIUS).

The apostles communicated everything they knew about God to their disciples, so there is no hidden or secret message still waiting to be revealed (IRENÆUS, TERTULLIAN). Holy Scripture is rational and consistent (METHODIUS), and minor discrepancies do not detract from this (TERTULLIAN), though faulty manuscripts must be corrected (JEROME, AUGUSTINE). Scripture has a spiritual purpose, which is the edification of believers in their faith (JUSTIN MARTYR, CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, TERTULLIAN). It is more ancient than any pagan philosophy or Christian heresy, and therefore more authoritative (THEOPHILUS, TERTULLIAN). The Bible is uniquely authoritative and sufficient in all matters of faith and doctrine (TERTULLIAN, AUGUSTINE). Its truth is vindicated by the power of God at work in the church (ORIGEN). Scripture may sometimes report things that are false, but only in the context of a wider message that is infallibly true (AUGUSTINE). We need to hear and obey this message because we are inherently sinful

and liable to go astray if we do not (CHRYSOSTOM).

The canon of Scripture contains the Hebrew Old Testament, which is to be preferred to the Greek Septuagint translation (MELITO, ATHANASIUS, CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, JEROME), though the latter was also composed under divine guidance (CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA), and most people find it easier to consult than the Hebrew original (AUGUSTINE). The Old Testament has been fulfilled in Christ (AUGUSTINE), but those who followed its teaching before he came into the world were saved by it (CHRYSOSTOM). The New Testament includes all authentic apostolic teaching and nothing else (EUSEBIUS, ATHANASIUS). Some books, especially 2 Peter, are of doubtfully apostolic origin and should be used with caution (ORIGEN, AUGUSTINE). But even if some of the human authors of the Scriptures are unknown to us, this does not matter, because their true author is God (THEODORET, GREGORY THE GREAT). All authentic apostolic tradition can be found in Scripture, but there are some ritual and liturgical customs that have been handed down from the apostles and may be used in the church, even though they have no explicit written authority behind them (IRENÆUS, TERTULLIAN, BASIL, CHRYSOSTOM). We must respect tradition in interpreting the Scriptures (EPIPHANIUS) and universal custom has the force of divine law (JEROME, AUGUSTINE). We can have confidence in them because of the unbroken succession of apostolic teaching and authority in the church (THEODORET) and because they are universally accepted and observed (VINCENT).

Understanding the true meaning of the Scriptures is difficult (AUGUSTINE), even though the text has been adapted to suit the understanding of our limited human minds (EPIPHANIUS). The literal sense is not always clear, and the text has to be searched carefully in order for its true spiritual meaning to be discerned (GREGORY OF NYSSA, AUGUSTINE).

Every part of Scripture has been inspired for a particular purpose (JOHN OF DAMASCUS). The Bible gives us eternal life (JUSTIN MARTYR), tells us what will happen in the future (THEOPHILUS) and reveals the secrets of true wisdom (CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA). Most importantly, it teaches us the way of salvation (CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA) and helps us grow in the knowledge of God (TERTULLIAN). Quotations from the Old Testament in the New are not always exact (JEROME), and often more than one interpretation of a text is possible (AUGUSTINE). Even the prophets and apostles grew in wisdom and understanding during the course of their careers (GREGORY THE GREAT).

The Form and Content of Our Faith

BELIEVING CHRIST’S TEACHINGS IN THE CHURCH. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH: Try hard to be well-grounded in the teachings of the Lord and the apostles, so that whatever you do may turn out well, both in body and spirit, in faith and love, in the Son, the Father and the Holy Spirit, in the beginning and at the end, along with your distinguished bishop, the beautifully woven spiritual crown of your eldership and the deacons who do God’s will. Be subject both to the bishop and to one another, as Christ was to the Father, and as the apostles were to Christ and to the Father, so that your unity may be both physical and spiritual. LETTER TO THE MAGNESIANS 13.¹

THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH HOLDS ONE AND THE SAME FAITH. IRENAEUS: Although the church is dispersed throughout the world, even to the ends of the earth, it has received this common faith from the apostles and their disciples:

[We believe] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and the sea, and everything that is in them

And in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God,

who became incarnate for our salvation

And in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed the [divine] dispensations through the prophets, including the advents, the birth from a virgin, the passion, the resurrection from the dead and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus our Lord, as well as his [future] coming from heaven in the glory of the Father, when he will “gather all things in one.”²

And to raise up again all flesh of the whole human race, in order that “every knee should bow and every tongue confess”³ to Christ Jesus, our Lord and God, our Savior and king, according to the will of the invisible Father, and that he should execute righteous judgment toward all.

