

*Christian Essential  
Series: Was Early  
Christianity Corrupted  
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### ***Was Early Christianity Corrupted by 'Hellenism'?***

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A common criticism of historic orthodox Christianity is the claim that early Christianity was corrupted by the intellectual forces of 'Hellenism.' (Hellenism, of course, refers to the influence of ancient Greek philosophy and culture, which spread throughout the Mediterranean world after the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC.) Specifically, the doctrines of Trinity and the deity of Christ have been rejected as unbiblical ideas that were introduced into Christianity through the corrupting

influence of Greek philosophy, particularly the ideas of Plato. As long ago as 1531, in his book, *On the Errors of the Trinity*, Michael Servetus criticized the 'Hellenistic' terms used by Trinitarian Christians to explain their understanding of God. More recently, various critics of orthodox Christianity--including Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, New Age adherents, and theological liberals--have argued that the true biblical understandings of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit were corrupted in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries by Greek philosophy and pagan polytheism, which led to the development of the doctrines of the Trinity and the deity of Christ. The following examples will document this approach:

**1.) Stephen E. Robinson, Professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University, and Mormon apologist writes:**

Evangelicals come to these conclusions [concerning the nature of God] only when they attempt to impose their Platonic assumptions and categories on LDS [Latter Day Saints] theology. . . . The LDS are troubled by the fact that the God of Christian "orthodoxy" is virtually indistinguishable from the God of the Hellenistic philosophers.

With specific regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, Robinson claims that it is based upon: "the non-biblical attempts of fourth- and fifth-century councils to define exactly how God is at the same time one and three by using Greek philosophical concepts, categories, and terms." He concludes by saying: "I do not trust the intellectuals of the Hellenistic church to have figured out exactly how this is so. . . ."

**2.) A popular Jehovah's Witness publication, entitled Should You Believe in**

**the Trinity?, explains the development of the doctrine of the Trinity as follows:**

Throughout the ancient world, as far back as Babylonia, the worship of pagan gods grouped in threes, or triads, was common. That influence was also prevalent in Egypt, Greece, and Rome in the centuries before, during, and after Christ. After the death of the apostles, such pagan beliefs began to invade Christianity. . . . While [Plato] did not teach the Trinity in its present form, his philosophies paved the way for it.

**3.) Muslim apologists Muhammad 'Ata'ur-Rahim and Ahmad Thomson offer a similar critique of the Trinity:**

Thus as the teaching of Jesus spread out beyond the Holy Land, it came into contact with other cultures and into conflict with those in authority. It began to be assimilated and adapted by these cultures

and was also altered to diminish persecution by the rulers. In Greece, especially, it became metamorphosed, both by its being expressed in a new language for the first time, and by its realignment with the ideas and philosophies of that culture. It was the many-gods viewpoint of the Greeks which largely contributed to the formulation of the doctrine of the a Trinity, together with the gradual elevation of Jesus . . . from being a prophet of God to somehow being a separate yet indivisible part of God.

What are we to make of this criticism? Is there evidence of wide-spread 'Hellenism' within the early church? If so, does this mean that central doctrines of the Christian faith were corrupted in the process?

### ***The Parthenon in Athens.***

What we do know is this: 'Hellenism' was a cultural force that touched most areas in

the ancient Mediterranean world. Thus, since Christianity arose in the Mediterranean world, it is not surprising that early Christians had to deal with its effects. We know that there were various reactions to Hellenistic philosophy among early Christians. For example, Tertullian claimed that Christianity and Greek philosophy has nothing in common at all. On the other hand, Justin Martyr felt quite comfortable making comparisons between Christianity and Greek philosophy in order to attract Hellenistic pagans to the Gospel. Justin was not alone in trying to create bridges from Greek philosophy to Christianity. Like Justin, many early Christians were willing to borrow certain terms and ideas from the cultural world of their day in order to communicate the Gospel to those around them. Does this mean that, in the process, Hellenistic ideas were allowed to creep into the Gospel message and distort its true meaning?

Although this is a common criticism of orthodox Christianity, it can be shown that, in fact, it is an argument with no real foundation.

The following four points will serve to reveal the weaknesses of this view.

