

One God in Three Persons (SC 5 and 6)

Matthew 3:13-17

March 30, 2008

- I. The Mystery of the Trinity
 - A. Struggles in the early church
 1. Early church fathers offered no clear statement of the Trinity
 - a. Tertullian – first to speak of the tri-personality of God yet maintain the unity of substance
 - b. Origen – first to speak of the eternal generation of the Son, but taught that Christ was subordinate to the Son in essence
 2. Augustine, responding to a boy who wanted to empty the sea into a hole in the sand: “Am I not trying to do the same thing as this child, in seeking to exhaust with my reason the infinity of God and to collect it within the limits of my own mind?”
 3. even speaking of three persons creates confusion, because persons are individuals with their own being and identity
 - B. Problematic formulations of the Trinity in the early church
 1. Socinians (forerunners of Unitarians and Modernists) – God the Father, Jesus Christ the man, the Spirit as divine influence – one in being and in person
 2. Modalistic monarchianism
 - a. goal: maintain the full divinity of Christ
 - b. three persons = modes in which the one God reveals himself
 3. Dynamic monarchianism (dynamic = power)
 - a. goal: maintain the unity of one triune God
 - b. the Son and the Spirit – impersonal powers existing in the one true God
 4. Arius and Arianism – the ultimate dynamic monarchianism
 - a. God could not involve himself with creatures, because he is so exalted and so transcendent
 - b. He created another person – greater than us, but lesser than God – to accomplish salvation
 - c. Christ the firstborn of all creation → not eternal, but created before and above men and women
 5. Alexander and Athanasius – defend the church against the errors of Arius
 - a. stress the unity of God – no division or separation in essential being
 - b. but three distinct persons
 - c. Why important? God must involve himself with creatures in order to save us – communion and union with God only possible if God personally unites us to himself
- II. The Doctrine of the Trinity
 - A. The doctrine summarized
 1. There is one God (Dt. 6:4; Shorter Catechism 5)
 2. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God (Mt. 28:19; SC 6)
 3. Each of these persons is distinct from the others (Matt. 3:13-17)
 - B. The Baptism of Jesus and the Trinity
 1. one of the only events recorded in all four gospels
 2. the first clear revelation of the Trinity – seen in seed form at Creation and in the Old Testament – but seen clearly for the first time at this baptism event
 3. sets the pattern for the baptismal formula

4. establishes for us the personal relationships between the three persons
- C. The Relationship of Father to Son (v. 17)
1. not a subordination in substance (Phil. 2:6; Jn. 10:30)
 2. but while equal in power and glory, the Son is not the Father
 3. this difference is born out in their relationship
 - a. look at the blessing of the Father – the Son’s job to please the Father, not the other way around
 - b. in his work, the Son submits to the will of the Father
John 6:37-38 ³⁷ *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.* ³⁸ *For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.*
- D. The Relationship of the Spirit to the Son (v. 16)
1. the Spirit serves and supports the Son – the Spirit of Truth will bear witness about me (John 15:26)
 2. the Son needs the anointing of the Spirit
 - a. the Spirit descends like a dove and rests on the Son
 - b. immediate evidence of that relationship (Matt. 4:1)
 - c. but Luke more clearly emphasizes the continued anointing power of the Spirit
 - i. Luke 4:1 – not simply led by the Spirit, but full of the Spirit
 - ii. Luke 4:14 – following the temptation, Jesus returns to Galilee to begin his ministry in the power of the Spirit
 3. The Spirit sustains and strengthens the Son in his work of redemption
 4. foreshadows the Spirit’s ongoing redemptive work today – Christ accomplished our redemption, but the Spirit applies that redemption to us, by working faith in us and uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling (SC 29-30)
- E. So what have we learned about the Trinity?
1. There is one God
 2. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Spirit is God
 3. Each of these persons is distinct from the others – and each of these persons present and active in the baptism event
- F. Importance for our understanding of salvation
1. Our redemption accomplished by the triune God, with each person doing their part to bring about our salvation
 2. Redemption satisfies the just wrath of the Father according to the plan which he sets out
 3. The Son, in perfect obedience to the Father, accomplishes that plan of redemption
 4. And his (the Son’s) perfect fulfillment of that plan requires him to be fully God in order to fully reconcile us to God
 5. The Spirit applies that salvation to us through the recreative power only available to the one true God
 6. The triune God accomplishes our salvation by the will of the Father, in the saving activity of the Son, through the powerful working of the Spirit