

IV. The Holy Trinity.

Knowing God thus, as Creator and Father, as Redeemer in Christ, and as Holy Spirit working in us, we confess our faith in the Holy Trinity.

So we acknowledge and worship one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

CHAPTER IV. THE HOLY TRINITY

2 Cor. 13: 14; Jude 1: 20-21; Rev. 1: 4-6; Matt. 28: 19-20.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
be with you all (2 Cor. 13: 14).

How often a moving act of worship has reached its crown and culmination in the beauty of that threefold benediction! It brings home to the mind the movement of the Divine towards us in prayer and in the hearing of the Word in the sanctuary. The soul has come face to face with a gracious reality, a story old but ever new, the living and dying of the Lord Jesus for us sinful men: that is the first, the most immediate, the freshest contact that a modern Peter or Mary or Philip can know. But that close contact would be meaningless if it were but a human touching a human, a friend greeting a friend, as moving as a glimpse of his mother's portrait was to Cowper, but just one other encounter among the episodes of history. But that grace that found us was something more: it was nothing less than the Eternal Love that reached out and "kissed me in a glad surprise," the Love that fashioned me, followed me down the years into the places of my sin and my despair and lifted me into the circle of the redeemed: it was the Great High God who made the stars who set His thought upon me and redeemed me. But how was it possible for me in the Word preached to see Jesus and in Him to recognize God Himself appropriating me? Why did my soul tremble in that joy and not another's? Because there is a third participant in that vitalizing contact. A power took hold of me and gently but irresistibly made me confront Jesus: I enjoyed a sharing of, or partnership in, the Spirit of God. Any worshipper knows that time and again in the same holy place with the same Scripture being opened before us with eloquence and imagination the contact is not made: we are *not* in the Spirit on the Lord's day. Thus the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God are ours just inasmuch as we are in touch with the Spirit, not otherwise.¹

¹ Cf. Moffatt, *Grace in the New Testament*, p. 153.

So Christian experience acknowledges a threefoldness in the encounter with God. And that acknowledgment of the Apostle comes early, just some twenty-five years after Pentecost. "The wonderful kindness of Christ is historically the first thing in the Gospel, the porch through which the believer enters the building, and comes to know what God is to him and what the Holy Spirit is. . . . After Christ's grace or kindness has brought him into the building the Christian finds the love of God around him, which he would not have known without that introduction." And what opens his eyes to the beauty of the porch and the glory of the building is the Holy Spirit. Paul affirms that truth elsewhere in speaking under the figure of adoption (Rom. 8: 15-16). We sinners, he implies, know a strange stirring in our souls when we awaken to the fact that it is for people like us that Christ died; then we realize that for a forgiving love like that there can be only one name: that must be the love of a Father; we hail Him as such (Abba). When we say that, he asserts (v. 16), it is the Spirit witnessing with our spirit that we are children of God. Again we notice the same threefoldness in Rom. 5: 5-8. Christian hope, he affirms, can hold its head high; for *God's love* has been poured out into, and keeps flooding, our hearts through *the Holy Spirit* which was given to us . . . God makes good His own love towards us in that while we were still sinners *Christ* died for us. There we note the author of our salvation, God in His love; the Christ who died for us; the power that opens our hearts and floods them with that love, the Holy Spirit.

Father, Son, and Spirit. Matt. 16: 17; Mark 12: 36-37; Luke 10: 21-22; John 14: 16-26; John 15: 26; John 16: 23; 1 John 4: 2-3; 1 Cor. 12: 3; 1 Cor. 6: 19; Phil. 2: 1; Rom. 8: 9-11; Acts 5: 29-32; Acts 11: 15-18.

The threefoldness in the Christian experience does not mean that we have to deal with three separate divine figures with distinct functions. Suppose we set side by side two confessions, that of Peter and that of Paul. Peter was the first to set Jesus on the higher plane. He broke forth in the words: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." It was an amazing insight that the young Galilean fisherman had that day, so amazing that it was

* Menzies, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, ad loc.

recognized at once that "flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 16: 17). Then Paul exclaims: "I give you to understand, that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Cor. 12: 3). In the old days as an embittered young Rabbi, offended by the idea that a crucified criminal could be proclaimed as the Messiah of Israel, he must have burst out: "Accursed be this Jesus!" Now he knows, having once stood on that very human viewpoint, how great a force was needed to lift him to a new vision: only a power from on high could so open a man's eyes to see in the rejected and humble carpenter the glory and dignity of the Son of Man, enabling him to give the title: Jesus is Lord. It is the Holy Ghost that enables a man to give Jesus the right predicate. But in Peter's case it was the Father who revealed it. Are these sources of revelation really different entities? Is it not rather that in the one case we think of the primal originator of all insight, the Father, and in the other case we think rather of the means by which that revelation comes, His Spirit?

