

# **Semănătorul (The Sower)**

## **The Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research**

### **Volume 3, Number 1.**

Articles published by the Faculty of Theology in Emanuel  
University of Oradea, and International Contributors,  
October 2022.

Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania

# **The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity in Reformed Theology**

Dinu Moga<sup>1</sup>

## **ABSTRACT**

Reformed Theology is concerned with the worship of a Triune God who created all things and who made Himself known in Jesus Christ and who, as the Holy Spirit, is the Lord and the Giver of life.

Discussing the doctrine of the Trinity more recent scholars have shown that the importance of this doctrine in Reformed theology will be understood better when we look at it, not in an isolated position to what was going on in the theological camps before the Reformation, but as a part of a theological tradition which precedes the Reformation and even the Middle Ages. Recent scholarship on the sixteenth century, while not blind to important areas of discontinuity, has brought attention to the important continuities that exist between Reformation thought and the patristic and medieval intellectual background.

We conclude that the confession of the Trinity is the sum of the Christian religion. Without it neither the creation nor the redemption nor sanctification can be purely maintained. Every departure from this confession leads to error in the other heads of doctrine. We can truly proclaim the mighty works of God only when we recognize and confess them as the one great work of Father, Son, and Spirit.

## **KEY WORDS**

Reformed theology, tradition, the doctrine of the Trinity, Council of Nicea, Biblical revelation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADITION IN REFORMED THEOLOGY**

It is appropriate to start with a brief discussion about the concept of tradition in Reformed theology. This is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, during the history of the Christian church the appeal to tradition has always played an

---

<sup>1</sup>DINU MOGA (MTh in Historical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2005; PhD in Theology, Babeş-Bolyai University, 2015) teaches Dogmatic Theology at Emanuel University of Oradea. E-mail: moga.dinu@emanuel.ro.

important part in its approach to false teachings. During the church's challenges from various movements, the word 'tradition' (Latin, *traditio*) came to mean 'a traditional interpretation of Scripture or 'a traditional presentation of the Christian faith'<sup>2</sup>. At the time of the early church the traditional presentation of the Christian faith has been reflected in the creeds of the church and its public doctrinal pronouncements which had found their expression in the canonical books of Scripture. The Reformed tradition is a continuation of that approach to Scripture. The reformers have seen tradition as a legacy from the Apostles, by which the church was guided and directed towards a correct interpretation of Scripture.

Secondly, according to a historian the study of tradition is also important for a consideration of the works and the spiritual thinking of various believing people prior to the Reformation period. Many evangelical believers tend to think that the Reformed doctrines started with the moment when Luther has nailed up his 95 theses. All these Christians see in the history of the church prior to this time total darkness, but, as the historian continues to explain, God has always had, and will always have, an uninterrupted succession of believing people on earth.<sup>3</sup> In order to support his argument, the same historian continues to show that the Reformation itself was nurtured in the bosom of medieval Rome and that the great spiritual and theological movement set rolling by Luther and Zwingli was in fact 'the best element of Western medieval Christianity trying to correct the worst elements'.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, the fact that the greatest doctrines of Reformed theology were formulated and presented best during the Reformation has not been due to the fact that those truths were completely absent from the thinking of various men from a more darker period of time, but it was due to the insistence of this tradition that every Christian should be a responsible theologian who can speak intelligibly about the faith. Such an insistence has been determined by the word of the Bible where Jesus Himself, and after Him His apostles, has urged the believers to 'love the Lord with all their mind' (Matthew 22:37) The Apostle Peter has urged his readers to be always prepared 'to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you' (1 Peter 3:15).

---

<sup>2</sup> John H. Leith offers a more detailed discussion about tradition in *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1978), pp. 67-83. Cf. also Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 29ff.

