

# The Divine Trinity

## Herman Bavinck

Born on December 13, 1854, in Hoogeveen, Drenthe, Holland, Herman Bavinck was the son of the Reverend Jan Bavinck, a leading figure in the secession from the State Church of the Netherlands in 1834. After theological study in Kampen, and at the University of Leiden, he graduated in 1880, and served as the minister of the congregation at Franeker, Friesland, for a year. According to his biographers, large crowds gathered to hear his outstanding exposition of the Scriptures.

In 1882, he was appointed a Professor of theology at Kampen, and taught there from 1883 until his appointment, in 1902, to the chair of systematic Theology in the Free University of Amsterdam, where he succeeded the great Abraham Kuyper, then recently appointed Prime Minister of the Netherlands. In this capacity — an appointment he had twice before declined — Bavinck served until his death in 1921.

The Eternal Being reveals Himself in His triune existence even more richly and vitally than in His attributes. It is in this holy trinity that each attribute of His Being comes into its own, so to speak, gets its fullest content, and takes on its profoundest meaning. It is only when we contemplate this trinity that we know who and what God is. Only then do we know, moreover, who God is and what He is for lost man-kind. We can know this only when we know and confess Him as the Triune God of the Covenant, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In considering this part of our confession, it is particularly necessary that a tone of holy reverence and childlike awe be the characteristic of our approach and attitude. For Moses it was an awful and unforgettable hour when the Lord appeared to him in the desert in the flame of fire coming from the bramble bush. When Moses looked upon that burning fire, which burned but did not consume, from a distance, and when he wanted to hasten to the spot, the Lord restrained him and said: Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. And when Moses heard that he feared greatly, hid his face, and was afraid to look upon God (Ex. 3:1-6).

Such a holy respect suits us also as we witness God revealing Himself in His word as a Triune God. For we must always remember that as we study this fact, we are not dealing with a doctrine about God, with an abstract concept, or with a scientific proposition about the nature of Divinity. We are not dealing with a

human construction which we ourselves or which others have put upon the facts, and which we now try to analyze and logically to dismember. Rather, in treating of the Trinity, we are dealing with God Himself, with the one and true God, who has revealed Himself as such in His Word. It is as He said to Moses: I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex. 3:6). So He reveals Himself to us also in His Word and manifests Himself to us as Father, Son, and Spirit.

It is thus that the Christian church has always confessed the revelation of God as the Triune God, and accepted it as such. We find it in the Twelve Articles of the Apostles' Creed. The Christian is not in that creed saying just how he thinks about God. He is not there giving out a notion of God, nor saying that God has such and such attributes, and that He exists in this and that wise. Instead, he confesses: I believe *in* God the Father, and *in* Jesus Christ His only-begotten Son, and *in* the Holy Spirit: I believe in the Triune God. In confessing this the Christian gives expression to the fact that God is the living and the true God, that He is God as Father, Son, and Spirit, the God of His confidence, to whom he has wholly surrendered himself, and upon whom he rests with his whole heart. God is the God of his life and his salvation. As Father, Son, and Spirit, God has created him, redeemed him, sanctified him, and glorified him. The Christian owes everything to Him. It is his joy and comfort that he may believe *in* that God, trust Him, and expect everything from Him.

What the Christian goes on to confess about that God is not summarized by him in a number of abstract terms, but is described, rather, as a series of deeds done by God in the past, in the present, and to be done in the future. It is the deeds, the miracles, of God which constitute the confession of the Christian. What the Christian confesses in his creed is a long, a broad, and a high history. It is a history which comprises the whole world in its length and breadth, in its beginning, process, and end, in its origin, development, and destination, from the point of creation to the fulfillment of the ages. The confession of the church is a declaration of the mighty deeds of God.

Those deeds are numerous and are characterized by great diversity. But they also constitute a strict unity. They are related to each other, prepare for each other, and are interdependent. There is order and pattern, development and upward movement in it. It proceeds from creation through redemption to sanctification and glorification. The end returns to the beginning and yet is at the same time the apex which is exalted high above the point of origin. The deeds of God form a circle which mounts upward in the form of a spiral; they represent a harmony of the horizontal and the vertical line; they move upwards and forwards at the same time.

God is the architect and builder of all those deeds, the source and the final end of them. Out of Him and through Him and to Him are all things. He is their Maker, Restorer, and Fulfiller. The unity and diversity in the works of God proceeds from and returns to the unity and diversity which exist in the Divine Being. That Being

is one being, single and simple. At the same time that being is threefold in His person, in His revelation, and in His influence. The entire work of God is an unbroken whole, and nevertheless comprises the richest variety and change. The confession of the church comprehends the whole of world history. In that confession are included the moments of the creation and the fall, reconciliation and forgiveness, and of renewal and restoration. It is a confession which proceeds from the triune God and which leads everything back to Him.

Therefore the article of the holy trinity is the heart and core of our confession, the differentiating earmark of our religion, and the praise and comfort of all true believers of Christ.

It was this confession which was at stake in the warfare of the spirits throughout the centuries. The confession of the holy trinity is the precious pearl which was entrusted for safekeeping and defense to the Christian church.

