

The Error of Anti-Trinitarianism

Written by Sylvester Hassell

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The doctrine of the Divine Trinity is the highest and greatest mystery of the Christian religion, far above the reason of all created intelligences, and to be received entirely upon faith. I hope that my brethren will bear with me while I try to write of this profound and mysterious subject in the simplest words that I can find to express the truth - while I carefully examine not only the words used by uninspired men, but the very words used by the Holy Ghost in regard to the Divine Existence; that they will remember that, even though they themselves may not need instruction in this matter, there are others of our brethren who do; and that they will be willing to devote, to the reading of this article, at least a hundredth part of the time that I have had to use in its preparation; and if they do so in the right spirit, I feel sure that the time will not have been spent by them in vain.

The Jews, Ebionites, Docetae, Gnostics, Monarchians, Patripassians, Sabellians, Arians, Manichæans, Tritheists, Mahometans, Socinians, Pantheists, Rationalists, Eeists, Swedenborgians, Universalists, Mnitarians, Hicksite Quakers, and Brahmoists (Modern Hindoo Theists) have been and are Anti-Trinitarians, or opposers of the doctrine of the Divine Trinity; and, perhaps, out of one hundred thousand Primitive Baptists at present in the United States, about a thousand (though I very much doubt whether there are so many) seem to deny the doctrine of the Trinity, but even with these I believe that the denial is more a rejection of the term than a disbelief of the truth. It is a most unquestionable fact that nearly all Primitive Baptists are Scriptural Trinitarians. The doctrine of the Trinity or Triunity or Three-Oneness of God, is not a Greek or Roman Catholic invention. It is the most fundamental, distinctive, and experimental doctrine of Christianity, every where implied in the Old Testament and explicitly taught in the New; it has been believed by the people of God ever since the days of Pentecost - the Apostolic Church, the Montanists, the Tertullianists, the Novatians, the Donatists, the Waldenses, and the Baptists; and it is the unconscious or unformed faith even of those Christians who do not understand the term Trinity - for they all believe in God as their Divine Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. No one who disbelieves in the Trinity should ever dare to be baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost;" nor should any one dare to be thus baptized who believes that this distinction in the Godhead is nothing but a name and a delusion, and not an eternal and unchangeable reality.

While the word Trinity, or Triunity, is not found in the Bible, the doctrine expressed by the words

