

BASICS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

A survey by D. Scott Meadows of CBC-Exeter, NH; Oct 2017 (3 sessions)

Description more than defense. Review and reinforcement. Ancient and broad consensus.

Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic [universal] faith; which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit (*Athanasian Creed*, c. 450–600 AD).

Confessional orthodoxy. 2LCF formally adopted by CBC-Exeter in 1999. Paragraph of 2LCF II.3 bold below.

I. Three Subsistences.

In this divine and infinite Being there are three subsistences, the Father, the Word (or Son), and Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence, yet the essence undivided:

- “This divine and infinite Being” is God previously described (II.1, 2). The topic here concerns what is “in this . . . Being,” *ad intra* theology proper. Divine simplicity retained (“without parts,” II.1); the subsistents are NOT three parts of God, for God is radically One, and “all that is in God is God.”
- A “subsistent” is “a particular being or existent, and individual instance of a given essence.” The Latin equivalent is *hypostasis* (Muller, DLGTT, so for all technical terms unless otherwise noted). Common, less technical term is Person.
- Their number and designations. Three—the Father, the Word (or Son), and the Holy Spirit (Matt 28.19; 2 Cor 13.14; 1 John 5.7 KJV).
- Brief statement of essential unity. “Substance” is “the underlying spiritual ‘stuff’ of things; that which exists, with emphasis on concrete reality.” “One power” is absolute sovereignty and omnipotence. One “eternity” is “the existence and continuance of God without beginning or end and apart from all succession and change. . . . the simultaneous and perfect possession of endless life [which] transcends not only limited time but also infinite temporal succession, namely, time itself.”
- Brief statement of shared divinity. “Essence” is “the whatness of a being, which makes the being precisely what it is; e.g., the essence of Peter, Paul, and John is their humanity; the essence of God is deity or divinity.” “Each having the whole divine essence” denies that 1/3 of God’s essence is in the Father, 1/3 in the Son, 1/3 in the Spirit. “Yet the essence undivided” emphasizes the incomprehensible unity of the three subsistents! That unity is so great we may well wonder what distinguishes them.

II. Their Relative Properties and Personal Relations.

the Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son;

Again, *ad intra* rather than *ad extra* (e.g., only the Son becomes incarnate in Jesus). We are dealing here with the ontological Trinity (“ontology” is the nature of being; what God is in Himself) rather than the economic Trinity (what God does in His saving activity). Now these *ad intra* “relative properties and personal relations” are very difficult to conceive, but they are revealed more plainly *ad extra* when God acts in history to save His people. The Father sends the Son (Advent) who together send the Spirit (Pentecost).

These “relative properties” are not attributes that exist in and of themselves. They only describe the relationships that inhere in and among the three divine subsistents (i.e., no one subsistent has some trait that the other two lack; “all that is in God is God”). These are “incommunicable properties or modes of subsistence that identify the individual persons of the Trinity in relation to each other.”

- The *paternity* of the Father refers to His “unbegottenness together with His generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit.” Remember, He is Father eternally.

- The *filiation* of the Son refers to His “generation from the Father and His procession of the Spirit.” Remember, He is Son eternally and the “only begotten Son.” The Son is not creature, but God.
- The *procession* of the Spirit refers to His “emanation from the Father and the Son or, strictly speaking, His being emanated.” Again, keep hold of the Spirit’s full deity in this.

III. Their Identification as One God.

all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being, but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations;

- Because there is a genuine plurality within the Godhead, plural terms like “all” and “their” are entirely appropriate. Likewise, “Him” is proper in reference to the God who is One. We must guard against both heresies of tritheism (three gods) and monadic modalism (one God with three modes or manifestations of being).
- “Infinite” refers to “the limitlessness of the divine essence with regard to eternity and immensity.” “Immensity” means “the freedom of God from all limit of place.” Infinity pertains identically to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
- “Without beginning” is one way to characterize eternity as it relates to God, and this likewise pertains identically to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
- “Therefore but one God” not only denies that there are any other “Gods” besides this One, but also that this One is radically One (not made up of parts). That notion is reinforced by the assertion that He is “not to be divided in nature and being.” “Nature” in this context pertains to His “whatness” (essence). “Being” pertains to His “is-ness” (existence). There is no divine attribute that is in the Father and not also in the Son and the Spirit, for all attributes together are but the divine nature as considered by us in its various excellences. Also, the fullness of the divine Being pertains identically to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
- God may not be “divided” but He may be “distinguished” as three subsistents (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), and, *ad intra*, ONLY by the aforementioned “several peculiar (uniquely pertaining to each One) relative properties and personal relations.” A popular error today is the eternal subordination of the Son (ESS) to the Father. It violates this principle spelled out in our 2LCF and held classically by orthodox theologians from very early times in church history.

IV. The Practical Use of the Doctrine of the Trinity.

which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on Him.

The “doctrine” (i.e., truth taught) about the Trinity is neglected and even despised for many reasons, not the least of which is that supposedly it is not “practical.” The accusation is completely false.

- If not for the doctrine the Trinity (and the reality of our Triune God), we could not possibly have “communion” with God, for it is in the Son and by the Spirit that we know, love, and become one with the Father. A hypothetical divine monad of these divine attributes (2LCF 2.1, 2) could not possibly be known by us or relate us to Himself as His beloved children.
- Our “comfortable dependence on Him” is integrally related to the doctrine of the Trinity, for in it we learn that the Father loved and chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, and the Son become man in Christ Jesus to accomplish our redemption, and the Spirit is sent into the world by the Father and the Son to apply that redemption to each elect sinner. As Christians, we enjoy a full communion with God in our distinct communion with the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (see *The Works of John Owen*, Volume 2).
- This practical use implies that all deniers of the doctrine of the Trinity are not true Christians, nor do they know anything in their experience of “communion with God and comfortable dependence on Him,” which is to say that only in orthodox, biblical Christianity is there any hope of salvation, and not in any of the other world religions, or in the ubiquitous functional and anti-theological secularism of our American culture. Nothing could be more “practical” than this doctrine of the Trinity! Ω