

LESSON 5

Belgic Confession Articles 8 and 9 The Holy Trinity

General:

In this lesson we confess God to be a Tri-une God, and seek the Scriptural proof for such a confession.

1. Terminology

In the confession concerning the Holy Trinity, the terminology is especially important:

Essence (being) – Persons

However, this terminology is not adequate to grasp the "mystery" of what is being confessed. We confess it because it is clearly revealed in the Holy Scriptures, but do not pretend to comprehend it (see also: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 8).

Although there is only *one* divine *essence* or *being*, which we call *God*, we must distinguish in God three *persons*. These three Persons may not be "separated," so that they virtually become three "Gods," but neither may they be so indistinguishably confused that only one Person remains.

2. The One God

The Scriptures clearly teach that there is only one God and that there is no God besides Him:

Deuteronomy 6:4,5: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (see also: 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, Ephesians 4:6, James 2:19).

The Christian faith recognizes that in God there are three Persons, but this does not substantiate the accusation (for e.g. of Judaism, Mohammedanism and modern sectarianism) that we therefore confess three Gods. We simply confess that this one God is so rich that He exists in three Persons Who are essentially One.

3. The Three Persons

We know of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Who are three, distinct Persons.

The Confession speaks of "incommunicable properties" or "each has His personal existence, distinguished by Their properties." This means: although these Persons are *one* God, they also differ in some aspects. For example, the Spirit is not "begotten" as the Son, and the Father never took upon Himself human nature as did the Son.

In the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 8) we can read of a distinction also in *works*:

- a) God the Father and our *creation*
- b) God the Son and our *redemption*
- c) God the Holy Spirit and our *sanctification*.

In these works, the three Persons show full unity and cooperation.

Father: cause, origin and beginning of all things
{1 Corinthians 8:6}

Son: word, wisdom, and image of the Father
{Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3}

Spirit: the eternal power and might who proceeds from
the Father and the Son {John 15:26}.

4. Heresies

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity was the first which the early Christian Church was called to defend (see list of heretics, Article 9). The most important heretics are:

- a) Sabellius: who taught that the names "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" were just three different names for one Person
- b) Paul of Samosata: who considered Jesus but an ordinary man, and denied that He was God
- c) Arius: who taught that there is only one divine Person, and that Jesus is merely a "creature" of God.

These heresies invariably sought to deny the *deity* of Christ, and were refuted at the famous Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381). During the time of the Reformation this confession was again attacked, e.g., by Socinus and Servet. Guido de Brès took great care that the Reformed would not be confused with the "Anti-Trinitarians."

5. Scriptural Proof

Since the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be "reasoned out," it is important to present clear Biblical proof. The term "*Trinity*" cannot as such be found in the Scriptures, but the matter itself is quite clear and evident. In Article 9 some (not all!) proof-texts are given:

- a) Genesis 1:26, And God (one) said, Let us (plural) make
- b) Matthew 28: in the Name (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (plural)}
- c) 2 Corinthians 13:14: the apostolic greetings are often trinitarian
- d) 1 John 5:7 (Authorized Version): some versions do not have this text, which is disputed since it does not appear in some major manuscripts.

QUESTIONS (Lesson 5):

1. Why is "terminology" so important when speaking of the "Holy Trinity"?
2. What does the confession mean when it speaks of "incommunicable properties"?
3. How can we distinguish between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?
4. Which heretics have denied the doctrine of the Trinity,
 - a) in the early Christian Church?
 - b) during the time of the Reformation?
5. Give (three) proof-texts for the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

ASSIGNMENT:

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 8.

ARTICLE 10

JESUS CHRIST TRUE AND ETERNAL GOD

We believe that Jesus Christ according to His divine nature is the onlybegotten Son of God, begotten from eternity, not made, nor created – for then He would be a creature – but of the same essence with the Father, equally-eternal, *who reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature*, and is equal to Him in all things. He is the Son of God, not only from the time that He assumed our nature but from all eternity, as these testimonies, when compared with each other, teach us: Moses says that God created the world; the apostle John says that all things were made by the Word which he calls God. The letter to the Hebrews says that God made the world through His Son; likewise the apostle Paul says that God created all things through Jesus Christ. Therefore it must necessarily follow that He who is called God, the Word, the Son, and Jesus Christ, did exist at that time when all things were created by Him. Therefore He could say, *Truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am, and He prayed, Glorify Thou Me in Thy own presence with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was made*. And so He is true, eternal God, the Almighty, whom we invoke, worship, and serve.

ARTICLE 11

THE HOLY SPIRIT TRUE AND ETERNAL GOD

We believe and confess also that the Holy Spirit from eternity proceeds from the Father and the Son. He is neither made, created, nor begotten, but He can only be said to proceed from both. In order He is the third Person of the Holy Trinity, of one and the same essence, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God, as the Holy Scriptures teach us.