<sup>3</sup> N. R. Needham, *2000 years of Christ's Power*, Part II: The Middle Ages (London: Grace Publications, 2000), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

These verses urged them to reflect, to meditate and then explain and present our Christian faith. Later the reformers argued, like Tertullian, that Scripture is capable of being understood clearly, provided that it is read as a whole. The right interpretation of Scripture was to be found where true Christian faith and discipline had been maintained. One of the ethos of the Reformed tradition was exactly the maintaining of a disciplined life in the study of God's Word and the practical living of the Christian life. Calvin has been the man who stood out not only in his personal achievements, but also in his insistence that discipline should characterize the Christian life and community.<sup>5</sup>

## THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY AND THE REFORMED TRADITION

One of the characteristics of the Reformed tradition was its interest in a theocentric theology. In other words, Reformed Theology is concerned with the worship of a Triune God who created all things and who made Himself known in Jesus Christ and who, as the Holy Spirit, is the Lord and the Giver of life.<sup>6</sup>

Discussing the doctrine of the Trinity more recent scholars have shown that the importance of this doctrine in Reformed theology will be understood better when we look at it, not in an isolated position to what was going on in the theological camps before the Reformation, but as a part of a theological tradition which precedes the Reformation and even the Middle Ages. Carl Trueman shows that 'recent scholarship on the sixteenth century, while not blind to important areas of discontinuity, has brought attention to the important continuities that exists between Reformation thought and the patristic and medieval intellectual background'.<sup>7</sup> It has been pointed out that 'every mainstream Christian body—including the Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran Reformed and Roman Catholic churches—regards the patristic period as a definitive landmark in the development of Christian doctrine. Each of these churches regard themselves as continuing, extending and where necessary, criticizing the views of the early church writers.'<sup>8</sup> As we shall see later, reformed thinkers like Calvin and Owen, Turretin and Bavinck were working their Trinitarian views, in terms set by

---

<sup>5</sup> For more on Calvin's view on discipline see Leith, *op. cit.*, p. 82-83.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> Carl. R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth, John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), pp. 9-10ff. Trueman makes an important reference to the scholarly work of Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), whose emphasis falls on the 'need to interpret individual theologians as existing and working within established traditions (exegetical, doctrinal, philosophical, etc.), and to understand specific formulations of doctrine historically rather than dogmatically' and continues to present a valuable account for the need to set theological development within the broad intellectual tradition.

<sup>8</sup> McGrath, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

classic Trinitarian and Christological formulations of the early church. Their attempt was to work out the implications of Reformed theology ‘in terms set by classic Trinitarian and Christological formulations of the early church’.<sup>9</sup>

However, Trueman maintains that it needs to be said that in their use of the classic formulation they did not attempt to imply that these writings had any ultimate normative authority for them. These were important only because they faithfully reflected the position of the Scriptures themselves. In John Owen’s case, Trueman explains that while the words of Scripture were the ultimate norm of his theology, the great human formulations of the faith were regarded as useful to provide ‘a working doctrinal framework within which the theological task of scriptural interpretation can take place’.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore John Owen has proved extremely well a tremendous capacity to use various elements of the theological tradition prior to him in order to defend Reformed theology against the heretical attacks launched against the truth of the Scripture. An extremely helpful summary of the way in which Reformed theology sought to defend itself against the assaults of Arminianism and Socinianism is offered by Carl Trueman in his book on Owen’s Trinitarian Theology, where he asserts:

Reformed Orthodoxy in general engaged in an intensive restatement of the orthodox, patristic roots of its theology while also pressing forward to an extensive reappropriation of the technical language of medieval and Renaissance Scholasticism in order to give its theological formulations the rigorous precision needed to distinguish itself from the tenets of Arminianism and Socinianism.<sup>11</sup>

A similar approach is noticeable much earlier in the writings of John Calvin. When Calvin’s attitude to the doctrines of the early church is considered, it is concluded that Calvin regarded himself as ‘a hearer of the Word who belongs to the multitude of those who have interpreted Scripture before him’.<sup>12</sup> Thus Calvin has established his doctrine of the Trinity in connexion with the witness of the early church. He expresses his appreciations for the ‘men of old’ who, ‘stirred up by various struggles over depraved dogmas, were compelled to set forth with

---

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed presentation of Owen roots in western tradition see Trueman, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), pp. 54ff.