If this confession of the trinity of God takes such a central position in the Christian faith, it is important to know on what ground it rests and from what source it has flowed into the church. They are not a few in our time who hold that it is the fruit of human argument and academic learning and who, accordingly, regard it as of no value for the religious life. According to them the original Gospel, as it was proclaimed by Jesus, knew nothing about any such doctrine of the trinity of God — that is, nothing about the term itself nor about the reality to which the term was intended to give expression. It was only — so the argument goes — when the original and simple Gospel of Jesus was brought into relationship with Greek philosophy and was falsified by it that the Christian church absorbed the person of Christ in His Divine nature, and eventually also the Holy Spirit into the Divine Being. And so it came about that the church confessed three persons in the one Divine being.

But the Christian church itself has always had quite a different idea about that. It saw in the doctrine of the trinity no discovery of subtle theologians, no product of the wedding of Gospel and Greek philosophy, but a confession rather which was materially concluded in the Gospel and in the whole Word of God — a doctrine, in short, which was inferred by Christian faith from the revelation of God. In answer to the question, Since there is but one Divine Being, why do you speak of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? the Heidelberg Catechism gives a brief and conclusive answer: Because God has so revealed Himself in His Word (Question 25). The revelation of God is the firm ground on which this confession of the church also rests. It is the source out of which this doctrine of the one, holy, catholic, Christian church has grown and been built up. God has thus revealed Himself. And He has revealed Himself thus, that is, as a triune God, because He exists in that way; and He exists in this way because He has so revealed Himself.

The Trinity in the revelation of God points back to the Trinity in His existence.

This revelation did not happen in a single moment. It was not presented and perfected in a single point of time. Rather, this revelation has a long history, spread out over the centuries. It began at the creation, continued after the fall in the promises and deeds of grace which accrued to Israel, and reached its apex in the person and work of Christ, in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and the establishment of the church. It maintains itself now throughout the centuries, and over against all opposition, in the ineradicable witness of Scripture and in the rock-firm confession of the church. Because the revelation has had this long history, there is progress and development also in the confession of God's triune existence. God undergoes no change, remaining always the same. But in the progress of revelation, He makes Himself always clearer and more glorious to people and to angels. As His revelation continues, our knowledge grows.

When, in the days of the Old Covenant, God begins to reveal Himself, the thing that stands in the foreground is certainly the unity, the oneness, of God.

For, due to the sin of man, the pure knowledge of God had been lost; the truth, as Paul profoundly says, was held in unrighteousness. Even that which can be known of God in the things that He has made was made vain by their imaginations and was darkened by the foolishness of their hearts. On every hand mankind fell into idolatry and the worship of images (Rom. 1:18-23).

Hence it was necessary that the revelation begin with an emphasis upon the unity of God. It seems to cry out to mankind: The gods before which ye bow are not the true God. There is but one true God, namely, the God who at the beginning made the heaven and the earth (Gen. 1:1 and 2:1), the God who made Himself known to Abraham as God the Almighty (Gen. 17:1 and Ex. 6:3), the God who appeared to Moses as Jehovah, as the I-Am-that-I-Am (Ex. 3:14), and the God who, out of sovereign favor, chose the people of Israel, and called them, and accepted them in His covenant (Ex. 19:4ff.). First of all, therefore, the revelation had as its content: Jehovah alone is Elohim, the Lord alone is God, and there is no other God beside Him.<sup>1</sup>

For the people of Israel, too, the revelation of the oneness of God was desperately necessary. Israel was surrounded on all sides by heathen and by heathen who at all times tried to tempt it into apostasy and unfaithfulness to the Lord; moreover, right on up to the captivity a great part of the people of Israel felt themselves attracted to the pagan idolatry and image worship, and again and again fell into the practice of them despite the proscription of the law and the warning of the prophets. Therefore, God Himself placed the emphasis on the fact that He, the Lord, who was now appearing to Moses and who wanted to redeem His people through Moses, was the same God who had made Himself known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the Almighty God (Ex. 3:6 and 15). When He

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<sup>1</sup> Deut. 4:35,39; Josh. 22:22; 2 Sam. 7:22; 22:32; 1 Kings 18:39; Isa. 45:5,18, 21; and elsewhere.

gave His law to Israel He wrote above it as its preamble: I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt. And in the first commandment, and the second, He strictly forbade all idolatry and worship of images (Ex. 20:2-5). Because the Lord our God is one God, Israel must love Him with its whole heart, its whole soul, and all its strength (Deut. 6:4-5). The Lord alone is Israel's God and therefore Israel may serve only Him.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the oneness of God is so strongly emphasized, and, as it were, constitutes the first article of Israel's basic law, the distinctions within that unity of the Godhead come to light also as in that revelation His fulness of Being progresses. The very name which is usually employed for designating God in the original Hebrew has a certain significance here. For this name *Elohim*, is in plural form, and therefore, although it does not, as was formerly generally supposed, designate the three persons of the divine Being, it does, in its character as an intensive plural, point to the fulness of life and of power which are present in God. It is, no doubt, in connection with this same fact, that God sometimes, in speaking of Himself, uses a plural referent, and by this means makes distinctions within Himself that bear a person'al character (Gen. 1:26-27; 3:22; and Isa. 6:8).

