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## THE UNDIVIDED THREE: THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY IN CHURCH HISTORY

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Among the greatest achievements of the early church is the forging of the doctrine of the Trinity. It received classical expression in the fourth-century creedal statement known to history as the *Nicene Creed*, in which Jesus Christ is unequivocally declared to be "true God" and "of one being (*homoousios*) with the Father" and the Holy Spirit is said to be the "Lord and Giver of life," who "together with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified."<sup>1</sup> Some historians have argued that this document represents the apex of the Hellenization of the church's teaching, in which fourth-century Christianity traded the vitality of the New Testament church's experience of God for a cold philosophical formula. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. The *Nicene Creed* served to sum up a long process of reflection that had its origins in the Christian communities of the first century. As Douglas Ottati, an American professor of theology who teaches at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, has recently put it: "Trinitarian theology continues a biblically initiated exploration."<sup>2</sup> Or, in the words of an earlier twentieth-century orthodox theologian Benjamin B. Warfield: the "doctrine of the Trinity lies in Scripture in solution; when it is crystallized from its solvent it does not cease to be scriptural, but only comes into clearer view."<sup>3</sup>

### THE NEW TESTAMENT BASIS OF THE NICENE CREED

There is, for instance, the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, bap-

tizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Here, we find the names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit coordinated in such a way as to imply their equality and their distinctness as persons, but mention is made only of the singular *name* of the three, a distinct indication of their unity.<sup>4</sup> Then, there are numerous passages in the Pauline corpus where these three persons are linked together as co-sources of the blessings that belong to believers in Christ. For instance, there is the benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:13: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." Or there is the way in which Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, traces the various manifestations of God's grace in the church first to the Spirit, then to the Lord Jesus, and finally to God.<sup>5</sup>

In other parts of the New Testament the same phenomenon is to be observed. In the letters outside of the Pauline corpus "it is everywhere assumed that the redemptive activities of God rest on a threefold source in God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit."<sup>6</sup> Peter can speak of God's saints in various regions of Asia Minor as being "chosen and destined by God the Father, and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood" (1 Peter 1:2). Jude writes his brief letter to encourage his readers to stand against apostasy by praying in the Holy Spirit, keeping themselves in the love of God, and waiting for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ (Jude 20-21). The author of Revelation asks for the seven churches to whom he writes "grace . . . and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:4-5).<sup>7</sup>

Particularly rich in Trinitarian language is the gospel of John.<sup>8</sup> Early on in the gospel, we are told that God has given the Spirit in unlimited measure to Jesus, for "the Father

loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands" (John 3:34-35). In the farewell discourse, John 14-16, Jesus tells his disciples "the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). Other verses in this section of John's gospel, however, assert that Jesus will be the One who will send the Spirit (John 15:26; 16:7). The Spirit is being sent in the place of Jesus as "*another Advocate*" (John 14:16), but it is only through the Spirit's presence in the disciples' lives that Jesus, and the Father, are also present (John 14:23). Like the other New Testament authors John does not use the word "Trinity," but the elements of Trinitarian faith are clearly here.<sup>9</sup>

#### FOURTH-CENTURY TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

Not only does the New Testament then provide clear warrant for the direction that theological reflection upon the nature of God took in fourth-century orthodoxy, but it should also be recognized that the men who stood behind the *Nicene Creed* were not primarily philosophers. They were active pastors in the church of their day, men who sought to be faithful witnesses to the teaching of the Scriptures. Uppermost in their minds was the way in which any other teaching about the nature of God imperiled the way of salvation.

One of the leading defenders of a full-orbed Trinitarianism during this period was Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379). In his book *On the Holy Spirit*, the first book in the history of the church wholly devoted to the subject of the Spirit, Basil rightly reasoned from the teaching of Scripture as a whole that it is God alone who can save fallen men and women. Texts like 1 Corinthians 2:10 and 12:3 clarified for Basil how salvation was imparted: through the power of the Spirit men and women come to a saving knowledge about God's redemptive work in the crucified Christ and are

enabled to call him "Lord." If the Spirit, therefore, is not fully divine, the work of salvation is short-circuited, for creatures simply cannot give such saving knowledge.<sup>10</sup> It should also be noted that Basil was a central figure in the rise of monasticism, which began largely as a renewal movement in response to the politicization and "secularization" of large sectors of the church following Constantine's toleration of Christianity in the first quarter of the fourth century. As such, Basil was very interested in Christian experience and can hardly be considered an ivory-tower academician.

