

# Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity

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Faith in the living God has been rejected time and again by the ignorant and the indifferent, as well as by many of the learned and the thoughtful. It has been especially challenged today. Such theologians as Bishop John A. T. Robinson of Woolwich, honestly seeking to be *Honest to God*, urged Christians to abandon most of the phrasing which historically has been used to convey Christian thought. Similarly, the late Bishop James A. Pike of California dismisses many traditional doctrines as old bottles which will inevitably burst and whose bursting should occasion no regrets.

In this kind of context many men, even ministers, feel uneasy when they think about the Trinity. The question before us is whether it is time to renounce a doctrine which, by affirming that there are three persons in God, seems to have produced confusion rather than clarification, or whether it was designed to embody values that are a vital and necessary part of the Christian faith.

From the days of Arius it has been a chosen scheme with his disciples to represent the doctrine of the Trinity as an artificial theological construct, and consequently unimportant. To a large number of Christians, however, it is a doctrine fundamental to Christianity since it deals with a correct knowledge of God. Related to the divine Being, His nature and mode of being, this knowledge affects every man's understanding of God as the object of his worship, whether he regards Him as one in essence and one in person, or admits that in the unity of the Deity there are three equally divine Persons. It cannot be an irrelevant subject. If the doctrine of the Trinity is true, then those who deny it do not worship the God of the Scriptures. If it is false, the Trinitarians, by paying divine honor to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, are equally guilty of idolatry. The doctrine of the Trinity is not merely speculation, but lies at the root of every man's theology and affects his whole creed and practice.

The difficulty is evident enough. A doctrine that affirms that God is one, and yet that there are three persons in God, must often bewilder the mind in its attempt to find a relevant and intelligible framework in which that seeming contradiction can be expressed and at the same time meet the average person's religious needs. No wonder that the reference to the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible has encouraged sardonic remarks to the effect that the whole doctrine is incomprehensible. But let us try to forget the arbitrary speculations and abstruse formulas of the scholastics and the church councils in an effort to understand from the Scriptures a doctrine beset with difficulties and obscurities. Here it is true, more than with any other topic in theology, that we see through a glass darkly.

## The Doctrine of God

**The God of the Hebrews.** In the NT there are no such words as Trinity or trinitarian. There is much about God the Father, about Jesus who is called the Son, and about the Holy Spirit.

Behind the NT is the OT. The world did not have to wait till the Christian Era to discover God. For the people of Israel, more than for any other nation of the earth, God was the conscious center of their lives. He is a God of action, never indifferent or passive. He participates in human episodes, and the events of history are no accidents. God's hand controls them. To Him all living things owe their existence, even if no one could look upon his face and live. When He comes down to touch men's lives, He either comes through an angel whom He has sent, or He inspires the prophets by His Spirit. They had a living faith in a living God.

The fundamental article of this faith is that God is one. "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut 6:4), is the cry which for centuries has been proclaimed by the Jewish prophets. We find it quoted by Jesus in His summary of the Law (Mark 12:29-30), and it is echoed in the words of Paul and other writers of the early church. Born in the midst of Judaism, the Christian religion shows a close bond between its concept of God and the Jewish doctrine of God. Both religions agree that God is Creator and Judge, and Ruler of the universe. Both agree that He is just and merciful. Both agree that He is one.

**The God of the Christian religion.** But the sending of Jesus Christ into the world reacted upon the Christian doctrine of God. A belief in the divine mission of Jesus and the experiencing of the Holy Spirit culminated in a doctrine of one God in three persons, a doctrine understood as a more intimate knowledge of the divine Being. The statements about Father, Son, and Spirit found in the NT are of such a nature as to reveal the awareness of a trinitarian theology. It seems to the author that the initial and crucial issue in this matter was in fact the relationship of Father to Son. In other terms if the Word had not been made flesh, there would have been no stumbling block for Jewish monotheism.

Let us remember that it was not with theory, but with experience that the Christian faith began; not with impersonal dogma, but with personal impact. That which made Christianity a vital entity and specifically identified Christian experience was the encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. In their attempt to define in words the nature and meaning of their encounter with the Galilean, the inspired writers of the NT point to Him as the Son of "the living God" (see, for instance, Matt 16:18).