Of greater significance is the teaching of the Old Testament to the effect that God brings everything in His creation and providence into being by His Word and Spirit. He is not a human being, who, at the cost of great difficulty and exertion, makes something else out of the materials He has at hand. Instead, simply by the act of speaking, He calls everything into being out of nothing.

In the first chapter of Genesis we are taught this truth in the loftiest way possible, and elsewhere, too, it is expressed most gloriously in word and song. He speaks, and it is done; He commands, and it stands fast (Ps. 33:9). He sends out His word, and melts the morsels of ice (Ps. 147:18). His voice is upon the waters, shakes the wilderness, causes the hills to skip like a calf, and discovers the forests (Ps. 29:3-10). Two truths are contained in this exalted account of God's works: the first is that God is the Almighty One who has but to speak and all things leap into being, whose word is *law* (Ps. 33:9) and whose voice is *power* (Ps. 29:4); and the second is that God works deliberately, and not with'out forethought, and carries out all His works with the highest wisdom. The word which God speaks is power, but it is also the vehicle of thought. He has made the earth by His power, He has established the world by His wisdom, and has stretched out the heavens by His discretion (Jer. 10:12 and 51:15). He has made all His works in wisdom: the earth is full of His riches (Ps. 104:24). This wisdom of God did not come to Him from outside Himself, but was with Him from the beginning. He possessed it as the principle of His way, before His works of old. When He prepared the heavens, set a compass upon the face of the deep, established the clouds above, strengthened the fountains of the deep, then wisdom was already there, brought up alongside of Him, daily his delight, and

rejoicing always before Him (Prov. 8:22-31 and Job 20:20-28). God rejoiced in the wisdom with which He created the world.

Alongside of this word and wisdom the Spirit of God as the Mediator of the creation makes His appearance just as God at one and the same time *is* wisdom and *possesses* it, so that He can share it and can exhibit it in His works, so He Himself is Spirit in His being (Deut. 4:12, 15) and He possesses Spirit, that Spirit by which He can dwell in the world and be always and everywhere present in it (Ps. 139:7). Without any one having been His counsellor, the Lord by His Spirit brought everything into being (Isa. 40:13ff.). At the beginning that Spirit moved upon the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2), and He remains active in all that was created. By that Spirit God garnishes the heavens (Job 26:13), renews the face of the earth (Ps. 104:30), gives life to man (Job 33:4), maintains the breath in man's nostrils (Job 27:3), gives him understanding and wisdom (Job 32:8), and also causes the grass to wither and the flower to fade (Isa. 40:7). In short, by the Word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the Breath of His mouth (Ps. 33:6).

And this self-diversity of God comes out even more in the works of the re-creation. Then it is not Elohim, but Jehovah, not God in general, but the Lord, the God of the covenant, who reveals Himself and who makes Himself known in wonders of redemption and salvation. As such He redeems and leads His people, not by His word alone which He speaks or has conveyed to them, but also by means of the Angel of the covenant (the Angel of the Lord). This Angel appears already in the history of the patriarchs: to Hagar (Gen. 16:6ff.), to Abraham (Gen. 18ff.), and to Jacob (Gen. 28:13ff.). This Angel reveals His grace and power especially in the emancipation of Israel from the bond'age of Egypt.<sup>2</sup> This Angel of the Lord does not stand on the same plane of importance as the created angels; rather, He is a special revelation and manifestation of God. On the one hand, He is clearly distinguished from God, who speaks of Him as of His Angel, and yet, on the other hand, is one in name with God Himself, and in power, in redemption and blessing, in worshipfulness and honor. He is called God in Genesis 16:13, the God of Bethel in Genesis 31:13, exchanges places with God or the Lord (Gen. 28:30, 32 and Ex. 3:4), and He bears the name of God within Him (Ex. 23:21). He redeems from all evil (Gen. 48:16), rescues Israel from the hand of the Egyptians (Ex. 3:8), cleaves the waters and dries up the sea (Ex. 14:21), preserves the people of God in the way, brings them safely into Canaan, causes them to triumph over their enemies (Ex. 3:8 and 23:20), is to be absolutely obeyed as though He were God Himself (Ex. 23:20). and always en'camps around those who fear the Lord (Ps. 34:7 and 35:5).

Just as in His re-creating work, Jehovah carries out His redemptive activities through this Angel of the covenant, so He by His Spirit gives out all kinds of

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<sup>2</sup> Ex. 3:2; 13:21; 14:19; 23:20-23; 32:34; 33:2; and Num. 20:16.

energies and gifts to His people. In the Old Testament the Spirit of the Lord is the source of all life, all weal, and all ability. He grants courage and strength to the judges, to Othniel (Judges 3:10), Gideon (Judges 6:34), Jephthah (Judges 11:29), and to Samson (Judges 14:6 and 15:14). He grants artistic perception to the makers of the priests' garments, the tabernacle, and the temple,<sup>3</sup> and He gives wisdom and understanding to the judges who bear the burden of the people alongside of Moses (Num. 11:17, 25). He gives the spirit of prophecy to the prophets,<sup>4</sup> and renewal and sanctification and guidance to all of God's children (Ps. 51:12-13 and 143:10).

