The Divinity of Christ

Ante-Nicene Christians between 95 and 200 A.D. believed that Jesus was God. This can be shown through the writings of several ante-Nicene Church Fathers. For example, The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (Didache), which was an early Catechism and instructional manual dating from perhaps around 150, directs that baptism should be performed by pouring “water on the head three times ‘in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”¹ This formula implies that these early Christians believed that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were each equal – and if Jesus is equal to the Father, then Jesus is God. Otherwise, they would have simply baptized in the name of the “Father” and left out the Son (and the Holy Spirit), or they would have included qualifiers or something to indicate the lesser status of the Son.

The Letter to Diognetus, written around 129, was an early defense of Christianity. When speaking of Jesus, this manuscript stated that God cared so much about humankind that, rather than sending someone like an angel, God instead “sent the Designer and Maker of the universe himself.”² This is a fairly explicit statement identifying Christ as God himself.

Even before the Didache, Ignatius of Antioch clearly identified Jesus as God. In fact, Ignatius identified Jesus as God 16 times total in his seven letters.³ For example, he stated “the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ, our God”⁴ and “our God, Jesus the Christ.”⁵ As another

example, he exhorts the Trallians to keep “very close to [our] God, Jesus Christ.” Ignatius was opposed to the Judaizers, and so his intent was to make it clear that Jesus was not just a prophet, but rather God incarnate.

Irenaeus was another ante-Nicene defender of Christ’s divinity. The goal of Irenaeus was to defend the Faith as it had been handed down from the apostles – to defend the Faith against heresies. He wrote that “Now the Church . . . received from the apostles and their disciples its faith . . .” and then continues within the same sentence, “every knee may bow . . . to Christ Jesus our Lord and God and Saviour.” In addition, Irenaeus criticized the Ebionites for their lack of faith in God becoming man. Referring to the Incarnation, he wrote, “Vain also are the Ebionites, who do not accept . . . the union of God and man, but remain in the old leaven of [merely] human birth.”

Origen taught that the Son was God. For example, in speaking of the Word, he stated, “there was no time that He was not.” By this he meant that Jesus was not a created being – instead, Jesus was Divine. Also, Origen identified the Blessed Virgin Mary as “Theotokos,” which means God-Bearer or Mother of God.

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10 D’Ambrosio, When the Church Was Young, p. 94.
The Eucharist

A Realistic Understanding of the Eucharist

There is evidence in post-New Testament ante-Nicene Christian literature of a realistic understanding of the Eucharist. We see one of the first such pieces of evidence in the Didache, in which the faithful were directed: “You must not let anyone eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptized in the Lord’s name.” Immediately following this, it further stated that the biblical quote “Do not give what is sacred to the dogs” is referring to the Eucharist. This indicates that at the time the Didache was written, the early Christians recognized the Eucharist as something sacred and special, which shows that they believed it was more than just a symbolic gesture.

Irenaeus also showed that the Eucharist was more than just a symbol when he criticizes the Ebionites for (1) only using water in their Eucharists, and (2) not believing that God is present in the Eucharist. Irenaeus wrote “They reject the mixture of the heavenly wine, and wish to be only the water of the world, not receiving God into their mixture.” Irenaeus then stated that when the bread and wine "receives the Word of God becomes the Eucharist, which is the body and blood of Christ" – and furthermore taught that the Incarnation, resurrection, and the Eucharist are teachings that each rely on and inform each other.

Justin also demonstrated the belief in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. In writing about the Eucharistic celebration, Justin explained the Christian belief that “the food

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12 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., pp. 387–388.
16 Ibid.
consecrated by the word of prayer . . . is the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus.”\textsuperscript{17} This was written at a time of government hostility toward the Christian faith and Christians were being accused of cannibalism. It would have been advantageous for Justin to identify the Eucharist as just a symbol, yet he instead affirms and explains the teaching of the real presence.

Tertullian (born around 160\textsuperscript{18}) taught that the Eucharist was really the body and blood of Christ. He wrote, “the flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul likewise may fatten on God.”\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, he taught that the Eucharistic re-presents the body and blood of Jesus; that is, the Eucharist makes present again the body and blood of Jesus.\textsuperscript{20} Cyprian (who died around 258) also taught this doctrine. Cyprian instructed that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was a single sacrifice – that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is not repeated in the Eucharist, but rather, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is re-presented (presented again) in the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{21} In other words, Cyprian taught that the Eucharist makes the sacrifice of the cross “present and efficacious here and now.”\textsuperscript{22} In a way, the Eucharist allows us folks here in the present to stand at the foot of the cross in 33 A.D.\textsuperscript{23}

Origen (who died around 254\textsuperscript{24}) held that Jesus was truly present in the Eucharist. He wrote,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[20] \textit{Ibid}.
\item[21] D’Ambrosio, \textit{When the Church Was Young}, p. 120.
\item[22] \textit{Ibid}.
\end{footnotes}
You who are wont to assist at the Divine Mysteries, know how, when you receive
the body of the Lord, you take reverent care, lest any particle of it should fall to
the ground and a portion of the consecrated gift (consecrati muneri6) escape you.
You consider it a crime – and rightly so – if any particle thereof fall down
[through] negligence.25

Here, Origen explicitly identifies the consecrated bread and wine as “the body of the Lord.”

Moreover, his reverence for the consecrated bread and wine indicate that they were considered
sacred, rather than just simply symbolic. Hippolytus, whose preaching had inspired Origen, also
confirms this early Christian belief in the real presence, writing in the year 215, that:

Each person must see to it that an unbeliever, or a mouse, or other animal, does
not eat the Eucharist, and that no part of it falls to the ground and is lost. For it is
the body of the Lord that the faithful eat, and they must not treat it with
contempt.26

Ignatius of Antioch, writing 105 years earlier (in the year 110), was explicit when he
criticizes those who have “wrong notions”: “They hold aloof from the Eucharist and from
services of prayer, because they refuse to admit that the Eucharist is the flesh of our
Saviour Jesus Christ.”27

The Centrality of the Eucharist

There is evidence in ante-Nicene Christian literature for the centrality of the Eucharist.

Clement identified the Eucharist as central to the life of the Church and that one of the primary
roles of the bishops was to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice, when he stated that “we shall be guilty

of no slight sin if we eject from the episcopate men who have offered the sacrifices with innocence and holiness.”

Ignatius makes a direct connection between Christian worship and the Eucharist (that the Eucharist is central to Christian worship). Ignatius taught that Christians should meet “frequently to celebrate God’s Eucharist and to praise him.” Ignatius taught that at those meetings they should “break one loaf, which is the medicine of immortality.”

Justin explained that the Christians had a meeting each Sunday, and at each of those Sunday meetings the Eucharist was celebrated: “when we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings” and then “the distribution, and reception of the consecrated [elements] by each one, takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons.”

Cyprian taught that the Eucharist is central to the unity of the Church. He wrote “In this very sacrament our people are shown to be made one.” Cyprian fought against schism, and saw the Eucharist as a unifying sacrament.

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32 Cyprian, as quoted and cited in *When the Church Was Young: Voices of the Early Fathers*, by Marcellino D’Ambrosio (Cincinnati, OH: Servant Books, Franciscan Media, 2014), p. 120.
Bibliography

