



## Bavinck on the doctrine of the Trinity

The last topic Bavinck treats in the doctrine of God before he begins to consider God's works in creation and redemption is the doctrine of the Trinity. Following the traditional order of topics in the Western theological tradition, Bavinck treats the subject of the Trinity after his treatment of God's attributes. Though it has been suggested that this location for the doctrine of the Trinity diminishes the truth of God's Trinitarian name, Bavinck concludes the doctrine of God's being and nature with the subject of the Trinity for two significant reasons.

First, this sequence of topics enables us to appreciate the co-equal and consubstantial nature of the three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. To affirm the deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is to affirm that *each person shares fully in all of the divine attributes*.

To paraphrase the language of the Athanasian Creed, *"the Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, and the Holy Spirit is eternal; but there are not three eternals."*

Every perfection or virtue that belongs necessarily to the Father, who is true and Almighty God, must likewise belong to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

And second, this sequence underscores that, in the course of the history of revelation, God has progressively revealed himself. The final and fullest revelation of God is given to us in his Trinitarian name. In the knowledge of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we have the apex of divine revelation and the most profound disclosure of God's ineffable being and power. The doctrine of the Trinity, in other words, is not a kind of postscript to the doctrine of the God. Rather, the doctrine of the Trinity is the most fundamental and all-encompassing revealed truth regarding the true and living God of the Scriptures.

### **The progressive revelation of the Trinity**

In the history of special revelation, there is evident progress from the intimations of the Trinity in the Old Testament to the full disclosure of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, we find a number of indicators of the Trinity, but the distinction of the persons is not clearly revealed. For example, the plural form of the name for God (*Elohim*) already hints at the richness and fullness of the divine being and life. God is not an abstract singularity, but contains a rich diversity within the unity of his being. In God's works of creation and especially re-creation, we also witness the distinct operations of the three persons, even though the references to the works of the Son and the Spirit do not clearly distinguish their person. In the account of creation, we read of God calling his creatures into existence by his *"Word"* and of the *"Spirit of God"* who was present at creation *"hovering over the waters"* (Genesis 1:2). During the period of the Patriarchs, there are a number of instances where the *"angel of the Lord"* appears and acts (e.g. Genesis 16:6-13; 18; 21:17-20; 22:11-19; 24:7, 40; 28:13-17; 31:11-13; 32:24-30). Following an ancient tradition of the church, Bavinck views these passages to describe pre-incarnate visitations of the eternal Son of God. Furthermore, when God empowers his servants to act in his name or fulfill their calling, he empowers them by the presence and operation of his Spirit.

In many passages, the Spirit of the Lord is revealed as *"the principle of all life and well-being, of all the gifts and powers in the sphere of revelation."*

(RD 2:263)

Though most of the Old Testament references to the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit do not explicitly distinguish between their persons, some passages clearly differentiate between all three persons (e.g. Psalm 33:6; Isaiah 61:1; 63:9-12; Haggai 2:5-6).

Unlike the less clear and distinct revelation of the Trinity in the Old Testament, Bavinck argues that the New Testament is thoroughly and explicitly Trinitarian. In the economy of redemption, the great events of the incarnation of the eternal Son in the "fullness of time" and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost serve to disclose in a definitive manner that the living God is a Trinity of coequal persons. To use an analogy from the writings of Benjamin B. Warfield, the difference between the Old Testament and New Testament revelation of the Trinity is like that between a dimly-lit and brightly-lit room. Though the truth of the Trinity is present in the Old Testament, it requires the brighter light of the fullness of New Testament revelation to disclose what is already implicit in the Old. What remains indistinct and unclear in the Old becomes distinct and clear in the New.

*"Much more clearly than in the Old Testament we now discover that the God of the covenant is and has to be a triune God, that is, that there is a threefold principle in operation in the work of salvation. Not merely a few isolated texts but the whole New Testament is Trinitarian in that sense. All salvation, every blessing, and blessedness have their threefold cause in God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."*

(RD 2:269-70)

It is not the case that the revelation of the Trinity in the New Testament is simply a matter of a variety of proof texts. Rather, the very fabric of redemption requires the distinction of persons and equality of being between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the incarnation of the Son, God himself comes to dwell with his people, to disclose his truth and grace, and to accomplish redemption. And in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and is bestowed by the Son, God imparts all the blessings of Christ upon his people and the church becomes a *"dwelling place of God in the Spirit"* (Ephesians 2). To deny the deity of the Son or of the Spirit is tantamount to a denial of redemption as a fulfillment of the covenant promise that God will establish a life-communion between himself and his people. Unless the Father truly gives himself to us in the person of the Son, and unless the Spirit truly comes from the Father and the Son to indwell the people of God, we can neither know nor enjoy true communion with the one only, true and living God.