Of Him the divine attributes are predicted: eternity (John 1:2; Rev 1:8, 11, 17, 18), omnipresence (Matt 18:20); immutability (Heb 13:8; 1:8, 10, 12); omnipotence (John 1:3; Col 1:17). Things that are in the OT said of Yahweh-God, the highest of all appellations of the Deity, are in the NT said of Christ (Ps 68:18 and Eph 4:8-10; Ps 102:21, 24, 27 and Heb 1:10-12; Isa 8:13-14 and 1 Peter 2:7-8; Isa 40:3 and Matt 3:3). "Crowned with glory and honor" because He was made "perfect through suffering," the Son is infinitely higher than the angels. He existed before all the Worlds; He fully shared in the divine glory throughout eternity. But He authenticated His person ultimately and in the time dimension, by His humiliation as servant and Redeemer. He lived as a man among men.

The phrasing "Son of God," to be sure, was not new. It appears in the OT identifying those who bear it with human beings, angels, or Israel in general, as well as its Davidic king in particular (see Gen 6:1, 2; Job 1:6; Hos 11:1; Ps 2:7). In either case it stresses a moral rather than a biological relationship. It explains in a perfectly standard and accepted way the character of the being recognized as very much out of the ordinary. Christ's dignity, however, stands at an infinite distance above that of any created being whatsoever. It is evident that the name is indicative of the deity of Christ. In wondrous union with the Father, but a different personality from Him,<sup>1</sup> this Son of God, fully God and perfect man, claims and receives without protest, as His just and inalienable right, equal trust, adoration, love and service with Him who says, "I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other" (Isa 42:8).

**The issue raised by the incarnation.** This special personal relationship of Jesus with God, so often stressed in the Synoptics and even more in Paul's Epistles passes almost into complete identification in Christ's last discourse with the disciples as recorded in the Fourth Gospel: "If you had known me, you should have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him." Philip's protest brings but a repetition, even an intensification: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:7.9).

It is evident that the sending of the Word into the world reacted upon the Christian doctrine of God. The incarnation raised the crucial issue of the relationship of Father with Son. God was regarded as one, but He was also believed to be the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Statements of this nature, taken in conjunction with other statements in which the divinity of Christ is affirmed or implied, lead immediately to the trinitarian doctrine. These ideas made it possible for Christians to conceive of the Father-Son relationship within the Deity and to discover a plurality within the unity of God. They readily considered these conclusions since they regarded them as foreshadowed in the OT Scriptures (Mic 5:1, 2 and Matt 2:5, 6; Ps 45:6, 7 and Heb 1:8, 9). OT prophecy found itself fulfilled. Implicit in the OT, these ideas find themselves explicitly and formally stated in the New. Therefore, it is erroneous to say that the doctrine of the Trinity is postbiblical and answers a problem which did not occur to the writers of the NT.

### **The Biblical View of the Spirit**

**In the Old Testament.** We still have to consider the biblical view of the Spirit. In the OT the Spirit (*rûah*) is primarily the power that comes from God to man, enabling him to do extraordinary things. It is true that the Spirit of God appears first as God's creative power. When "the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep," then "the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." So begins the book of Genesis (Gen 1:2). But this creative Spirit, the divine *rûah*, is essentially the power of "the living God," the energy that comes to a man to enlarge his power for the special task appointed him to do. This is clear, for example, in the case of Samson (Jdgs 14:6) or of Saul (1 Sam 10:10). In Joel 2:28 the outpouring of the Spirit produces prophecy. In Isa 44:3ff.; Eze 11:19 and 36:26, the result is religious regeneration. In Isa 11:2 it is the endowment of the Messiah. However, several chapters later, Isaiah implies that God Himself is Spirit, when He affirms, "The Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit" (Isa 31:3). Finally in Ps 51:11 and Isa 63:10 the Spirit is called holy. That which was only intimated at first was set forth more clearly and more fully as time went on.

**Jesus and the Holy Spirit.** This "Spirit of the Lord" Jesus regarded as having assigned Him, in fulfillment of another of Isaiah's promises, "to bring good tidings to the afflicted . . . to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor . . ." (Isa 61:1, 2). In selecting these lines to set forth His view of His own mission, Jesus tied together God's revelation in His Son, the Christ, and the OT doctrine of the divine Spirit. He unquestionably was bringing in new factors for a better understanding of the nature of the Spirit, factors which would eventually lead His disciples to the understanding of the personality of the Spirit.