That he may send “the spirits of wickedness”⁴ and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, together with the ungodly and unrighteous, wicked and profane among human beings, into everlasting fire, but in the exercise of his grace may grant immortality to the righteous and holy, and to those who have kept his commandments and persevered in his love and may clothe them with everlasting glory.

As I have already observed, the church has received this preaching and this faith, even though it is scattered throughout the world, and carefully preserves it intact, as if it were living in a single house. The church believes these doctrines as if it had only one soul and one heart, and it proclaims them and hands them on in perfect harmony, as if it spoke with only one voice. The languages of the world may be dissimilar, but the message of the tradition is one and the same. . . . Just as the sun is the same wherever it shines, so is the preaching of

¹PG 3:672-73; cf. ANF 1:64. ²Eph 1:10. ³Phil 2:10-11. ⁴Eph 6:12.

the truth the same everywhere in the world, enlightening everyone who wants to come to a knowledge of the truth. No church leader, however gifted he may be, will teach anything different from this, because no one is greater than the Master. Nor will anyone of inferior eloquence do harm to our tradition, because our faith is always one and the same. For this reason, the gifted teacher can add nothing to it, nor can the less gifted take anything away from it. Just because some people have more or less intelligence than others, it does not follow that they should add or subtract doctrines accordingly. AGAINST HERESIES 1.10.1-3.⁵

FIND THE TRUTH AND BELIEVE IT. TERTULLIAN: There is a particular and definite truth taught by Christ, which the Gentiles ought to believe. This is what they are called to seek so that once they have found it, they can believe it. You cannot go on forever looking for something that has already been taught as the one definite truth. You must seek until you have found it, and when you have found it, then you ought to believe it. After that, you have nothing else to worry about, because there is no further truth to be believed and nothing more to go looking for. If you have any doubts about this, we can prove our point because we have Christ’s teaching in our possession. AGAINST HERETICS 9.⁶

THERE IS ONLY ONE RULE OF FAITH. TERTULLIAN: The rule of faith is altogether one, alone immutable and irreformable. It is the rule of believing in only one Almighty God, the Creator of the universe, and in his Son Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised again the third day from the dead, received into the heavens, sitting now at the right hand of the Father, destined to come to judge the living and the dead through the resurrection of the flesh as well [as of the soul]. This law of faith is constant, but other points of discipline and

behavior are open to correction as the grace of God operates and progresses to the [perfect] end. ON THE VEILING OF VIRGINS 1.⁷

THE RULE OF FAITH AND HUMAN HISTORY. TERTULLIAN: The rule of faith prescribes the belief that there is only one God and that he is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing by his Word, which he sent forth. This Word is called his Son, and under the name of God he was seen in different ways by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, and was at last brought down by the Spirit and power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and being born of her, came out as Jesus Christ. He preaches this new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven. He worked miracles. Having been crucified, he rose again on the third day, and having ascended into heaven, he sat at the right hand of the Father. From there he sent the power of the Holy Spirit to guide those who believe. He will come again with glory to take the saints into the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises. He will condemn the wicked to everlasting fire after both these types of people (i.e., the good and the evil) have been resurrected and given back their flesh. We shall prove that Christ taught this rule, and the only questions it raises among us are those that are provoked by heretics. AGAINST HERETICS 13-14.⁸

WE MUST BELIEVE SOME THINGS AND REJECT OTHERS. APHRAHAT: This is faith, when a person believes in God the Lord of all, who made the heavens and the earth, the seas and all that is in them, and he made Adam in his image. He gave the law to Moses, he sent of

pages 6-33 deliberately omitted for sample

⁵PG 7:549-53; cf. ANF 1:330-31. ⁶PL 2:23; cf. ANF 3:248. ⁷PL 2:889; cf. ANF 4:27. ⁸PL 2:26-27; cf. ANF 3:249.

IN ONE GOD

πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεόν
πατέρα, παντοκράτορα,
ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς,
ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀοράτων.