consummate clarity what they felt, lest they leave any devious shift to the impious, who cloaked their errors in layers of verbiage'.<sup>13</sup>

Commenting on the way in which Calvin has organised his various editions of the *Institutes* the editor Hugh T. Kerr shows that the organising principle for the last edition 'was simply the Apostles' Creed'.<sup>14</sup> In support to his argument, he draws attention to the fact that as the Apostles' Creed contains four major articles—God, Christ, Holy Spirit, Church—so Calvin's *Institutes* is divided into four corresponding books. For Calvin the Holy Scripture alone is authoritative. However, he acknowledges that nothing should hinder him to use words that express truth to which the Bible bears witness. When he addresses 'heretics' who have condemned him for using 'foreign terms fashioned by the human mind', Calvin answers by making a distinction between what can be rightly or wrongly called 'foreign'. Thus he says:

If they call a foreign word one that can not be shown to stand written syllable by syllable in Scripture, they are indeed imposing upon us an unjust law which condemns all interpretations not patched together out of the fabric of Scripture. But if that is 'foreign' which has been curiously devised and is superstitiously defended, which conduces more to contention than to edification, which is made use of either unseasonably or fruitlessly, which by its harshness offends pious ears, which detracts from simplicity of God's Word—I wholeheartedly embrace their soberness.<sup>15</sup>

By making these assertions Calvin and others reformers justify their right to take over from the early church fathers the doctrine of the Trinity with all the theological equipment which accompanied it.<sup>16</sup>

It is important, therefore, to underline the fact that all Reformed theologians have given sufficient proofs of their intellectual abilities to expound and make use of what has been produced before them by the early church and medieval theologians. Each one of them spoke for their time and addressed new questions which the patristic authors did not encounter in the same way. Calvin, Owen and others after them, in full awareness, proved a tremendous capacity to make use

---

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 1, Book 1, Ch. XIII, 4 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 124-125. We shall abbreviate reference to this work simply by citing the standard three-part reference to the *Institutes* followed by the page number.

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *A Compend of the Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. Hugh T. Kerr (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. vi.

<sup>15</sup> *Institutes* I, Ch. XIII, 3, p. 124.

<sup>16</sup> For the use of words 'trinity' or 'person' see Calvin, *Institutes* I, Ch. XIII, 19, p. 144.

of the ideas contained in these theological principles, but expanded and brought them to a different level of refinement, while at the same time they exhorted us to seek from Scripture a sure rule for both thinking and speaking, to which both the thoughts of our minds and the words of our mouths should be conformed.<sup>17</sup>

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Before we discuss further the importance of this doctrine in Reformed Theology, it is important that we should reflect briefly upon the way in which the doctrine of the Trinity has been discussed in the history of the church. We won't be able to get into all the historical details, as this is not the purpose of this essay, but we shall attempt to follow broadly the way in which events took place in relation to this doctrine and the errors these events produced.

The doctrine of the Trinity has not been greatly discussed by the early Church Fathers. In Berkhof's historical presentation it is shown that until the time of Tertullian, Christ, or Logos, has been conceived by some as impersonal reason, while others regarded Him as personal and co-eternal with the Father, sharing the divine essence, and yet ascribing to him a certain subordination to the Father.<sup>18</sup> The Holy Spirit has occupied no important place in their discussions at all. Some considered him to be subordinate, not only to the Father, but also to the Son.<sup>19</sup> Other represented Him a divine influence or a mode of manifestation assumed by the Godhead. The fatal errors of Modalism and Subordinationism consist in the fact that they deny the personal relationship within the Trinity, the mediatorial work of the Son or the Holy Spirit and therefore ultimately lose the heart of the doctrine of the atonement.<sup>20</sup>

Tertullian was the first to use the word 'Trinity' when he wrote his most significant theological writing *Against Praxeas*.<sup>21</sup> But the way in which he formulated his Trinitarian doctrine was wrong as it involved an unwarranted subordination of the Son to the Father. The doctrine of the Trinity came to the fore for the first time in the Trinitarian controversy between Arius (c.250-c.336)

---

<sup>17</sup> *Institutes* I, Ch. XIII, 3, p. 124.