Again, read Rom. 8: 9, 10: "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the *Spirit of God* dwell in you. Now if any man have not the *Spirit of Christ*, he is none of his. And if *Christ* be *in you* . . ." In quick succession Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ, Christ in you, tumble from the same pen, different terms apparently for the same reality (cf. 2 Cor. 3: 16-18). So also in the Fourth Gospel: "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you" (14: 18). Further on it is the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, who comes (15: 26; 16: 7). Again we have the assurance: "If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it" (14: 14). Compare 16: 23: "Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you." It is as if a man enjoying the glow of re-invigoration in the garden will say, "It is the spring" or "It is the lovely air" or "It is the fragrance of the flowers," whereas it was no single one of these but all together happily commingled on a May morning.

How shall we explain this reference at will to the Living Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Eternal Father? Is it not that we enjoy a rich redemptive experience and in that mystical operation we seem to discern a face now on this side now on that? As Professor Donald Baillie has finely summed it up: "They all stand for the vital truth that we have more than the story of the

historical Jesus, we are united by faith to a Living Spirit who becomes supremely real to us through that story. If Christians speak of that Spirit as the Living Christ, they should be careful not to allow this to eclipse the idea of the Living God, or (worse still) to suggest that in the distant background there is a God who is less friendly and intimate than Christ, or (in another direction) to obscure the features of the historical Jesus and the importance of reading the old, old story of Him.”

Knowing God Thus. Ps. 33: 4-9; Prov. 8: 22-36.

What came upon those early Christians was a recreating of personality that could not be analyzed. Jesus the man of history had set new life glowing in them. But that Jesus always drew men's thoughts beyond Himself to the Father. And the Father since the life and death of Jesus had become accessible through His Spirit as He had never been before. It was a Trinity of experience that they were in process of formulating. The God who had long disclosed Himself as the Creator and the Righteous Author of the moral law had now drawn closer to men in the Son, the Redeemer, and He continued in that deeper intimacy opened up by the Son through His abiding Spirit, the upbuilder and sanctifier of the new life.

This development was not really untrue to the Hebrew heritage. Jehovah had never been a remote and aloof God, but one who was ever intervening in the history of His people. The Spirit of God was a reality in the life of Israel, especially in the experience of the prophets. Often that Spirit had been spoken of as the Word, and in later thought it had been almost personalized. "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made," said the Psalmist; "he spake and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast" (Ps. 33: 6-9). "He uttered his voice, the earth melted" (Ps. 46: 6). There was dynamic in the divine Word, as had been from the beginning: "God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Gen. 1: 3). His Word went forth with power: "it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please" (Is. 55: 11). As they came to feel that God was too pure to put His hand upon evil matter, they thought of God as having an agent or agents. The Wisdom of God in Proverbs 8 is pictured

¹ *Faith in God*, p. 263.

dramatically as if it were a separate reality alongside of the Almighty: "When he prepared the heavens, I was there . . . I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him" (vs. 22-30). So while God remained the One and Only in Hebrew thought, the way had opened up for speaking as if there were other divine realities beside Him.

Then came Jesus, so manifestly uplifted above His fellows in the strength and beauty of His living and able to make men aware of a divine radiance in His words and actions. To come under His influence was to know that this could be nothing less than God expressing Himself in a new freedom. And even when He disappeared from the human scene, that new accessibility of God continued, His Spirit came upon men with an explosive energy as at Pentecost, or with a power of inner renewal as in a Peter. Where could men place this reality except by linking it with God and with the Risen Christ?

Creator and Father, Redeemer, Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity certainly gathers up and affirms the *manifoldness* of the self-disclosure of God to many an individual soul. Consider Paul's experience. (1) There were the long years a-growing within the privileges of a Jewish home and the mercy-laden inheritance of the family of Israel. Under the inspiration of the Scriptures of the Old Testament there came to him the sense of awe before the God of Power and Judgment and Holiness, an awe that showed up the cleverness of the university youths of Tarsus as empty and superficial, an awe that constrained him to go to Jerusalem and give himself to an intenser study of the law. That same disclosure, he found, had come to his fellows in Gamaliel's classroom. (2) Then there came the vision on the Damascus Road: an outreaching love, ignoring all his persecutions and his bitter hate, apprehended him and startled him with the magnanimity of its mercifulness; the love spurned in the crucified Messiah came back to plead with him. It had pleased God to make a disclosure within his soul of the meaning of the Son of Man (Gal. 1: 15f.). That new revelation of the love of God in Christ was for ever after the essential element in his thought of God. That was a depth in the divine nature that never met the gaze of the scholars in Gamaliel's classroom. (3) Then there was the

