

Studies in the Westminster Confession of Faith

*Newtownabbey Free Presbyterian Church Rev Brian McClung 12th December 2012 Chapter 2 Part 12
1 Corinthians 8:6*

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.

I think it is worthwhile repeating the point that these views of the Trinity are entirely possible because we are here dealing with a Spirit Being. God is infinite Spirit and therefore it is entirely feasible that He should exist as a Trinity of persons, but one essence. We must be extremely careful not to judge the Divine Being but our limited understanding and also by the obvious limitations of human beings.

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

4. That these three persons are distinguished from one another by different properties. Under this particular point we are seeking to comprehend, to some degree, the manner in which we are to understand and perceive the distinctions in the Trinity between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit/Ghost.

[1] Our understanding of the term 'person' within the Trinity. The term 'Godhead' appears three times in the Scriptures: *Acts 17:29; Romans 1:20; Colossians 2:9.* This term: *denotes that infinite, eternal, and unchangeable nature, or essence, which is not peculiar to the Father, or the Son, or the Holy Ghost, but is common to all three.* Exposition of the WCF by Rev Robert Shaw.

The distinctions within the Godhead are termed '*persons*'. The nearest the Scriptures come to stating this would possibly be in *Philippians 2:6: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God.* The eternal Son is in view and divine inspiration describes Him as: *being in the form of God.*

Dr Alan Cairns in his Dictionary of Theological Terms has this to say about this term: *The original meaning of the Latin word 'persona' is far removed from its present sense and it is an even larger step from the present sense of the word to the scriptural and theological meaning when applied to the Godhead. But despite its imperfection as a term, there is none better in man's vocabulary. In everyday usage, the term 'person' denotes an entirely separate and distinct rational individual. It does not have this meaning when referred to the persons in the Trinity. A divine person, to use John Calvin's words, "is a subsistence in the divine essence - a subsistence which, while related to the other two, is distinguished from them by incommunicable properties".*

Here is an immediate example of where we must not apply our understanding of human beings to the Divine Being. The two are not alike and to do so creates a mistaken view of the Trinity. A divine person within the Godhead: *is a subsistence distinguished from other persons by incommunicable properties".* A divine person in the Godhead differs from a human person:

- i. The substance of a human person is not the identical and numerical substance of another human person;
- ii. One human person exists externally and separately from another but one divine person exists in another and inseparably from another;
- iii. One human person can exist without another but one divine person cannot exist without another.

[2] This distinction between these three 'persons' in the Godhead is marked by a certain definite order. We speak about the first, second or third persons of the Trinity/Godhead. This indicates a definite order. In using these terms we are not inferring any ascending/descending order of time, importance, honour or dignity. All

three persons are co-equal, co-substantial and so-eternal. Hence the order of the persons when listed are sometimes inverted:

Father; Son; Spirit, *Matthew 28:19*
Son; Father; Spirit, *John 14:16; 2 Cor. 13:14*
Spirit; Father; Son, *John 14:26*

Father; Spirit; Son, *1 Peter 1:2*
Son; Spirit; Father, *Ephesians 2:18*
Spirit; Son; Father, *John 15:26; 1 Cor 12:4-6*

In using these terms we are recognising the teaching of the Scriptures about the order within the Trinity:

- i. God the Father is the First Person of the Trinity. The personal property of the Father is that He 'begets' the Son: *I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee, Psalm 2:7*. There are 'essential' and also 'personal' properties belonging to the three different persons in the Godhead. 'Essential properties' are common to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. 'Personal properties' are peculiar to one person within the Godhead and cannot be affirmed by the other two. 'Paternity/Generation' is the peculiar property of the First Person. He, as God the Father, begets the Son.
- ii. God the Son is the Second Person of the Trinity. The personal property of the Son is that He is 'begotten' of the Father: *And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth, John 1:14*. 'Filiation' is the peculiar property of the Son.
- iii. God the Holy Spirit/Ghost is the Third Person of the Trinity. The personal property of the Holy Spirit/Ghost is that He 'proceeds' from the Father and the Son: *But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me, John 15:26*. The Father and the Son both send forth the Holy Spirit/Ghost. 'Procession' is the peculiar property of the Holy Spirit/Ghost. [The Russian/Greek Orthodox Churches deny this truth about the Holy Spirit. They believe that the Holy Spirit/Ghost only proceeds from the Father]

Being truly God, co-equal with the Father, the Son must be eternally begotten. We speak about the 'eternal generation' of the Son. The same is equally true concerning the procession of the Holy Spirit/Ghost. He proceeds from eternity. To sum up this point: The Father is neither begotten by, nor proceeds from any other person; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; and the Holy Spirit/Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son from all eternity past. This truth is reflected in the Scriptures where we will observe the concept that all things are:

- i. 'Out' of the Father, *But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him...;*
- ii. 'Through' the Son, *...and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him, 1 Corinthians 8:6;*
- iii. 'In' the Holy Spirit, *And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory, 1 Timothy 3:16; Epaphras...also declared unto us your love in the Spirit, Colossians 1:7,8.*

[3] This distinction between these three 'persons' in the Godhead is marked by a certain works. Paternity/Generation, Filiation, Procession are works within the Divine Being that terminate, not upon the creatures that God has made, but upon other members of the Trinity. There are also works which characterise the different persons of the Trinity which do terminate upon the creature.

Though these works are all jointly attributed to each of the three persons:

- i. Creation is ascribed primarily to God the Father: *God...Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds, Hebrews 1:1,2;*
- ii. Redemption is ascribed primarily to God the Son: *Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart, Psalm 40:7,8.*
- iii. Sanctification is ascribed primarily to God the Holy Spirit/Ghost: *But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth, 2 Thessalonians 2:13.*

This classification points back to the essential order within the Trinity.

[4] Some illustrations of the Trinity. While readily confessing their defectiveness theologians have sought to draw help from creation to illustrate the mystery of the Trinity. They speak about the spring/fountain, creek/stream and the river; or the rising mist; the cloud; and the rain; or the rain, snow and ice; or the tree with its roots, trunk and branches. Augustine used the unity of the intellect, affections and the will within mankind.