

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity

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In the Introduction to his book on the Trinity, Gordon Clark comments that "over a period of thirty years the present writer has attended services in many places between Philadelphia and San Diego. . . . In the churches, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and independent, I never heard a sermon on the Trinity."<sup>1</sup> If this is any indication of the theological laxity of our age, it is a serious matter. Why? Because the doctrine of the Trinity is a cardinal doctrine; it is fundamental to the Christian faith and must be preached. According to A. A. Hodge:

By what considerations may it be shown that the doctrine of the Trinity is a fundamental element of the gospel? . . . It is not claimed that the refinements of theological speculations upon this subject are essential points of the faith, but simply that it is essential to salvation to believe in the three persons in one Godhead, as they are revealed to us in the Scriptures.<sup>2</sup>

What Hodge is saying is that a person cannot be saved apart from a knowledge of the Trinity. It is an essential element of the Gospel. By this he does not mean that one needs to have an exhaustive knowledge of the Trinity to have a saving

knowledge of God. But the God of Scripture is Triune and to know God is to know him as Triune.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (2:3) synthesizes the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity<sup>3</sup> 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." In this statement we have three major teachings: there is one living and true God who exists eternally in three persons; all three persons are equally divine; each of the three equal persons has distinguishing properties.

Christianity is both monotheistic and Trinitarian. Monotheism is the doctrine, as expressed by the *Shorter Catechism* (Q 5), that "there is but one only, the living and true God." In *Deuteronomy* 6:4 we read: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." In the New Testament, the apostle Paul writes: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (*1 Timothy* 2:5). And in *1 Corinthians* 8:4 we read: "there is no other God but one." There is unity

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<sup>3</sup> Although the term "Trinity" itself is not found in the Bible, the doctrine, as we will see, is taught throughout the Scriptures. "Trinity," which comes from the Latin *trinitas* ("threeness"), was first coined by Tertullian (c. A.D. 155-220) in his description of the three persons of the Godhead.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *The Trinity* (Trinity Foundation, 1985), 1.

<sup>2</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Zondervan, 1972 [1879]), 198.

within the Godhead. But there is also plurality: threeness. This does not mean that God is one and three in the same sense; that would be contradictory. God is one in one sense: essence, and three in another sense: persons. This is unique to Christianity. Both Judaism and Islam are monotheistic, but neither is Trinitarian. In the Christian doctrine, the unity and plurality of God are both essential.<sup>4</sup> As the *Catechism* (Q 6) states: "There are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." And each of the persons, as the *Catechism* (Q 6) goes on to say, is one hundred percent divine: "and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory." That is, each member of the Trinity "is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth" (Q 4). (The body and soul of the incarnate second person of the Godhead, of course, are not parts of the Trinity.)

Each person of the Godhead, then, is fully divine. But each person has properties which distinguish him from the other persons. The differences between the three are not differences in essence; they are distinctions within the Trinity. Only the Father can say, "I am the Father"; only the Son can say, "I am the Son"; and only the Holy Spirit can say, "I am the Holy Spirit." In referring to the other members of the Trinity, the Father can say, "He is the Son and he is the Spirit," but he cannot say, "I am the Son" or "I am the Spirit." In the same manner, the Son can say, "He is the Father and he is the Spirit," but he cannot say, "I am the Father" or "I am the Spirit." And the Spirit can say, "He is the Father and he is the Son," but he cannot say, "I am the Father" or "I am the Son." Simply stated, that which distinguishes the three members of the Godhead are the eternal paternity of the Father, the eternal Sonship of the Son, and the fact that the Spirit is eternally the Spirit. The Westminster divines speak of the distinguishing properties within the Godhead as follows: "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."

John Calvin declared the uniqueness of the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity:

There are in God three hypostases [persons] . . . the Father and Son and Spirit are one God, yet the Son is not the Father, nor the Spirit the Son, but . . . they are differentiated by a peculiar quality. . . . [W]here simple and indefinite mention is made of God, this name pertains no less to the Son and the Spirit than to the Father. But as soon as the Father is compared with the Son, the character of each distinguishes the one from the other. . . . [W]hatever is proper to each individually, I maintain to be incommunicable because whatever is attributed to the Father as a distinguishing mark cannot agree with, or be transferred to, the Son.<sup>5</sup>