### **Trinitarian terminology: One being, three persons**

According to Bavinck, Scriptural revelation, especially in its New Testament fulfillment and completion, gives us all the elements that constitute the building blocks for the church's dogma of the Trinity. In the course of the church's reflection upon the Scriptures, the church was obligated to formulate the teaching of Scripture in the face of doctrinal heresies, which denied the doctrine of the Trinity, and in order to testify to the saving works of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One of the questions that often surfaces in the course of the church's dogmatic reflection upon Scripture is the question of the use of extra-biblical language and terms to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity. Was this development necessary, and must we use such language in our confession of the truth concerning the Triune God?

Bavinck answers this question by noting that the use of such language is indispensable.

The essence of Christianity — the absolute self-revelation of God in the person of Christ and the absolute self-communication of God in the Holy Spirit — could only be maintained, the church believed, if it had its foundation and first principle in the ontological Trinity. Accordingly, as soon as the data presented to that end by Scripture became the object of theological reflection, a need arose for various terms and expressions that do not occur in Scripture, but are nonetheless indispensable for the twofold purpose of giving expression, however imperfectly, to the truth (of the Trinitarian faith) and of maintaining it in the face of misunderstanding and opposition. (RD 2:296)

This question reminds us that the Bible is not a dogmatic textbook, which the church only needs to repeat parrot-like. The data of Scripture call for a process of reflection and intelligent apprehension. In the history of theological reflection upon the doctrine of the Trinity, it has become evident that the use of extra-biblical terms to summarize the Bible's teaching has served the cause of faithfulness to Scripture. Frequently, when such language was rejected as extra-biblical, the cause of Scriptural faithfulness has actually suffered.

*"Under the guise of being scriptural, biblical theology has always strayed farther away from Scripture, while ecclesiastical orthodoxy, with its extra-biblical terminology, has been consistently vindicated as scriptural."*

(RD 2:297)

Though a significant consensus regarding the doctrine of the Trinity exists within the historic Christian church of the East and West, some differences of language and Trinitarian terms are evident. In the Western church, the common language used for the doctrine of the Trinity is that God is one in "being" or "substance" (*essentia, substantia*), yet God exists in "three persons" (*prosopa*). In the Eastern church, the common language used is that God is one in "being" (*ousia*), yet God exists in "three subsistences" or "hypostases" (*hypostases*). This difference in language reflects a difference between the Latin language, which served as the primary language of theology for centuries in the Western church, and the Greek language, which served as the primary language of the Eastern church. Despite these differences in language and the misunderstanding that such differences can produce,<sup>1</sup> the consensus teaching of the Christian church is expressed in these terms: there is one God, who subsists eternally in the persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The church confesses that God is one in "essence" or "being" to deny that the three persons of the Triune Godhead are three Gods. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit do not simply "share" the nature of being God, but are the one being who is God. The unity between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is not merely that they share a common nature (the way "Peter, James, and John" share a human nature); it is a unity of being that is full and complete. Moreover, whether the term used is "person" or "subsistence" the distinction of persons within the Godhead is not the same as the distinction between three human persons, who are three separate individuals. The unity of God's being and nature is such that, however necessary and proper the distinction between the persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, there are not three "beings" in the Godhead. At the same time, a clear distinction must be drawn between the persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The distinction of persons within the Godhead is real: the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father, nor is the Holy Spirit to be confused with either the Father or the Son.

Perhaps one way to illustrate the meaning and significance of this language is to note the two great Trinitarian heresies that the early church faced and finally rejected.

The first heresy was the teaching of Arius, who insisted that the God is in his essence "unoriginate" and "unbegotten." According to Arius, the Son of God was "begotten" in the sense of "made." There was, to use a favorite expression of Arius, "a time when the Son was not," that is, a time before the Son was begotten of the Father in the sense of being "made" or "created" by an act of God's will. The consequence of Arius's teaching was a denial that the Son was true and eternal God, co-equal and of one essence with the Father. At the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., the church confessed, contrary to the teaching of Arius, that the Son was "of one essence" with the Father. The Nicene Creed introduced into Christian theology, therefore, the all-important teaching that the Father and the Son are distinct persons, but one in being. It was not long thereafter that the church also confessed that God is one in essence, yet distinct in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The second heresy was that of a theologian by the name of Sabellius, who taught that the three "persons" are only different ways of speaking about the different works of God in the economy of redemption. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in the view of Sabellius, are not ultimately

distinct in their person, but these "names" are simply ways of referring to the different works of the one person of God in the history of redemption. This "Sabellian" or "modalistic" heresy denied that the three persons of the Trinity are anything more than "masks" or "roles" that God plays at different moments in the course of history.

