

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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The Trinity

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In the New Testament the three Persons are clearly portrayed, and the people of God in this age must face the problem of how the three can be one and the one three. The Old Testament is by no means abrogated. We are not polytheists or tri-theists, but monotheists; and Gregory of Nazianzen well said, "I cannot think of the *one*, but I am immediately surrounded with the splendor of the *three*; nor can I clearly discover the *three* but I am suddenly carried back to the *one*." Christians are monotheists and Trinitarians. As Calvin (*Institutes*, I, xiii, 2) said, "While he declares himself to be but One, he proposes himself to be distinctly considered in Three Persons, without apprehending which, we have only a bare empty name of God floating in our brains, without any idea of the true God."

For this very reason it seems that Calvin overdoes his warnings against vain curiosity. No doubt some people waste time in idle curiosity; but they must be few in number, for the general populace spends very little time considering the Trinity or any other part of Christianity. Of course, it is also true that all of us make mistakes in our theology. No one is in errant. Therefore, as Calvin says, we should be prudent, careful, and reverent. We must consider every doctrine, not the Trinity only, from every angle. We must ask: Is our exegesis correct? Are our summaries as complete as required? Are our inferences valid? But with all due caution, it still seems that modern man should be urged to be more curious about the faith, rather than less.

If there be any influence of Greek philosophy on the doctrine of the Trinity, it would be in the relationship of the three Persons to the one essence. This is very complicated. It involves the general philosophic problem of unity in multiplicity. Parmenides and Plato were strong on unity; but the former got nowhere with multiplicity, and many think that Plato did not quite succeed. On the other hand, Locke, Berkeley, and William James were strong on multiplicity, but unity eluded them. This problem is not an artificial problem invented by secular philosophy, which Christians automatically escape. Nor is the Trinity the only point in Christianity where it appears. The solution of the puzzle also bears on the doctrine of creation, the origin of the souls of Adam's posterity, and the doctrine of original sin. Therefore, much as a beginning student would like to avoid philosophy, sooner or later he must face these difficulties or resign theology in despair.

The solution the following pages defend is the philosophy of Realism, often called Platonism. Strictly, it is not Platonism, but rather the theory of ideas as transformed by Philo. The term *Realism*, as opposed to empirical and nominalistic epistemology, denotes any theory insisting that we know the real object, and not merely a sensory image or representation of it. Plato called these real objects *Ideas*. The argument is this: Suppose we have a lot of dice of various sizes. They all have the same shape. Now, this shape is something real.

Even though the shape comes in different sizes, it is the same identical shape. If sensory objects alone were real, there could be no idea of similarity or identity, for none of the individual dice is itself similarity. Nor is any one of the dice *cube*. If one of the dice were the cube, and if only sense objects are real, then no other die could be cube. Hence, there is a real object of knowledge, the cube. It is not a sense object, not only for the preceding reason, but also because this cube exists in many places at once, as no sense object can. Similarly, Plato united all men under the Idea Man, all horses under the Horse, and all beautiful things under real Beauty. With other arguments also Plato asserted the reality of knowable intellectual objects.

The other part of Platonic theory that no Christian can accept, and Philo's transformation of it, will be discussed in the next chapter. But without this part of the theory, *viz.*, the assertion of non-sensory intellectual objects, it is hard to see how an understanding of the Bible would be possible. To begin with, God himself is a non-sensory object. So is the idea of justification by faith—as well as man and animal and cube. Empiricism would require all nouns to be proper names of individual sense objects; it can never account for the unity in this multiplicity, and therefore renders both communication and thought impossible.

Now, when we face the subject of the Trinity—the common unity in the three Persons—may we not say that the three Persons share or communicate the common characteristics of omnipotence, omniscience, and so forth, and so constitute one essence? The Platonic point of view makes this essence a reality, as truly as Man and Beauty are real. Were the essence not a reality, and the Persons therefore the only realities, we should have tritheism instead of monotheism.

But if anyone assert that it is completely wrong to begin with realistic epistemology, it is enough to recall that nominalism provides no basis for the imputation of righteousness and justification by faith. Or even for talking about the human race. For any doctrine, it is necessary that the cube be a real object of knowledge.

A more substantial objection is that unity in the Godhead cannot be the unity of a species or a genus. The three Persons are one in a stricter, deeper, more inexplicable sense than the sense in which three or thirty men are one. Whether this objection is plausibly true or not depends on the sense in which men are one and the sense in which the Trinity is one. Those who make this objection should define the two senses (if indeed they are two) and point out the distinction. Unless we know how the Persons are one and how men are one, we cannot tell whether the unity is the same or different. But the objectors hardly define specific unity and disclaim ability to define divine unity. Their wording, however, suggests that they are using Aristotelian terminology and have misunderstood Plato.

