

Studies in the Westminster Confession of Faith

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Chapter 2 - God and the Holy Trinity

Section III: In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding: the Son is eternally begotten of the Father: the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.

Proof texts: *1 John 5:7; Matthew 3:16,17; 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14; John 1:14,18; John 15:26; Galatians 4:6.*

This section of Chapter Two of the W.C.F. deals with the doctrine of God and the Trinity. This section highlights four fundamental points about the Trinity:

- [1] The Scriptures teach a Trinity in unity.
- [2] These three persons are each equally part of the Godhead.
- [3] These three names Father, Son and Holy Ghost are not different names for the same person.
- [4] That these three persons are distinguished from one another by different properties.

We are coming to consider the third of these four propositions:

3. These three names Father, Son and Holy Ghost are not different names for the same person. The W.C.F. comes here to deal with the 'Oneness' view of God. We believe in a Trinity of persons, but one essence. We believe in this concept of the Trinity in opposition to that form of belief that argues that God is one essence and one person.

[1] This 'Oneness' belief, however, argues that God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are really expressions of the one person. To be precise, expressions of our Lord Jesus Christ, just operating in different spheres and performing different functions. To them Jesus is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They argue that in the same way that Jesus Christ is: Prophet, Priest and King; He is also: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Within this belief, the divine nature of Jesus came to be known as 'God the Father'; the human nature of Jesus came to be known as 'God the Son' and the 'Holy Spirit' is the spiritual presence or form of Jesus dwelling amongst His people. Thus the Father is not the Son, this is a crucial distinction for them, just like *Spirit* is not *Flesh*, but rather, the Father is *in* the Son in a unique sense. An often quoted phrase used by early pioneers of the Oneness movement expressed the concept as: *God was manifested as the Father in creation, the Son in redemption, and the Holy Ghost in emanation.*

In believing this doctrine the *Oneness Movement* deny the Eternal Sonship of our Lord Jesus Christ. In contrast, Oneness teaching believes that the Son did not exist, in any substantial sense, prior to the incarnation, except in the foreknowledge of God. The belief in the Eternal Sonship of the second person of the Trinity is something which the WCF specifically mentions. The *Oneness* argument is that the concept of Sonship only relates to Jesus' human nature and not to His divine nature, that it was part of His humiliation. In saying this they fail to make a distinction between those passages of Scripture which speak of Him as the eternal Son and those which speak of Him as the Son of man.

[2] This is not a new or recent belief. This view of God goes back to early times in the New Testament Church. It is the old heresy of Sabellianism. Dr Alan Cairns in his Dictionary of Theological Terms has this to say about Sabellianism: *A form of Unitarianism named after Sabellius, a third century African Bishop.... It is the view that God is not only one single essence but one single person. Thus the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not personal names but modes or relations of the one divine person in His dealings with man. According to Sabellians the term Father referred to this one divine person when His incomprehensible greatness and sovereignty were in view. Son referred to His revelation to men and His becoming incarnate. Holy Spirit referred to His operating immediately upon the creature in the works of creation, providence or grace....*

The modern day 'Oneness' movement arose as a result of a claimed 'revelation', supposedly given to a man called R. E. McAllister, who was a Pentecostal preacher, at a Camp Meeting held near Los Angeles in 1913.

He also went on to teach that baptism should be administered correctly in the name of Jesus only, and no longer according to the Trinitarian formula. He based this claim on *Acts 2:38: Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.* The fall-out from this supposed 'revelation' eventually led to a split by adherents of this 'Oneness' teaching from the Assemblies of God in 1916. An obvious point, worthy of notice, is that the modern day practice of believing in the 'Oneness' view of God did not come from serious and attentive Bible study but by a claimed extra-Biblical 'revelation'. It only goes to prove that this belief is not to be found in the Scriptures.

This 'Oneness' view of God is also held by Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and a number of Pentecostal Churches worldwide but not them all. One of the largest of these groupings would be the United Pentecostal Church and locally we have 'The Church of God' assemblies holding this view. They are not to be confused with the 'Churches of God' which are part of the general Brethren movement in Northern Ireland and profess to be Trinitarian. This 'Oneness' doctrine was brought to Northern Ireland and spread around by two men: Gordon Magee chiefly and James Forsythe to a lesser extent. In the 1950s Gordon Magee went to the USA and came into contact with this 'Oneness' doctrine and when he subsequently returned to Ulster he began to teach it to the congregations of The Church of God.

[3] Biblical proof that there are three distinct persons in the Godhead. Previously we have mentioned places in Scripture which speak of a plural number as indicating a Trinity of persons. We want now to specifically consider some texts that support the premise of three distinct persons.

i. *Genesis 1:26,27: And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.* In whose plural image was man created? The Oneness movement says that is in the likeness of God and the angels. *Genesis 1:27* says otherwise.

ii. *Genesis 11:7: Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.* Who [plural] came down from heaven? The Oneness movement argue again that it was the Lord and the angels. However, *v5* says otherwise: *And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.*

iii. *John 8:17,18: It is also written in your law, that the testimony of two men is true. I am one that bear witness of myself, and the Father that sent me beareth witness of me.* How can this line of argument be plausible if only one person is in view as the Oneness movement claims? What good is the testimony of one witness? It is not acceptable according to the law of God, *At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death, Deuteronomy 17:6.* The truth of who Christ is, was established because of the strength of two separate witnesses. These texts argue most strongly against the uni-personality of God.

iv. *John 14:16; 16:26: And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you.* To whom was Christ going to pray on these occasions? Was He praying to Himself? The Oneness movement argues that His human nature was praying to His divine nature. Not a good enough answer! There can be no distinction between His human and divine natures in this way. To argue as they do requires two different persons not only two different natures. It is a 'person' who reasons and prays and not a 'nature'.

v. *John 3:35; 5:20: The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand; For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel.* Only two persons can love one another in this way. One person in two different manifestations of their one nature cannot be said to love each other. It is simply ludicrous!

In seeking to do justice to texts like those just quoted the doctrine of the Trinity was developed and formulated. To fully do justice to these Trinitarian texts the belief in a Trinity of persons within one divine essence was deemed necessary. It is worthwhile reminding ourselves that this view of the Trinity is entirely possible because we are here dealing with a spirit being. God is Spirit and therefore it is entirely feasible that He should exist as a Trinity of persons, but one essence.