

## The Doctrine Of The Holy Trinity

Why should we considering the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity at a time like this? With the world in the state it is in, is it of any relevance?

1. In the Trinity each attribute of God receives its profoundest expression. Contemplation of the divine attributes in abstraction yields knowledge of God. Contemplation of God as triune yields knowledge of who God is *for us*.
2. Contemplation of God as triune is largely contemplation of God's self-disclosure in space/time.<sup>1</sup> It considers God's acts from Creation to Consummation. Therefore it is the basis for all unity in the evident diversity around us. It *explains* all order, pattern, development and progress characterizing world history. It *answers* the question as to whether things considered to be essential to the human experience actually has any true basis from which we can understand it. For example, is there any factual basis to which we can ground the entirely human need for communication and seek to understand it? Apart from a supposition of inter-Trinitarian communication rooted in eternity there would seem to be no solid explanation. We understand that, "**by the word of the Lord were the heavens made**" and everything since has in back of it a move and march towards the dawning of the eternal morning. History is the outworking of communication rooted in eternity.

**The Term Defined:** The term will not be found in the Scripture. It comes from the Latin word *trinitas*, which means "threeness." The Westminster Confessions states the doctrine as follows,

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.

### Some Misconceptions:

1. Some view the doctrine as a manmade addition adopted by the Church later because of the influence of Greek Philosophy. This is untrue. Consider the reason given for the doctrine in the Heidelberg Catechism, **Q.** "Since there is but one Divine Being, why do you speak of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? **A.** "Because God has so revealed Himself in His Word." (Question 25 Heidelberg Catechism).

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<sup>1</sup> Here is is common to make a distinction between the ontological and economic Trinity. The former refers to God as He is in and of Himself and later denotes God as He is revealed to and for His creation. The attributes of God are customarily treated with an eye towards the ontological Trinity, while God as a triune being is considered touching the economic.

2. Some stumble because there is some apparent development in the formulation of the doctrine. This should not cause us to stumble because all theological endeavors are developmental in their formulation of doctrines. Doctrines are simply not formulated until something is questioned or challenged. Also, the very nature of God's revelation and illumination in history is progressive. Progression does not necessitate a move from error to truth, rather from relative clarity to greater clarity in our understanding. The Christian revelation is perfect yet incomplete at every stage. "The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy." **Ps. 19:7.**

### **The Ground of the Doctrine is the Word of God.**

1. It must be granted that in the Old Testament God's self-disclosure emphasized the unity of His being. (a) This was necessary because the Fall resulted in man's radical departure from true knowledge of God. Paganism was rampant and man was greatly in need of knowledge of this oneness. (b) This was equally necessary for the covenant community, because they faced the continual enticement of pagan worship practices, brought about by the nearness of the surrounding nations.
2. Nevertheless, the Old Testament was not without abundant indication of fullness within this unity bordering on plurality.<sup>2</sup>
  - a. **Plurality in God's Essence is Hinted At.** *Elohim*, the name usually employed for designating God, is in the plural form. Grammarians agree that it is to be taken as an intensive plural and it is illegitimate to extrapolate a full-blown Trinitarian understanding from it. Nonetheless, when its usage is coupled with God's plural self-references it must denote a fullness bordering on distinction of persons.<sup>3</sup>
  - b. **Plurality is Revealed in Creation:** Even more significant is the Bible's assertion that God created all things in omnipotent power, by His Word and His Spirit. The creation account in Genesis places three, viz. God, Word and Spirit, as involved in the creation act. That all things are comprehended here implies the eternity of the Word and the Spirit (which the Bible's subsequent testimony bears out). **Ps. 33:6-9; Isa. 40:13ff.**<sup>4</sup> The two notions come

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<sup>2</sup> Or, to use Warfield's wonderful metaphor, the Old Testament is like, a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted; the introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before. The mystery of the Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament; but the mystery of the Trinity underlies the Old Testament revelation, and here and there almost comes into view. Thus the Old Testament revelation in not corrected by the fuller revelation which follows it, but perfected, extended and enlarged.

Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952),30.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 1:26-27; 3:22; Isa. 6:8.

<sup>4</sup> Here the NIV and some other versions read 'mind' for 'Spirit' or 'spirit.'

together wonderfully in **Ps. 33:6**, “**By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of His mouth.**”

- c. **Plurality is Revealed in the Re-Creation:** As the Covenant God, He is not styled so much as Elohim, but as Yahweh. He leads His people, not by His word alone:
- i. But by the Angel of the Covenant (the Angel of the Lord). This Angel appears early on to the patriarchs, to Hagar (**Gen. 16:6ff**), to Abraham (**18ff**) and to Jacob (**28:13**). He displays His power by liberating the Children of Israel from Egyptian bondage. He stands apart from other Angels in rank and importance, but is a special revelation and manifestation of God. He is clearly distinguishable from God, who refers to Him as His Angel, and yet He is presented as one in name, power, redemption, blessing, worship, and honor with God Himself. He is called Lord (**Gen. 28:30, 32** and **Ex. 3:4**). He bears the name of God Himself within Him (**Ex. 23:21**). He redeems Israel from all evil (**Gen. 48:16**), rescues Israel from the clutches of Egypt (**Ex. 3:8**), cleaves the waters and dries up the sea (**Ex. 14:21**), preserves the people of God on their way and delivers them safely into Canaan, there giving them triumph over their enemies (**Ex. 23:20**), and always encamps around those who fear the Lord (**Ps. 34:7** and **35:5**).<sup>5</sup>
  - ii. By His Spirit He grants to His covenant people all light, blessing and skills necessary to accomplish His holy will. By His Spirit, He gives artistic ability to the tabernacle craftsmen (**Ex. 28:3; 31:3-5; 35:31-35**), courage and strength to the Judges (**3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 14:6; 15:14**), light and power of prophetic utterance to the Prophets (**Nu. 11:25, 29; 24:2-3; Micah 3:8**) and sanctification and guidance for the people of God (**Ps. 51:12-13; 143:10**).
- d. **Plurality Revealed Anticipates Further Revelation:** That plurality, which is somewhat shadowed in the Old Testament, contains aspects that are preparatory of the clearly defined Trinitarian statements, confronting us in the New Testament. A future promise of greater covenantal fulfillment serves as the channel of conduit for the emergence of an agent who is divine yet also distinct from God.<sup>6</sup>
- i. In the last days the Lord will raise, from the ashes of Israel, a prophet in the likeness of Moses, yet greater (**Duet. 18:18**),

