

LESSON III

The Trinity of God

CHAPTER I

THE TRINITY OF GOD

The word 'Trinity' does not appear in the Bible. But the teaching on the subject is clear in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament. This does not mean that we can know all there is to know about the trinity. The Bible itself declares that the trinity is a mystery. However, the Bible has revealed enough for man to understand that a trinity exists and that they still are one God.

To Christians, the term "Trinity of God", refers to a trinity in unity. Therefore, underlying the teaching on the trinity is the "Unity of God". The last lesson discusses briefly the Unity of God, being one of His absolute attributes. That is, God is One in His essential being. Then, God being one, we cannot equate trinity with tri-theism. Tri-theism speaks of three Gods and many religions may have teachings on this aspect of god. We cannot even find any similarities with the Biblical teaching on the trinity and the teachings of tri-theism of non-Christian religions. There are no three Gods in the trinity.

Having determined, Scripturally, that there is but one Divine Being, and that He is indivisible in His basic nature we can go on to say, again Scripturally, that there are three persons in the one Divine Being. They are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. By saying three persons we do not mean that in the Godhead there are three separate individuals. Also, by saying 'Person', we do not imply the same meaning of person as we would if referring to a human being. Rather, we talk about a 'personal' God. In the trinity, then, we can say that there are three eternal personalities of God. But, again, care should be taken to not confuse this with God acting in three different characters or roles. This would be denying the trinity. For there are three personal distinctions in God, each of them eternal.

We can also say that the three 'Persons' of the Godhead are three Intelligences. But we must remember that we mean three Intelligences in one God. And again, the three Persons are also spoke of as three subsistences. This term seems better than the term person, since person usually co-notates the human type of person, that is with individual natures. But in the Godhead, the three Persons or subsistences, are all part of the same Divine essence or nature.

Therefore, the nature of God belongs to all the three Persons of the Trinity, and is identical in each. In human understanding this may not be fully comprehended. But we have the Scriptures to reveal to us the nature of the trinity or Godhead. And we find that there is no subordination to each other. What may be seen as subordination is just the definite order in the operation of the Godhead. This is not in terms of the nature of the trinity but it appears in the sense that God the Father is eternal and not begotten of any person. The Son is begotten of the

Father but also in an eternal sense. And also the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and is from eternity, that is, eternal. Thus what seems a subordination is not really so. It remains that the three Persons of the trinity are all eternal. In their operation alone there is a definite order.

The three subsistences of the Divine Being all have the same attributes as seen in the lesson on the Attributes of God. But there are personal attributes which distinguish the Godhead's three persons from each other. Again, we emphasize, these are not attributes pertaining to the nature of God, but attributes pertaining to operation. But within the Godhead these operations are distinct. The former operations are called **opera ad intra**, they are not the same as the operations of the Godhead in relationship to man and creation. The latter are called **opera ad extra**. The former operations are internal and are not performed jointly. The Father is responsible for generation, the Son for filiation, and the Spirit for procession. But of more importance are the latter operations which are operations of the Godhead outward, towards mankind. They are not the work of one person exclusively, but rather of joint operation. However, some of these are given as pertaining more to one person than the others. This can be seen in creation, which is mostly the work of the Father. Redemption is primarily the operation of the Son. And sanctification is basically prescribed to the Holy Spirit. It is essential, however, that we see at the same time the Oneness, the unity in trinity, that is the basic teaching concerning the Godhead. Let us avoid the pitfall of making the trinity merely operations of God, when the Bible clearly declares that there are three distinct persons and yet one God.

CHAPTER II

SCRIPTURAL PROOFS FOR THE TRINITY

It is very important to realize that we depend entirely upon the Word of God, the Bible, for the teachings on the trinity. Man cannot reason out the doctrine. For no man, by himself, can comprehend it. Thus illustrations too cannot fully fathom the teaching or analogize it. It is a doctrine of revelation. God, revealed it to man through the Scriptures. Nothing short of God's revelation would have enabled us to know of the trinity particularly its implications. Experience would not have been a basis. Nor even philosophical theorizing. Christian experience may have led to speculations regarding the nature of God. But it could not have led to the knowledge of the trinity that we have because of God's revelation. The doctrine of the trinity, then, is very much a God-revealed doctrine.