In the face of these heresies — the one a denial of the deity of the Son and Holy Spirit, the other a denial of the distinct persons within the Godhead — the church was compelled, on the basis of Scripture, to insist that God is one being, yet eternally existing in three distinct persons. Far from being an imposition of unbiblical terminology upon the simplicity of Scriptural teaching, the church recognized that such language was an indispensable fence against the intrusion of the most profound heresy into the church.

### **The "double procession" of the Holy Spirit**

In spite of the great consensus that was reached in the church on the doctrine of the Trinity, Bavinck observes that a difference of teaching emerged between the Eastern and Western church on the question of the "relation" between the Holy Spirit and the Father and the Son. Whereas the Eastern church spoke of the Holy Spirit's "procession" from the Father *alone*, the Western church ultimately affirmed a doctrine of the "double procession" of the Spirit from the Father "and the Son" (the so-called *filioque* clause). Though this debate about the procession of the Spirit may seem to us at first glance rather obscure and arcane, there are two important questions that it raises. First, the Western church affirmed the procession of the Spirit from the Father "and the Son" in order to oppose any vestige of "subordinationism" in the doctrine of the Trinity. The Son, who is co-equal and consubstantial with the Father, is not subordinate to the Father in respect to the procession of the Holy Spirit. Though the Spirit proceeds distinctly from the persons of the Father and the Son, we may not exclude the Son from the eternal procession of the Spirit in a way that would diminish him as truly God. And second, the economy of redemption involves the Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost in fulfillment of the Father's promise and as an act of the risen and ascended Christ. The Spirit is not simply the Spirit "of the Father"; He is also the Spirit "of the Son" (Galatians 4:6) who is imparted by the Son as "*another Comforter*" who bestows the blessings of Christ upon his people. In the judgment of the Western church, a failure to acknowledge the Son in the procession of the Holy Spirit would threaten an unbiblical separation between the work of the Son and the work of the Holy Spirit.

### **The "incommunicable properties" of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit**

To conclude his summary of the doctrine of the Trinity, Bavinck devotes some attention to the subject of what are known as the "*incommunicable properties*" of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> The "names" of the three persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, remind us of the distinct relations between them. The Father is distinguished by His "incommunicable property" of paternity; He begets the Son, and together with the Son "spirates" (breathes out) the Holy Spirit. The Son is distinguished by his "incommunicable property" of being "generated" by the Father. And the Holy Spirit is distinguished by his "incommunicable property" of being breathed out or proceeding from the Father and the Son. These "incommunicable properties" are descriptive of the "relations" that exist within the Godhead between the three persons. These relations are not temporary but eternal. They are not voluntary in the sense of distinct acts, but necessary in the sense of relations that belong to the identity of each person. From all eternity, the Father has always been the One who begets the Son; the Son has always been generated of the Father; and the Holy Spirit has always proceeded from the Father and the Son.

Though these terms may seem to us to be obscure or difficult, they serve to preserve truths that are precious to every Christian believer. All Christians know from Scripture that life is to be found in fellowship with God — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When we pray as believers, we address God as "*our Father*." We expect to be heard by the Father because we come to him in "*the name of the Son*." And we pray "*in the Spirit*." If our prayers are a true communion and fellowship with God, then it is absolutely vital that God *is* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Likewise in

worship: we come into the presence of our Father in heaven through the Son and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. If our prayers and worship are addressed to the true and living God, then this God must be even as we acknowledge him to be. Furthermore, if to know God is to love and serve him, then we must believe that he is as he has revealed himself and acted through the course of the history of redemption. When God the Father sends his Son to be our Redeemer, he is not play-acting but revealing himself to us. God the Father, who eternally and perfectly loves his only-begotten Son, has willed to include us by gracious adoption within the embrace of that love. Through adoption believers come to enjoy the privileges of sonship that are the "natural right and property" of the eternal Son of God! God the Son, who is the perfect image and reflection of the Father, has come to us in order to make him known. Since the Son is the exact and perfect image of the Father, we truly know and are able to come to the Father through him. God the Holy Spirit, who lives in perfect and unbroken communion with the Father and the Son, is given to us in order that by him we may come through the Son to the Father. Thus, all that is true and precious in the Scriptures' revelation of God to us is expressed and summed up in the doctrine of the Trinity.