Basil did not live to participate in the Council of Constantinople in 381 that drafted what has come to be called the *Nicene Creed*.<sup>11</sup> But the document, in particular the article on the Holy Spirit, strongly reflects his theological perspective. There is, in fact, good evidence that Basil's younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395), who was present at the council and who had drunk deeply at the well of his brother's Trinitarianism, played a central role in the drawing up of the creedal statement.<sup>12</sup> Like his brother, Gregory was a strong proponent of monasticism and very interested in the experiential side of Christianity.

Also like his older brother, Nyssa wrote widely on the subject of the Trinity. One of his most intriguing and more dramatic statements about the Trinity occurs in a document that has been entitled "On the difference between *ousia* [being] and *hypostasis* [person]."<sup>13</sup>

You have before now, in springtime, beheld the brilliance of the bow in the clouds—I mean the bow which is commonly called the "rainbow." . . . Now, the brightness [of the rainbow] is both continuous with itself and divided. It has many diverse colors; and yet the various bright tints of its dye are imperceptibly intermingled, hiding from our eyes the point of contact of the different colors with each other. As a result,

between the blue and the flame-color, or the flame-color and the purple, or the purple and the amber, the space which both mingles and separates the two colors cannot be discerned. For when the rays of all the colors are seen they are seen to be distinct, and yet at the same time . . . it is impossible to find out how far the red or the green color of the radiance extends, and at what point it begins to be no longer perceived as it is when it is distinct.

Just as in this example we both clearly distinguish the different colors and yet cannot detect by observation the separation of one from the other, so, please consider that it is also possible to draw [similar] inferences with regard to the divine doctrines. In particular, one can both conclude that the specific characteristics of [each of] the Persons [of the Godhead], like any one of the brilliant colors which appear in the rainbow, reflect their brightness in each of the [other] Persons we believe to be in the Holy Trinity, but that no difference can be observed in the . . . nature of the one as compared with the others. . . . Reason also teaches us through the created object [that is, the rainbow], not to feel distressed in doctrinal discussions whenever we encounter something hard to understand and our brains reel at the thought of accepting what is proposed to us. For, just as experience appears to be better than a scientific theory in the case of what is seen by our eyes, so also faith is better than the apprehension which comes from [logical] reasoning with regard to those doctrines which transcend our comprehension. For faith teaches us about what is separated in person and about what is united in being.<sup>14</sup>

Here Gregory is grappling with a perennial issue in the history of Trinitarian thought, namely, the difficulty that the human mind encounters in reconciling the oneness and threeness of God. He thus resorts to an illustration from the created realm, the rainbow. When a rainbow is seen clearly in the sky, the various colors of the spectrum can be easily distinguished, but they pass so gradually into each other

without any abrupt transition that it is impossible to say where one color begins and another ends. Similarly, the individual members of the Godhead can be distinguished in their operations and activities, but this should never be done in such a way as to destroy their unity in being.

It is also noteworthy that Gregory—who did have definite philosophical inclinations, far more than most of the orthodox theologians of the fourth century—is quite prepared to say that in the final analysis the doctrine of the Trinity surpasses human comprehension. In the face of this mystery, logic and human reason can only go so far. It is only through faith that the believer can affirm what logic ultimately cannot: the threeness and the oneness of God.