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is unmistakably taught in the Scriptures. The word is derived from the Latin word *trinus*, or *tes-unus*, or the Greek word *trias*, three in one. The Greek word *trias* was first used in this sense by Theophilus, of Antioch, in Syria, about A.D. 180; and the Latin word *trinitas* was first used by Tertullian about A.D. 220. Webster defines Trinity, "The union of three persons (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) in one Godhead, so that all the three are one God as to substance, but three persons as to individuality;" Worcester defines it, "Union of three in one - the three persons comprised in the Godhead, and distinguished as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost;" and Stormonth defines it, "The union of three persons in one Godhead, comprising the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that there is but one numerical, indivisible substance, or essence, or nature (Greek *ousia*, or *physis*; Latin, *substantia*, or *essentia*, or *natura*) in the Godhead; that this substance eternally exists as three equal hypostases, subsistences, or persons (not mere emanations, energies, or manifestations, but real, solid, essential, enduring modes of existence, intermediate between substance and attributes), utterly incomprehensible by finite beings, and incapable of adequate illustration by any created things; that each hypostasis (this is the word used by the Holy Ghost in Heb 1:3, translated "person" in the King James version) or substance (this is the most approved and least objectionable translation of hypostasis) is distinguished from the others by personal properties and relations peculiar to Himself - the Father having eternally begotten the Son, and the Spirit proceeding from the Father and Son - all three creating, redeeming, and sanctifying, but the Father pre-eminently said to create, the Son to redeem, and the Spirit to sanctify; that Father, Son, and Spirit are one and the same, undivided and indivisible, in nature, power and glory; but that in mode of subsistence, and operation, there is subordination (involving, however, neither inferiority nor posteriority) of the Son to the Father, and of the Spirit to the Father and the Son, the Son being of the Father, and the Spirit being of the Father and the Son - and the Father sending the Son and the Father and the Son sending the Spirit - the Father operating through the Son, and the Father and the Son operating through the Spirit. In Heb 1:3, the Greek word *charakter*, translated, "express image," means stamp, impression, character, exact resemblance or counterpart; and the Greek word *hypostasis* (translated "person" in Heb 1:3, and "substance" in Heb 11:1), means support, substance, actual existence, reality (opposed to semblance), the real nature of a thing as underlying and supporting its outward form and properties, the special or characteristic nature of a person or thing (directly opposed to *ousia*, general nature), and so used to translate the Latin *persona*. Thus, the phrase rendered "the express image of His person," means "the exact resemblance of His subsistence or spiritual nature, or mode of existence;" in the Peshito Syriac Version of the second century, it is rendered "the image of Himself, or of His being;" in the Revised Version, "the very image or impress of His substance." In 2Co 4:4, Christ is called "the image of God;" and in Col 1:15 "the image of the invisible God" - the word *eikon*, rendered "image," means likeness, portrait, similitude. The Greek word *prosopon*, rendered "face" or "person," is used thirteen times in the New Testament, of Christ peculiarly, {Mt 11:10; 17:2; Mr 1:2; Lu 1:76; 7:27,27; 9:52; 10:1; Ac 13:24; 2Co 2:10; 4:6; 2Th 1:9; Re 20:11; 22:4} and five times of the Father peculiarly; {Mt 18:10; Ac 3:19; Heb 9:24; 1Pe 3:12; Re 6:16} it means, face, visage, countenance, front, a mask, a dramatic part (like the Latin *persona*), a person. Our word person is from the Latin word *persona*, which is composed of two words, *per*, through, and *sono*, to sound, and meant, first a mask worn by an actor, and through

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which he spoke; and then it came to mean the role or character which the actor sustained; and afterwards and at present, it generally means a human being, a separate individual. The word person, when applied to the hypostases or subsistences in Trinity, mean infinitely more than the successive phases of action in transitory scenical exhibitions; but it does not mean what the word person means when applied to human beings, an entirely separate and distinct individual. In reference to the Trinity, the word person means that personal distinction, in the one indivisible Godhead, which arises from the peculiar mode of existence of Father, Son, and Spirit, as set forth in the Scriptures (no more and no less), and which occasions a mutual love and concurrence in council, the use of the personal pronouns, I, Thou, and He, and a distinct order of operation - the Three Divine Persons being co-eternal, consubstantial, and co-equal, having the same identical numerical essence and the same attributes, and constituting the One Only Living and True God, as revealed in the Scriptures and by His Spirit in the hearts of His people, and as totally distinguished from all the false gods of men's imagination and invention.

One of the oldest Predestinarian Baptist Confessions of Faith in the world (made in London in 1646), in its first and second Articles, says:

"Article i. the Lord our God is but one God, whose subsistence is in Himself, whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but Himself; who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; who is in Himself most holy, every way infinite in greatness, wisdom, power, love; merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, who giveth being, and preservation to all creatures to all creatures."

"Article ii. In this Divine and Infinite Being there is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, each having the whole Divine essence, yet the essence undivided; all infinite, without any beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being, but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties."