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<sup>5</sup> In this section there is heavy reliance upon the observation so Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*. Please refer to it for a truly cogent statement of the obvious parallels to salvific redemption.

<sup>6</sup> It should also be noted that the very nature of God’s gracious self-disclosure comes to us by way of His acting in history. Therefore, as the acts themselves are progressive, because purposeful, the revelations of the one acting becomes progressively more distinct.

- an eternal priest after the order of Melchizedek (**Ps. 110**), and a divine Davidic king (**2Sam. 7:12-16**). That which characterizes each presentation of this one to come is equality with and distinction from God. The presentation is comprehensive in that the very attributes belonging to God are given to this predicted one, yet His is unmistakably a man (**Isa. 7:14**), having no form or comeliness that we should desire Him (**Isa. 53:2ff**).
- ii. The presentation of the divine Spirit given in the Old Testament is also preparatory of greater divine works and a fuller unveiling in the New Testament. In the Last Days, He will appear as the Spirit of counsel and might (**Isa. 11:2**), who will be poured out upon all flesh (**Joel 2:28-32**), granting the benefit of cleansing, a new heart and spirit (**Eze. 36:25-27**), which will enable God's covenantal community to faithfully walk in fellowship with Him.
- e. **Plurality in the New Testament is to Be Expected.** In spite of the admittedly veiled revelation found in the Old Testament, there is adequate light to prepare any observant reader of the Bible for the candid presentation of God consisting of diversity within unity. What remains is the question as to whether the presentation of God in the New Testament *matches* the expectations emanating from the Old Testament.
- i. The unity of God is the point of departure for all saving activities of God contained in the New Testament. This includes the great work of redemption comprised in the respective stages of incarnation, atonement, and the outpouring of the eschatological Spirit, as well as the subsequent instruction of Jesus and the Apostles. However, the presentation of this unity is inclusive of diversity. God is seen to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is revealed as Triune of a tri-unity.
  - ii. The work of redemption is clearly revealed as a three-fold endeavor. The Father gives the Son to the world (**Jn. 3:16**), the Son who comes from heaven is born of the Spirit's power (**Lk. 1:35**). In the ministry of the Son, He is publicly declared by the Father and just as publicly empowered for service by the Spirit's power at the same Baptism (**Matt. 3:16-17**). The Son makes satisfaction to the Father through the eternal Spirit (**He. 9:14**). The Resurrection of the Son from the dead is the sovereign act of the Father (**Ro. 6:1-3**), but simultaneously the Spirit's public designation of the Son's divinity (**Ro. 1:4**).
- f. **Plurality if Defined and Clarified in the New Testament.** The New Testament revelation differs noticeably from the Old Testament in its clarity and richness. Here the essence of the

diversity is given and the demands and expectations in the Old Testament are adequately met.

- i. Salvation is presented as the co-equal, co-eternal work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are the co-bringers of redemption, while divine properties and attributes are attributed to all three.
    1. The Father is portrayed as the God who elects, plans, sends, and adopts, according to the council of His own will (**Eph. 1:3-6**).
    2. The Son is portrayed as the one who comes, redeems, and performs ongoing mediation (**Eph. 1:7-12**).
    3. The Spirit is portrayed as the God who applies the fruits of the Son's mediation, sanctifies and seals the believer, and testifies of the Father's love to the believer. (**Ro. 8:12-17; Eph. 1:13-14**).
3. The Doctrine of the Trinity is essential for the spiritual well being of the believer.
- a. It is a source of great joy and comfort to the saint to have a scriptural basis for the ongoing experiences every Christian must undergo to enter the celestial city. Every believer must first be redeemed, and subsequently adopted, sanctified, preserved, and finally glorified. It is no small comfort to be able to intelligently worship the agents of so mighty and all-important a work.
  - b. Apart from a right understanding of the objective basis for the various aspects of the workings of grace, it is not possible for the believer to intelligently cooperate with the Spirit's work of sanctification. The ground of the believer's justification is the love of the Father, while the means is the satisfaction of the Son. These are inseparable from the respective persons of the respective divine acts. How can one ever truly rest upon and draw comfort from these acts, when under trials, apart from a clear conception of these distinctions?
  - c. In the final analysis most all heresies and deceptions are reducible to a failure to recognize the divinity of one party of the Godhead or another. Can there be anything more destructive to the faith and spiritual health of the believer than a habitual denigration of God's person?
  - d. To not rightly recognize the distinctive nature of God and His acts on behalf of the believer is to wrongly read the word of God. There can be little soul happiness derived from ignorance of the Bible's most exalted themes.