

Three In One -The Doctrine Of The Divine Trinity Examined

In a booklet he wrote some years ago a minister of one of the best known Churches recalled a conversation he had had with a Moslem student from Pakistan, and a regular attender at his Church. The conversation turned to prayer. As it happened, the time for University examinations was approaching, and the Minister suggested how helpful it was to pray at such time. "That's right, Reverend" the Moslem student said, "I pray for my examinations, too, and it's only then I wish I were a Christian." In answer to the question, "Why?", the student replied, "Well, you see, I would then have three gods to pray to".

It will be promptly said and, no doubt was promptly said, that the student visitor from Pakistan had got it all wrong. At the same time he had, unwittingly stumbled into what is, at least from the outside, the most perplexing, difficult, and hard to understand area of Christian teaching - the teaching concerning God and the doctrine of the Divine Trinity.

The Christian Church's official position on this has its origin at the Council of Nicea, called together in the year 325 A.D. To combat the heresy of "Arianism", a formula was agreed upon. God is three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. At the same time, and however difficult it is to understand this, they are one.

I quote the Nicene Creed - "We believe in one God, the Father, All Sovereign, maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only begotten that is, of the substance of the Father. God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made, things in heaven and things on earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, and became man, suffered, and rose on the third day, ascended into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Spirit."

Like most creeds drawn up by man, the Nicene Creed by no means satisfied a considerable number of Christians. However, it has largely "stuck" and the concepts it embodies have come down to us today. In most Christian Churches you will hear mention of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Each is a separate Person. Each has a separate identity. Each has a different function. At the same time, although three, yet they are one. The Church would assert it is a mystery.

Nevertheless this mystery of three co-equal Persons in the Godhead, each of whom is God, is to be believed. And this is where it rests.

However, not everyone is content that it should rest there. It is a contradiction to assert the existence of three Gods and yet to insist they are one. And there is a great deal of confusion in people's minds. Many not knowing what to believe and some simply giving up trying to understand. So many times questioning is met with the assertion that we are not meant to know or understand. Common sense tells us it can't be so and yet we are to believe otherwise.

For centuries the subject of the Godhead and the question of the Trinity was a central and all important issue in the Christian Church. A few are known to have questioned the orthodox teaching of three in one. They, as some of us do today, detect the illogicality and impossibility involved. One of those who did question was the now largely forgotten Spaniard Michael Servetus who, in 1553 was tried for heresy for his views and put to death in Geneva at the instigation of John Calvin.

Twenty two years earlier, in 1531, Michael Servetus had published a book under the title, "Errors in respect of the Divine Trinity". He had searched the Scriptures and discovered not one word about three persons in one essence, and had come to the conclusion that the doctrine of three coequal Persons in the Godhead, each of whom is God, was both unscriptural and unbelievable.

"Infinitely great has been the injury brought upon the Christian Church by the dogma of Tritheism", he wrote. "Innumerable heresies and monstrous notions have sprung from it, and within the Church it has given birth to the most marvellous doctrines and thousands of inexplicable, hair splitting, and unreasonable problems."

Two hundred years later, and reminiscent of certain of the things Michael Servetus had argued, Emanuel Swedenborg wrote of the Divine Trinity as being not a trinity of three co-equal persons, each of whom is God, in the Godhead, but as being a trinity of essentials in the one God. And he pointed to the analogy which exists with every individual.

Although consisting of three essentials, yet we are one person. Those three essentials are our soul, our body, and our proceeding or outflowing life. We are one person, in whom is a trinity of three essentials. Similarly, God is one Person in whom is a Divine trinity of essentials - not 'Persons', please note, but 'essentials'. Referred to as 'the Father', is the Divine soul and life. Referred to as 'the Son' is the body and human nature assumed in the world. And 'the Holy Spirit' is the proceeding life and influence from this one God.

It should be noted that nowhere in the Old Testament is there any mention of any other than one God, generally known and referred to there by the name "Jehovah". In fact, the point is made emphatically, as in Isaiah Chapter 43, verse 11, and in Isaiah 45, verse 21. "I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no saviour". Again, "And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is none but me".

Also what is important is it is just as emphatically stated that the one God, Jehovah, would Himself descend into the world to bring about redemption, and not, as is commonly supposed, that He would send another. Consider these words in Isaiah Chapter 25, verse 9 "In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

And it is interesting that the Jews perceived Jesus to be claiming to be this one God, Jehovah, when they took up stones to stone him (John 8, 59). "It is believed at this day in the Christian Churches" wrote Swedenborg, "that God, the Creator of the universe, begot a Son from eternity, who descended and assumed a human in order to redeem and save mankind. (It can however be) shown from the Word that Jehovah God Himself descended and became Man and also the Redeemer." (*True Christian Religion* 82).

There is one God and this one God, out of love and concern that we should continue to have all possibilities of salvation, Himself descended into the world. He chose to do this as the only effective means open to Him of overcoming the power of evil from hell which had become such that it was threatening to destroy the human race.

By assuming or "putting on", fallen human nature by conception and birth of the virgin Mary, He would, as He intended, come face to face with the allurements and inclinations to selfishness and evil which were besetting people everywhere. Not only would He come face to face with them but He would endeavour to resist and overcome them. And He did this. From earliest childhood to the last moments of His life on earth Jesus was in constant combat with the forces of evil. As the result of His victories over these forces He brought a new strength into the human situation which everyone could thereafter call upon to help them through their struggles and temptations.

But, you will say, Jesus spoke of the Father as someone separate from Himself. He also prayed to Him. How do you account for this? God was inmost within Jesus from the beginning. But there was much from Mary which covered over the Divine which was there. As Jesus, however "put off" what He had derived from Mary, so He made room for the Divine life to descend into His life and consciousness more and more. It was a gradual process. For much of the time they seemed to be two. At the end, and when the process was complete, they were one.

Even during His ministry, and while there are those places which make it appear as if the Father and Jesus were two, there are other places where, clearly, they are spoken of as one. The best known of these is in John's Gospel, chapter 14, where, confused about the matters, Philip requested Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?"

"For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9). And this says it all. There is one God in one Person, and He is the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ. He is the God we can visualise and love and worship and work with. He is our Creator. He came on earth to be our Redeemer. And His influence is all the time at work on behalf of our regeneration and everlasting well being.

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