

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

Ch. 2: God and the Holy Trinity

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In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son. [Chapter 2, Section 3]

John Owen, the Puritan divine (1616–1683) and member of the Savoy Conference of 1661, writes: "Now the sum of this revelation in this matter is, that God is one; that this one God is Father, Son and Holy Ghost; that the Father is the Father of the Son, the Son the Son of the Father, and the Holy Ghost the Spirit of the Father and the Son; and that, in respect of this their mutual relation, they are distinct from each other. The Father is this one God and therefore is to be believed in, worshipped, obeyed, lived unto, and in all things considered by us as the first cause, sovereign Lord, and last end of all. The Son is the one true God, and therefore is to be believed in, worshipped, obeyed, lived unto, and in all things considered by us as the first cause, sovereign Lord, and last end of all. And so, also of the Holy Ghost."

The following Scriptures support the doctrine of the Holy Trinity (and there are many more):

"For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one" (1 John 5:7).

"And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:16–17).

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19).

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen" (2 Corinthians 13:14).

"But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me" (John 15:26).

"And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father" (Galatians 4:6).

The Old Testament also plainly teaches a plurality of Persons in the Godhead:

"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). "And the LORD God said, Behold the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Genesis 3:22). This cannot refer to the angels, for man is said to be created after the image of God, but never after the image of angels; and the temptation was, "Ye shall be as gods," not angels.

"By the word of the LORD [or Jehovah] were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath [or spirit] of his mouth" (Psalm 33:6). Here mention is made of Jehovah, the Word and the Spirit as acting together in the work of creation.

Again we find that, "All things were made by him [the Word]" (John 1:3), and that, "By his spirit he hath garnished the heavens" (Job 26:13).

There is also a Trinity of Persons mentioned in Isaiah chapter 63 where, besides the LORD [Jehovah] being spoken of three times, we read of "the angel of his presence" and "his holy Spirit" (Isaiah 63:7-10).

The doctrine of the Trinity, then, plainly is revealed in the Old Testament as well as in the New.

How the Three Persons of the Trinity are Distinguished

The Son is distinct from the Father, "being ... the express image of his person" (Hebrews 1:3), and in John 8:17-18 He reckons His Father to be one witness and Himself another. The Holy Ghost is distinct from both as appears from John 14:16-17: "I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth."

(a) The Father begets the Son: "For unto which of the angels

said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son? And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him. But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom" (Hebrews 1:5-6,8).

(b) The Son is begotten of the Father: "... we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father... No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (John 1:14,18).

(c) The Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son: "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me" (John 15:26). In Galatians 4:6 He is called "the Spirit of his Son," and in Romans 8:9 "the Spirit of Christ." He is said to receive all things from Christ (John 16:14-15), to be sent by Him (John 15:26), and to be sent by the Father in Christ's Name (John 14:26). All this plainly implies that the Holy Spirit proceeds both from the Father and the Son from all eternity, from everlasting to everlasting. To deny this would be to deny the supreme and eternal Godhead of all the three glorious Persons, who are "the same in substance, equal in power and glory" (Shorter Catechism Q.6).

Clear Evidence of the Three Persons of the Godhead Being One God

The Father is truly God, and the Son is truly God as regards their attributes, viz, *Eternity*: "... whose goings forth have been from old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2); *Omnipotence*: "... the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8); *Omnipresence*: John 3:13, where the Son is said to be "in heaven" when bodily upon earth, and "Lo, I am with you *alway*, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20); *Omniscience*: Peter says to Him, "Lord, thou knowest all things" (John 21:17); *Unchangeableness*: "They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; and as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail" (Hebrews 1:11-12).

The works also are ascribed to the Father and the Son, as *Creation*: "All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3). The *Preservation* of all

things are ascribed to both: "... upholding all things by the word of his power" (Hebrews 1:3). Also, the *Salvation* of sinners: "But I ... will save them by the LORD their God" (Hosea 1:7). Whatever the Father does, the Son does also.

Divine worship is ascribed to the Son. The angels are commanded to "worship him" (Hebrews 1:6), and all men must give the same honour to Him as to the Father (John 5:23). We must have faith in Him, and they are blessed who believe in Him. We are to pray to Him (Acts 7:60), and we are baptised in His Name (Matthew 28:19). The Son is expressly said to be "equal" with the Father (Philippians 2:6), and "one" with Him (John 10:30). It is no contradiction to the doctrine when Christ says, "... my Father is greater than I" (John 14:28), for He is not speaking there of His nature as God but of His office of mediation, and so He is called His Father's "servant" in Isaiah 42:1.

The Holy Spirit is truly God (Acts 5:3-4); 1Corinthians 3:16; Isaiah 61:1). Divine attributes are ascribed to Him, as *Omni-potence*: He "worketh all in all" (1 Corinthians 12:6f); *Omni-presence*: (Psalm 139:7); and *Omniscience*: (1Corinthians 2:10). Works also are ascribed to the Holy Spirit, as *Creation*: (Psalm 33:6); *Preservation*: (Psalm 104:30); *Working of Miracles*: (Matthew 12:28); *Raising the Dead*: (Romans 8:11); *Inspiring the Prophets*: (2 Peter 1:21). Divine worship is also due to Him, we are baptised in His Name and we pray to Him (2 Corinthians 13:14; Acts 4:24,31).

The Godhead is not divided, there is no inequality amongst the three Divine Persons and none is deserving of more honour than another, seeing they are all one God.