In short: the Word, the promise, the covenant, which the Lord gave to Israel at the exodus from Egypt, have existed throughout the ages, and still stood fast even after the Captivity in the days of Zerubbabel, so that the people had no need to fear (Haggai 2:4-5). When the Lord led Israel out of Egypt He became the Savior of Israel. And this disposition of God towards His people came to expression in the fact that in all their oppression He was oppressed (He regarded the affliction of His people as His own affliction), and that He therefore sent them His Angel to preserve them. He redeemed them by His love and grace and He took them up and carried them as His own throughout those days of old. He sent them the Spirit of His holiness in order to lead them in the ways of the Lord (Isa. 63:9-12). In the days of the Old Covenant, the Lord through the high priest laid His threefold blessing on the people of Israel: the blessing of vigil, the blessing of grace, and the blessing of peace (Num. 6:24-26).

Thus gradually, then, but ever more unmistakably, the threefold distinction within the Divine being comes to expression already in the history of God's leading of Israel. However, the Old Testament includes the further promises that in the future there will be a higher and richer revelation. After all, Israel repudiated the Word of the Lord and vexed His Holy Spirit (Isa. 63:10 and Ps. 106). The revelation of God in the Angel of the covenant and in the Spirit of the Lord proved to be inadequate: if God wanted to confirm His covenant and fulfill His promise, another and higher revelation would be necessary.

Such a revelation was heralded by the prophets. In the future, in the last days, then the Lord will call up out of the midst of Israel such a prophet as Moses was, and the Lord will put His words in that prophet's mouth (Deut. 18 :18). This one will be a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4); He will be a king out of the house of David (2 Sam. 7:12-16), a rod out of the stem of Jesse (Isa. 11:1), a king, judging and seeking judgment (Isa. 16:5). A human being, a man He will be, and the son of a woman (Isa. 7:14), and He will be without form or comeliness (Isa. 53:2ff.); but, at the same time, He will be Immanuel (Isa. 7:14), the Lord our righteousness (Jer. 23:6), the Angel of the covenant (Mal.

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<sup>3</sup> Ex. 28:3; 31:3-5; 35:31-35; and 1 Chron. 28:12.

<sup>4</sup> Num. 11:25,29; 24:2-3; Micah 3:8; and like passages.

3:1), the Lord Himself appearing to His people (Hos. 1:7 and Mal. 3:1). And He bears the name of Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6).

This manifestation of the servant of the Lord is to be followed by a richer dispensation of the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and strength, of the knowledge and fear of the Lord, this Spirit will rest upon the Messiah (Isa. 11:2; 42:1; and 61:1). He will be poured out upon all flesh, over sons and daughters, old men and young men, servants and handmaids,<sup>5</sup> and He will give a new heart and a new spirit, so that His people may walk in His statutes, and keep His ordinances, and do them.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the Old Testament itself points out that the full revelation of God will consist of the revelation of His triune being.

This promise and announcement the fulfillment of the New Testament fully satisfies. In this respect also, the unity or oneness of God is the point of departure of all revelation.<sup>7</sup> But out of this oneness the difference in the Divine being now, in the New Testament, comes into much clearer light. This happens first in the great redemptive events of incarnation, satisfaction, and outpouring, and next in the instruction of Jesus and His apostles. The work of salvation is one whole, a work of God from beginning to end. But there are three high moments in it, election, forgiveness, and renewal, and these three point to a threefold cause in the Divine being: that is, to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The very conceiving of Christ already shows us the threefold activity of God. For while the Father gives the Son to the world (John 3:16), and while the Son Himself descends from heaven (John 6:38), that Son is conceived in Mary of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20 and Luke 1:35). At His baptism Jesus is anointed by the Holy Spirit, and is there publicly declared to be the beloved Son of the Father, the Son in whom He is well pleased (Matt. 3:16-17). The works which Jesus did were shown Him by the Father (John 5:19 and 8:38), and they are fulfilled by Him in the strength of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:28). In His dying He offers Himself to God in the eternal Spirit (Heb. 9:14). The resurrection is a raising up by the Father (Acts 2:24) and is at the same time Jesus' own act by which He is greatly proved to be the Son of the Father according to the Spirit of holiness (Rom. 1:3). And after his resurrection He, on the fortieth day, ascends in the Spirit which quickened Him on high in heaven and there He makes the angels and authorities and powers subject to Himself.

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<sup>5</sup> Joel 2:28-29; Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 36:26-27; and Zech. 12:10.

<sup>6</sup> Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:26; Jer. 31:31-34 and 32:38-41.

<sup>7</sup> John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:4; and 1 Tim. 2:5.

The teaching of Jesus and the apostles agrees fully with the lesson of those events themselves.

