



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

"How can God be three in one?"

I must confess that I do not know *how* God can be three in one. Similarly, I do not know *how* the Holy Spirit can in-dwell millions of Christians at one and the same time. But I *do* know that God in His nature can be Omnipotent, Omnipresent, and Omniscient, and it is from this standpoint that we must proceed so that we can trace the *manifestations* of God as His Word reveals them.

Necessity for Explanation

The controversy over the nature of the Godhead has raged from the first century A.D. even to now, so we need to be very careful of what we say, and this necessitates saying only those things for which there is Scriptural warrant, and which do not rely on speculation or spiritualisation, i.e., let us stick to the facts as they are presented to us.

There seems to be no doubt at all that before the Incarnation of the Lord there was a strong monotheistic inheritance which had been carried over from the Old Testament; this is embodied in the Credo given in Deuteronomy, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4). After the Incarnation of Christ, and with the advent of the Holy Spirit, there was a necessity for a radically changed viewpoint. Many of the Jews, of course, were still rooted firmly in the traditions of their Old Testament Fathers, and could not accept Jesus as Messiah. But to the Greco-Roman world explanations of otherwise incomprehensible phenomena (to them) had to be given, and we are indebted to the Apostles Paul and John for precise statements concerning what we know today as the teaching relating to the Godhead; some would refer to this as the Doctrine of the Trinity, but there is no Scriptural warrant for this term which is a purely theological term, and is not found anywhere in the Bible. The name 'Trinity' is applied to the peculiarly Christian idea of the Godhead, in which, within the unity of the Godhead, three distinct 'persons' are identified.

Modalism

This doctrine, taught by some in the early days of Christianity, needs a little explanation so that we know what it means. Maybe some people still subscribe to it today.

Modalism represents the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three *modes* of the self-disclosure of God. They are not as *distinct* within the being of God. Therefore, this doctrine teaches that God came to earth merely in a different mode; i.e., in a different manner or fashion when He came as Christ and as the Holy Spirit. Now you will understand that this doctrine precludes the idea of Jesus being the Only Begotten Son, and denies the distinct Personality of the Holy Spirit. So Modalism does not offer an adequate explanation of what the Apostles term the Godhead, indeed, the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) stated what was to become a crucial formula, i.e., the Son is "of the same essence as the Father", but the statement said little about the Holy Spirit.

The Divine Unity

When we speak about the Divine Unity we are not referring to mere temporal manifestations or modes, nor are we thinking in terms of three Gods (Tritheism); the Bible nowhere teaches this. As a matter of fact, Paul says in his first letter to Corinth, "As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice to idols, we know that the idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth (as there be gods many, and lords many), But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus, by whom are all things, and we by him" (1 Cor. 8:4-6). Similarly James, "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well, the devils also believe, and tremble" (James 2:19). In view of these two statements, we cannot look upon Jesus as a 'person' with a separate independent existence, but we see Him in the Divine essence of the Godhood, the essential Personality of God Himself; in Him, says Paul, "dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9).

The phrase 'the fulness of God' is an interesting one. The Bible asserts quite definitely that there is One God, so whatever is in the Divine nature of the One God must also be present in what comprises the Godhead. Now we know that Paul has stated that in Jesus all the 'fulness' of the Godhead dwelt bodily, i.e., corporeally, which according to the word used in Col. 2:9 means tangibly, visibly, physically. Furthermore, in his Ephesian letter Paul states, "And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God" (Eph 3:19). Therefore, to be filled with Christ means to be filled with the fulness of God. Christ dwells in our hearts by faith; the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our lives when we become God's children; God is our Father, and underneath are the Everlasting arms. When we know Christ, we know God in the completeness of His Being, for, says Paul, "it pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell" (Col. 1:19).

If the foregoing is true, which it undoubtedly is, then we ought to be able to find the perfect co-ordination of the Godhead relative to the most important aspect of Divine Revelation, i.e. Salvation, and indeed we do. In what the Church knows as the Great Commission we have Christ saying to His Apostles, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:18-20). Also, in invoking a Benediction on the saints at Corinth, Paul says, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen" (2 Cor. 13:14).

The Only Begotten Son

What sort of glory did John and his fellow-Apostles see when they say Jesus? John says, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (John 1:14 A.V.) The Englishman's Greek New Testament renders part of that verse as 'a glory as of an only begotten *with* a Father'. The Greek word PARA, which means 'with' or 'from', indicates that John is not making earthly comparisons but stating the unique, eternal relationship which the Son had with the Father before the foundation of the world. There are some people who think that Jesus was merely a man who became the Son of God at His Incarnation. Nothing, according to the Word, could be further from the truth. John goes on, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom

of the Father, he hath declared Him" (1:18). This expresses the eternal and essential relationship which Jesus had in the Godhead with His Father. Surely we do a grave injustice to the Lord when we look upon Him as a subordinated and down-graded Christ of God. God sent no angel to this earth, but His Only Begotten Son in Whom resided all the fulness of the Godhead.

The Holy Spirit

The Personality of the Holy Spirit is testified to by John also. In John 14:26 we read, "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you". It is interesting to note the interplay of essentiality in the Godhead by what Jesus said, "But when the Comforter is come, whom *I* will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me" (15:26). Spiritual fulness satisfies our deepest needs. The fulness of God is as much applicable to the Holy Spirit as it is to Christ. He will see to it that we get all we need for the true consummation of our new life in Christ Jesus, as Paul put it, "For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding" (Col. 1:9).

Yes, the Holy Spirit fills this part of the work of the Godhead in teaching, guiding, spiritually motivating, and leading us into wisdom and spiritual understanding.

Summary

What, then, have we learned? Well, we know that there is One God and not three. We also know that the Son and the Holy Spirit are not merely *modes* of the self-disclosure of God, but that even in the One God they have distinct Personalities and are of the essential Personality of God Himself. We know that the Godhead expresses the Eternal Will of God Himself, and that through and by the Son and the Holy Spirit we know God in the completeness of His Being. We know that all of this is for our Salvation and eternal well-being. And wonder of wonders, we know that the child of God becomes a *partaker* of the Divine Nature. Is there more that we need?