#### TRINITARIANISM IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

By and large the Trinitarianism of the *Nicene Creed* remained unchallenged until the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Even during that most tumultuous of theological eras, the Reformation, this particular area of Christian belief did not come into general dispute, though there were a few, like Michael Servetus (1511-1553) in the sixteenth century, who rejected Trinitarianism for a unitarian perspective on the Godhead. In the rationalistic atmosphere of the eighteenth century, however, the doctrine was heavily attacked and ridiculed as illogical. During this period the English-speaking world saw the re-emergence of Arianism, the heresy of the fourth century which affirmed the creaturehood of Christ, as well as the rapid spread of Unitarianism. By the early nineteenth century the doctrine of the Trinity “had become an embarrassment, and the way was open to dismiss it as a philosophical construction by the early church.”<sup>15</sup>

Orthodox response to this attack on what was rightly considered to be one of the foundational truths of Christianity was varied. In certain evangelical circles the doctrine

was an essential part of catechetical instruction. In 1752 Benjamin Beddome (1717-95), the pastor of a Calvinistic Baptist work in Bourton-on-the-Water, Gloucestershire, drew up *A Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism by Way of Question and Answer*.<sup>16</sup> This catechism basically reproduced the wording and substance of an earlier catechism written by the seventeenth-century Baptist Benjamin Keach (1640-1704), but added various sub-questions and answers to each of the questions in Keach’s catechism. The *Scriptural Exposition* proved to be fairly popular. There were two editions during Beddome’s lifetime, the second of which was widely used at the Bristol Baptist Academy, the sole British Baptist seminary for much of the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century it was reprinted once in the British Isles and twice in the United States, the last printing being in 1849.

To the question, “How many persons are there in the Godhead?” Keach’s catechism gave the answer, “There are three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one, the same in essence, equal in power and glory.” Beddome faithfully reproduces this question and answer, but then adds five paragraphs of questions and Scripture texts as a further delineation of the subject.<sup>17</sup>

In the opening paragraph he argues first for the triunity of God from such passages as Genesis 1:26, where we have the statement “Let us make man” (KJV), and the *Comma Johanneum*, as 1 John 5:7 in the KJV is known. The latter verse is an unfortunate choice since this text is undoubtedly spurious.<sup>18</sup> Then, on the basis of Psalm 110:1 and John 14:26, Beddome affirms the distinct personhood of the Son and the Spirit respectively. This train of argument logically raises the question, “May it with any propriety then be said, that there are three Gods?” To this Beddome answers with a resounding, “No,” and in support of his answer he cites

Zechariah 14:9 (KJV): "There shall be one Lord, and his name one."

The next paragraph adduces texts where both the Son and the Holy Spirit are referred to as God. "Is the Son called God? Yes. *Who is over all God blessed for evermore.* (Romans 9:5). Is the Spirit called God? Yes. *Why hath Satan filled thine heart to lye to the Holy Ghost, thou hast not lyled unto men but unto God.* (Acts 5:3-4)." As we have noted above, there are a number of texts that Beddome could have cited as proof that the New Testament calls the Son "God." With regard to the Spirit, though, apart from this passage from Acts there is no clear attribution of the title "God" to the person of the Spirit in the New Testament.

The divine attributes and activities that the Spirit and the Son share with the Father and are the sole prerogative of a divine being are the subject of the third paragraph.

Is the Son eternal as well as the Father? Yes. *Before Abraham was, I am,* (John 8:58). Is the Spirit eternal? Yes. *He is called the eternal Spirit,* (Hebrews 9:14). Is the Son omnipresent? Yes. *Where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I,* (Matthew 18:20). Is the Spirit so too? Yes. *Whither shall I go from thy Spirit,* (Psalm 139:7). Is the Son omniscient? Yes. *Thou knowest all things,* (John 21:17). And is the Spirit so? Yes. *He searcheth all things,* (1 Corinthians 2:10). Is the work of creation ascribed to the Son? Yes. *All things were made by him,* (John 1:3). Is it also ascribed to the Spirit? Yes. *The Spirit of God hath made me,* (Job 33:4). And is creation a work peculiar to God? Yes. *He that hath built all things is God,* (Hebrews 3:4).