The plurality of God and the divine status of each member is taught in both the Old and New Testaments. The Hebrew word *elohim* ("God") itself, a plural noun which is found over 2,500 times in the Old Testament, suggests some form of plurality within the Godhead, albeit it does not specify three persons. Divine plurality is further supported in *Genesis* 1:26; 3:22; and 11:7, where the plural pronoun "Us" is used of the one true God. Too, the Old Testament ascribes creation and providence (both of which are divine actions) to the Father (*Genesis* 1:1; *Job* 34:12-15), the Word (*Genesis* 1:3; *Psalms* 33:6, 9), and the Spirit (*Genesis* 1:2; *Psalms* 33:6; 104:30). The "threeness" of Jehovah (God's covenant name; compare *Exodus* 3:10-15) is at least strongly implied in the Aaronic benediction of *Numbers* 6:24-26: "Jehovah bless you and keep you; Jehovah make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; Jehovah lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." The Trinitarian nature of the Godhead is also taught in *Isaiah* 48:16; 61:1; and 63:9, 10. (The Angel of

<sup>4</sup> There are, of course, some Egyptian, Hindu, and Greek religions which are tri-theistic (i.e., three gods), but they are not Trinitarian in the sense of the Christian doctrine. Christianity does not teach tri-theism.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vols. I & II, Library of the Christian Classics, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster, 1960), I:13:2, 5, 6.

the Lord—the pre-incarnate Second Person of the Godhead—is given divine status in *Genesis* 16:7-13; 18:1-21; and 19:1-22.)

The New Testament witness is clearer still. The Trinity is revealed at both the birth (*Luke* 1:35) and baptism of Jesus (*Matthew* 3:16, 17). Creation and providence are ascribed to the Father (*Matthew* 7:11; *Acts* 17:28), the Son (*John* 1:3; *Colossians* 1:15-17; *Hebrews* 1:3), and the Holy Spirit (*Matthew* 1:18; 4:1; *Romans* 1:4). *1 Corinthians* 12:4-6; *2 Corinthians* 13:14; and *1 Peter* 1:2 also speak of the three persons of the Trinity. *Matthew* 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," is especially strong, in that it teaches both the unity and plurality of God. In this verse the three persons of the Trinity are emphatically distinguished by the use of the definite article "the" in each case; yet there is one singular "name."

That the New Testament teaches the deity of the Father is beyond cavil. The passages speaking to his divine nature are numerous, *John* 6:27 and *1 Peter* 1:2 being just two examples. Regarding the Son, in *John* 1:1-3, 14, we read that he is the eternal *Logos*: the Word of God. In *John* 8:58 and 13:19 Jesus claims that he is the eternal "I AM" (the Old Testament Jehovah). And there are at least eight places in the New Testament in which Jesus Christ is called God (*theos*): *John* 1:1; 1:18 (*NASV*); 20:28; *Romans* 9:5; *1 Timothy* 3:16 (*NKJV*); *Titus* 2:13; *2 Peter* 1:1; *Hebrews* 1:8; and *1 John* 5:20.

In *Acts* 5:3, 4 the Holy Spirit is called God (*theos*), and in *Hebrews* 9:14 he is said to be eternal. The fact that blasphemy of the Spirit is an unforgivable sin also speaks to his divine nature (*Matthew* 12:32). And in *1 Corinthians* 2:10, 11 we read that the Holy Spirit is able to search the mind of God. (Some modern day liberals have averred that the Holy Spirit is merely "the power of God," not a divine person. But in *Luke* 1:35, *Acts* 10:38, and *1 Corinthians* 2:4, the Spirit is distinguished from his power.) Passages such as these, from both the Old and New Testaments, which teach the unity and plurality of the three divine members of the Godhead, could be multiplied many times. But I

hope these will suffice to show that even though the word *Trinity* is not used in the Bible, the doctrine, as expressed by the Westminster divines, is clearly taught.

The history of the church has witnessed two major heresies regarding the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity: modalism (or Sabellianism<sup>6</sup>) and subordinationism. Modalism teaches that God is one in essence and one in person; there are not three persons, there are merely three ways of referring to the one person. Sometimes the Bible calls this person Father (e.g., when it speaks of creation), sometimes he is called Son (e.g., when it speaks of redemption), and sometimes he is called Holy Spirit (e.g., when it speaks of regeneration and sanctification). The Son and the Spirit are called "modes" of God; hence the name modalism. In modalism the unity of God is secured, but at the expense of the divine triunity of the persons.

Subordinationism teaches that there is one God: the Father. The Son and the Spirit are lesser deities, if divine at all. The Son and the Spirit, say the subordinationists, are not eternal beings; thus, they are subordinated to the Father. Modern unitarianism, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and related theologies have developed from the subordinationism taught in the early years of Christianity.