**1.) The Jewish world, from which Christianity arose, had already been touched by Hellenism prior to the birth of Christ.**

Critics who use this argument often make it sound as if the life and culture of Jesus and the first disciples was untouched by Hellenism, and that only in later centuries was it allowed to 'infect' the church. However, we know from history that this is simply not the case. In his groundbreaking study, *Judaism and Hellenism*, Martin Hengel has shown that, from the middle of the third century BC, Jewish Palestine had

already experienced the effects of Hellenism in various ways. For example:

(1) Under Ptolemaic rule, the Jews were forced to deal with Hellenistic forms of government and administration;

(2) As inhabitants of an important coastal land, Palestine served as a crossroads for international trade, which brought many Hellenized merchants through the area;

(3) The Greek language--the common language of the Roman Empire--became a part of Jewish culture (and became the language of the New Testament!);

(4) Greek educational techniques were adopted, in part, by the Jews. Thus, the idea of a pristine Judaism, untouched by Hellenism, giving rise to an equally untouched early Christianity that was later 'corrupted' by Hellenism is simply a false historical picture.

**2.) Recent studies have shown that the influence of Hellenism on various peoples in the ancient world was largely superficial, and primarily attracted the ruling class and those with political and administrative hopes.**

In his massive study of the Hellenistic period, Peter Green demonstrates that the effects of Hellenism on local cultures in the ancient world operated like a forced cultural veneer over an otherwise healthy and distinct traditional worldview. G. W. Bowersock has come to similar conclusions:

the persistence of all these local traditions has suggested that there was no more than a superficial Hellenization of much of Asia Minor, the Near East, and Egypt . . . . [Hellenism] was a medium not necessarily antithetical to local or indigenous traditions. On the contrary, it provided a new and more eloquent way of giving voice

to

them.

These observations point to the fact that Hellenism did not tend to infiltrate and 'corrupt' the local religious traditions of the ancient world. Rather, people maintained their religious traditions in spite of Hellenistic influence in other areas of their lives. This leads to our third observation.

**3.) Although Judaism and early Christianity were affected by the surrounding culture in certain ways, they diligently guarded their religious beliefs and practices from Hellenistic pagan influences, even to the point of martyrdom.**

We now come to the heart of the issue. The historical and archaeological evidence shows that both Judaism and early Christianity carefully guarded their religious views from the surrounding Hellenistic culture. For example, with regard to

Judaism, the archaeological work of Eric Meyers on the city of Sepphoris in first-century Upper Galilee reveals that, in spite of wide-spread Hellenistic influence on various cultural levels, the Jewish people maintained a strict observance of the Torah.

When it comes to early Christianity, it is clear that the religious influences are Jewish rather than Hellenistic paganism. The essence of the Christian Gospel is nothing more nor less than the fulfillment of all the Old Testament covenantal promises through the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. It is the climax of the history of Yahweh-God's dealings with the Jewish people through a series of covenants, culminating in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. It is a Jewish worldview that dominates the Gospel, not that of paganism. Gregory Dix's conclusions on the question of the Hellenization of the Gospel confirm this claim: the central core of the Gospel consists of "a Jewish

Monotheism and a Jewish Messianism and a Jewish Eschatology; which is expressed in a particular pattern of worship and morality."

This conclusion does conflict with what used to be a popular view of Christian origins in the early twentieth-century. This view, held by a group of critical scholars known as the 'History of Religions School,' claimed that many early Christian beliefs and practices were actually borrowed from Hellenistic pagan 'mystery cults.' In recent years, however, this view has largely been abandoned by the scholarly world. The evidence now demonstrates that early Christianity is best understood as arising from the Jewish thought world. In his book, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World*, philosopher Ronald Nash wrestles with the claims of the History of Religions School. His findings are worth noting:

Was early Christianity a syncretistic faith? Did it borrow any of its essential beliefs and practices either from Hellenistic philosophy or religion or from Gnosticism? The evidence requires that this question be answered in the negative.

Nash's conclusion fits with the findings of many others. The work of historians and biblical scholars such as N. T. Wright and David Flusser confirm that first-century Judaism is the proper context within which to understand the rise of early Christianity. It is true that Christianity eventually broke with Judaism. Unlike Judaism, it understood God as a Triune Being, and the Messiah as both divine and human. However, these theological perspectives were rooted in the experience of the early Jewish Christians as recorded in the New Testament. As Dix has noted, "Christianity ceased to be Jewish, but it did not thereby become Greek. It became itself--Christianity."

