

## Newsletter January 2014

In this newsletter we shall discuss the doctrine of the Holy Trinity by using edited excerpts taken from *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity*, Book I, Chapter 6.3. Earlier in Chapter 2.1 of Book I, we discussed the many attributes of God the Father. In Chapter 5.1, as we studied the Holy Spirit, we found that He is also God. Then in Chapter 6.1 we discussed Christ, the Son, with respect to his deity as well as his humanity as a consequence of the incarnation (cf. Newsletter December 2011). Thus, we must conclude that the Father is God, Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is also God. Scripture unequivocally states that there is only one God, not three (cf. De. 6:4; 1Co.8:6). Therefore, we find that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are necessarily one and the same God living in perfect and eternal unity and harmony.

Human language completely fails us in describing this unique divine relationship inasmuch as we have no specific word to describe three distinct living essences that are nonetheless wholly integrated as one into a greater infinite cosmic being. The writers of the New Testament books chose to record events and the teachings of Jesus as they encountered them, for the most part, without grappling with summary words to fully describe the divine being as an everlasting harmonious relationship of three. Even so, we find that the Greek word *theios* often translated “Godhead” (also “being” or “divine being”) in English is an effort to define the overall attribute of God in one word (cf. Ac.17:29; Ro.1:20; Col.2:9). In like manner, we often incorporate inadequate words to describe the individual properties of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit living in complete unity within the singular Godhead. The Apostle John utilized the Greek word *logos* in describing Jesus Christ within this divine relationship as being with God and yet God Himself in essential being: “In the beginning was the Word [*logos*], and the Word [*logos*] was with God, and the Word [*logos*] was God” (Jn.1:1; cf. Jn.1:14).

Words often have a broad common meaning in English that could lead us to improper assumptions about the Godhead. Therefore, to justify the use of imprecise words, we must first assign a special context to them when we use them with respect to deity, which greatly narrows their meaning (cf. Book I, page 356). That is precisely what has been done with two English words, “trinity” and “person” such that more common English dictionary definitions of those words are not accurate when we use them to speak of deity. The word “trinity” in common usage means a summation of three individual things, or of three separate individuals acting as a single governing unit (i.e. a troika). Neither of these definitions is applicable to the indivisible eternal divine relationship. Therefore, we must acknowledge a special narrow application of the word “trinity” to describe the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit subsisting as one undivided being or Godhead. This is ordinarily accomplished by capitalizing the first letter of the word “trinity” and/or by adding the qualifying prefix “Holy.” Unfortunately, the term “Holy Trinity” carries with it a certain amount of high church stigma carried over from erroneous Roman Catholicism doctrine (cf. Book I, page 365, 366) such that many evangelicals prefer to use the more clearly descriptive term “triune,” which taken literally means “three in one.”

In trying to explain the ways in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinguishable from each other, as is clearly demonstrated in Scripture, a special application of the word “person” was derived from the Latin word “*hypostasis*.” In theological terms, “*hypostasis*” means one of three subsistences each having identical attributes that are fully integrated within one singular subsistence that is God. Augustine wrote concerning this impoverishment of words: “On account of the poverty of human speech in so great a matter, the word ‘*hypostasis*’ had been forced upon us by necessity, not to express what it is, but only not to be silent on how Father, Son, and Spirit are three.” Today, we are compelled to use “person” for want of a better word.

