

CHAPTER 6.

FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

One evening, as a father is tucking in his child for the night, his seven-year old son says, “Dad, may I ask you a question?” “Of course,” replies the father. The son asks, “Why do we talk about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, when there’s only one God? It makes it sound like he is three gods.” Patiently the father explains, “No, he is one God, but at the same time as being one God, he is also three persons. That is why he is called the triune God.” To this the son replies, “I know, Dad, I’ve heard that word *triune* before. But it still does not make sense to me. Either God must be one, or he must be three, but he cannot be three and one at the same time, can he? According to the rules of math, that does not work. One plus one plus one equals three, not one!”

Do you understand what the seven-year old boy is struggling with? Not only children but also adults have a hard time understanding the doctrine of the Trinity. According to elementary math, one plus one plus one equals three. So, logically, if we speak of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then we should also speak about three gods. Yet the Bible is very clear that the LORD is one (Deut 6:4). What are we to make of this? How are we to think about it?

Since the doctrine of the Trinity is hard to understand, many Christians do not draw from it as much spiritual strength and comfort as they should. They may well believe it, but they do not frequently *use* it. In their minds this doctrine is mostly something that theologians will dis-

cuss and debate. However, not only theologians need this doctrine; all Christians do. In the first place, it is part of true faith. True faith accepts all that God has revealed in his Word (LD 7), and Scripture does reveal a triune God (see the next section below). Therefore, even if it is hard to understand, it is crucial that we believe it. You can think back to what we learned about faith and the limits of human understanding in chapter 4.

Secondly, the early church devoted a lot of energy to making sure they confessed this doctrine correctly. The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed all deal explicitly, and sometimes extensively, with our triune God. If it was so important for the early church, it should also be important to us today.

Thirdly, one of the most significant events in a Christian's life is his or her baptism. Baptism is administered in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Baptism also ought to be used throughout our lives to strengthen our faith (see LD 25, Q&A 65). So, through our baptism the teaching about our triune God becomes a very personal and profitable doctrine.

GOD HAS SO REVEALED HIMSELF IN HIS WORD

In Lord's Day 8, Q&A 25, the Catechism asks, "Since there is only one God, why do you speak of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?" In other words, the Catechism understands quite well the question that the seven-year old son asked his father. Our logic cannot fathom exactly how God can be three-in-one. Surprisingly, though, the Catechism's answer is short and to the point. In fact, the answer is only one sentence. Also, it does not bring forward various analogies in creation to give us some limited understanding of the Trinity. For example, many have said that the Trinity can be compared to a triangle: three points, yet one shape. But the Catechism does not use such analogies. Instead, it simply states: "Because God has so revealed himself in his Word that these three distinct persons are the one, true, eternal God." In short, the Catechism is saying this: God describes himself as triune, and if anyone knows who God is, then surely it is God himself!

We must also remember that God is God; he is not a creature. Often the reason that we struggle with this doctrine is that we are still thinking about God in a far too human manner. Among human beings it is certainly true that if you have three persons, then you have three human beings. Three persons do not make one human being! However, what applies to creatures does not necessarily apply to the Creator. We must be careful that we do not—intentionally or unintentionally—pull God down to our level.

Let us turn to the Bible now and see how God reveals himself as triune, starting with the Old Testament. The first two verses of the Bible already teach us something about the Trinity. On the one hand, it is clear that there is only one God. Scripture begins with these words: “In the beginning *God* created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). It does not say “gods” but one “God.” But in the very next verse we read that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” This raises some questions. Is the Spirit of God in verse 2 the same as God the Creator in verse 1? Is there any kind of distinction between the two? At this point, so early in Scripture, these questions are not yet answered. However, the LORD reveals more as his Word progresses.

The next revelation of God’s triune nature is in Genesis 1:26. There God speaks on the sixth day of creation. Just as in Genesis 1:1, it is one God—not gods—who is speaking. Yet he speaks in an unexpected way. He says, “Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness.” Now, since there is only one God speaking, we would have expected him to say, “Let *me* make man in *my* image, after *my* likeness.” However, even though he is the one God, he speaks using plural pronouns. This is not a one-time occurrence either. The same pattern is repeated in Genesis 3:22 and, later on, in Genesis 11:6–7. At this point, the LORD still has not revealed many details. He speaks in the plural, but he has not revealed *how many* persons he is, or what their names are. But there is more revelation to come.