<sup>18</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1963), p. 82.

<sup>19</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 245.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 242-245.

<sup>21</sup> More details on Tertullian are offered by Needham, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-130.

and Athanasius.<sup>22</sup> Arianism held that the Father alone was the eternal and true God, because He alone, in the full sense of the word, was ungenerated. Concerning the Son, the Logos, who had become flesh in Christ, Arius taught that, inasmuch as this Christ was generated, He could not be God but had to be a creature—a creature, it is true, who had been made before other creatures, but nevertheless was made as they were made through the will of God. And in the same way, Arius, held that the Holy Spirit was a creature or else a quality or attribute of God.

This teaching was nontrinitarian and ultimately destructive to the whole Christian faith. If Arian heresy is accepted, it means that Christ could not redeem fallen humanity. The Arian controversy—also called ‘the great trinitarian strife’<sup>23</sup> or ‘the greatest theological controversy in the history of Christianity’<sup>24</sup>, of the fourth century has been opposed first of all by his own bishop, Alexander, who contended for the true deity of Christ, but subsequently received a hostile response from Athanasius, who argued that the divinity of Christ was of central importance to the Christian understanding of salvation. He maintained that to regard Christ a creature was to deny that faith in Him brings man into saving union with God. He strongly emphasised the unity of God and insisted on a construction of the doctrine of the trinity that would not endanger this unity. But while stressing the unity of God, Athanasius also recognized three distinct hypostases in God. According to him the unity of God as well as the distinctions in His Being are best expressed in the term ‘oneness of essence’.<sup>25</sup>

His fundamental position stated that union with God is necessary unto salvation and that no creature but only one who is Himself God can unite us with God. Athanasius argued that the only possible solution is to accept Jesus as God incarnate. The logic of his argument would be that no creature can redeem another creature. If, according to Arius, Jesus Christ is a creature, Jesus Christ can not redeem humanity. Or to put it in another way, Athanasius argued that only God can save and if Jesus saves it means that Jesus is God.

When Constantine conquered the Eastern half of the Roman Empire in 324 A.D., he found the Eastern church divided by this controversy. In 325 A.D. Constantine called together the Council of Nicea in order to sort out the

---

<sup>22</sup> Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 87-91. Other details regarding the controversy and the events which led to the Council of Nicaea are also offered by N. Needham, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-212. Cf. also Grudem, *op. cit.*, pp. 243-244.

<sup>23</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Needham, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>25</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 90.



Christological disagreements. The council settled the Arian controversy affirming that Jesus was *homoousios* (one in being or of one substance) with the Father, thus rejecting the Arian position and asserting the divinity of Christ.

Although the Council of Nicea seemed to have settled the Arian controversy and restored unity and peace to the Eastern Church, this appearance was deceptive. The Eastern Church was divided into three parties. Besides the Arian and Athanasian contending parties there was a third party called the *Origenist* party which accepted the traditional Eastern theology of Origen. Although at the Council of Nicea they have accepted the word *homoousios*, later they had serious doubts about its use due to the fear that it would open the door to Sabellianism. Sabellianism, or Modalism, held that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were but three names for one and the same God—a God who had made Himself known thus successively as His revelation progressed in various forms and manifestations. Thus, we see that while Arianism tries to maintain the oneness of God by placing Son and Spirit outside the Divine being and reducing these to the level of creatures, Sabellianism tries to arrive at the same end by robbing the three persons of the Godhead of their independence. This is done by metamorphosing the persons into three successive modes of revelation of the same Divine being.

Therefore, they came up with the suggestion that the word *homoousios* be replaced by the word *homoiousios*, so as to teach that the Son is *of a similar substance* with the Father not *the same substance*. This meant that the Son, although uncreated and divine, was inferior to the Father in His divine nature.