**4.) Many of the central elements of the Gospel are diametrically opposed to the Hellenistic mind-set.**

This claim can be demonstrated by offering the following examples: First, like Judaism, the Christian Gospel proclaims that God created all things 'out of nothing' ('ex nihilo'). This is contrary to the Greek view of pre-existing eternal matter. Second, since God created all things, including matter, Christianity (with Judaism) understands matter in general, and the human body in particular, as 'very good' (Gen 1:31). The Hellenistic worldview understood matter as questionable at best--if not down-right evil. The body was seen as something like an unnatural tomb, within which the eternal human soul was temporarily trapped until released by death. Whereas, with Judaism, Christianity proclaimed that to be human was to have a body, and thus that we would

experience resurrection of the body (an uncorruptible body!) in the after-life, the Greek view of the after-life was freedom from the body.

Some have noted similarities between certain Greek systems of ethics and New Testament teachings on morality. However, even here there are significant differences. While one can identify certain common features, such as literary styles and basic moral codes, there are prominent differences in the motivation (Christians are motivated by regard for God and His call to holiness; the Greeks by self-evident 'reason') and means for living a moral life (Christians are empowered by the Holy Spirit; Greeks rely upon their own innate wisdom and ability). Finally, unlike the Greek philosophical view, the hope of heaven provides the foundation for Christians to persevere under moral pressure.

Finally, we must address the claim that the doctrines of the deity of Christ and the Trinity are later Hellenistic pagan corruptions of the early and 'pure' Christianity. Two responses will suffice to show the weaknesses of these claims. First, the claims of those like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses that New Testament Christianity was corrupted by later Hellenistic influence fail to account for the fact that it is the New Testament data itself which led the early Christian fathers to confess the deity of Christ and the Trinity of God. While space considerations do not allow for a detailed biblical defense of these doctrines, reference can be made to a number of significant studies demonstrating that these doctrines are rooted in the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ (see endnote for suggested resources). Second, recent research has forcefully shown that the early Christian idea of Christ's deity

developed not in a Hellenistic context but in a distinctly Jewish thought-world. Richard Bauckham, a contributor to this relatively new scholarly movement (sometimes known as the 'New History of Religions School') states these conclusions succinctly:

When New Testament Christology is read with this Jewish theological context in mind, it becomes clear that, from the earliest post-Easter beginnings of Christology onwards, early Christians included Jesus, precisely and unambiguously, within the unique identity of the one God of Israel . . . . The earliest Christology was already the highest Christology . . . . .

In conclusion, although the claim that early Christian belief and practice was corrupted by Hellenistic influence is commonly argued by critics of orthodox Christianity, the historical evidence does not support this claim. Rather, like the Judaism from which it

arose, the Christian faith rigorously guarded its unique religious identity in the midst of the religious and philosophical diversity of the ancient Mediterranean world.

*-The End -*

### **How to receive Christ:**

Receiving Christ is as easy as A-B-C.

#### **A – Admit your sins**

You must first repent of your sins. This means turning away from them and asking God to forgive you. Acts 3:19 says “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”

#### **B – Believe and confess**

What does it mean to believe? It means to trust your life to Jesus. If you jump out of a falling airplane with a parachute, you don't just know or hope the parachute will save you. You believe it! You trust your life to the parachute. Similarly, believing in Jesus means trusting your eternal life to him. Acts 16:31 says "They said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.'" Paul affirms this in Romans 10:9-10 "That if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."

In verse 13 it says "For whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved."

### **C – Call on Jesus as your savior**

Through prayer, invite Jesus to come in and change your life through the Holy Spirit. Invite him to save you. “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” – Romans 5:1 (NASB) Remember “he who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.” – 1 John 5:12-13 (NASB)

### **What Now: Find a Family not just a Church**

If you accepted Christ as your savior, the next step is to find a local, Bible-preaching Church in your area. A place where you belong! The author of Hebrews writes “and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but

encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” – Hebrews 10:24-25 (NASB)



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