Jesus came to earth to declare the *Father* and to make His name known among men (John 1:18 and 17:6). The name of father applied to God as creator of all things was also used by the pagans. This meaning of the term is supported also by Scripture at various places.<sup>8</sup> Besides, the Old Testament several times uses the designation Father to refer to God's theocratic relationship to Israel because in His marvelous ability He has created and maintained that relationship (Deut. 32:6 and Isa. 63:16). But in the New Testament a gloriously new light is shed upon this name of father as applied to God. Jesus always indicates an essential difference between the relationship in which He Himself stands to God and that in which others, say the Jews or the disciples, stand to Him. When, for example, He teaches the disciples, at their request, the "Our Father. . ." He says expressly "When ye pray, say. . ." And when, after the resurrection, He announces His forthcoming ascension to Mary Magdalene, He says: "I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (John 20:17). In other words, God is His *own* Father (John 5:18). He knows the Son and loves Him in such a way and to such an extent as, reciprocally, only the Son can know and love the Father.<sup>9</sup> Among the apostles, accordingly, God is constantly referred to as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:3). This relationship between the Father and the Son did not develop in time but existed from eternity (John 1:1, 14; 17:24). God is therefore Father in the first place because in a very unique sense He is the Father of the Son. This is His original, special personal characteristic.

In a derived sense God is further called the Father of all creatures because He is their creator and sustainer (1 Cor. 8:6, and elsewhere). He is called the Father of Israel because Israel is His handiwork by virtue of election and calling (Deut. 32:6 and Isa. 64:8), and the Father of the church and all believers because the love of the Father for the Son accrues to them (John 16:27 and 17:24) and because they have been accepted as His children and are born of Him through the Spirit (John 1:12 and Rom. 8:15).

The Father is therefore always the *Father*, the first person, He from whom in the being of God, in the counsel of God, and in all the works of creation and providence, redemption and sanctification, the initiative proceeds. He gave the Son to have life in Himself (John 5:26), and He sends out the Spirit (John 15:26). His is the election and the good pleasure (Matt 11:26 and Eph. 1:4, 9, 11). From Him proceed the creation, providence, redemption, and renewal (Ps. 33:6 and John 3:16). To Him in a special sense the kingdom and the power and the glory accrue (Matt 6:13). He particularly bears the name of *God* in distinction from the *Lord* Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Christ Himself as Mediator calls

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 3:38; Acts 17:28; Eph. 3:15; and Heb. 12:9.

<sup>9</sup> Matt. 11:27; Mark 12:6; and John 5:20.

Him His Father, not only, but also His God (Matt 27:46 and John 20:17) and Christ is Himself called the Christ of God.<sup>10</sup> In a word, the first person of the Divine being *is the Father* because “of Him are all things” (1 Cor. 8:6).

If God is the Father, the inference is that there also is a *Son* who received life from Him and who shares His love. In the Old Testament the name of son of God was used for angels,<sup>11</sup> for the people of Israel,<sup>12</sup> and particularly too for the theocratic king of that people.<sup>13</sup> But in the New Testament this name takes on a far profounder meaning. For Christ is the Son of God in a very peculiar sense; He is highly exalted above angels and prophets (Matt. 13:32; 21:27; and 22:2), and He Himself says that no one can know the Son except the Father, and no one can know the Father except the Son (Matt. 11:27). In distinction from angels and men, He is the Father’s own Son (Rom. 8:32), the beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased (Matt 3:17), the only-begotten Son (John 1:18) whom the Father gave to have life in Himself (John 5:26).

This very special, this unique, relationship between Father and Son did not develop in time by way of the supernatural conception of the Holy Spirit, or of the anointing at baptism, or of the resurrection and ascension — though many have maintained this — but is a relationship which has existed from all eternity. The Son who in Christ assumed human nature was in the beginning with God as the Word (John 1:1). then already had the form of God (Phil. 2:6), was rich and clothed with glory (John 17:5, 24), was then already the brightness of God’s glory and the express image of His person (Heb. 1:3), and precisely therefore He could in the fulness of time be sent out, given, and brought into the world.<sup>14</sup> Hence, too, the creation (John 1:3 and Col. 1:16) and providence (Heb 1:3) and the accomplishment of the whole of salvation (1 Cor. 1:30) are ascribed to Him. He is not, as creatures are made or created, but is instead, the first-born of all creatures that is the Son who has the rank and rights of the first-born over against all creatures (Col 1:15) Thus He is also the first-born of the dead, the first-born of many brethren, and therefore among all and in all He is the first (Rom 8:29 and Col 1:18) And even though in the fulness of time, He assumed the form of a servant, He was nevertheless in the form of God. He was in all things like unto God the Father (Phil. 2:6):. in life (John 5:26), in knowledge (Matt. 11:27), in strength (John 1:3 and 5:21, 26), in honor (John 5:23). He is Himself God, to be praised above all else into eternity.<sup>15</sup> Just as all things are *of the Father*, so they are also all *through the Son* (1 Cor. 8:6).

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 9 :20; 1 Cor. 3 :23; and Rev. 12:10.

<sup>11</sup> Job 38: 7

<sup>12</sup> Deut. 1:31; 8:5; 14:1; 32:6, 18 and Hosea 11:1.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Sam. 7:11-14 Ps. 2:7.

<sup>14</sup> John 3:16; Gal. 4:4; and Heb. 1:6.

<sup>15</sup> John 1:1; 20:8; Rom. 9:5; and Heb. 1:8-9.