There are in fact only eight passages in the Synoptic Gospels in which there is a reference by our Lord to the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> But how significant are the implications! Christ's most notable references to the Spirit are those we find in the Fourth Gospel. In the early chapters of this

book the Spirit is scarcely more prominent than he is in the Synoptics. God himself is a spirit, and man must be “born of water and of the Spirit” if he is to enter the kingdom of God. When we come to the latter part of John’s writing, we enter into a really intensive discussion of the nature and mission of the Spirit. This is the representation of the Spirit as taking Jesus’ place in the life of the disciples and of the Church. The Paraclete, or Comforter, as the KJV translates it (RSV, “Counselor”) is in fact a long step beyond the *rûah* of the OT. There, as noted before, we have something like an impersonal force, gradually revealed as a moral personality. In John’s account of the conversation of the Last Supper we have from the very first a fully personal being, who is not only conceived as power, but also as life. No doubt this latter idea was foreshadowed in the OT since “fire” as well as “wind” were traditional symbols of the Spirit.

**Jesus: The Holy Spirit is the indwelling Lord.** In fact, what this Comforter, Advocate, or Counselor does and will do is clearly set forth by Jesus throughout the discourse. He will “teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). “He will convince the world of sin” (16:8) and “guide” the disciples “into all the truth” (16:13). “He will glorify me,” says Jesus, and “he will declare to you the things that are to come” (16:13, 14). The introduction of the Spirit as “another Paraclete” points to a parallel between the Son and the Holy Ghost (John 14:6).

The suggestion is clearly one of identity in function as well as that of a fully personal being, whereas the character as well as the mission are summed up and specified in “you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you” (John 14:17). The Holy Spirit is thus described as the Lord indwelling the mind and heart of each individual believer. The nature of the Spirit is here revealed to the Master’s disciples.

The God in whom Jesus believed and whom he revealed was not in any essential quality different from the OT God, the God whom the Jews sought to serve. Jesus did not come to destroy the Law, nor the Prophets, but to fulfill them. And this is what He did. There was nothing about His concept of the Spirit of God which was alien to the theological thinking of pre-Christian Judaism. Even as the OT writings inspired the faith in one God and Father of all, so they also made available to Christianity the identifying of that God as an active God, active on the earth, and among men, in the presence of the Holy Spirit. These were to become constituent factors in the origins of the doctrine of the Trinity.

**The apostles and the Holy Spirit.** As the Lord had promised, the postresurrection presence of the Spirit was experienced in many remarkable ways by those whom Jesus had called. The NT states that the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost fulfilled OT prophecy (Acts 2:16ff.). In the OT the expression *rûah qôdeš* occurs only three times and even then with “thine” or “his,” whereas in the NT, Holy Spirit (*pneuma hagion*) occurs 88 times, sometimes with the definite article and sometimes without it. The common NT use of the phrase “the Spirit” reveals a new world, a new dispensation, and indicates the vital and familiar position which He played in the experience of the early Christians. The meaning of Christ’s apparent equation of the Spirit with the Son was taking on a deeper significance for them.

**An independent personality.** The terms, “Spirit of God” or “Holy Spirit,” however, do not suggest a personality as much as does the term “Son of God.” Moreover, the person of the Holy Spirit did not appear in a clearly discernible, personal form among men, as did the person of the Son of God. Thus, in the early church, the personality of the Holy Spirit was often questioned and even denied in some instances, as by the Monarchians for example, who were followed by Socinians and other modern Unitarians.

A careful examination of the NT writings, however, leaves us little doubt that their authors thought of the Spirit as a fully personal “he” and not “it.” Such personal properties and actions

are ascribed to the Spirit as have proved Him an independent personality. He has intelligence (John 14:26; 15:26; Rom 8:16), a will (Acts 16:7; 1 Cor 12:11), and affections (Eph 4:30). Furthermore He performs acts proper to personality. He is said to speak expressly (1 Tim 4:1), to send (Acts 10:20), to prevent (Acts 16:7), to command (Acts 11:12), to forbid (Acts 16:6), to call ministers of the gospel (Acts 13:2), to appoint them to their spheres of duty (Acts 20:28), to make intercession (Rom 8:26, 27), to be grieved and tempted (Eph 4:30; Acts 5:19), as well as to dwell in Christians as His temple (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19), and to comfort them (John 14:16, 17). These qualities and actions are more commonly identified with human personality and cannot be attributed to some mere power or influence.<sup>3</sup> And this person is God since lying unto the Spirit is lying unto God, as Peter declares to Ananias in Acts 5:3, 4.<sup>4</sup>