One of the first indications that God is Father comes in Exodus 4:22. The LORD sends Moses to say to Pharaoh, “Then you shall say to Pharaoh,

‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son.’” By implication this also means that the LORD is Israel’s Father. Likewise, in Hosea 11, the LORD speaks passionately about Israel as his child, calling him “my son” (v. 1) and describing how he taught Israel to walk, leading him with “cords of kindness” (v. 4), and refusing to give up on him and abandon him because, after all, he was his very own child (v. 8).

Moreover, what is implicit in Exodus 4 and Hosea 11 becomes explicit in other passages. For example, in Deuteronomy 32:6 Moses rebukes the Israelites by asking, “Do you thus repay the Lord, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?” Similarly, in Jeremiah 3:19, the LORD directly admonishes his people when he says, “And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me.” There are also other places in the Old Testament where the LORD speaks of himself as the Father, including Isaiah 63:16 and Malachi 2:10. In sum, then, God reveals himself as the Father who loves his children with a strong and compassionate love. Understandably, he is also deeply offended when his people, who are his very own children, turn their backs on him and forsake him.

At the same time, already in the Old Testament, it is clear that there is more to the LORD than being Father. There are certain occasions when we hear about a special Son. When this particular Son is described, we can only come to one conclusion: he is God. For example, in Psalm 2 the LORD makes a decree saying, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you” (v. 7). This Son will rule over the entire earth (v. 8), and all people, even kings, are summoned to “kiss the Son” (v. 12), just as much as they are called to “serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling” (v. 11). Thus, at the end of Psalm 2 the Son is put on par with the Father.

This becomes even clearer in Psalm 110 where David calls one of his own sons “my Lord” (v. 1). As Jesus explained to the Jews in Mark 12:35–37, the only way to understand this psalm correctly is to acknowledge that this particular son of David is also, and at the same time, God. What is deduced from Psalm 110 is made explicit in Isaiah 9:6, where

the prophet announces, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” On the one hand, this Son of whom Isaiah speaks is to be human, since he will be born. Yet, on the other hand, he must also be God. Otherwise why would he be called “Mighty God”? Likewise, Daniel 7 speaks of a “son of man” who rides on the clouds of heaven and rules over all people of every nation. These are clearly divine privileges. In short, then, as the Lord continues to reveal himself in Scripture he teaches us that he is not only Father but also Son. Moreover, in the Old Testament it is prophesied that this Son who is God will also be a son of man, that is, a human being. These prophecies were fulfilled at the incarnation of God’s eternal Son (John 1:14).

Finally, the Holy Spirit is also revealed in the Old Testament, starting with Genesis 1:2, as we saw above. However, it does not stop with the first chapter of the Bible. Frequently we hear about the Holy Spirit descending upon certain individuals, especially prophets, kings, and judges (Num 11:17; Judg 3:10; 6:34; 1 Sam 16:13, etc.). Lest anyone think that the Spirit of God is only some kind of divine force, the prophet Isaiah says that the people of Israel “rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit” (Isa 63:10). Grieving is something that is done with respect to a person, in this case a divine person, the third person of our triune God.

Clearly, the LORD was busy throughout the Old Testament revealing himself as the one, true, and triune God. These revelations become even clearer in the New Testament. Two passages immediately come to mind: Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:14. In Matthew 28 the Lord Jesus Christ sends out his apostles with these words: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” He speaks of one name (not names in the plural) and yet he refers to three persons. This verse is perhaps the most clear and succinct revelation of our triune God. This is also confirmed at the end of 2 Corinthians, when the apostle Paul gives his final greeting and blessing: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Under-

standing God in this verse to refer to God the Father, we once again hear all three persons mentioned side by side. Other passages that teach about the Trinity are:

God the Father: Matthew 6:25–34; John 5:16–27; Romans 8:12–17.

God the Son: John 5:26, 8:58; Colossians 1:13–20; Hebrews 1:3, 5–14.

God the Holy Spirit: John 14:16–17; Acts 5:3–4; 2 Corinthians 3:17–18.

In addition, the Belgic Confession gives a helpful summary of these passages in Articles 8–11.