The fourth paragraph seeks to prove the deity of the Son and the Spirit from the fact that both of them are the object of prayer in the Scriptures. To show this of the Son is relatively easy, and Beddome can refer to a passage like Acts 7:59 (KJV), where Stephen, the first martyr, prays, "Lord

Jesus, receive my spirit." To find a text where the Spirit is actually the object of prayer is far more difficult. Beddome cites Revelation 1:4, where the "seven spirits," which Beddome rightly understands to be a symbolic representation of the "one holy and eternal Spirit," are included along with God the Father and Jesus Christ in a salutation to the seven churches in Asia Minor. As we have noted above, this passage clearly has significant Trinitarian import. But it does not really serve Beddome's purpose, for a salutation is simply not equivalent to a prayer.

The fifth and final paragraph gives further scriptural support for the fact that there is a plurality within the Godhead. "Are divine blessings derived from all three persons in the Godhead? Yes. *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all* (2 Corinthians 13:13). Have each of these their distinct province in the affair of man's salvation? Yes. *Thro' him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father* (Ephesians 2:18)."

#### GIVING PRAISE TO "THE UNDIVIDED THREE"

An equally important teaching tool for the transmission of Trinitarian doctrine in the eighteenth century was the hymn. In fact, in eighteenth-century Baptist and Congregationalist churches the singing of the "passionate, doctrinal, emotional hymns" of that century took the place of the formal reciting of a credal statement like the *Nicene Creed*.<sup>19</sup> Consider the rich Trinitarianism of *We Give Immortal Praise* by Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the Congregationalist hymn writer who has been described as the father of the English hymn.

We give immortal praise  
To God the Father's love,  
For all our comforts here,  
And better hopes above:

He sent his own  
Eternal Son  
To die for sins  
That man had done.

To God the Son belongs  
Immortal glory too,  
Who bought us with his blood  
From everlasting woe:  
And now he lives  
And now he reigns,  
And sees the fruit  
Of all his pains.

To God the Spirit's name  
Immortal worship give,  
Whose new-creating power  
Makes the dead sinner live:  
His work completes  
The great design,  
And fills the soul  
With joy divine.

Almighty God! to thee  
Be endless honors done,  
The undivided Three,  
And the mysterious One:  
Where reason fails  
With all her powers,  
There faith prevails  
And love adores.

The first three stanzas outline the work of each member of the Godhead in securing the salvation of sinful men and women: the Father's love which stands at the fountainhead of that salvation; the Son's death which effects redemption; and the Spirit's "new-creating power" that applies the Son's

work to sinners' hearts and so "completes the great design."

The final stanza then goes on to unashamedly confess that God is both "the undivided Three"—given the previous three stanzas an understandable assertion—and "the mysterious One." For Watts the mystery obviously concerns how the three can be said to be one. The essential unity of the three is something that ultimately human reason, even "with all her powers," cannot fathom. But Watts asserts, the proper response to this mystery was not therefore to reject it as irrational, as so many were doing in the eighteenth century. Faith and love can go where reason cannot.

The regular singing of hymns like this one by the man or woman in the pew gave Trinitarianism a hearing far wider than the treatises written for and against the doctrine by learned theologians. A text from one such woman, the Welsh poet Ann Griffiths (1776-1805), is a good example in this regard. Converted around 1797, she became one of the great hymn writers of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism. In a letter that she wrote to a friend named Elizabeth Evans she stated:

Dear sister, the most outstanding thing that is on my mind at present as a matter for thought is to do with grieving the Holy Spirit. That word came into my mind, "Know ye not that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit which dwelleth in you" (1 Corinthians 6:19); and on penetrating a little into the wonders of the Person, and how he dwells or resides in the believer, I think in short that I have never been possessed to the same degree by reverential fears of grieving him, and along with that I have been able to see one reason, and the chief reason, why this great sin has made such a slight impression upon my mind, on account of my base and blasphemous thoughts about a Person so great.

This is how my thoughts ran about the Persons of the Trinity. I feel my mind being seized by shame, and yet under a constraint to speak because of the harmfulness of it. I

thought of the persons of the Father and the Son as co-equal; but as for the Person of the Holy Spirit, I regarded him as a functionary subordinate to them. O what a misguided imagination about a Person who is divine, all-present, all-knowing, and all-powerful to carry on and complete the good work which he has begun in accordance with the free covenant and the counsel of the Three in One regarding those who are the objects of the primal love. O for the privilege of being one of their number.

