

The 1689 Confession of Faith; Chapter 2, Paragraph 3 – “Of God and the Holy Trinity”, Message #50 – “God’s Attributes and His Essence Equated”, Presented in the Adult Sunday School Class by Pastor Paul Rendall, on September 20th, 2020.

Paragraph 3 – In this divine and infinite Being there are three subsistences, d) the Father, the Word or Son, and Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence, e) yet the essence undivided: the Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is f) eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit g) proceeding from the Father and the Son; all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being, but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations; which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him.

d) 1st John 5: 7; Matthew 28: 19; 2nd Corinthians 13: 14; e) Exodus 3: 14; John 14: 11;

1st Corinthians 8:6; f)John 1:14,18; g)John 15:26; Gal 4: 6)

We are continuing the study of our God as being one God, undivided in His Essence and Being, even though there are three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, all subsisting together in this Divine Essence. Each of these 3 Persons has, as our Confession states, the whole Divine Essence, yet that Essence is undivided. Last Sunday we saw that God in His nature is a Spirit existing as pure and Perfect Light. His Essence, it says here in Paragraph 3, is distinguished by several peculiar relative properties. These properties or perfections are what we as Christians generally understand as His attributes. The relative properties which are distinguished in God are His Attributes. They are equated with each other in His Essence because God is One God, but they for our sakes, because we are finite in our understanding, must be distinguished from each other if we are even to begin to comprehend what our God is like.

Turretin’s preliminary propositions on – “Can the Divine Attributes be really distinguished from the Divine Essence?”

In attempting to address this point I am going to follow Francis Turretin’s Systematic Theology. He puts it this way in the Fifth Question in his Third Topic – The One and Triune God. (P. 187-189, Vol. 1) – “Can the Divine Attributes be really distinguished from the Divine Essence?”

Proposition 1. “To understand the question, certain things must be premised concerning the Divine Attributes. The Divine Attributes are essential properties by which He makes Himself known to us who are weak and those by which He is distinguished from creatures; or they are those which are attributed to Him according to the measure of our conception in order to explain His nature.”

Proposition 2. “Attributes are not ascribed to God properly as something superadded to His Essence (something accidental to the subject), making it perfect and really distinct from Himself; but..... they indicate perfections essential the Divine Nature conceived by us as properties.

Proposition 3. “Although the several attributes represent the most fertile and simple nature of God, yet they can represent it only inadequately (that is, not according to its total relation, but now under this perfection, then under another). For what we cannot take in by one adequate conception as being finite, we divide into various inadequate conceptions so as to obtain some knowledge of Him (which is not error in the intellect, but only of imperfection.) Thus omnipotence is the Divine Essence itself apprehended as free from every obstacle in acting; eternity is the Essence of God as without limit in duration; and so of the rest.”

Proposition 7. “The Attributes of God cannot really differ from His Essence or from one another (as one thing from another) because God is most simple and perfect. Now a real distinction presupposes things diverse in Essence which the highest simplicity rejects. Things really diverse can become one only by aggregation (which is opposed to absolute perfection). Again, if they differed really, the Essence would be made perfect by something really distinct from itself and so could not be in itself most perfect. Third, it would follow that God is not therefore immutable because He would have in Himself passive potency (the root of mutability) by which the Attributes might either be elicited from the Essence or added to it. But since God is the first and independent Being (which is whatever can be) nothing can be added to or taken away from Him.”

Proposition 8. “Yet that the Attributes of God differ both in His Essence and mutually from one another is evident from the diversity of conceptions. For where there is ground for founding distinct formal conceptions of anything (although one and simple in itself considered), there we must necessarily grant virtual and eminent distinction. Since therefore in the most simple Divine Essence there is ground from forming diverse formal conceptions concerning the Divine Perfections (which is evident from their distinct definition and explanation), it is best to say that these Attributes giving rise to such conceptions are virtually to be distinguished both from the Essence and from each other.”

Proposition 11. “Attributes may be mutually predicated of each other in an identical sense inasmuch as they may be considered as having unity and identity with each other (as when I say the Divine Intellect is the same thing with His will, or His Justice is the same thing with His Mercy.). However this is not the case in the formal sense because they are formally distinguished in our conceptions and by their objects (so that I cannot say Justice is Mercy because the formal conception of Justice differs from the formal conception of Mercy).”

Proposition 16. “The definition of thing in itself differs from our conceptions of that thing. The former, not the latter, argues a real distinction. Now the definitions of the Divine properties are rather of our conceptions (conceiving God under this or that relation) than of the things itself (which is one and most simple).”

This One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is to be equated with His Attributes, and not understood by us as consisting in parts.

I personally believe that these propositions of Turretin accurately represent the Biblical truth about the doctrine of God. For us who are finite beings, weak in our conception, to be able to comprehend God's essence is impossible. We must see Him as incomprehensible, but we must also see Him as He has revealed Himself and His Attributes in His word, as having these essential

1. Let's look first at one of the Essential Properties or Attributes of God, that the He is Love.

1st John 4: 7-11 – “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” “In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.” “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

Also, verse 16 – “And we have known and believed the love that God has for us.” “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.”

What wonderful verses these! John first gives us the practical application of exhorting us to love one another, because Christian love is of God; that is, it is from Him directly poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. Love is the lead and primary gift of the Spirit, produced by the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and we exhibit love as a fruit of the Spirit. Everyone who loves with this special grace, other brethren and other people, is born of God and knows God. He who does not love (that is, as it is defined in 1st Corinthians 13) does not know God. And then this explanation – “For God is love”. That is, God is love in His holy Essence and Being.