We have taken only a brief look at some of the key passages in which the LORD reveals himself to be triune. Even from this short survey it should be evident, however, what a rich and full doctrine it is. Not only do we have a God who is the loving Father who cares for all creation, and especially his children, but this same God is the Son who became man and worked redemption for us, and he is the Spirit who dwells in our hearts, shaping and moulding us to be more and more like our Saviour (LD 32). When we think about the Trinity, we should not think of a doctrine that is confusing but, rather, one that is truly comforting. What a blessed thing it is to be baptized in the name of this triune God. It is triple blessedness. It is an indescribable privilege *three times over!*

THE IMPLICATIONS OF CONFESSING ONE GOD

Now that we have looked in Scripture at how God reveals himself to be triune, it is good to analyze the implications of this doctrine. Not all, but many false religions are polytheistic, that is to say, their followers believe in the existence of many different gods. The ancient religions of Canaan, Egypt, Babylon, Greece, and Rome were all characterized by the worship of many gods. Typically, there would be gods of war, fertility, health, and wealth. In many religions the sun, moon, and stars were worshipped as gods. Often dead ancestors were also worshipped and given some kind of divine status. Also in the world today there

are polytheistic religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and neo-paganism, of which Wicca is one kind.

Since it confesses one God (Deut 6:4), the Christian faith immediately sets itself apart from all belief in many gods. This also affects the character of Christian worship. In polytheistic religions the gods often compete, or even fight, with each other. Moreover, even in those polytheistic religions that have a more peaceful pantheon, the worshipper is busy trying to make sure he keeps all the various gods happy. If a worshipper starts to neglect a particular god, it may well happen that this god becomes angry with him and makes his life difficult. By contrast, in the Christian faith we do not have to worry about frantically running after all kinds of different gods, trying to divide our worship time equally among them. Rather, we worship one God, and we know that we have a good standing before him, only by faith for the sake of Jesus Christ (LD 23).

At the same time, because the three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are completely united as one, we never have to worry that there might be some tension or misunderstanding among them. As Jesus Christ said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). The three persons have always worked together in perfect and seamless harmony, and they will always continue to do so. This, too, is a great blessing for us.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF CONFESSING THREE PERSONS

The Christian faith is most certainly a monotheistic faith. This means that we worship only one (*mono*) God (*theos*). At the same time, it is different from other monotheistic religions, such as Islam. Other monotheistic religions tend to believe in a more impersonal god. God is described in them as the Almighty, the Sovereign, the Supreme One, or something similar. However, the God of Holy Scripture is, first of all, Father. By its very nature, *Father* is a personal and relational term. God is also Son, and *Son* is a very personal and relational term. Finally, God is also Spirit. At first glance, *Spirit* may not seem to be as personal as *Father* or *Son*. However, when we consider that in Scripture the Spirit hovers with care (Gen 1:2), is grieved by rebellion (Isa 63:10; Eph 4:30), groans in the

prayers of God's children (Rom 8:26), and serves as the Counsellor for the church until the return of Christ (John 14:15, 26), then it is clear that the Holy Spirit does not in any way diminish but, on the contrary, increases how personal God is. So, the three persons, who are the one God, ensure that God is not the cold, distant, impersonal god of deism (see chapter 5) or other monotheistic religions.

At the same time, it has always been challenging to find just the right way of describing the relationships among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In particular the early church devoted a lot of time to this issue. Consider, for example, these excerpts from the Athanasian Creed:

Now this is the catholic faith, that we worship one God in trinity and trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons, or dividing the substance. For the Father's person is one, the Son's another, the Holy Spirit's another; but the Godhead of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is one, their glory is equal, their majesty is co-eternal.

The Father is from none, not made nor created nor begotten. The Son is from the Father alone, not made nor created but begotten. The Holy Spirit is from the Father and the Son, not made nor created nor begotten but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits. And in this trinity there is nothing before or after, nothing greater or less, but all three persons are co-eternal with each other and co-equal.

The Athanasian Creed is careful to maintain equality among all three persons. At the same time, the creed is equally diligent not to confuse any of the three. Each person remains distinct, yet fully united as one God. In this way the distinctiveness of the three persons is not compromised or cancelled out by the truth that God is one.