This is not to say that the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity does not recognize an order of economy, or administration, within the Godhead. Here there is a form of subordination. There are Biblical passages which state that the Father sent the Son into the world to accomplish his redemptive work (*Mark* 9:37; *John* 17:3). And there are passages which teach that the Father and the Son sent the Spirit (*John* 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). Likewise, Jesus said: "My Father is greater than I" (*John* 14:28). But these verses do not teach a subordination within the Trinity, i.e., they say nothing with regard to the divine nature of the members of the Godhead. Rather, these verses teach that within the (economic) Trinity, each member has functions to perform in redemptive history. Simply stated, the

<sup>6</sup> Sabellianism is named for Sabellius (3rd century), who taught a form of modalism.

concept of the economic Trinity has to do with the works of the Triune Godhead outside of himself.

In the work of redemption, for example, the Father is the one who elects (*Ephesians* 1:3, 4; *1 Peter* 1:2), the Son is the one who becomes incarnate and accomplishes redemption for the elect (*Ephesians* 1:7; *1 Peter* 1:2), and the Spirit is the one who regenerates the elect (*John* 3:3-8; *Titus* 3:5, 6), and progressively sanctifies them (*2 Corinthians* 3:17, 18; *2 Thessalonians* 2:13), *i.e.*, he applies redemption. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (8:1, 5, 8) says it this way:

It pleased God in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only begotten Son, to be the mediator between God and man . . . unto whom he did from all eternity give a people to be his seed, and to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified.

The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, which he through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of Heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him.

To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption, he doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same; making intercession for them; and revealing unto them, in and by the Word, the mysteries of salvation; effectually persuading them by his Spirit to believe and obey; and governing their hearts by his Word and Spirit; overcoming all their enemies by his almighty power and wisdom, in such manner and ways as are most consonant to his wonderful and unsearchable dispensation.

In this sense, and in this sense only, God the Father is greater than the Son, and the Father and the Son are greater than the Spirit; not in their essence, but in their administrative order, or economy.

Finally, it is to be noted that there is perfect harmony in the work of the Trinity. This is necessarily true because orthodox Christianity teaches that the three persons of the Trinity have only one will. Apart from this, there would be confusion and chaos within the Godhead. But "God," writes the apostle Paul, "is not the author of confusion" (*1 Corinthians* 14:33). And in *Malachi* 3:6 we read: "I am the Lord, I do not change."

The perfect harmony that exists within the Trinity is found in Scripture in various ways. We have already seen that each member of the Trinity is involved in creation (*Genesis* 1:1-3; *Psalms* 33:6; *John* 1:3), and that each is active in salvation (*1 Peter* 1:2). In *1 Corinthians* 12:4-6 Paul teaches us that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in communion with the church. And in the Great Commission of *Matthew* 28:18-20 we read that all three persons are active in the evangelization of the world. Further, all three persons are involved in the redemptive work of Christ: his incarnation (*Luke* 1:35); his baptism (*Matthew* 3:16, 17); his crucifixion (*Hebrews* 9:14); his resurrection (*Acts* 2:32; *John* 10:17; *Romans* 1:4); and his ascension (*Acts* 2:33). In fact, the perfect harmony that exists in the work of the Trinity is one of the strongest arguments for "limited atonement." Since the Father has chosen only some to be saved (*Ephesians* 1:4), and the Spirit regenerates and seals a certain number (*Titus* 3:5, 6; *Ephesians* 1:13, 14), then the Son's atonement could not have been unlimited, *i.e.*, for the whole. The fact is that Christ died to save only those whom the Father has chosen and those who will be regenerated by the Spirit: the elect (*Ephesians* 1:7; 5:25). "You shall call his name Jesus," writes Matthew (1:21), "for he will save *his people* from their sins."

We live in a day when many seminaries and would-be theologians are praising the virtues of "practice," and playing down the need to study doctrine. This is a sad commentary on the church at the end of the twentieth century. To de-emphasize doctrine is to de-emphasize Christianity, for Christianity is doctrine. Christianity is the teaching of the sixty-six books of the Bible. Practice or behavior is the result of the doctrine. But the behavior itself is not Christianity. What is needed is a return to the study

of systematic theology. And a study of the Trinity is a good place to start. After all, belief in the Trinity is essential to a saving knowledge of God.

Robert Reymond says:

The Biblical basis of the doctrine of the Trinity, I would submit . . . runs deep and cuts a wide swath. . . . [H]e who would advocate a truly Trinitarian faith will necessarily endorse the full, unabridged deity and personal subsistence of the Son and the full, unabridged deity and personal subsistence of the Holy Spirit. It was the realization of these twin facts that lay behind the statement of Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-c. 389): "I cannot think of the One, but I am immediately surrounded with the glory of the Three; nor can I clearly discover the Three, but I am suddenly carried back to the One."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *God and Man in Holy Scripture* (unpublished manuscript, Covenant Theological Seminary, 1990), 107.