We can say that revelation was, to a certain extent, progressively made. That is, we knew more of the nature of the Son of God after He came to earth to redeem man from sin. And similarly, when the Son returned to His glory, then he sent the Spirit to facilitate His redemption to mankind. Thus we know more of the Spirit. This too, is nothing more than the fullness of God's plan, so that at the appropriate time God revealed the persons of the trinity more fully to man. However, we shall see that there were at least intimations of the Persons of the Godhead at times that were prior to the fuller revelations. And, we should wisely add, the complete knowledge of the Godhead has not been completely revealed to man.

The Old Testament: The Old Testament does not fully reveal the trinity. But it does contain intimations of the trinity. One such intimation is found through the usage of a plural Hebrew word for God. This is the word **Elohim**. This is not a conclusive proof, but we should point out that the word **Elohim** is regularly used with a singular verb. Similarly, of interest are passages where a plural pronoun is used for God. Such a passage is Genesis 1:26, “Let us made man in our own image, after our likeness.” Another such passage is in Isaiah 6:8, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

What could be another intimation of the Trinity, but yet not conclusively, are passages of a three-fold nature. For instance, in Numbers 6:24-26, we find a three-fold benediction of God’s blessings: “The Lord bless you and keep you: The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.”

Also in the Old Testament are passages referring to the Angel of the Lord. These are even more interesting than the passages just mentioned, that refer to the plurality of the term for God. In the Angel of the Lord references, the Angel is represented as being distinct from the Lord, but yet somehow identical to Him. One such passage is Genesis 16:7-13. Here the Angel of the Lord speaks to the woman Hagar, and attributes to Himself powers that apply to God. Verse 10 for example, “And the Angel of the Lord said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude.”

References to the Messiah in Isaiah, particularly, indicate that He is one with the Father. The grand verse in Isaiah 9 verse 6, calls Him, “And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, the everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”

There are also numerous references to the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. Though we may say that these could have been synonyms for God, yet there are passages which mention both the Messiah and the Spirit, with the speaker being God Himself. And there are passages in which the Messiah speaks and refers to both God and the Spirit. For example, Isaiah 48, verse 16 says, “...and now the Lord God and his Spirit hath sent me.” So also in Isaiah 61:1.

The above instances clearly show that the trinity, though not fully mentioned or taught, was definitely indicated. And there appears an anticipation for a fuller revelation to come, as it did, both in the person of Christ, and in the teachings of the New Testament.

The New Testament: The New Testament does offer a clearer revelation of the trinity. It shows us the distinctions between the persons of the trinity and also clearly mentions the existence of the three persons. There are numerous references to each of the persons, separately, and also to them in various relationships. For example we find the Father sending the Son to redeem mankind. This is beautifully brought out in John 3:16, “For God so love the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Likewise we have the Father and the Son sending the Spirit. In John 15:26, Jesus speaks, “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost (Spirit), whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things...” We also find the Father speaking to the Son, (Mark 1:11, “And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son in whom I am

well pleased.”) And the Son prays to the Father in Matthew 26:39, (“...O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.”) And the Spirit is found praying to God for believers, (Romans 8:26. “...But the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered.”) Thus we see each person of the trinity in clear distinction and in relationship to each other.

But we also find in the New Testament the three persons of the trinity together, showing their oneness and unity. In these references we see the Godhead clearly leaving no doubt that there is absolutely no similarities between the ‘trinity’ and tri-theism. We read of the formula for baptizing people in Matthew 28:19, “...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” And when Jesus Himself was baptized in the river Jordon we find God speaking of the Son, and the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove. We can read this in Matthew 3:16-17. The writer of the Hebrews speaks of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the work of atoning man from sin. (Hebrews 9:14). And there is the benediction found at the end of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians which includes the Father, the Son and the Spirit. We read, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen.” (II Corinthians 13:14).

There are many more passages in the New Testament showing the three persons of the Trinity alongside each other, or separately. And passages showing each of them in certain operations which in the Old Testament were attributed to God. All these indicate the fact that the three persons of the Trinity are in reality one God. We find from the New Testament that the writers of the New Testament had no problems understanding or believing the existence of the three persons of the trinity, or the fact that they were one God. Yet they did not say they knew all about the trinity. It was an understanding based on faith. And it was a faith based on the revelation of God through His Son, and further through the work of the Spirit.

CHAPTER III

THE THREE PERSONS OF THE TRINITY IN DISTINCTION

The trinity was progressively revealed. Thus, as seen earlier we first learn a lot of God the Father in the Old Testament, with indications of the Son and the Spirit. Then the Son came to dwell among men, and as the Bible says, “...we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) And the Spirit came when the Son ascended into heaven. Thus we will consider the three persons of the trinity, progressively, in this manner.