### **Analogies for the Trinity?**

Bavinck closes his consideration of the doctrine of the Trinity with a treatment of the topic of analogies or arguments for the Trinity. Is it possible to appeal to arguments or examples of "vestiges of the Trinity" in the creation to help explain or confirm the truth of the church's dogma of the Trinity?

Though Bavinck traces the history of attempts to set forth such analogies or arguments, he views this history with some ambivalence. Despite the diversity of candidates for this purpose, they all follow roughly into two kinds: analogies that lean in the direction of "unitarianism," or analogies that lean in the direction of "tritheism." The first set of analogies appeals to features of the creation that reflect various forms of irreducible "threeness." Examples of such analogies are abundant: earth/wind/fire; the three forms of water (liquid, gas, ice); fire/flame/heat; the true/the good/the beautiful; being/known/willing; mind/knowledge/love; root/branch/fruit, etc. In all of these analogies, there are three distinct components or elements that are essentially one. The second set of analogies appeals to the unity within diversity in relations between persons. These analogies, which have become more prevalent in modern theology, compare the Trinity with the unity of being and purpose that obtains between distinct persons. For example, in order for the Triune God to be a fellowship of perfect and mutual love, there needs to be a real difference between the One who loves (the Father) and the One who is loved and reciprocates in love (the Son); there also needs to be a communion or fellowship of love between the Father and the Son, which fellowship is effected through the communion of the Holy Spirit. The problem with all of these analogies, however, is that they tend to push in the direction of some form of Trinitarian heresy. The first set of analogies tends to suggest the error of a "Unitarian" or non-Trinitarian view of God. The second set of analogies tends to suggest the error of "Tritheism," emphasizing the distinction of persons at the expense of the unity of being. In Bavinck's opinion, such analogies may have limited usefulness, but they ultimately fail to capture the fullness of the Christian confession regarding the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

In his concluding section on the doctrine of the Trinity, Bavinck identifies three ways in which this dogma is absolutely vital to the Christian faith. First, the doctrine of the Trinity presents a stark contrast to the errors of Deism and Pantheism. Deism views God as though he were aloof and unrelated to the world. Though Deism regards God as the Creator of all things, it conceives the world as independent from God's interest or involvement. Pantheism, by contrast, fails to distinguish between God and the created world, and confuses the history of the creation with the self-development of God. Second, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity simultaneously affirms God's independence from the creation and his connectedness with the creation. According to the Christian faith, the boundary between God and the world must be maintained, even though God is pleased to reveal the fullness of his life by means of his relations with his creatures. The Christian

doctrine of the Trinity makes God known as *"essentially distinct from the world, yet having a blessed life of his own"* (RD 2:331). And third, the doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that all things are "from," "through," and "in" God. Whether in creation or in recreation, the communion we enjoy with God is a communion with the Father, through the Son, and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The "covenant" relationship that God aims to initiate and perfect between himself and his people can only be understood in Trinitarian terms: fellowship with God requires that God give himself to his people in the person of the Son and by way of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

*"Christians have a God above them, before them, and within them."*

(RD 2:334)

Cornelis Venema

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<sup>1</sup> One common example of misunderstanding is the Western church's preference for the language of "person" rather than "subsistence." Because the term for "person" in Latin originally referred to the "mask" a person would wear, when playing a particular role in the theatre, the Eastern church viewed this language with suspicion. The distinction of the persons within the Godhead is "real," not "apparent," and the term "person" was viewed as an inadequate way of making this point.

<sup>2</sup> See the Belgic Confession, Art. 8: "According to this truth and this Word of God, we believe in one only God, who is the one single essence, in which are three persons, really, truly, and eternally distinct according to their incommunicable properties; namely, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is the cause, origin, and beginning of all things visible and invisible; the Son is the word, wisdom, and image of the Father; the Holy Spirit is the eternal power and might, proceeding from the Father and the Son. Nevertheless, God is not by this distinction divided into three, since the Holy Scriptures teach us that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit have each His personality, distinguished by Their properties; but in such wise that these three persons are but one only God."