Now you may wonder if this level of doctrinal detail is required of all Christians. Or can this kind of precise theological language about the Trinity be left up to the experts in theology? This question is perfectly understandable; however, the answer may be surprising to some. The Athanasian Creed ends by saying, "This is the catholic faith. Unless a man believes it faithfully and steadfastly, *he cannot be saved.*" In other

words, something eternally important is at stake here for all believers. But why?

To explain this further, the Athanasian Creed was written to refute a man named Arius (A.D. 256–336). Although he spoke of the Son as a god, Arius taught that Jesus Christ was some kind of lesser god. This teaching is also called *subordinationism*, a term which is another way of saying that some people make Christ out to be someone less than true and complete God. However, as soon as anyone compromises the full divinity of Jesus Christ, he also compromises the heart of the gospel. Our salvation depends upon having a deliverer who is both true God and true man—fully God and fully man (LD 5–6)! Without that, we are without hope. So, since the heart of the gospel was at stake, the Christians in the early church went to great lengths to make sure that the doctrine of the Trinity was accurately and fully confessed. If it were anything less than that, we would still be stuck in our sin and misery.

JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES AND MORMONISM

The teachings of Arius are still alive today. Both the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mormons teach that Jesus Christ is a god, but they add that he is a lesser divine being than the Father is.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, the Watch Tower Society, commonly known as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, slowly grew and became organized. Charles Taze Russell and Joseph Franklin Rutherford were two key founding fathers. Today this organization has approximately eight million members and can be found throughout the world. They are well known for distributing tracts and magazines from door to door.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormons, is a large organization as well. It has some fifteen million members worldwide. Founded by Joseph Smith in New York State, it now has its headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Both the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons corrupt the gospel precisely on the point of who Jesus Christ is. They both teach that he is a divine being. For them Christ is more than just a normal or average human being. But both deny that Christ is truly and fully God, even as the Father is God. However, Scripture is clear: the Word, who is Christ, is God—true God of true God (John 1:1, 14). Moreover, it is exactly this truth that, as we said above, qualifies Christ to be our only Mediator and Deliverer (Rom 1:1–4; LD 5, 6). With a Saviour who is truly God we have a salvation that is truly and eternally effective. In the end, then, confessing our triune God is not a confusing riddle; instead, it is a very rich comfort!

Suggested Readings: Psalm 110; Matthew 28:16–20

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Explain how John 8:58–59 demonstrates that Christ is God. In this connection you will find it helpful to review the discussion of the name *Yahweh*, or I AM WHO I AM, in chapter 5.
2. Explain how Acts 5:3–4 demonstrates that the Holy Spirit is God.
3. Using books that you have available to you or online resources, describe how the Muslims view God, whom they call Allah. How does the Muslim view of God differ from the view of God as revealed in the Bible? Can you think of three specific points of difference?
4. Find a copy of the Athanasian Creed. Read through the entire creed. Take note of any words or phrases that you do not understand. Discuss these as a group and try to clarify the meaning together.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Many Reformed churches use an official liturgical form when baptism is administered. Below is a quotation from such a form. Discuss at least three different ways in which this explanation could help Christians in their daily walk of life.

When we are baptized into the name of the Father, God the Father testifies and seals to us that he establishes an eternal covenant of grace with us. He adopts us for his children and heirs, and promises to provide us with all good and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit.

When we are baptized into the name of the Son, God the Son promises us that he washes us in his blood from all our sins and unites us with him in his death and resurrection. Thus we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God.

When we are baptized into the name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that he will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from our sins and the daily renewal of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God's elect in life eternal.¹

2. Organizations such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons will often say that the doctrine of the Trinity was developed later by the church, in the third and fourth centuries, but that it is not found in Scripture itself. How would you respond to this challenge?
3. What is the best way to explain the doctrine of the Holy Trinity to a seven-year old child? Would you use analogies such as the triangle (i.e., three angles, yet one shape) or time (i.e., past, present, and future, yet one chronology)? Or do those analogies hinder rather than help?
4. When sharing the gospel with those who are unfamiliar with it, at what point would you introduce the doctrine of our triune God? Is it something that should wait until they have become quite familiar with other scriptural teachings? Or is it such a foundational doctrine that you need to bring it up sooner rather than later?

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1. *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 2014), 597.