The most elaborate and esteemed Predestinarian Confession of Faith, put forth in London in 1689, by more than a hundred Baptist churches, and published in the Church History (pages 663-695), gives perhaps the simplest and most scriptural and satisfactory statement of the doctrine of the Trinity, in Chapter iii, Section 3. After declaring, in Sections 1 and 2, the unity spirituality, sovereignty, holiness, power, wisdom, and mercy of God, it says in Section 3:

"In this Divine and Infinite Being there are three subsistences, {1Jo 5:7; Mt 28:19; 2Co 13:14} the Father, the Word (or Son), and the Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole Divine essence (Ex 40:38; Joh 14:11; 1Co 8:6), yet the essence undivided. The Father is of none neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is {Joh 1:14,18} eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit {Joh 15:26; Ga 4:6} proceeding from the Father and the Son, all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature, but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations; which doctrine of

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the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God and comfortable dependence on Him." See Eph 2:18.

The Circular Letter, in 1774, of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, to which most of our Northern Churches then belonged, was written by Eld. Samuel Jones, of Wales, in defense and exposition of this Article of the London Confession, and is an excellent production. (It is published in the Church History, pages 560-562.)

It may thus be seen how false is the statement that Trinitarianism is a Catholic instead of a Bible doctrine, and is Tritheism, or a division of the Deity into three parts. The Trinitarian does not believe that there are three Gods, but that there is only one God, and that He is a Three-One eternal, infinite, indivisible Spirit - divisibility is a property of matter, and not a property of spirit at all. The attempt to evade the inscrutable mystery of a real and proper Three in One, by ignoring the personal distinctions in the Godhead revealed in the Scriptures, seems either a mere strife of words, or else the dictate of a proud rationalistic philosophy which, refusing to bow down before the Incomprehensible Jehovah, dares to allegorize away the real Threeness of His eternal nature into an apparent Threeness of His temporal manifestations, thus making God a changeable Being, different in time from what He is in eternity (somewhat like Plato's Trinity, a figurative personification of three of the attributes of God - Goodness, Intellect, and Will; or the Hindoo Trinity, a figurative personification of three of the powers of nature, Creation, Preservation, and Destruction). The errorist makes the doctrine of God more plain than true; we should be humble and honest enough to have that doctrine more true than plain. Exclusive attention to one class of Scriptures, and inattention to or ignoring of others equally true and important (a leading and fatal error of Primitive Baptist philosophy), leads to a one-sided and defective view of the Godhead, as may be clearly seen in the crude efforts to illustrate the unique and incomparable nature of God by means of any of His finite creatures. For instance, it is sought to illustrate the Trinity by a human being who has three names, as Simon Peter Barjona. Neither one of these was begotten by the other, or proceeds from the other, or is sent by the other, or can be properly said to choose or love the other the other, or to speak to or pray to the other, or to dwell in the other; and thus the idea at the bottom of the illustration is shown to be radically false. There is a distinction in the meaning of the names of Peter, but there is no personal distinction in the three-fold name, as each name means the same person; while in the Triune name of God, Father, Son, and Spirit, there certainly is something of a personal distinction, an otherness as well as a oneness, as Christ says, {Joh 14:9,16,28} a real Father begetting a real Son, and a real Spirit proceeding from Father and Son, distinguished by the personal pronouns, I, Thou, and He (see John xiv-xvii), as had been intimated in the Old Testament, in the use of Elohim, a plural name of God, 2200 times, with a singular verb or pronoun; a reference to the Spirit and the Word of God ("God said") in the first chapter of Genesis; God's speaking of Himself in the plural; {in Ge 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa 6:8} the three fold name of God in Nu 6:24-26 and Isa 6:3; the three great national feasts of the Jews, Tabernacles pointing to the Father in creation, Passover, the Son in redemption, and Pentecost, the Spirit in sanctification; and in the contrasts between Jehovah and the Angel of Jehovah, or the Angel of His presence, {Ge 16; 18:32; Ex 3:14; Isa 63; Mal 3} between God and Wisdom by Whom He built the world, {Pr 8} and between the God of Israel and the Messiah or Christ (Ps 2; 16; 22; 45;

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89; 110; Isa 53; 61; Da 7; Zec 12; 13); and as is shown in the New Testament, in the baptism of Christ; {Mt 3:16-17} and in the baptism of every believer in Christ; {Mt 28:19} and in the apostolic benediction; {2Co 13:14} and in the ascription of praise of God; {in Re 1:5-6} and in the last chapter of the Inspired Volume. {Re 22:1,3,17} Intertwined in the whole woof and warp of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, are the great and indisputable facts, that there is but one God, and that not only the Father, but the Son and the Holy Ghost are God, having Divine attributes, doing Divine works, and entitled to Divine adoration.