*Credo in unum Deum
Patrem omnipotentem;
factorem coeli et terrae,
visibilem omnium et invisibilem.*

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.*

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: Christians inherited their belief in one God from Judaism and were insistent on this throughout the patristic period. At the popular level, they had to defend their faith against the prevailing polytheism of the ancient world. Many early Christian texts contain examples of anti-polytheistic satire, but few of them mount a sustained attack on polytheism as a system of belief. The main reason for this is that Christians did not often have to fight this battle at the intellectual level, since many educated pagans were equally critical of polytheism and ridiculed the ancient myths every bit as much as Christians did. They preferred to believe in a perfect being out of which existing reality had been formed. Precisely how this had happened, however, was a matter for furious disagreement among the different philosophical schools of ancient Greece, and Christians were quick to point out the inconsistencies of the various theories that were put forward to explain what we call the creation.

There was nevertheless one belief that was constant in ancient pagan philosophies, and that was that evil was something opposed to the perfect being and in no way part of it. This caused problems for Christians, who could not accept that evil was a power outside the control of God. To protect the divine perfection and goodness, some heterodox Christians came up with the theory that the God of the Old Testament was an inferior deity who created the world as we know it. In their view the true God dwelt above and beyond this creator (demiurge) and was completely unknowable. Orthodox Christians insisted that the one true

God was also the Creator, and that whatever evil was, it could not be completely independent of him or outside his control.

The early Christians also insisted that God is a personal being who establishes a relationship with human beings, who are created in his image and likeness. This relationship was initially given to the Jews, and in Christ it has been extended to others as well. God does not reabsorb us into his being but establishes a fellowship with us that will endure for eternity. It is this personal character of God that distinguishes Christian belief most obviously from any philosophical equivalent, and the insistence with which it was hammered home is a good indication of how difficult it was for the average pagan to embrace this concept.

It would be wrong to suggest that the doctrine of the one God developed in any significant way during the first Christian centuries, and the teaching of Augustine and John of Damascus can be found in the second century, with very little difference. However, Christian theologians had to explain how the one God was at the same time a Trinity of persons, a doctrine that did not contradict the monotheism of the Old Testament. Belief in a communion of three divine persons led to a growing understanding of God as love, a biblical idea that finds its greatest flowering in the works of Augustine. By stressing the concept of divine love, he was able to combine the unity of the three persons in one God and our union with him (and them) as the height of our spiritual experience and the ultimate goal of the divine plan of salvation.

OVERVIEW: God cannot be called by a proper name but was referred to inexplicably by Moses as “I am who am,” in contrast with the gods that do not exist (JUSTIN MARTYR), yet this incomparable One is worshiped under many different names (ORIGEN). Some of these have been given to him by different peoples, and others depend on particular functions that belong to him (TERTULLIAN), though the most accurate name used for him is that of pure Being (EPHREM, BASIL, GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, HILARY, AMBROSE, AUGUSTINE). Even so, there is no name that can describe him adequately (CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA), and God is beyond even Being (PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS). The eternal God has no sex (ARNOBIUS, LACTANTIUS) but transcends everything else and is the absolute being (TERTULLIAN, GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, HILARY, AUGUSTINE). There is nothing like him, and so he can only be defined as being himself (NOVATIAN, CYRIL OF JERUSALEM). Because of this, God can only be defined by what he is not (JOHN OF DAMASCUS), and only he is a fit object of human worship (AUGUSTINE). He does not compel but calls us to worship him (TERTULLIAN).

God is beyond our understanding (IRENAEUS, CHRYSOSTOM), beyond the power of human nature to comprehend, as if dwelling in impenetrable darkness (ORIGEN). Knowledge of him must therefore begin by confessing our ignorance of who or what he really is (CYRIL OF JERUSALEM). He is perfect and for that reason absolutely unique (AMBROSE, JOHN OF DAMASCUS). He is the supreme Being, which makes it absurd to suppose that there can be more than one of him (TERTULLIAN, EUSEBIUS, EPHREM). All three persons of the Trinity share this absolute oneness of the Godhead (ORIGEN, ATHANASIUS, BASIL, GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS) and may be addressed as three holies in the one divine holiness (AMBROSE). The God of the Old Testament and the God of the New are one and the same, though the Trinity is revealed

more clearly in the New (GREGORY OF NYSSA, AUGUSTINE). However, it remains a fundamental belief of the Christian church that God is One, as he proclaimed to the ancient Israelites (GREGORY OF NYSSA, HILARY, EPIPHANIUS, AMBROSE, AUGUSTINE, FULGENTIUS).