Dear sister, I feel a degree of thirst to grow up more in the belief in the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit in my life; and this by way of revelation, not of imagination, as if I thought to comprehend in what way or by what means it happens, which is real idolatry.<sup>20</sup>

What is so striking about this text is the genuine depth of feeling displayed with regard to what some might consider a theological error of little consequence. But Ann is right to recognize that when it comes to the Trinity, subordinationism of any kind is harmful at best, blasphemous at worst.

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#### Notes

1. This creed was actually drawn up in A.D. 381 at the Council of Constantinople and is technically the *Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*. The original *Nicene Creed*, issued by the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, said nothing

about the Holy Spirit beyond the statement "[We believe] in the Holy Spirit." When the deity of the Spirit was subsequently questioned in the mid-fourth century, it was deemed necessary to expand the *Nicene Creed* to include a statement about the deity of the Holy Spirit. In the end this expansion involved the drafting of a new creedal statement at the Council of Constantinople. Apart from the article relating to the Spirit, though, there is little real difference between the two creeds.

2. "Being Trinitarian: The Shape of Saving Faith," *The Christian Century* (November 8, 1995), Volume 12, Number 32, 1045.
3. "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity" in his *Biblical and Theological Studies*, edited by Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1952), 22.
4. "Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," 41-5.
5. "Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," 47-8. Other passages which could be mentioned include 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; Ephesians 2:18; 3:14-17; 4:4-6; Titus 3:4-6.
6. "Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," 48.
7. For the identification of the "seven Spirits" as a symbolic allusion to the Holy Spirit, see Richard J. Bauckham, "The Role of the Spirit in the Apocalypse," *The Evangelical Quarterly* (1980), 52:75-77.
8. For a good discussion of the reliability of the Trinitarian teaching of this gospel, see Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1995), 194-98.
9. D. A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus: An Exposition of John 14-17* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1980), 49-50.
10. For an extensive discussion of Basil's defense of the Spirit's deity, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Spirit of God: The Exegesis of 1 and 2 Corinthians in the Pneumatomachian Controversy of the Fourth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).
11. See note 1.
12. *Spirit of God*, 193-201.
13. This work has been preserved among the letters of Basil as *Letter 38*. Twentieth-century scholarship, though, has clearly shown that the work is from the pen of Gregory.
14. *Letter 38.5* (translated by Michael A. G. Haykin).
15. G. L. Bray, "Trinity" in *New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, Illinois/Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 694.
16. On Beddome, see Michael A. G. Haykin, "Benjamin Beddome (1717-1795)" in his edition, *The British Particular Baptists 1638-1910* (Springfield, Missouri: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), 1:166-83.
17. *A Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism by Way of Question and*



*Answer*, 2nd edition (Bristol: W. Pine, 1776), 23-25.

18. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 101-02; Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 716-18.
19. Bernard Lord Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts: Five Informal Papers* (London: Epworth Press, 1942), 136.
20. Cited A. M. Allchin, *Ann Griffiths* (University of Wales Press, 1976), 49-50.

Almighty Father strong to save, whose arm hath bound the  
restless wave,  
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep, Its own appointed  
limits keep:  
O hear us when we cry to Thee, for those in peril on the sea.

O Christ, the Lord of hill and plain, o'er which our traffic  
runs amain,  
By mountain pass or valley low; wherever Lord, Thy  
brethren go,  
Protect them by Thy guarding hand, from every peril on the  
land.

O Spirit, whom the Father sent, to spread abroad the  
firmament;  
O Wind of heaven, by Thy might save all who dare the  
eagle's flight,  
And keep them by Thy watchful care, from every peril in  
the air.

O Trinity of love and power, our brethren shield in danger's  
hour;  
From rock and tempest, fire and foe, protect them where-  
so-e'er they go;  
They evermore shall rise to Thee, glad praise from air and  
land and sea.

A MISSIONARY SERVICE BOOK (1937)  
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