



PART 1



One God: Three Persons



Evidence from the Bible

The term *Trinity* does not occur in the Bible nor is there any single verse which sets out the doctrine in the precise words used by Christians down the ages. What we do have, however, is some very clear teaching involving three great facts: first, God is one; secondly, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are God; and, thirdly, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons. The doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to do justice to all of these points. To understand why the church expressed it in the terms familiar to us today we must look both at the biblical teaching and at the discussions which went on among Christians, particularly in the fourth century.

The doctrine itself is of vital importance to Christians. It is the one belief held in common by the people of God everywhere. It is crucial to our understanding of both God and man. And it is the model for the way we should live, particularly in our relations with one another. Only a proper understanding of it can produce a sense of mystery, the devotion of God and the true humanism which are the essence of religion.

The Old Testament

God is one

The single most important doctrine of the Old Testament is the unity of God: 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one' (Deut. 6:4). This contrasted vividly with the beliefs of Israel's neighbours, most of whom were *polytheists*, believing that there were many gods. In effect this meant that each natural force (for example, the sun, the rain, the thunder, the fields, the seas) had its own god. The only advance on this was what is known as *henotheism*. Those who held this view believed that each land had its own god: other gods might be supreme in other lands, but their particular god was supreme in theirs.

Israel's faith was in stark contrast to all this. They believed that the Lord was exclusively God: he was God over the whole earth, the only God who actually lived and existed (Isa. 45:22). Other gods were idols but the Lord actually did things: he made the heavens (Ps. 96:5).

God's unity did not only mean that he was *the only God*, however. It also meant that he was *a single being*.

The Lord was one, possessing in himself every power and perfection of deity. He was the single source of grace, the single author of creation and the single object of worship.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not in any way a retreat from this Old Testament teaching. We may even say that Deuteronomy 6:4 is the most important text in the Bible for Christian faith. The unity of God is the bed-rock of our confession. When we confess Christ as Lord we do not see him as a second God, but as identical with the Creator-Lord of the Old Testament.

God is more than one

But if the Old Testament is emphatic about the unity of God, it appears to have little to say about the second aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity, namely, the idea of more-than-oneness in God. The reason is simple. The writers of the Old Testament had to bend all their efforts to keep the people from idolatry and polytheism. Only when belief in the Lord as the one, exclusive deity was firmly established would it be appropriate to complicate matters by revealing that in the oneness of God there were the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. There is scarcely a hint of this in the Old Testament. In fact, no group possessing only the Old Testament has ever come to a knowledge of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Yet once we know that God is triune we can see some hints of it in the Old Testament. Augustine, in a famous saying, declared that what is patent in the New Testament is latent in the Old. More elaborately, he compared the Old

Testament to a room which is fully furnished but unlit. Until we have light, we cannot see what is there. Once we have light, everything is clear. Yet there is nothing there that wasn't there before.

Augustine's observations are particularly appropriate to the doctrine of the Trinity. Without the light of the New Testament we can see no hint of more-than-oneness in God. But once the New Testament reveals that God is represented by the Three, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, we can see things in the Old Testament that point in the same direction. It is not the New Testament that puts these things there. It merely shows that they are there.

Elohim

One of these Old Testament hints is that the name most often used for God is *Elohim*. This word is plural in form. Grammatically, it should be translated *gods*. In fact, sometimes it refers to angels and then it is translated in the plural (compare Ps. 8:5 with Heb. 2:7). The important thing is that when it is used of the God of Israel it has a singular verb or adjective (as if we were to say, 'The gods *is*'). It would be too much to say that this very peculiar grammar *teaches* the doctrine of the Trinity. But it certainly agrees with it, and if we bear in mind that in the last analysis it was God who chose the language of the Old Testament (2 Tim. 3:16), we can now see that he had good reason for calling himself *Elohim*. The plural not only points to the truth that in him there is a concentration of *God-ness* but also fits in beautifully with the fact that in

him there is a fulness of fellowship. The New Testament disclosure of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is the best, and possibly the only, explanation of God's giving himself a plural name.

'Us' and 'our'

There is another hint of the doctrine of the Trinity in Genesis 1:26: 'Let *us* make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness'. These words can hardly refer, as some allege, to a consultation between God and the angels. Man was not made by the angels. Neither was he made in the image of the angels. God made man in his own image and the words of Genesis 1:26 indicate some consultation within God himself. We find similar language in Isaiah 6:8: 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?'

Neither of these passages is sufficient by itself to lead men to the belief that God is triune. But when we learn that doctrine from other sources (the New Testament), we can see at once that from the very beginning God was speaking in a way that expressed the deepest truths about himself, even though these truths could not yet be grasped by those to whom he was talking.