God is eternal (CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA) and sovereign and can do whatever he likes (MELITO). He knows the future (IRENAEUS, AUGUSTINE), but his foreknowledge is compatible with human free will (TATIAN, JUSTIN MARTYR). A distinction must be made between things that God actively wills, all of which are good, and things that he merely allows to happen, many of which may be evil (TERTULLIAN, CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA).

God is eternal (LACTANTIUS), knows everything (IRENAEUS) and is everywhere at the same time (MELITO, CYPRIAN, MINUCIUS FELIX, GREGORY THE GREAT). He has no body (GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA) but is infinite and invisible spirit by nature (HILARY, LEO). He is simple in the sense that he is not compounded of different substances (DIDYMUS, CHRYSOSTOM, JOHN), and he cannot change (AUGUSTINE). God is greater than his attributes, each of which equals the sum of his being (AUGUSTINE, JOHN OF DAMASCUS), but no words can describe him adequately (HILARY). He is not the cause of evil, though he allows it to occur (CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA) and can even make use of it for his own good purposes (ORIGEN). But God has no experience of evil in himself, and in that sense may be said not to know it (BASIL), nor can he do things that contradict his nature (ORIGEN).

God’s wrath is not a vice but a virtue (NOVATIAN). The term is a metaphor for his disciplining of the human race, because he cannot have human passions (ORIGEN, GREGORY THE GREAT). God’s wrath is part of him and is therefore both righteous and eternal (LACTANTIUS).

God’s goodness is made manifest by his

determination to punish evil (LACTANTIUS). He desires our salvation (CHRYSOSTOM) which he planned before the foundation of the world (AUGUSTINE). From our point of view, union with God is the best thing we could ever have or desire (AUGUSTINE, PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS).

In sharp contrast to this, pagan idolatry is both foolish and absurd (JUSTIN MARTYR, TATIAN). Pagan polytheism makes no sense, imagining that it is even possible to invent new gods (THEOPHILUS). God cannot be depicted in material objects, and it is blasphemous to worship such things (ATHENAGORAS, TERTULLIAN, JOHN OF DAMASCUS). He has no need of sacrifices either (LACTANTIUS). Idolatry springs from evil (ATHANASIUS), and the pagan gods are powerless to do what they are asked (AUGUSTINE).

God can be known by his works, but only partially (ATHANASIUS, PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS), and the first step toward knowing him is to confess our ignorance of him (CYRIL OF JERUSALEM). He is ultimately indefinable (GREGORY OF ELVIRA), and so we must do what we can to find words to describe him (MARIUS VICTORINUS), knowing all along that whatever we come up with will be inadequate (BASIL, GREGORY OF NYSSA). Our knowledge of him may be compared with that of children (CHRYSOSTOM), but in truth, if we could understand him, he would not be God (AUGUSTINE).

Who God Is

GOD HAS NO PROPER NAME. JUSTIN MARTYR: God cannot be called by any proper name. Names are given to mark out and distinguish their subject matters because these are many and diverse, but no one existed before God who could give him a name, nor did he see any need to name himself, since he is one and unique, as he testifies by his own prophets, saying, "I am the first, and besides me there is no other God."¹ For this reason, when God

sent Moses to the Hebrews, he did not mention any name but taught the people by using a participle that he is the one and only true God. He says, "I am who am,"² obviously contrasting himself with the gods who do not exist. He did this so that those who had previously been deceived might see that they had been worshipping not beings but things that had no being. HORTATORY ADDRESS TO THE GREEKS 21.³

WE KNOW GOD BY HIS WORKS OF CREATION. TATIAN: God alone is to be feared—he who is not visible to human eyes nor comes within the compass of human art. Only when I am commanded to deny him will I not obey, but will rather die than show myself false and ungrateful. Our God has no origin in time; he alone is without beginning, and he is the beginning of all things. "God is a spirit,"⁴ not pervading matter but the maker of material spirits and of the forms that are in matter. He is invisible, impalpable, being himself the Father of both visible and invisible things. We know him from his creation and apprehend his invisible power by his works.⁵ TO THE GREEKS 4.⁶

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¹Is 44:6. ²Exod 3:14. ³PG 6:277; cf. ANF 1:281. ⁴Jn 4:24.

⁵See Rom 1:20. ⁶PG 6:813; cf. ANF 2:66.