



The Apostles' Creed

Study 3: The Holy Trinity (Prov. 8:1-36)

o True Christians believe in the one God who reveals Himself as consisting of three Persons, viz. the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

I. A doctrine under constant attack.

1. Christians regard the doctrine of the Trinity as the teaching of Scripture; it is not a teaching derived (or inferred) from Scripture. Although the term "Trinity" is not used in the Apostles' Creed, the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly taught.
 - A characteristic of the historic creeds, catechisms, and confessions of faith is the attempt to express the truths of Scripture using scriptural words and expressions, instead of using extra-biblical words, e.g. Eschatology, ordination (to office), teaching elders, ruling elders, local church, etc. In the 1689 Confession, "Trinity" is used sparingly, in Chs. 2:3; 8:2, but the doctrine is clearly spelled out.
2. Round about the year AD 107, the Roman Emperor Trajan sentenced the bishop of Antioch, Ignatius (c. 35 - c. 108) to death by being thrown to the lions in the Colosseum in Rome. Tradition holds that he was a disciple of the apostle John. He wrote seven epistles to the churches which ministered to him while on the way to Rome to be martyred.
 - Ignatius shows clearly the early belief in the Trinity. He speaks of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He constantly refer to the deity of Christ by expressions like "Jesus Christ our God" and "the blood of God". The virgin birth of Christ is spoken of in more than one passage, e.g. "Hidden from the prince of this world were the virginity of Mary and her child-bearing and the death of the Lord." "Jesus Christ was with the Father before the ages, and in the end was made manifest." "He is the Word of the Father, proceeding forth from silence." "He died for us that, believing in His death, we may escape death." (Whitham, p. 71.)
 - A converted philosopher called Aristides wrote in defence of the Christian faith against the pagans and the Jews. Of interest is the fact that it is easy to reconstruct from his statements an outline of a creed which corresponds very closely to the Apostles' Creed. (Whitham, p. 76.)
3. The earliest attacks against the Trinity came from the Jews. A certain Justin Martyr (AD 100-165) wrote "Dialogue with Trypho" in which Trypho, the Jew, claimed that the doctrine of the Trinity is contrary to the Unity of God which is taught in the OT.
 - To this, Justin replies that the theophanies or appearances of God in the OT were really appearances of the Word, the Second Person of the Trinity, before the Incarnation. He also points out the indications of plurality of Persons in the Godhead in the OT, e.g. in Gen. 1:26; Prov. 8, etc. (Whitham, p. 83.)

- Another early attack of the Trinity came from the Gnostics. Gnosticism believed that matter is evil while the spirit is good. God, the spiritual principle of the universe, was considered an absolute unity. The Godhead cannot unite itself with limited and evil matter. Therefore, the church's doctrine of the Incarnation was rejected. There was also speculation whether the apparently severe God of the Old Testament is the same as the loving God of the New Testament. In Gnosticism, the 'demiurge' is a heavenly being who created and control the material world, and is opposed to anything spiritual. Christian leaders from the West and the East of the Roman Empire adopted different approaches to counter the Gnostic heresies.
- In the West, men like Irenaeus (AD 130-202), Tertullian (AD 160-220), and Hippolytus (AD 170-235) appealed to the unity and solidarity of the Christian tradition. They attacked Gnosticism by exposing the endless variations and inconsistencies of the secret traditions professed by the Gnostics.
- In the East, men like Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215) and Origen (AD 185-254) overthrew the theories of the Gnostics by showing that the church possessed a rational answer to all their problems. They appealed not only to faith, but to reason as enlightened and guided by faith.

II The teaching of the Apostles' Creed.

1. Justin Martyr's arguments for the Trinity hold good up to today.
 - The theophanies of the OT were actually appearances of the Son of God, e.g. Gen. 18:1, 13, 22, etc.; Josh. 5:13-15; Judg. 13:17-21; Dan. 3:25.
 - There are indications of plurality in the Godhead, e.g. Gen. 1:26; 11:7; Prov. 8:1, 22, 30, 35-36.
 - Apart from the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is referred to in the OT, e.g. Gen. 1:2; 6:3; 41:38; Exod. 31:3; Num. 11:17, 25; Judg. 6:34; Psalm 51:11-12; 104:30; 139:7; 143:10; Isa. 11:2; 63:11; Ezek. 2:2.
 2. The NT makes explicit references to one, living, and true God (Mark 12:29; 1 Thess. 1:9), who exists in three Persons, e.g. Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 John 5:7 (authenticity of this verse have been questioned).
 - Each Person is distinct (Matt. 3:16-17; John 12:27-28; 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:13-15).
 - : Each Person is fully divine, possessing all the divine attributes and doing divine works, e.g. creation (Gen. 1:1; John 1:3, 10; Psalm 104:30); omnipresence (Matt. 28:20; Psalm 139:7-10); omniscience (John 2:24-25; Isa. 40:13-14; 1 Cor. 2:10-11); omnipotence (Phil. 3:21; Rom. 15:19); eternity (Isa. 44:6; Rev. 22:13; Heb. 9:14).
 - : We must beware of the errors of Modalism when teaching the doctrine of the Trinity. The three Persons of the Godhead are not different 'modes' of existence of the same Person.
 - In summary, we may say that there is only one true God, consisting of three distinct Persons, viz. the Father, the Son (or the Word), and the Holy Spirit - each Person being fully God, of the same substance (or essence), equal in power and glory.
 3. The doctrine of the Trinity is denied outrightly by the two other "Abrahamic religions", viz. Judaism and Islam. Another way of rejecting the Trinity is to deny the deity of Christ. This was the approach of Arianism in the 4th century, Socinianism (after Faustus Socinus, 1539-1604) in the 16th & 17th centuries, and the Jehovah's Witnesses from the late 19th century.
- = "This doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and our comfortable dependence on Him (1689 Confession, Ch. 2:3)."

Review Questions

1. What do Christians believe about God?
2. Why is the term “Trinity” not used in the Apostles’ Creed?
3. Who was the bishop put to death by being thrown to the lions by Emperor Trajan?
4. Which converted philosopher defended Christianity in such a way that the outline of the Apostles’ Creed may be discerned?
5. What is the title of the book written by Justin Martyr in defence of the doctrine of the Trinity?
6. Name three champions of orthodox Christianity against Gnosticism in the West.
7. Name two champions of orthodox Christianity against Gnosticism in the East.
8. Outline Justin Martyr’s arguments from the Old Testament in support of the Trinity.
9. Summarise the doctrine of the Trinity.
10. Which two major “Abrahamic religions” deny the doctrine of the Trinity?

Assignment/Discussion

Why is “Modalism” a wrong way of proving the Trinity? What is the difference between attempting to prove the Trinity and proving the Trinity from Scripture?

Memory Passage (Matt. 3:16-17)

16 When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. 17 And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

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