A denial or allegorizing away of the Trinity is of a course a denial and allegorizing away of the Covenant made, before the foundation of the world, between the Father and the Son for the certain salvation of all the elect of God; and accordingly I find that consistent Primitive Baptists who deny the doctrine of the Divine Trinity, also deny the reality of the Everlasting Covenant of Redemption, in which the Divine Father stipulated to save fully and forever all the people whom He loved and chose and gave His Son, and the Divine Son stipulated to do and to suffer for them, in a sinless body, all that the holy and violated law of God required them to do and suffer. This Covenant was not a mere figure, but a real transaction in eternity between the First and Second Persons or Subsistences of the adorable Trinity, as is demonstrated by the following Scriptures; 2Sa 23:5; Ps 40:17; Isa 35; 42; 54:17; Jer 31; 33; Zec 6:13; 9:11; Mt 25:34; Lu 24:26,46; Joh 6; 10:17; Ro 5; 8; 9; 11; 1Co 15; Ga 3; Eph 1:2; Heb 2; 8; 10:1.

There are, among professing Christians, only two general classes of error in regard to the Divine Nature; one (Patripassianism or Sabellianism) obliterates all personal distinctions in the Godhead; and the other (Arianism) makes Christ the first and highest creature of God, and the Holy Ghost the first and highest creature of Christ. Both of these classes of error (of which Sabellianism is more plausible and refined and more nearly true, though still false) are utterly refuted by the Scriptures that have been cited in this article. Not a part, but all the teachings of the Scriptures must be taken to get a true idea of God. We do not thoroughly understand ourselves, nor anything else, much less the greatest of all mysteries, the Divine Nature; and not even to a never-ending eternity shall we be able to fully comprehend God. We no more understand the self-existence, eternity, omnipresence, omniscience, or omnipotence of God than we understand the Trinity of His Being; but still we believe all these to be characteristics of the of the Most High. The perfect cube of the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and Temple, containing the Shekinah in the midst of darkness, may have been intended to show that the Divine Trinity dwells in accessible light, enveloped in impenetrable darkness.

"God is infinite - we are finite, and can know but little of Him and the mode of His existence. Where we cannot understand, let us wonder and adore. The economy of redemption seems to have been arranged in recognition of a distinction of persons or subsistences in the Godhead, and hence the Three Persons or Subsistences are represented as doing their respective parts in the great work. It is our privilege to consider the love which had been lodged in the Father's bosom from eternity as expressing itself in the gift of His Son; to contemplate the Son as pouring forth His soul unto death, thus procuring redemption by His blood; and to rejoice in the work of the Spirit in renewing th heart, sanctifying the soul, and fitting it for heaven. We should

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never forget that in baptism there is avowed consecration to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity, as it is recognized in baptism, has much to do with experimental and practical religion. It has well been said that, while this doctrine is bones to philosophy, it is milk to faith. Far, far from us be the idea that the existence of Three Persons or Subsistences in the Godhead is a barren speculation. It is a truth both mysterious and grand, and its influence should be eminently salutary. One of its effects should be the stimulation of desire on the part of the people of God to be one even as the Three Persons or Subsistences of the Godhead are one. Who can think of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as one - one in nature, one in love, one in purpose - and not hope for the day when the intercessory prayer of Christ will be answered in the union of all His true followers?" - Joh 17:20-23; 1Co 1:10; 2Co 13:11; 1Pe 3:8.