Both, Father and Son, come together and are united in the *Holy Spirit* and by means of the Spirit dwell in all creatures. True, God is according to His nature a Spirit (John 4:24) and He is holy (Isa. 6:3); but the Holy Spirit is clearly distinguished from God as Spirit. Just as, in a comparative way of speaking, man is a spirit in his invisible nature and also possesses a spirit, by means of which he is aware of himself and is self-conscious, so God is a Spirit by nature and also possesses a Spirit, a Spirit which searches the depths of His being (1 Cor. 2:11). As such the latter is called the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit (Ps. 51:12 and Isa. 63:10-11). And this is done in distinction from the spirit of an angel or of a human being or of any other creature. But, although He is distinguished from God, from the Father and the Son, He stands in the most intimate of relationships with both. He is called the breath of the Almighty (Job 33:4), the breath of His mouth (Ps. 33:6), is sent out by the Father and the Son (John 14:26 and 15:26), and He proceeds from both, not from the Father alone (John 15:26) but also from the Son, for He is also called the Spirit of Christ or the Spirit of the Father (Rom. 8:9).

Although the Holy Spirit is in that way given or sent or poured out by the Father and the Son, He often makes His appearance as a power or a gift which qualifies men for their calling or office. Thus, for example, the Holy Spirit is spoken of at various places in the Acts of the Apostles in connection with the gift of prophecy (8:15; 10:44; 11:15; 15:8; and 19:2). But it is not warranted to infer from that fact, as many do, that the Holy Spirit is nothing more or other than a gift or power of God. At other places He definitely makes His appearance as a person, one who bears personal names, has personal characteristics, and does personal deeds. Thus in John 15:26 and 16:13, 14 (although the Greek of the word translated *Spirit* in our language is of neuter gender) Christ uses the masculine referent: *He* shall testify of Me and glorify Me. At the same place Christ calls Him Comforter, using the same name that is used of Christ in 1 John 2:1, a name translated *advocate* in the English version.

Besides these personal names all sorts of personal characteristics are ascribed to the Holy Spirit: for example, selfhood (Acts 13:2), self-consciousness (Acts 15:28), self-determination or will (1 Cor. 12:11). Besides He is credited with all kinds of personal activities, such as investigating (1 Cor. 2:11), listening (John 16:13), speaking (Rev. 2:17), teaching (John 14:26), praying (Rom. 8:27), and the like. And all this comes out most clearly and sublimely in the fact that He is placed on one and the same level with the Father and the Son (Matt. 28:19 and 2 Cor. 13:14).

The last point is the most important and it indicates the fact that the Holy Spirit is a person not merely but also very God. And Scriptures provide all the data which are necessary to make this confession. We have only to note that despite the distinction between God and His Spirit which was pointed out above, the two frequently exchange places in Scripture, so that it is quite the same whether God or His Spirit says or does a thing. In Acts 5:3-4 the lying to the Holy Spirit is called a lying to God. In 1 Corinthians 3:16 the believers are called God's temple,

because the Spirit of God dwells in them. To these facts we must add that various Divine attributes, such as eternity (Heb. 9:14), omnipresence (Ps. 139:7), omniscience (1 Cor. 2:11), omnipotence (1 Cor. 12:4-6), and various Divine works, such as creation (Ps. 33:6), providence (Ps. 104:30), and redemption (John 3:3) are ascribed to the Holy Spirit quite as well as to the Father and the Son. Consequently He shares in the same glory with those two. He takes His place alongside of the Father and the Son as the cause of salvation (2 Cor. 13:14 and Rev. 1:4). It is in His name also that we are baptized (Matt. 28:19), and blessed (2 Cor. 13:14). Moreover, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an unpardonable sin (Matt. 12:31-32). In other words, just as all things are *of* the Father and *through* the Son, they all exist and rest *in* the Holy Spirit.

All of these elements of the doctrine of the trinity, spread throughout the Scriptures, were gathered together, so to speak, by Jesus in His baptismal command and by the apostles in their benedictions. After His resurrection and before His ascension, Christ bids His apostles to go out and make all peoples His disciples and to baptize them in the one name in which, nevertheless, three different subjects are revealed. Father, Son, and Spirit are in their oneness and their distinction the fulness of the perfected revelation of God. Just so, too, according to the apostles the whole good and salvation of man is contained in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> The good pleasure, the foreknowledge, the power, the love, the kingdom, and the strength are the Father's. The Mediatorship, the reconciliation, the grace, and the redemption are the Son's. The regeneration, the renewal, the sanctification, the redemption are the Spirit's.

The relationship in which Christ stands to the Father corresponds fully with the relationship in which the Spirit stands to Christ. Just as the Son speaks nothing and does nothing of Himself but receives everything from the Father (John 5:26 and 16:15), so the Holy Spirit takes everything from Christ (John 16:13-14). As the Son testifies of the Father and glorifies the Father (John 1:18 and 17:4, 6), so the Holy Spirit testifies of the Son and glorifies Him (John 15:26 and 16:14). Just as no one comes to the Father but through the Son (John 14:6), so no one can say that Jesus is the Lord except through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). Through the Spirit we have fellowship with the Father and the Son. It is in the Holy Spirit that God Himself through Christ dwells in our hearts. And if this all be so, then the Holy Spirit is, together with the Son and the Father, the one, true God, and is to be eternally lauded and praised as such.