THE FATHER: The term Father is sometimes applied to the tri-unity of God. Also it is sometimes applied to the triune God, but in a special relationship, as was the case with the children of Israel. But in the distinction of the trinity, the term is used to refer to the first person of the trinity in relationship to the second person, the Son. Thus God the Father is the Father of

the Son. Hence we see in John 1:14, the Son is said to be the only ‘begotten’ of the Father. This relationship is in a metaphysical sense.

The special distinction of the Father is that He is neither begotten nor unbegotten. And He gave generation to the Son. The Spirit was spirated by Him. That is, the Son and the Spirit have their existence, metaphysically, because of the Father.

In relationship to this world, the Father who responsible for the works of creation; for preparing the plan of redemption; and for the works of providence.

THE SON: The second person of the trinity is called the Son of God in a metaphysical sense. But He is also called the Son of God in terms of His being the Messiah. And again, He was called the Son of God, being ‘born’ on earth through the operation of the Spirit of God.

The Son was eternally generated by the Father. This does not imply ‘division’ in God, but rather a spiritual and divine generation. And of course we cannot see this generation in terms of a physical sense. Hence the Son was, is and will be God. We will consider in detail the deity of Christ in another lesson, but here we will simply state what John says in John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And the Word here is the Son of God.

All things that are of the Father are **by** the Son. The Father is the absolute Cause and the Son is the mediating Cause. He is the Redeemer and the means whereby we can be justified to the Father. The work of salvation designed by the Father was fully executed by the Son.

THE HOLY SPIRIT: The third person of the trinity is the Holy Spirit. He was not revealed in a physical form as was the Son. However the Scripture attributes deity to Him in many circumstances. He has His ground in the Father and the Son, and is in the closest relationship with them.

The Spirit is responsible for the completion of the work of the Father and the Son among men. The Spirit follows the work of the Son and this is particularly seen in the work of redemption. And we see the work of the Spirit in the inspiration of Scripture, in the formation of the Church and in its continuing life, and also in the generation of life itself. The work of the Spirit should never be underestimated.

The works and operation of the three persons of the trinity could be treated in more detail than is done here. However, we should remember, that the three persons are in distinction in a certain order, with definite operations attributed to each. And yet there are joint operations and they remain one God.

Also, let us be aware that we cannot say that the trinity represents God working in three different spheres. Or they are just three modes of operation of God. The Bible emphasizes that they are one God, but also speaks clearly of their distinction. Man may not fully see this. But this is revealed to us through His Word and more so through the person of Christ, who was God and is God (John 1:1), and yet is in distinction to the Father. There is need to be clear in our

minds as to our own beliefs concerning the trinity. And those beliefs can only be approved by God when they follow His Word.

CONCLUSION

The great significance of the trinity is in the fact of redemption. The basis for redemption is rooted in the teachings on the trinity. God the Father sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sin, and the Son came down to earth and did the work of redemption and returned to His glory. And together, Father and Son sent the Spirit to be the means of applying that redemption to mankind. We see the work of redemption more clearly through the great fact of the trinity.

It is difficult to find the proper terminology to discuss the trinity. The word 'trinity' itself, as stated in the beginning of this lesson, is not truly Biblical. Man cannot fully comprehend the trinity. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a proper analogy to illustrate the trinity. It will remain a mystery till eternity, and even then God will reveal it to us according to His wisdom. But we can know that the three persons of the trinity do exist. Distinctively, they exist for distinct operations. And yet they operate together, and are one God. Let us receive it in faith and on the basis of the inspired Word of God to be able to say we believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

CHAPTER II

SCRIPTURAL PROOF FOR THE TRINITY

1. How was the teaching of the trinity made available to man? Or, how do we know of the existence of the three persons of the trinity?
2. Give about two indications from the Old Testament to show that the trinity was intimated.
3. The New Testament is quite implicit in the teachings on the trinity. Give a few passages of Scripture to show that the three persons of the trinity are together as God.
4. We know that the trinity was progressively revealed. In what 'form' was the second person of the trinity revealed to the world?

CHAPTER III

THE THREE PERSONS OF THE TRINITY IN DISTINCTION

1. Give a brief distinction between the three persons of the trinity, in terms of their operation.

a) The Father:

b) The Son:

c) The Holy Spirit:

2. Can you fully understand the trinity? Why or why not?

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