The Great Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity

It is a fundamental doctrine, necessary to salvation. For those who are "without God" (Ephesians 2:12) and have not the Father *cannot be saved*, for "Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father" (1 John 2:23). Those who are none of Christ's *cannot be saved*, for "... if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" (Romans 8:9). None receive the Spirit but those who know Him (John 14:17). The mystery of the Trinity is so interwoven with the whole of religion that, where there is unbelief, there can neither be any true faith, right worship or obedience. Where is faith if this doctrine is taken away? "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and

Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3); "Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father" (1 John 2:23); "For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father" (Ephesians 2:18). And there is no obedience without this doctrine. "He that hateth me," says Christ, "hateth my Father also" (John 15:23), and "He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him" (John 5:23).

"God in three persons, blessed Trinity," wrote Reginald Heber (1783–1826), yet the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father. Each is God, each is *all* of God, but each is distinct from the other two. This truth is not hard to state but it is totally impossible to understand. The theologian, Louis Berkhof, states in his *Systematic Theology*: "The Trinity is a mystery beyond the comprehension of men, not merely in the Biblical sense that it is a truth, which was formerly hidden but is now revealed; but in the sense that man cannot comprehend it and make it intelligible... The real difficulty lies in the relation in which the persons in the Godhead stand to the divine essence and to one another... the Church has never tried to explain the mystery of the Trinity, but only sought to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity in such a manner that the errors which endangered it were warded off" (BOT edition, page 89).

Some people, in trying to make the truth understandable, have merely succeeded in denying it. Usually one of three things happened. Some, well aware that the Bible teaches that God is three, have ended up by denying that God is one and have fallen into the trap of the three Persons as three separate divine beings. In other words, they have become tritheists – those who believe in three gods. Others, well aware that the bible teaches that God is one, have denied the deity of the Son and the deity of the Holy Spirit. They have refused to accept these two Persons as God. This leaves them with but one Person, who is the only divine Being. Such people are called Unitarians or Arians. Others, also aware that the Bible teaches that God is one, have thought of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, as one and the same identical Person.

But the titles, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are not the names of the same Person merely appearing in different forms at different times. They are distinct Persons. So, in John 12:28 the Father says: "I"; in John 17:4 the Son says: "I"; in Acts 13:2 the Holy Spirit says "I." There are three who are God and each can say "I." So when we say that they are distinct Persons, we do not

mean that one is as separate from the other as one human person is from every other. They are but one God. Such a profound mystery! There is no way that we can explain it.

All that is revealed to us is that the three are distinct as "one Spirit ... one Lord ... one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4:4-6), and "the same Spirit ... the same Lord ... the same God" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6).

The Doctrine of the Trinity in History

The Jews of Jesus' days strongly emphasised the unity of God, and this emphasis was carried over into the Christian Church. Tertullian (160-225 AD) was the first to use the term 'Trinity' and to formulate the doctrine. But his formulation was deficient, since it involved an unwarranted subordination of the Son to the Father. Origen (185-254 AD) went even further in this direction by teaching explicitly that the Son is subordinate to the Father in respect to essence, and that the Holy Spirit is subordinate even to the Son. He detracted from the essential deity of these two Persons of the Godhead and furnished a stepping-stone to the Arians. They denied the deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, by representing the Son as the first creature of the Father and the Holy Spirit as the first creature of the Son. The Arians still retained a semblance of the doctrine of the three Persons of the Godhead, but this was sacrificed entirely to Monarchianism, which saw in Jesus but a man and in the Holy Spirit a divine influence.

On the other hand, there were also some who lost sight of the unity of God to such an extent that they landed in Tritheism. So the Church began to formulate its doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century. The Council of Nicea (325 AD) declared the Son to be co-essential with the Father, while at the Council of Constantinople there were controversies which agitated the Church with reference to the constitution of the Person of Christ. Then the Creed of Athanasius was generally adopted, at least among the western Churches.

After the Reformation, the Arminians revived the doctrine of subordination. They ascribed to the Father a certain pre-eminence over the other Persons in order, dignity and power. A somewhat similar position was held by Samuel Clarke (1675-1729). Others followed, for instance Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1722), who held that the eternal 'God-man' became flesh in the Son and operated through the Holy Spirit. The Socinians of the Reformation made Christ merely a man, and the Holy Spirit but a

power or influence. Those were the forerunners of the Unitarians and also of the liberal theologians of today, who speak of Jesus only as a divine teacher, and identify the Holy Spirit with the indwelling of God.

We are no nearer to explaining the incomprehensible mystery of the Trinity but we have been able to see what the Scriptures actually say about it. The real difficulty lies in understanding how each Person can be God Himself and yet stand in the relationship that He does to the other two Persons. This difficulty remains and can never be removed. It is beyond the powers of the human mind to understand it.

However, from the first century until the present day, many people have tried to discover and use various analogies and illustrations to make the truth of the Trinity understandable. For example, three leaves in a shamrock; the mind, emotions and will in man; the sun, its beams and its heat; etc. Every one of these comparisons has been defective in one way or another. They have either said something *less* than the Bible says, or something *more*, or something *different*. We must face it – the doctrine of the Trinity is without analogy.

Without the doctrine of the Trinity the whole plan of redemption falls to pieces. The doctrines of justification and adoption cease to mean anything, and the same can be said of any other gospel doctrine. We love the doctrine of the Trinity because it is the very bedrock upon which our salvation stands. The Triune God is the One who has saved us; the Triune God is the One we love and adore.

How good is the God we adore,
Our faithful, unchangeable friend!
His love is as great as His power,
And knows neither measure nor end

'Tis Jesus, the First and the Last,
Whose Spirit shall guide us safe home;
We'll praise Him for all that is past,
And trust Him for all that's to come.

Joseph Hart (1712–68)

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