To this instruction of the Holy Spirit the Christian church in its confession of the Trinity of God has said yea and amen. The church did not arrive at this rich and glorious confession without a hard and long struggle of the spirits. Centuries on end the profoundest experience of the spiritual life of the children of God and the doughtiest intellect of the fathers and teachers of the church went into the

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<sup>16</sup> 1 Cor. 13:14; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 John 5:4-6; and Rev. 1:4-6.

understanding of this point of the revelation of Scripture and to reproducing it purely in the confession of the church. No doubt the church would not have succeeded in this effort at the laying of foundations, if it had not been led into the truth by the Holy Spirit, and if in Tertullian and Irenaeus, Athanasius and the three Cappadocians, Augustine, and Hillary, and so many others besides, it had not received the men who, endowed and equipped with unusual gifts of godliness and wisdom, kept to the straight course.

Nothing less than the peculiar essence of Christianity was at stake in this battle of the spirits. From two sides the church was exposed to the danger of permitting itself to be wrested from the firm foundation on which it was built and so to be submerged by the world.

On the one hand, there was the threat of Arianism, so called after the Alexandrian presbyter Arius who died in the year 336. Arius held that the Father alone was the eternal and true God, inasmuch as He alone in the full sense of the word was ungenerated. Concerning the Son, the Logos, who in Christ had become flesh, he taught that, inasmuch as this Christ was generated, He could not be God but had to be a creature — a creature, it is true, who had been made before other creatures, but nevertheless was made as they were made through the will of God. And, in the same way, Arius held that the Holy Spirit was a creature or else a quality or attribute of God.

On the other side the party of Sabellianism was at work, so called after a certain Sabellius who lived in Rome at the beginning of the third century. Sabellius held that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were but three names for one and the same God — a God who had made Himself known thus successively as His revelation progressed in various forms and manifestations. In the form of the Father, accordingly, God was operative as Creator and Lawgiver. Thereupon He worked as Redeemer in the form of the Son. And He now works in the form of the Holy Spirit as the Re-creator of the church.

While Arianism tries to maintain the oneness of God, by placing Son and Spirit outside the Divine being and reducing these to the level of creatures, Sabellianism tries to arrive at the same end by robbing the three persons of the Godhead of their independence. This it does by metamorphosing the persons into three successive modes of revelation of the same Divine Being. In the first tendency the Jewish, deistic, rationalistic mode of thinking comes to expression rather characteristically, and in the second the idea of Pagan pantheism and mysticism. The moment the church set about giving itself a fairly clear account of the truth which was later stated in the confession of the Trinity of God, these two other tendencies arose alongside at the right and left, and they accompany the confession of the church to this day. Always and again the church and each one of its members must be on guard against doing injustice on the one hand to the oneness of the Divine Being, and on the other to the three Persons within that Being. The oneness may not be sacrificed to the diversity, nor the diversity to the

oneness. To maintain both in their inseparable connection and in their pure relationship, not only theoretically but also in practical life, is the calling of all believers.

In order to satisfy this requirement, the Christian church and Christian theology in the early period made use of various words and expressions which cannot be found literally in the Holy Scriptures. The church began to speak of the *essence* of God and of three *persons* in that essence of being. It spoke of the *triune* and the *trinitarian*, or of *essential* and *personal* characteristics, of the *eternal generation* of the Son and of the *proceeding* of the Holy Spirit from the Father and from the Son, and the like.

There is no reason at all why the church and the Christian theology should not use such terms and modes of expression. For the Holy Scripture was not given to the church by God to be thoughtlessly repeated but to be understood in all its fulness and riches, and to be restated in its own language in order that in this way it might proclaim the mighty works of God. Moreover, such terms and expressions are necessary in order to maintain the truth of Scripture over against its opponents and to secure it against misunderstanding and error. And history has taught throughout the centuries that a lighthearted disapproval and rejection of these names and modes of expression leads to various departures from the confession.

At the same time, we should, in the use of these terms, always remember that they are of human origin and therefore limited, defective, fallible. The church fathers always acknowledged this. For example, they held that the term *persons* which was used to designate the three ways of existence in the Divine Being did not do justice to the truth in the matter but served as an aid towards maintaining the truth and cutting off error. The word was chosen, not because it was accurate in every respect, but because no other and better was to be found. In this matter again the word is far behind the thought, and the thought is far behind the actuality. Although we cannot preserve the actuality in any but this inadequate form, we may never forget that it is the reality itself and not the word that counts. In the dispensation of glory other and better expressions will certainly be laid upon our lips.

The reality itself which is concerned in the confession of the holy trinity is of the highest importance, both for the mind and the heart.

For it is by that confession that the church maintains, in the first place, both the unity and the diversity in the being of God. The Divine Being is one: there is but one Being that is God and that may be called God. In creation and redemption, in nature and grace, in church and world, in state and society, everywhere and always we are concerned with one, same, living, and true God. The unity of the world, of mankind, of truth, of virtue, of justice, and of beauty depends upon the

unity of God. The moment that unity of God is denied or under stressed, the door is open to polytheism.