**What about the spiritual gifts?** The impression which we receive from these statements is confirmed by what we find in Paul's writings regarding the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is true that when Paul speaks of the gifts of the Spirit and of the power of the Spirit, both may appear at first to be mechanistic and impersonal. It soon becomes clear, however, that for Paul the Spirit is truly the Paraclete who walks beside us and helps us to do works of love, joy, patience and the like (see, for instance, Gal 5:22, 23; Rom 5:4, 5; 8:2, 11). The same Spirit, affirms the apostle, Who personally moved with loving care at the beginning and Who was effective in the resurrection of God's Son (Rom 1:4; 8:11), is now personally working with suffering signs too deep for words (Rom 8:19-23). Is this then an impersonal effluence? From a study of the Scriptures one sees that the Spirit neither dispenses impersonal gifts nor energizes His creation with impersonal power. He gives himself. Only a person can spend Himself and yet remain inviolate and uncontrolled.

**The consistency of the apostles.** If these examples had been few in number, they could have been dismissed as metaphorical. However, since they come from different authors and are comparatively numerous, they cannot lightly be pushed aside. Even the fact that many passages—the majority of them—can be interpreted as suggesting that the Spirit is a dynamic force<sup>5</sup> is not inconsistent with His personal existence. The dynamic descriptions of the Spirit do not actually imply that the Spirit is impersonal; they are consistent with the belief that the Spirit is personal. On the other hand the references which imply that the Spirit is a person are not in conflict with the others. The only view which can account for all the references and preserve a general consistency is the view that the Spirit is personal.

The fact is that the biblical authors were not conscious of any inconsistency when they described the Spirit in both personal and dynamic terms. In Acts 2:4, for instance, the Spirit is described first dynamically—"And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit"—and then animistically or personally—they "began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." The first reference could be interpreted as personal or impersonal. The second can only be personal. There is no good reason for detecting an inconsistency here. The Holy Spirit is a personal being, and, because He is divine, can abide in many different men at the same time. In Acts 11:16 is a reference to baptism with the Holy Spirit which could be interpreted in a dynamic sense, considering the Spirit as a divine effluence. However, only a few verses previously, Peter had said, "and the Spirit bade me go with them," which indicates the personal nature of the Spirit. The inspired writer was able to include in the same passage descriptions of the Spirit in both animistic and dynamic senses because the dynamic references in which the Spirit is described as a power were consistent with the passages in which the Spirit was said to behave like a person.

The more the early Christians, under the guidance of the Spirit, meditated upon the matter and the more they experienced His activity in their own lives, the more they were conscious of

His personal nature, as separate, of course, from the person of the Father and that of the Son.

### **The Trinity in the Scriptures**

**Clear Trinitarian confessions.** We have seen that in the mind of the apostles there is an intimate connection between the Spirit and the Lord and the Father. Do they, however, think of the Holy Spirit as divine, as a divine person distinct both from the Father and from the Son? This is conclusively answered in several passages in which Paul mentions all three persons together. In one of his very earliest writings, for instance, he affirms: “But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess 2:13, 14). It is evident that God, Christ, and the Spirit are in forefront of Paul’s mind.

First Corinthians 12:4-6 agrees with this: “now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one.” The triadic pattern of this section is unmistakable. A step further is taken in what may be considered as an attempt to bring together basic values of the Christian faith and life when Paul ends his second Epistle to the Corinthians with these words: “The grace or the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13:14). The verbal collocation of the three divine persons has culminated in a clear trinitarian confession.<sup>6</sup> The Gospel of Matthew also ends with a very explicit juxtaposition of the three persons found in their now traditional order: “Go therefore,” says the resurrected Christ, “and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). The fact that in these statements we have a trinitarian formula seems inescapable. It is erroneous therefore, as we mentioned earlier, to say that the doctrine of the Trinity is postbiblical and answers a problem which did not occur to the writers or the NT. They believed in one God, but one God in three persons.

