

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH II: 3 *(Readings: Gen.1:26-2:3; Jn.10:11-21; Rev.14:6-13)*

How God Is

This is only a small Article. Compared with the two above it in Chapter 2 of The Westminster Confession, it almost seems insignificant. Yet it's this doctrine which tells us about how God is. This is about the way God exists. Which means this is all about how we have come to know God, come to faith in Him, and be made more and more like Him. Mind you, realising how vital this doctrine of the Trinity is doesn't always help us when we have those Jehovah Witnesses at the door. It's no use trying to argue with them about how they've got that wrong. They know their answers down pat. And, quite simply, we can't convince them otherwise. Only the Holy Spirit can do that, and He can only do that as they realise that what they're trusting in isn't Jehovah God at all but their own works. Like the apostle Paul experienced.

And it's the same also for the Muslim. Because if it is one thing they hate it's the doctrine of the Trinity. Mohammed made sure that the Koran had a completely twisted version of this to confuse many centuries of Muslims since.

In your discussion with those from these groups, and other groups like them, they will keep coming back to one particular thing. They will keep saying to you that nowhere in the Bible will you find the word 'Trinity'. And they will go on to say that that's because there's no such thing as this in the Bible. They say it's what some church council four hundred years after Christ decided.

They will quote you a number of historical sources and encyclopaedias and commentators to support them. They argue very tightly. "It's logical," they say. And there you have all the difference, because they don't come from faith. And so they cannot understand the things of faith. They cannot accept any mysteries.

Well, God sending His Son to be born on earth, to live among us, to suffer and die for us, and then to rise victoriously for us, is the most perplexing mystery of all! No wonder they deny it! Because these cults and religions all do! So, in words of a first consideration to this third Article of Chapter 2, let's realise, **THE TRINITY EXPLAINS WHAT GOD SAID.**

The Trinity Explains What God Said

This is what Article 3 starts with when it says, "In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity."

Now, looking at the Scriptures, you will find a developing progression as to what it teaches concerning God. While right at its beginning there's reference to a plurality within the Godhead, that's not clearly known until the Gospel accounts. For example, in Genesis 1, the verses 1 till 3, we can see that God, God the Spirit and God the Word, is being alluded to. In Genesis 1 verse 26 God speaks with Himself of making man "in our image". Further on in Genesis 11, there is the time when the Lord came down to see the city and tower of Babel and, seeing what mankind was doing there, said in verse 7, "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so that they won't understand each other."

Then there is the 'Angel of the LORD' who frequently appears in the Old Testament. He is described in Genesis 32 as having the appearance of a man while being recognised as God. In Exodus 23 God says His Name is in him and it will be him who brings His people into the Promised Land.

And then there are references to God's Spirit. He's already there hovering over the earth at the beginning of creation. But further on He is mentioned in connection with the life of the Old Testament believer. David shows this in his plea in Psalm 51 verse 11, "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me."

While the Old Testament was written before the revelation of the Trinity in Christ's coming, yet it is through the New Testament that we can see this already in the Old. Like the saying goes, "The New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed and the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed."

But it was exactly enough for the Hebrews at that time. This God has a unity and a singularity in Himself. He is One God.

For Israel the revelation of God's oneness was what they needed. All around her she was surrounded by pagans - pagans who constantly tried to seduce God's people away from Him. And right up until the great captivity in Babylon Israelite history is blighted by pagan idolatry and image worship. Again and again the Israelites fell into those evil ways, even with the clear word of the Law and the continual warning of the prophets. Indeed, the first and second commandments of the Law are about who God is alone and how He is to be worshipped alone. It is because the LORD our God is one God that Deuteronomy 6:5 says Israel has to love Him with all their hearts and with all their souls and with all their strength.

So those references in the Old Testament to the different Persons in the Godhead doesn't leave us with a series of differences but rather a sense of the fullness of life and power which is in God altogether. Like we read in Genesis 1 verse 26, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness."

And how strong God is! The LORD only has to speak and something is made out of absolutely nothing by his Word and Spirit. It's a world above us and yet it's in this world He proves Himself to us. THE TRINITY EXPLAINS WHAT GOD SAID.

The Trinity Shows What God Does

But let's go further into this Article. In the words of a second consideration to this Article we see THE TRINITY SHOWS WHAT GOD DOES.

Note that the three persons are named and their particular character is stated. While we have seen that Article 3 said, "In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity," now it's defined. For it describes, "God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternal proceeding from the Father and the Son."

Here what is called the 'economy' of the Godhead is elucidated. 'Economy' means simply how things work. So this is about how the three distinct Persons relate to each other. And, also, about what each does, because the one goes automatically with the other. This is about a unity, after all.

This is where the scripture passages we read particularly ties in. From the beginning of the Bible, from the very central point of the Bible, and from the end of the Bible, we saw what God in each of His Three Persons has done. And it's all for us! As Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God has created us, saved us, and sanctified us. We owe everything to Him. In fact, all our happiness and comfort is that we do believe in that God, and that we trust Him and look for everything from Him.