But this unity or oneness of God is, according to Scripture and the confession of the church, not a contentless unity, nor a solitariness, but a fulness of life and strength. It comprises difference, or distinction, or diversity. It is that diversity which comes to expression in the three persons or modes of being of God. These three persons are not merely three modes of revelation. They are modes of being. Father, Son, and Spirit share one and the same Divine nature and characteristics. They are one being. Nevertheless each has His own name, His own particular characteristic, by which He is distinguished from the others. The Father alone has fatherhood, the Son alone has generation, and the Spirit alone possesses the quality of proceeding from both.

To that order of existence in the Divine Being the order of the three persons in all Divine work corresponds. The Father is He *from* whom, the Son is He *through* whom, and the Spirit is He *in* whom all things are. All things in the creation, and in the redemption, or re-creation, come from the Father, through the Son and the Spirit. And in the Spirit and through the Son they are come back to Him. It is to the Father that we are particularly indebted, therefore, for his electing love, to the Son for His redeeming grace, and to the Spirit for his regenerative and renewing power.

In the second place, the church in maintaining this confession, takes a strong position over against the heresies of deism (belief in God without revelation) and pantheism (polytheism) and of Judaism and Paganism. Always there is that dual tendency in the human heart: the tendency to think of God as distant and removed and to think of self and world as independent of God, and the tendency to draw God down into the world, to identify Him with the world, and so to deify the self and the world. When the first tendency prevails in us we come to the point of thinking that we can do without God in nature, in our calling, in our business, in our science and art, and also in the work of redemption. And, if the second tendency prevails in us, we change the glory of God into the image of some creature or other, deify the world, the sun, the moon and the stars, art, science, or the state, and in the creature, usually conceived in our image, we worship our own greatness. In the first instance God is only afar *off*; in the second He is only nearby. In the first, He is outside of the world, above it, free from it; in the second, He is inside it and identical with it.

But the church confesses both: God is above the world, distinguished from it in essence, and yet He is with His whole being present in it and at no point in space or time separated from it. He is both afar off and nearby. He is both highly exalted above all creatures and at the same time deeply condescending to them all. He is our Creator who brought us into being by His will as creatures distinct from Him in kind. He is our Redeemer who saves us, not by our works but by the

riches of His grace. He is our Sanctifier who dwells in us as in His temple. As the triune God He is one God and is *above* us, *for* us, and *in* us.

Finally, in the third place, this confession of the church is also of the greatest importance for the spiritual life. Quite unjustifiably it is sometimes maintained that the doctrine of the trinity is merely a philosophically abstracted dogma and that it possesses no value for religion and life. The Reformed Confession of Faith takes an entirely different view of this. In Article XI of that Confession the church stated that God is one in essence and three in persons. This we know from the witness of Holy Scripture, and from the activities of the three persons, especially those which we sense within us. True, we do not base our faith in the trinity on feeling and experience; but when we believe it, we notice that the doctrine stands in intimate relationship with the spiritual experience of the children of God.

For the believers come to know the workings of the Father, the Creator of all things, He who gave them life, and breath, and all things. They learn to know Him as the Lawgiver who gave out His holy commandments in order that they should walk in them. They learn to know Him as the Judge who is provoked to terrible wrath by all the unrighteousness of men and who in no sense holds the guilty guiltless. And they learn to know Him, finally, as the Father who for Christ's sake is their God and Father, on whom they trust so far that they do not doubt but that He will supply for every need of body and soul, and that He will convert all evil which accrues to them in this vale of tears into good. They know that He can do this as Almighty God and that He wants to do it as a faithful Father. Hence they confess: I believe in God, the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

Thus, too, they learn to know in themselves the workings of the Son, He who is the only-begotten of the Father, conceived in Mary of the Holy Spirit. They learn to know Him as their highest Prophet and Teacher, He who has perfectly revealed to them the secret counsel and will of God in the matter of their redemption. They learn to know Him as their only High priest, who has redeemed them by the one sacrifice of His body, and who still constantly intercedes for them with the Father. They learn to know Him as their eternal King, who rules them with His Word and Spirit and who shelters and preserves them in their achieved redemption. Hence they confess: I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only-begotten Son, our Lord.

And they also learn to recognize in themselves the workings of the Holy Spirit, He who regenerates them and leads them into all truth. They learn to know Him as the Operator of their faith, He who through that faith causes them to share in Christ and all His benefits. They learn to know Him as the Comforter, He who prays in them with unutterable longings and who testifies with their spirit that they are children of God. They learn to know Him as the pledge of their eternal inheritance, He who preserves them until the day of their redemption. And they therefore confess: I believe also in the Holy Spirit.

Thus the confession of the trinity is the sum of the Christian religion. Without it neither the creation nor the redemption nor the sanctification can be purely maintained.

Every departure from this confession leads to error in the other heads of doctrine, just as a mistaken representation of the articles of faith can be traced back to a misconception of the doctrine of the trinity. We can truly proclaim the mighty works of God only when we recognize and confess them as the one great work of Father, Son, and Spirit.

In the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is contained the whole salvation of men.