active ministry of the Apostle of Christ with its adventures and wrestlings, its conflicts mental and spiritual, its visions and revelations in hours of crisis and upheaval—a career which daily depended on the quickening and illumining of the Spirit, that glory of God that he had first seen in the face of Jesus Christ. That too was an enablement that the pupils of Gamaliel never knew. His contemporaries still in the synagogue no doubt had the Spirit of the God of Israel to guide their path. But they lacked that immediacy of contact that came not from law and prophecy, but from Jesus only. Thus Paul could not adequately confess his faith in the One God in the fashion of his fathers and Jewish contemporaries. He had to affirm a God who had entered into history in Jesus with a fresh declaration of His Word, and had continued to enlarge that disclosure in the movements of the Spirit. The Christian thus asserts in the doctrine of the Trinity that he has an enlarged and deepened understanding of God.

Working in Us.

Again, the conception of the Trinity has supreme value in reminding us that God is *personal in a most ardent and active sense*, One who thinks, wills, and acts in movements that penetrate our human world. The philosopher might be content to think of God as high and lifted up in lonely contemplation, unmoved by the trivial and the transitory that make up so much of earthly existence. But the sinner has need of a God of another sort—a God who has entered the human scene and is ever willing to enter it again with the will and purpose to redeem and restore. The Christian God does not live to Himself: He has ever sought to express Himself, to communicate with the creatures He has made, to impart to the world the spiritual life that is within Himself. If we cannot penetrate the mystery of His *being*, we at least must proclaim that we have experienced the wonder of His *doing*. We cannot think of Him without recalling the mighty act in which He came near to men in the life and death of Jesus Christ. We dare not attempt to sustain the redeemed life except by drawing freely from the inspiration and illumination of the living Spirit. And we are concerned to assert that that unique episode of revelation that men experienced in Jesus Christ and that grace upon grace that we draw upon in life's crises are not just casual and

accidental touchings of His pity: these define for us what is His essential nature and abiding character as the God who is Love.

The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that it was from the depths of His own rich nature that God called us, His creatures, into being, reclaimed us, and continually renews us. It confesses that there was a purpose behind our coming into being, our life here, and our final destiny. It asserts that we are ever confronting a God who has put meaning into all the works of His hands, a God who never loses personal hold of His own, a God who crowns us with glory and honour by the very fact that He cares for us everlastingly. We stake our all on the belief that His essential being must be like unto His doing.

Three in One. John 1: 1-18; Phil. 2: 6-11; Col. 1: 15-16; Heb. 1: 3-5.

While the New Testament does not formulate the doctrine of the Trinity, it opens up the truth that later thinkers were to expand. The Fourth Gospel starts off from three assertions that were probably already enshrined in a hymn of the Church. (1) *In the beginning was the Word; i.e.* the Word is not a mere part of the created order, made within time: He was there when time awoke. (2) *And the Word was with God; i.e.* He was not a mere phase of the divine being, but a reality with independent existence, a person confronting God. (3) *And the Word was God; i.e.* the Word was not just of divine quality or rank (*theios*), but actual God (*theos*). Then the Evangelist goes on to claim that this pre-existent Word entered human history in Jesus. There we have already a belief in a "binity," or twofoldness, in the Godhead. Nor was that peculiar to the Fourth Gospel. Paul had told the Philippians (2: 5-11) that it was One who had enjoyed divine dignity who laid aside His high estate and took upon Himself the nature of a humble servant; and in Colossians 1: 15ff. he claims He was prior to all things in the universe and holds all things together, *i.e.* gives meaning to the cosmos. So the author of Hebrews saw Him as One from whom flashed forth the character and reality of God. Evidently before the end of the first century Christians had placed their Lord alongside the One God of the Hebrew faith.