Think about it. 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. And then the regeneration, the renewal, the sanctification, and the glorification, are the Spirit's.

There are a number of simplifications that have come in connection with this. We need to avoid them because they take away from the biblical message.

Rowland Ward provides a helpful summary of these. He says that, firstly, there is 'unitarianism'. This says there is one God but denies the distinction of the persons. In consequence, the deity of Christ is denied, and the personality of the Holy Spirit is rejected. This is what the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Christadelphians teach today, and what the Arians taught in the 4th Century.

Secondly, there is 'modalism'. This teaches that the three persons are but several ways in which the one God has revealed Himself. It's like an actor performing several roles in a play. So they deny the distinction of persons. This was what Sabellius in the 3rd Century taught.

And, thirdly, there is 'tritheism'. This denies the one nature but affirms three persons thus teaching three gods, which is really 'polytheism'. When the apostle Paul cries out, in Romans 11 verse 36, the deepest praise to God that "from him and through him and to him are all things," He conveys the unity in working that the Trinity has. He is showing three persons in one essence. To use the words of Herman Bavinck, "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 re-creation, come from the Father, through the Son and the Spirit. And in the Spirit and through the Son they are coming back to him. It's to the Father that we're particularly indebted, therefore, for His electing love, to the Son for His redeeming grace, and to the Spirit for His regenerative and renewing power."

If you're still wondering at this point why we as mankind don't get a bit of a look-in here, you're looking in the wrong place! For when you come into any true Christian church you have to face the fact that it's only God who does anything good. It's only by being changed and helped by God that you are able to do anything good.

What believers confess each Sunday, and what they should show every day, and in every possible way, is that the Lord is the one, true, eternal God. He is the Father, Son, and Spirit - the God of confidence, the God to whom they've completely surrendered to, and the God upon whom they rest with their whole heart. You owe everything to God!

The Trinity Brings What God Is

And it's because we owe everything to God, that, in the third place, THE TRINITY BRINGS WHAT GOD IS.

Now, here let's first of all see what the Trinity in the Godhead means by describing what it is not. You see, since the New Testament Church began, there has always been a struggle against heresies which are anti-trinitarian.

But these heresies are more than just wrong ideas. Like any heresy they actually show us something of man's sinful nature. For anything which does not faithfully show God actually faithfully shows what stands against God.

There's nothing neutral about God. You're either for Him or against Him. And that includes the kind of so-called mistakes that well-meaning Christians make, because in these errors they go against God. The wrong doctrine is as much a sin as the wrong life. And when we sin we actually make ourselves out to be our own gods. Then we declare independence from the true God!

Congregation, what is really behind those anti-trinitarian heresies are two tendencies. One of these tendencies thinks of God as distant and removed. So it thinks of ourselves and the world as independent of God. The other tendency draws God down into the world. It identifies Him so much with this world that it makes mankind and this world out to be God.

The first tendency was very much the influential one until recently. This is the belief that we can do without God - progress will find the way. "We can do it!" they say.

It's no surprise that one of this strand of heresies was deism. This was a powerful influence within the Church at the time of the enlightenment. And, interestingly, it was also a strong force at the time of the writing of the American Constitution.

The second tendency is now having its day. For then the glory of God is changed into the image of something else. The world is deified, like the greenies do; the stars are worshipped, like the astrologists do; crystal rocks energise you, like the new-agers do. And most of all, in this tendency, man worships his own greatness. Its slogans are, "You are the most important person in the world," "Just do it!," "As long as it what you feel you want to do!" Here is where we see such a heresy as Gnosticism.

We can put God right out of the picture, or we can paint God as part of our own picture. But that doesn't change the 'Big Picture'. For the Church confesses both things - God is above the world, totally apart from it in His nature, and yet He is in His whole being with us and is never apart from us. God is our Creator who brought us to life by His will as creatures distinct from Him in kind; He is our Redeemer who saves us, not by what we do but by the riches of His grace; and He is the Sanctifier who lives in us, as He once was in His Temple. As the triune God He is one God and is above us, for us, and in us.

That's what Matthew 28 verse 19 states as Christ commissions His Church to go forth making disciples of all nations, baptising them "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." And that's why it's in the benedictions which the Apostles end their letters with. For example, what could be more all inclusive than what Paul says in 2nd Corinthians 13 verse 14? He wrote there, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you."

We come back to where we started. The Trinity is no mere philosophically abstracted dogma that possesses no value for religion and life, because we believe we experience it in our lives.

I mean, what is the love of the Father to you? What has the grace of the Son done for you? And what does the fellowship of the Holy Spirit now do for you?

And, you know, these are the questions that the rest of this Confession will answer. For here we have, in summary form, the rest of the Westminster Confession of Faith. It is trinitarian. It has to bring out the way God relates to us.

But, dear friend, it's how you answer these questions in your own life which will show who the Trinity is. And to do this, this Confession of Faith must be your confession of the faith.