At first, it would appear that the doctrine of the Trinity is contradictory. That is, we are saying that God is one and at the same time saying that God is three. However, what we are actually saying is that God is one in one sense and three in another sense. He is one in substance, essence, and being, but three in persons or personalities. For that reason, the doctrine of the Trinity is actually a paradox, not a contradiction. A contradiction cannot be resolved, while a paradox only seems to be contradictory on the surface because it expresses a truth that is very difficult for our minds to grasp. To use a very simple example of a paradox, we have one book, the Bible. If someone lifts it up and says, he is holding sixty-six books in his hand that would appear to be a contradiction. However, it is sixty-six books in one sense as well as being one book in a another sense. So we observe that the

Bible is one, but not in every sense. Nevertheless, in this simple allegory, we could also say that the Bible is divided into sixty-six books, but we absolutely cannot say that the Godhead is divided into three persons since within each person is the fulness or completeness of the Godhead (cf. Col.2:9). Again, by incorporating the Greek word *logos* from the Gospel of John, we discover that Jesus Christ is with God in the sense of his person being distinguishable from the Father, while He also is fully God and thus inseparable from his Father (cf. Jn.1:1, 10:30).

Logically, we cannot hope to fully understand this paradox, but we can clearly see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit written in Holy Scripture as distinct persons, yet we know that they are of the same substance, which constitutes one God, because each are clearly referred to as the one eternal God. Thus, we must accept this fact on the basis of our faith in God's Word. In a brief statement found as the responsive answer to question 6 of *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (cf. Book III, pages 258,259), we find a quite reasonable definition of the doctrine of the Trinity that is simple and to the point: *"There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory."* This is a helpful definition of which we shall make use in the following paragraphs.

In the first two clauses of this statement, three individual "persons" are named whom we refer to as the "Father", "Son", and the "Holy Spirit" who comprise a singular eternal being or Godhead. At times when we speak of God, we speak only of the "Father," the awesome sovereign being who dwells in the Eternal Heavens; whose being is of such magnitude that the earth is but his footstool; the majestic God who is completely invisible and without physical form; who is not even within our physical dimension and who exists apart from time in eternity. We speak of Him, whose uniqueness and holiness is such that no image, whether real or imagined, could possibly do Him justice, but can only offend Him. At other times, we speak of God only as "the Son," that unique man (and yet God), Jesus Christ, who walked among men and died on the cross for our transgressions: fully man, yet fully God – the son of man and also the incarnate Son of God. Still other times, we speak of God as the Holy Spirit who dwells within us and is the same Spirit that also fully dwells within Jesus Christ. He is the Comforter whom Jesus sent from the Father to stand by us and guide us in Jesus' physical absence (cf. Jn.16:7). The Holy Spirit is the One who is not only with us, but also living within us such that we can never be separated from Christ even for a moment (cf. He.13:5). From these obvious observations, we recognize the necessity for individually describing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as we find them in Holy Scriptures yet without suggesting any disunity in the divine being; thus, the term "persons" is being used here in the special context applicable only to deity.

*"These three are one God."* In the beginning of this work, we saw that God was a Spirit, not existing in our physical dimension and, yet, was a real being with a recognizable personality (cf. Book I, Chapter 2.1). The Holy Spirit is a "Spirit" as is the Father and is referred to as God and by other names in Scripture that leave no doubt that the Holy Spirit is not only from God, but is God. Furthermore, we established how the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus and that Jesus received the Holy Spirit without measure and in Him was the full essential being and nature of Godhead bodily (Col.2:9). While natural man has within him a fallen spirit of corruption, Jesus uniquely had within Him the holy Spirit of God from his birth, because He was begotten of God through the Holy Spirit (Lu.1:34,35).

*"These three are one God, the same in substance..."* We clearly see that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all three share fully that same divine substance found only within the Eternal Being. In this work, the word "substance" has been used in describing that which is the indivisible and incomprehensible essence of God. It is not that "substance" is a more accurate term than are any others, but that this word is probably more clearly comprehended. While there is a clear distinction of persons in the Godhead, there is no difference in their substance. For Jesus is heard to ask, "Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me" (Jn.14:10)? Furthermore, Jesus also said, "he that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (Jn.14:9). Therefore, we cannot rightly speak of the Godhead without speaking of all three identities or persons. Jesus, as we saw earlier, existed even before his coming here on earth in the flesh (cf. Jn.1:1). How can that be except that we are speaking of Jesus as the One God of incorporeal substance? Moreover, the word "Emmanuel" from Scripture literally means "God