The Angel of the Lord

But the clearest of all hints of the Trinity in the Old Testament is the personage known as 'the Angel of the Lord'. The remarkable thing about him is that he is both distinguished from the Lord and identified with the Lord.

He is *distinguished* from the Lord, for example, in the very form of his name: the Angel *of* the Lord. He also speaks of God as someone distinct from himself. For example, in Genesis 16:11 the Angel says to Hagar, ‘The LORD has heard of your misery’. Similarly, in Genesis 22:12 he says to Abraham, ‘Now I know that you fear God’.

The distinction is even more emphatic in Genesis 24:40 in the words of Abraham to the servant he was sending to seek a wife for Isaac: ‘The LORD... will send his angel with you and make your journey a success’.

Yet in other passages the Angel is clearly *identified* with God. One of the clearest instances of this is in Genesis 31:11-13: ‘The angel of God said to me in the dream, “Jacob”. I answered, “Here I am”. And he said... “I am the God of Bethel... Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land”’. We find the same thing earlier in Genesis 16:10, in the Angel’s words to Hagar, ‘I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count’: the Angel is promising to do something that lies only within the capability of God. He makes a similar promise to Abraham in Genesis 22:17: ‘I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore’. In Genesis 48:16, the aged Jacob invokes the Angel of the Lord when blessing the sons of Joseph: ‘The Angel who has delivered me from all harm – may he bless these boys’. Centuries later the prophet Hosea referred to another incident in the patriarch’s life and wrote: ‘As a man he struggled with God. He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he

wept and begged for his favour. He found him at Bethel and talked with him there – the LORD God Almighty, the LORD is his name of renown!’ (Hosea 12:3-5).

The Angel of the Lord was certainly not sent to reveal the doctrine of the Trinity. The great concern of the Old Testament, as we have seen, was to fix on the mind of Israel the fact that God is one. Any premature emphasis on the more-than-oneness would have increased the risk (grave enough already) of polytheism. The Angel came to *help* the people of God. He was the Lord’s executive. Revelation of the innermost nature of God was not his mission. Yet, in the course of helping his people, he did incidentally disclose truth about God himself. Looking back at his work from the viewpoint of the New Testament we can now see that one can be sent from God and at the same time be himself God.

The New Testament

Before looking in detail at the New Testament teaching let us first notice a few general points.

The Trinity is revealed in salvation

First of all, the New Testament disclosure of the Trinity is closely related to the experience of salvation. The three-foldness in God is revealed not directly but in the course of redemption. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit each make a distinct contribution to our salvation and, as so often, God reveals what he is through what he does. Here, too, is another reason why the doctrine of

the Trinity could not be revealed in the Old Testament. The full and final truth about God could become clear only in the completion of the work of salvation. Knowledge of the Trinity was simply impossible before Bethlehem and Pentecost.

The Trinity is presupposed

It is also worth noting that in the New Testament the doctrine of the Trinity is not something put forward aggressively. It is in the background as something presupposed, almost in the same way as we today assume that the earth is round and don't feel any need to keep reminding people of it.

The New Testament writers do not, for example, dogmatically state that Christ is God and then go on to defend and expound their position. Nor do they lay down aggressively their belief that the Holy Spirit is a person. When we open the New Testament we find the early Christians already in comfortable possession of these truths. We do not see these convictions growing, or attacked and defended, as we do, for example, the doctrine of justification by faith. In the very earliest books of the New Testament, Christians are already worshipping Jesus and calling him Lord.

Yet the writers are curiously lacking in any feeling of embarrassment over the matter. They certainly betray no sense of being innovators or revolutionaries. This is quite remarkable. All of them were Jews, with a firm, almost fanatical, belief in one God. Yet there they are worshipping

Jesus and the Holy Spirit as well as God the Father, while at the same time warning their readers against idolatry! The only possible explanation for this is that their belief in the Trinity is set firmly within the framework of their belief in one God. If the Son is Lord, he is the Lord of the Old Testament. If the Holy Spirit is Lord, he, too, is the Lord of the Old Testament. The appearance of the Son and of the Spirit does not work a sudden addition to the number of gods, but a revelation of previously unknown fulness and depth in the being of the one God himself.

Terms used

We must also notice, however, that the New Testament writers expressed these truths without the very specialised jargon which theologians use today. It was only after the New Testament books and letters had been written that, in the course of debate and controversy, the church introduced new words into the Christian religion: words like Trinity, person, essence, nature and substance. These words do not occur in the New Testament; at least not with the special meanings they bear today. This has created a difficulty for some Christians, who feel that we should not use non-biblical terms to express our beliefs. In fact, this was already a difficulty in John Calvin's day (1509-1564) and he met it head-on in an interesting paragraph of his famous *Institutes* (I.xiii,3). The objections were particularly strong against the use of the word *Person* and Calvin made three points in reply.