From here onwards we see how two distinctive approaches gradually emerged. The Origenist party formed the majority in the East and has continued to hold an important position within the Orthodox churches today. This position was developed by a group of three writers: Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379), Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389), and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-395), known as the *Cappadocian fathers*. The West, however, took a different view and was loyal to the Council of Nicea. They developed a type of theology that was more in harmony with the views of Athanasius.<sup>26</sup>

The Cappadocians also settled the dispute about whether the Holy Spirit was God. Up to this time the Holy Spirit has not come into serious consideration. In 358 A.D. Athanasius had already argued that the Holy Spirit must be recognised as God alongside Father and Son, but it was the Cappadocians that carried this argument further, strengthened it, and laid the basis for extending the term

---

<sup>26</sup> A more detailed account of the two positions is presented in A. McGrath, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-72 and Berkhof, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-97.

*homoousios* to the Holy Spirit. In 381 A.D. the general Council of Constantinople met and under the guidance of Gregory of Nazianzus declared its approval of the Nicene Creed and affirmed the deity of the Holy Spirit. To express the doctrine of the Trinity the Cappadocians came up with the formula: God is three *hypostases* in one *ousia* or God is three *persons* existing eternally in one single *being*.

In the East the final formulation of the doctrine was given by John of Damascus who maintained that there is but one divine essence and three *hypostases*. They are one in every respect, except in their mode of existence. In the West the doctrine of the Trinity reached its final statement in the great work of Augustine, *De Trinitate*. He too stressed the unity of essence and the Trinity of persons. But Augustine defined God's unity or oneness in terms of the divine essence shared fully and equally by the three persons of the Trinity. This was in contrast to the Eastern view, which located God's unity or oneness in the person of the Father. The difference between the Eastern and the Western view of the Trinity is important, because it lays the theological basis on which the Eastern and Western branches of the Church finally split up into two separate Churches with very different traditions of theology and spirituality.

We notice, therefore, that what had started as a dispute about the status of Christ finally became a search for a full doctrine of the Trinity.

Latter theology did not add materially to the doctrine of the Trinity. There were deviations from the truth and consequent restatements of it. When we come to the Reformation period we noted that John Calvin discusses the doctrine of the Trinity at length in his *Institutes* I.13 and defends the doctrine as formulated by the early Church. Although at first he himself avoided them, he defends the use of the terms 'person' and 'trinity', and criticised those who opposed their use. The doctrine of the Trinity, as formulated by the Church, finds expression in all Reformed Confessions, most completely and with the greatest precision in chapter III of the *Second Helvetic Confession*.

Having established this very general historical context, we can move ahead to discuss four representative Reformed theologians. We shall start with John Calvin.

## REPRESENTATIVE REFORMED THEOLOGIANS AND THEIR VIEW ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

*John Calvin (1509-1564)*

John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is the most influential statement of Reformed theology in particular and of Protestant theology in general. When we consider Calvin's writings on the Trinity in his *Institutes*, the first thing we need to draw attention to is the fact that the purpose of Calvin's Trinitarianism is to secure the Biblical message. His *Institutes* represent, in fact, the effort to state the message of the Bible in a coherent and orderly way and in the language of an ordinary discussion.

Calvin writes as a churchman concerned with organisation, preaching, worship and pastoral care. But above all he writes as an exegete of Scripture, something that is well reflected in his exposition on the Trinity. His aim is to defend the Biblical message against the 'great battles' always instigated by Satan in order to 'tear our faith from its very roots'.<sup>27</sup> Calvin sees the problem as being a spiritual battle between the forces of evil and the truth of God's Word. Satan is working in the world through his ungodly spirits who stir up certain persons to fabricate wrong teachings.

According to Calvin's view, an incorrect presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity will directly affect the standing ground of the believer—the message of the Bible. When he proposes resistance to these wrong teachings, Calvin cautions his readers not to let their 'thoughts and speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends'.<sup>28</sup>

At this point we must draw attention to the fact that Calvin's 'great battles'<sup>29</sup> are fought against the writings of Servetus who came up with all sorts of soteriological presuppositions and inferences. So, Calvin writes in order to refute the Christology of Servetus, and his debate turns upon the question of the true Godhead of Jesus Christ. The problem with Servetus is that he presents us, says Calvin, with a 'monstrous fabrication' that 'person' is nothing else than a visible manifestation of the glory of God.<sup>30</sup> For Servetus the second divine being is somehow derivative from God, or a part of the one Godhead, so that God the Father would thus have an additional element.