with us” (Mt.1:23). Therefore, the Father is that One God, the Holy Spirit is that One God, and Jesus is that One God – not each in part, but each fully. When we say that the three persons of the Godhead are all of the same substance, we mean that they are all three the same identical essential being. Jesus does not obtain his deity from the Father, nor does the Father derive his deity from the Holy Spirit. Each person fully defines all that is God in such a way that the Godhead is in no way divisible. The three persons of the Godhead fully share the same incorporeal substance totally and without division.

*“These three are one God... equal in power and glory”*. A common way of speaking (even among those who are sound in the faith) is to rank the members of the Godhead as the Father who is the boss, Jesus the son who is inferior in rank under Him, and the Holy Spirit as the worker who is inferior both to the Father and to the Son. However, in Scripture we find that there is no hierarchy of glory, power or authority within the Godhead. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit never differ in opinion or thought, just as they do not differ in substance. Therefore, such phrases as referring to Jesus as the “number two person in the Godhead” are misleading at best since it erroneously implies an inferiority of position or substance. Surely, when we use phrases distinguishing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we do not see any ranking of substance, power, or glory, but merely a willing subordination of function and order that was limited to the specific task at hand – the redemption of mankind. That is why Jesus could say that He “...came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.” (Jn.6:38) and also say, “I and my Father are one” (Jn.10:30). In the sense of Jesus’ human nature, He did not come to do his own will, but in the sense of his deity his will never differed from that of his Father – hence he came to do the will of the Father in order to complete his work of atonement (Jn.4:34).

Rather than properly limiting subordination of function to the redemption of mankind, some have gone over to an extreme in describing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as mere modes (or functions) of one singular Godhead in an eternal cosmic sense (cf. Book I, pages 349, 364). This notion blurs the individual characteristics of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit together in such a way that we can find no real distinction between them at all. We could not even properly refer to them separately as the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, which Scripture clearly does, because they would be one in every sense. For instance, those holding to modalism must concede that the Father and the Holy Spirit also died on the cross when Jesus died, and that Jesus spent considerable time praying to Himself when he prayed to his Father. This thought defies reason as well as the plain text of Scripture. Moreover, modalism could allow us to choose to worship God through only one of his supposed three modes exclusively. The worship of the Father and Son would become unnecessary if we should choose to concentrate all our worship on the Holy Spirit. Those of the modern Pentecostal Oneness persuasion commonly referred to as “Jesus Only” (cf. Book III, page 324) place a very strong emphasis upon the indwelling Holy Spirit over the Father and the Son as the preeminent divine being in practice if not in specific doctrine. Many such Pentecostals consider the Holy Spirit to be the “final mode” of God replacing “earlier modes.” Nevertheless, other Pentecostals insist that they are not holding to a sequential form of modalism, but only parallel modalism, which only implies a means of function within a singular Godhead. In that way, the “modes” of the Father, and the Son, are seen to exist simultaneously with the Holy Spirit, but their functions, though still existing, are no longer beneficial or useful in today’s world.

As we have put forth, any subordination of function and order can be found only within the act of redemption, and it does not imply a fundamental modality within the eternal Godhead Itself. Jesus, the Son of God became man on earth, in order to make atonement for our sins, and by means of the Holy Spirit He was glorified by the Father and now sits again at the Father’s right hand. The Holy Spirit actively strives with all men on Earth and dwells within redeemed men and women; The Father is at all times in heaven and rules over all. In this, three distinct persons are acting in concert as one singular unique being in the act of redemption. There is full unity of the three persons within the Godhead, and by such unity, our salvation is made secure (cf. Jn.10:28,29). It is through our unity within Christ that we have been fully accepted within the bosom of the Eternal Beloved (cf. Ep. 1:3-6). © Arthur J. Smith January 2014