### **The Trinity of Speculation and the Trinity of Revelation**

**The Trinity of speculation.** These trinitarian confessions worked their way into the heart of Christian thinking and theology. Such statements of experience made under the guidance of the Spirit long antedated the Trinity of speculative thought that characterized the succeeding centuries of ecclesiastical history. It was legitimate, however, indeed inevitable, to reflect upon the threefold distinctions within God himself in an effort to discover what must be true of him.

The affirmation of a threefold distinction within the Deity and attempts to explain it are not wanting in number. From the Cappadocian Fathers—Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzen—to the so-called Athanasian Creed or the more recent Hegelian and Barthian interpretations, not to mention Augustine, speculative Christian theologians, beginning with a humble confession of the incomprehensibility of the divine nature and the limitations of human speculation, cheerfully went on to interpret the relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the Deity, each one in terms of then-accepted discrimination of substance. “Hypostasis,” “nature” and “person” were among the preferred terms.<sup>7</sup>

The method most frequently employed in these trinitarian speculations consisted in interpreting the divine nature by analogies drawn from human nature. One thing became more and more evident as the centuries passed by: The differentiation among the three persons of the Deity was no longer, as it was for Paul and the NT writers, a difference in the operation of the

divine Being in God's creation and upon the human life testified by revelation and experience. It was a description of distinctions within the Deity for which there is no definable basis within the revealed knowledge of God. One is not thought of any longer as Creator, another as Redeemer, and the third as Sanctifier; but rather all three persons are seen as functioning in three divine activities. Despite their pious professions of ignorance, more theologians appear to believe that they achieved precise and indisputable knowledge of the inmost character of God. The Trinity of speculation had triumphed over the Trinity of revelation and experience.

**The Trinity of Revelation.** Some have argued more recently that the NT doctrine of the Trinity is a declaration concerning the inmost being of God that took its rise from empirical data of a reception of divine manifestation. It is an effort, they say, to discover what must be true of the Ultimate Reality based on what our experience or that Reality tells us. The threefold experiential distinction, which may be indisputably real within our Christian experience—like creation, redemption, and sanctification, for instance—would in fact have been projected into the divine Being. Christian faith, in fidelity to its knowledge of God in experience, would thus have declared a threefold Deity.

Such a conclusion, however, is unsound and it is important to clearly see why. It is true that the NT authors could not but write within the framework of their personal experiences. But recognition of the divine Trinity is not merely a description of human experience. It is not just an inspired report on the feelings and thoughts of the apostles. It is a declaration concerning God based on a revelation; not only on the self-disclosure of God, but also on a disclosure of the truth of God. Therefore, it is an objective reality and, in the strictest sense, an affirmation of theology. The recognition of the Holy Spirit—as truly fully divine, parallel and equal to the Father is—first of all, the object of a revelation. This is how God wills to make himself known to man.

We can, therefore, rightly yearn to know as much regarding God as it is possible to know. It is legitimate to inquire what light God's revelation of Himself casts on His inmost being.

Since this is God's revealed self-manifestation it must be possible to think of the divine Being as a society of divine Persons. Shall we conclude, therefore, that it is analogous to a society of human persons, as has been vigorously advocated? Let us beware of the inadequacy of our earthbound thoughts regarding the ineffable Deity. The divine Triad is met only in God's revelation. It is therefore impossible to speak about God's triune nature independent of the Scriptures. We must abide by the testimony of the OT and NT. This means more than all the psychological and physiological analogies. When we speak of divine "persons" we do so because the Scriptures enforce this conclusion upon us. We do so because this is how the biblical writers try to make us understand the relationship existing among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**Three distinct Persons in the Unity of God.** The word "person," at this point, requires more particular notice. According to the ordinary rules of language-interpretation of the Scripture nothing is more certain than that there is but one God.<sup>8</sup> This ought never to be forgotten. It is the very foundation of our doctrine of God. By the same use of language rules we also learn that there are three in whom we are to believe. The highest names and perfections are attributed to them throughout the Holy Writings. The Scriptures seem to indicate that these three are all persons, because they are described as doing that which only intelligent agents or persons can do. Is not this sufficient authority for applying the term "persons" to them? Finally, the same authoritative source tells us that they are distinct, not merely in relation to us, as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, but in relation to each other as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is sufficient authority for calling them distinct Persons, although the danger always exists

that one may tend to tritheism.