The Greek mind could not rest content with misty outlines of

doctrine: it demanded sharper definition. If the Spirit had come to take the place of Jesus (John 16: 7ff.), then what was the relation of that Spirit to God and to Christ? The Greek mind was bold: it did not turn aside from analyzing even the divine nature, but for centuries kept on debating and formulating. False doctrine was all the time compelling the Church to clarify her creed. Jews and philosophers could not be allowed to scoff at Christians as believers in three Gods. When the practical Romans took up the debate, they introduced new terms, and these terms did not exactly translate the Greek. The Greeks had striven to make clear that there was one Being (*ousia*) of God, but within that being were three underlying realities (*hypostasis*). The Romans used the word *persona* for *hypostasis*. What they meant was that the three members of the Godhead were persons in the sense that, as the Scriptures show in passages of colloquy, it is possible for a man to have personal relations with each of them. But *persona* was an unfortunate word in that it could mean the part played by an actor, a rôle instead of a personality: it was thus easier to think of Jesus as but a phase or attribute of the divine. Our translation "person" suggests to modern ears the modern sense of personality, and so we tend to think of the Trinity as implying three separate centres of consciousness. We mean by the term something "less definite indeed than our modern 'person,' but more definite than 'aspect' or 'attribute'; it holds an intermediate place between 'individual' on the one hand and 'emanation' or 'influence' on the other."⁴ Human analogies have been brought forward to elucidate the mystery. Augustine suggested that "when the mind knows itself and loves itself, there remains a trinity—mind, love and knowledge. . . . These three are one, and one substance." Or, again, memory, understanding, and will: "These three are one, in that they are one life, one mind, one essence." Again, there is the analogy of love in which there are three—the lover, the beloved, the love that binds. Modern thinkers have argued from the constitution of society. The mind of a society is a real will capable of initiating action and affecting human life: it may be reckoned "on its spiritual side as an individual in a completer degree than the members who constitute it . . . the social mind is, in some sense, a reality which transcends the individuals, though

⁴ K. E. Kirk, *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, ed. A. E. J. Rawlinson, p. 164f.

having no existence apart from them."⁵ So in the Godhead there is a society of Father, Son, and Spirit, and yet one real mind over and above all.

These analogies all leave us with a sense of incompleteness, and by their very failure they remind us that here is a mystery that baffles human thought and outreaches human experience. Why should we expect to achieve clarity here? Is this world of ours easily intelligible? Is it not an unsolved riddle? Surely then the Creator of that universe is still farther above the limitations of the human mind.

The absorbing feature of the history of this doctrine is that herein we see the Spirit at work guiding men from grave errors at critical points of the human story. When it was insisted that the Christ was no mere emanation of the divine, but very God, that was like the shadow of a great rock in a weary land of fear. In days when men believed in a multiplicity of angelic powers presiding over the planets, evil powers into whose control you might be delivered by your birth in a certain month, it was a grand message of assurance to be told that high over all malign powers on the very platform of God sat the One who had made Himself known as the friend of frail struggling men. Again, over against the thought of God in Greek philosophy as remote and aloof, it had to be stressed that the Christian God has entered decisively into history in Jesus of Nazareth, and He is known in the Son of Man's activities and self-giving for what He really is: God acted and still acts because He does care for man, whereas the Greek could not sing

There is no place where earth's sorrows
Are more felt than up in—Olympus!

There have been times in human history when the philosopher has sought to remove the historical landmarks of Christianity. It is reckoned an offence that God should enter history at a particular moment of time, and attempts have been made to reduce Jesus to a teacher and His legacy to a beautiful but impractical idealism. Against such a dissolution of the historic Gospel into a nebulous philosophy the doctrine of the Trinity has affirmed that Jesus was no mere fleeting human figure, but One in whom God Himself came to visit and redeem His people. Moreover, the teaching of

⁵ W. R. Matthews, *God in Christian Thought and Experience*, p. 196ff.

Jesus is not just a series of sayings like the Sermon on the Mount, a closed book of the long ago; it is rather the opening pages of the revelation of God and Judgment that is having fresh chapters written on living souls by the person of the Spirit of God.

The doctrine does not teach that there are three Gods, or three manifestations of God, or three attributes merely made known at different times. Our assertion is that we deal always with God in His wholeness. There is not "a more and a less in the Godness of God," as Barth expresses it. Or, again, "He can be our God, because He is equal to Himself in all His modes of existence, is one and the same Lord." We are misled when we set the inexorable Judge over against the gentle Jesus or picture His Justice as in conflict with His Love. We are confronted by one Person in the fullness of His nature. When Christ touches a man, that is not just God acting on His merciful side. When Christ touches a man, He judges just as He pities. When the woman taken in adultery appears before Him, He does not express His whole mind in the words "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more." There is the atmosphere created by His embarrassed writing on the ground, His challenge, "Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone." There is the piercing look, the flash of the eye, the indefinable quality that hung about the whole man, as his contemporaries testify. What appears there is not just a side or phase of Christ or a partial glimpse of the divine. There is there the sense of a Presence real and indivisible. And when we speak of a Person in the Trinity we mean not less than very God, not a mere ray from a distant sun or the faint echo of a far-off voice, but

God's presence, and His very Self,
And essence all-divine.