Hodge wrote (*Systematic Theology*, II, 59), "the whole nature of essence is in the divine person [each one], but the human person [each one] is only a part of the common human nature" [Hodge is quoting W. G. T. Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*, II, 120. —Ed.] This is a confusing sentence. To fit the argument, it ought to read, "the whole nature or essence is in the divine person, but only a part of the common human nature is in the human person." If the sentence is not so interpreted, the antithesis Hodge wants to assert—the antithesis between the unity in God and the unity in men—vanishes. Yet this interpretation, the only one that preserves the antithesis, makes the second half of the sentence false; for if a part of human nature were lacking in an object, if the definition of that object did not include every part of the definition of man, if the man did not participate in the whole Idea, that object would not be an individual man. A man is a man only because the entire definition fits.

The arguments of the eminent American theologian fail completely to show that epistemological realism, and especially the assertion that there are eternal Ideas in the mind of God, are inconsistent with the doctrine of the Trinity. But it must be made likewise clear, in the interest of sound logic, that the failure of Hodge's arguments do not prove the identity of the type of unity among men with the type of unity among the three Persons of the Trinity. It remains an unrefuted plausible option. It seems to

be the best solution ever proposed. But it still may be and undoubtedly is inadequate.

One of the purposes of this discussion is to warn the student that the theory of Ideas is not inconsistent with the incarnation of Christ, as Hodge claims; nor does it deny that the sin of Adam was the sin of an individual man, as Hodge also claims; nor does it conflict with but rather is essential to the doctrines of justification, regeneration, and other doctrines. Nor is it true to say, as Hodge does, that "as a historical fact, the consistent and thoroughgoing advocates of this doctrine teach an entirely different method of salvation." This may be true of some nineteenth-century Hegelians, but note that it was Augustine who defended grace against Pelagius' works. Note too that Anselm had a better understanding of the Atonement than anyone before him (except the apostles), and note also that in later Catholicism it was the Jansenists and Augustinians who preserved more of the Gospel than their opponents. Hodge says, "individuals alone exist" (62). But if so, there is no *real* unity in the Godhead, and we have only the three individuals.

Another more recent theologian also has difficulty with unity and multiplicity, with the three and the one. If one stresses logic and notes that something can be three in one respect and one in a different respect, the problem of the Trinity vanishes so far as this supposedly logical contradiction is concerned. It is not hard to find examples of a combination of three and one. A corporation may consist of three officers and be one corporation. Whether this is "adequate" for the Trinity is irrelevant. It shows that three-ness and unity can coexist; and if in this case, and in this manner, then no doubt in other cases and other manners. Hence the alleged logical impossibility of the Trinity is disposed of. The Trinity is one in one sense and three in a different sense. That is all that is needed to avoid contradiction.

Strange to say, a recent theologian has renewed the logical difficulty or perhaps has invented a new one. Cornelius Van Til asserts unity and plurality of the Trinity in exactly the same sense. He rejects the Athanasian doctrine of one substance and three Persons, or one reality and three *hypostases*. His

words are, "We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person" (*An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 229). The mimeographed syllabus on its title page says that it is for classroom purposes only and is not to be regarded as a published book. What this means is unclear. The author teaches it in class and so makes it public. There is no reason for not regarding it as his own view).

In the context, Van Til denies that the "paradox" of the three and the one can be resolved by the formula, "one in essence and three in person."

This departure from the faith of the universal Christian church is indeed a paradox, but it is one of Van Til's own making. That there are paradoxes in Scripture is undoubtedly true. One reader is puzzled at one point and another exegete is puzzled at another. But when a line of argument results in a recognizable contradiction, such as an object is both three and one in exactly the same sense, it should be a warning that the argument is unsound. The piety that accepts contradictions is not piety, but something else.

Furthermore, when a theologian asserts that a given paradox cannot be solved in this life by any human being, he is making an assertion that requires omniscience. That a scholar has failed to find in Scripture the solution of a difficulty does not prove that none is there. Before such a conclusion could be reasonably drawn, it would be necessary to trace out all the inferences derivable from Scripture. When all are set down, only then could one reasonably assert that the solution is not there.

Until then it is better, more reasonable, and more pious to continue with the *Westminster Confession*: "In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons of one substance...." Where is the creed that says that there are three *ousiai*? Or, one Person?