When the Son and the Holy Spirit are conceived to be names, operations, attitudes, or offices of the Deity then they are not conceived as Persons. He who conceives that the Father is not the Son or Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is not the Son, conceives them to be three distinct persons. And he who conceives the unity of God and the Trinity of persons, conceives the persons distinct but united. In other words, though he may not be able to accurately express his conceptions, he will nevertheless really conceive the three divine Persons to be at the same time distinct and yet one.

The argument has only one fault. This fault is fundamental. It is true that with respect to men, who are the only intelligent beings besides God and the angels of whom we have any knowledge, this notion of perfect unity in plurality of Persons does not correspond or fit into the framework of our human existence—perhaps because man's nature was purposely meant to be different from the nature of God. In other words, it was the will of the Creator that man should be thus. Therefore, even the best analogies fall short in their attempt to describe the divine Being. Any and all spiritualistic interpretations are simply imperfect and untrue. They weaken and diminish the divine majesty to which no earthly likeness can be compared. The word "person" is still a poor way of expressing the reality. Here more than anywhere else in theology are we reminded of the purely hypothetical character of our speculations. Therefore, we must confess that the Trinity is one indivisible God and that the distinctions of the Persons do not destroy the divine unity. This unity of God is expressed by saying that He is one substance. Nevertheless, in the divine unity there are three co-eternal and co-equal Persons, who, though distinct, are the One undivided and adorable God. This is the doctrine of Scripture.

### **Relationship Between Father, Son, and Spirit**

How then shall we conceive the relationship of God as Father, as Son and as Holy Spirit? It is a relation, not or separation but of interdependence. Strictly speaking, all three must be thought of together, not separately.

**The relationship between the Son and the Father.** "The light of the knowledge of the glory of God," indeed, is given "in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). The Son is "the image of the invisible God, the first-born or all creation" (Col 1:15), but Paul's faith in Christ does not allow him to forget the eternal Lord of Israel. It is "God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace" (2 Thess 2:16). "God is faithful," He assures the Christians of Corinth, "by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor 1:9). "Blessed be the God," begins another letter to them, "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Cor 1:3).

Paul's Epistles are categorical about the primacy of the Father. His famous section on the *kenosis*, the incarnation of Christ, concludes that both the self-humbling and exaltation of Jesus are directed to assure "the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:5-11). Such statements, however, remain in full harmony with Paul's confession of Faith that Christ is God. As we noted earlier, he hails Him as Lord, acknowledges that He performs divine functions, and applies to him OT quotations which were used by the Jews only of Yahweh. At the same time he recognizes Christ's humanity and obedience to the Father. When the apostles discuss His relationship with the Father they speak as if He were in some sense less than the Father, even after His resurrection. In acknowledging the priority and primacy of the Father, however, they did not deny the Son's divinity. The NT writer who deals most freely with the problem of the interrelations between Father and Son is the writer of the Fourth Gospel, and he emphasizes that

Jesus is God. There is nothing incidental in the references that Jesus is God in the Fourth Gospel, which deliberately begins with the statement that the Word is God and reaches its climax in ch. 20:28 when Thomas calls Jesus “My Lord and my God.” This whole gospel is intended to state not only that Jesus is God, but also how the only-begotten Son of God is also the only begotten God in close relation with the Father.

**Is Christ inferior to the Father?** Does the confession of Christ’s full and true Deity conflict with these passages of Scripture in which he is described as being inferior to and sent by the Father?<sup>9</sup> Paul himself sometimes writes as if Christ had a subordinate position to the Father. Such statements as Phil 2:5-11 show that the apostle was aware—as much as John—of the problems involved in Christ’s relationship with the Father, and was attempting a solution.

It was natural for Paul to describe the earthly Christ as subordinate, for he had “humbled himself.” He who was equal with the Father voluntarily assumed the limitations of human nature at the incarnation. As a man, He prayed and obeyed God. Paul, however, does not confine this voluntary subordinate status to the earthly Jesus but extends it to the risen Lord.<sup>10</sup> This is forcibly expressed in 1 Cor 15:24-28, when, at the end, the Lord Jesus will hand over His kingdom to the Father.

Such statements show how the apostles attempted to bring a solution to the problem we are examining. Their view, however, was not subordinationism, nor does it imply any inferiority of the Son compared with the Father. Christ, here, is set in the order of Deity. The willing subordination of the Son to the Father—and of the Spirit to the Father and to the Son<sup>11</sup>—relates not to their essential life with the Trinity. Neither is it in any way inconsistent with true equality. It is a demonstration of the unity of purpose existing among the members of the Deity. Here the activities of one are seen to be but the carrying out of the united will. We may conclude with some that the Father has a metaphysical priority,<sup>12</sup> or with others that He has a primacy of order.<sup>13</sup> One thing, nevertheless, remains certain: The NT writers have not worked out the problem with subtle refinement, but they all agree that the Father has priority and that both Father and Son are God. And they consider such a statement consistent.

**The relationship between the Spirit and Christ, and between the Spirit and the Father.** Regarding the relationship between the Spirit and Christ, and between the Spirit and the Father, it has been shown that the NT writers regarded the Spirit as a person. They do not call Him God or ascribe to Him divine functions with the same regularity with which they ascribe them to Christ. Nevertheless, the Spirit is both the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of Christ. Divine works are performed by Him, and divine honor is paid to Him. The possession of the Spirit is described as one of the main characteristics of the Christian life. There is no indication, however, that there was a problem of the Spirit for these inspired writers, or that they felt any difficulty about the relationship between the Spirit and Christ or between the Spirit and the Father. The Father, the Spirit, and the Son are clearly shown as different from each other. The Fourth Gospel adds, for its part, that the Father sends the Son, and that the Son must go away so that the Spirit may come. This is the NT answer to the problem of the relationship among the three Persons of the Trinity.

The Spirit, then, is after Christ in the divine economy. The Spirit does not come into operation, as promised, until Christ is glorified, until He has completed His earthly ministry and has returned to the Father. This is because the work of the Spirit has to do with the work of the incarnate Christ. The relationship of the Spirit with Christ is in terms of continuation, as the complement to the work of Christ, continuing the presence of Christ beyond the brief span of His historical appearance.<sup>14</sup> This is why the Spirit is so often referred to as the Spirit of Christ as well as the Spirit of God the Father, without implying any notion of inferiority or essential

sub-ordination.

**The work of the Trinity is outwardly indivisible.** All three, in fact, are One in the same design. The work of the Spirit cannot be isolated from the work of the Father and the Son. The work of the Trinity is outwardly indivisible just as the Trinity is indivisible. The triune God has really only one work to accomplish, just as He Himself is one true God. That is His eternally all—embracing, life—creating and life-saving work. In this one work all three Persons are actively engaged, drawing us away from sin, the devil, and destruction.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinguished only by their mutual relations as revealing the Deity to us.<sup>15</sup> God the Father stresses the infinity, eternity, and power of the Deity, the primacy and finality of God. Jesus Christ affirms the character of the divine nature. In Him we discern the nature of the divine purpose and the manner of God's working for its realization. The Holy Spirit testifies of the intimacy of omnipotent Power, the never—railing availability of God, how close He is to each one of us at every moment. Each of them—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—enlarges our understanding of God as revealed in the Scriptures. This is why the Trinity is a relationship, not a separation.

## Conclusion

Let us sum up our results and draw a conclusion. Is the Father real? Is He personal? What shall we think of Christ? What of the Holy Spirit? How are they related to each other? Is there any essential "Threeness"? Are we clear as to whether we believe in three Gods, or truly in one?

These questions are of no little importance. They deal with a reality so profound, so immediate that it touches every human being, learned or unlearned, at the center of immediate concern. They are as relevant today as they were nineteen hundred years ago.

These issues did not first occur when later generations of theologians reflected upon the NT Scriptures, as some suppose. It is the writer's conviction that the problems implied in the Trinity were raised and answered in NT times, and by the NT writers. They arose because of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God the Son, and the development of Christian experience and revelation under the guidance of the Spirit of God. This is how in the Scriptures a biblical doctrine of God began with an account of the names and titles of Father, Son and Spirit, their divine personalities and mutual inter-relations. Such an account of the Three in One is difficult to summarize in a vigorous formula, and the absence of the word Trinity does not rob from it the status of doctrine.

The apostles knew their limitations. They did not make it their chief aim to unravel all the complexities of the Almighty God. They could but dimly discern the divine Nature. But this did not deter them. Rejecting the terms of Greek mythology or metaphysics, they expressed their convictions in an unpretending trinitarian confession of faith, the doctrine of one God subsisting and acting in three Persons.

There should, in fact, be no end of inquiry or of efforts of interpretation in a desire to meet the needs of today's souls in a way that is relevant. Let us not forget, however, that the doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to describe and to understand what ultimately we do not understand and cannot describe. Therefore, let us count our imaginations as the small dust in the balance and renounce these subtleties that go beyond everything to be found in the Scriptures, remembering that the experience of the Trinity, founded on the study of God's Word, is within our grasp. This is why, far from being a fossilized tradition, the doctrine of the Trinity can be a living doctrine and a living experience. These are realities we cannot deny. They have practical bearing. This, therefore, is a precious doctrine, indispensable to the Christian under-

standing of God, Christ, and salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> The personalities of the Father and the Son are distinct. They are not to be identified nor confounded, as is clearly indicated, for instance, at Christ's baptism and transfiguration, when the voice of the Father was heard, saying of Him, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17; 17:5). Jesus adds, "I bear witness of me. . . , and the Father himself which hath sent me has bore witness of me" (John 5:36, 37, KJV).

<sup>2</sup> They are as follows: the teaching about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28-30; Matt 12:31, 32; Luke 12:10); the Promise of the guidance of the Spirit in the coming time of persecution (Mark 13:11); the saying about casting out evil spirits by the Spirit of God (Matt 12:28); the reference to the inspiration of Ps 110 (Mark 12:36; Matt 22:43); the giving of the Holy Spirit in answer to prayer (Luke 11:13); the baptismal command (Matt 28:19); the reference to Isa 61:1, 2, in Christ's sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:16 ff.); and our Lord's promise of the Pentecostal outpouring (Luke 24:9).

<sup>3</sup> Similar language implying that the Spirit is personal is found in other parts of the NT. According to Peter, the Spirit testifies (1 Pet 1:11). One author of the epistle to the Hebrews says that the Spirit speaks and bears witness in the writings of the OT (Heb 3:7). Several times in the book of Revelation the Spirit is said to speak (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; etc.).

<sup>4</sup> "The Spirit—who with unutterable groanings intercedes for the soul in inner conflict, and who through the constant motion of faith and love draws him into God's all-embracing eschatological act of salvation—is no one else than God himself," writes Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, trans. by John M Jensen (Philadelphia, 1953), 180.

<sup>5</sup> "My Spirit," for instance, would be more appropriate to an impersonal essence than to a person. Other phrases like "fervent in spirit," "being born in the Holy Spirit," and the repeated Pauline phrase, "in the Spirit," are claimed by some to support the view that the Spirit is a power rather than a person (see Acts 15:29; 18:25; Rom 9:1; 12:11; 14:17; 15:16; 1 Cor 6:11; 12:3, 9, 13; 14:16).

<sup>6</sup> Many other texts of Paul reveal on closer examination the influence of a threefold pattern. See for instance Rom 15:30; Gal 4:6; 2 Cor 1:21, 22; Eph 3:14-16; Tit 3:4-6.

<sup>7</sup> On the tortuous course of trinitarian speculation through succeeding centuries, see Henry P. vanDusen, *Spirit, Son and Father* (New York, 1958), 149-177. Note, also, the carefully documented Bampton lectures of H.A.W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (London, 1954).

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Deut 4:39; 2 Kgs 19:51; Ps 88:10; Isa 44:6,9; Mark 12:29, 32.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Christ's own statements in John 4:34; 12:49, 50; 14:28.

<sup>10</sup> Even Christ's resurrection, in some passages, is an act attributed to the Father, not to Christ: Rom 4:24; 8:11; Gal 1:1; 1 Thess 1:10; etc.

<sup>11</sup> As some statements indicate that the Father sends the Son and works through him, so others stress the fact that the Father and the Son work through the Holy Spirit: Rom 5:5; Gal 5:22, 23; Tit 3:5; Acts 5:8, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, xv, 47.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I, xiii, 18-26.

<sup>14</sup> On the relationship between the Spirit and Christ, see George S. Hendry, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* (London, 1965), 11-29, 72-95; and Arthur W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London, 1962), 199-223.

<sup>15</sup> An excellent discussion of the interpersonal relation existing among Father, Son and Holy Spirit is that of Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1955), 89-96, 104, 105, 183.