---

<sup>27</sup> *Institutes* I, Ch. XIII, 21, p. 145.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

For Calvin such an incorrect presentation of this doctrine would result in an overthrow of ‘the whole glory of God’ and is a means through which the uninstructed are brought into a state of alarm and confusion.<sup>31</sup> All these sects, as Calvin calls them, had done nothing else but to tear apart God’s essence and to confuse the distinction that exists between the Persons of the Trinity. Therefore, Calvin sees as being vital, the establishing of a correct representation of the doctrine of the Trinity. For him this is the only way in which the gate can be closed not only to ‘Arius and Sabellius, but to other ancient authors of errors’.<sup>32</sup>

How can we do this, asks Calvin? His answer is by ‘holding fast to what has been sufficiently shown from Scripture: that the essence of the one God is simple and undivided, and that it belongs to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit; and on the other hand that by a certain characteristic the Father differs from the Son, and the Son from the Spirit.’<sup>33</sup> Calvin proceeds to use the Scripture in order to prove what he has just said. Therefore, he sees the divinity of Christ in texts such as John 1:1 where although the Word is said to have been God when the universe was not yet created, John utterly distinguishes the concept of Word from idea. Calvin concludes that if the Word was with God from eternity and had His own glory with the Father (John 17:5), it means that He could not have been an outward or figurative splendour, but of necessity it follows that He was a *hypostasis* that resides in God himself. In Genesis’ narrative Moses presents the Spirit as well, not as a shadow, but as the essential creative power of God. For Calvin this leads to the conclusion that the eternal Spirit had always been in God, while with tender care he supported the confused matter of heaven and earth, until beauty and order were added. Calvin therefore asserts with confidence that the being of God is one.

In conclusion, reading Calvin’s work on the Trinity we realise that his intention is to say that whoever does not pay attention to this doctrine, no matter how often the words of Scripture are in his mouth nor how frequently he speaks of Christ, he is not preaching the incarnate God but emptying the gospel of its specific content.

*John Owen (1616-1683)*

Describing the polemical context in which Owen has been involved, Carl Trueman classifies his opponents in three general categories: Papists, Arminians and Socinians, but shows that from all these three Papists were the least

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>32</sup> Idem.

<sup>33</sup> Idem.

important to Owen.<sup>34</sup> It is concluded therefore that Owen's writings are a direct attack on the doctrines of the Arminians and Socinians.<sup>35</sup> This is not surprising when we take into account the fact that from his early ministry Owen has started to exhibit his father's Puritan convictions and found very difficult to avoid debates over controversial doctrinal matters such as election and predestination which, for him, lay at the very heart of the gospel.<sup>36</sup>

As Calvin before him, Owen charges the Arminians for their 'disputes of carnal reason against the Word of God'.<sup>37</sup> His writings against the Arminians began with the publication of *A Display of Arminianism* in 1642.<sup>38</sup>

When Owen discusses the emphasis they placed on the teaching of Scripture about man, sin, Christ, atonement, salvation, he shows that they deny some of the basic tenets of the faith and therefore must be regarded as heretics. He describes them as 'modern blinded patrons of human self-sufficiency'<sup>39</sup> Reflecting on their doctrines, Owen calls them 'innovations in the received doctrines of the reformed churches' and views them as a direct attack on the doctrine of the Trinity.

In Owen's conflict with the Socinians the main topic of debate is Christology and consubstantiality of the Father and the Son with serious implications on the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>40</sup> To do this they refer to Scripture passages, also quoted by the Arians, which seem to represent the Son as inferior to the Father.<sup>41</sup> Their basic idea is that Christ is not essentially God, but earns his position as Son of God through his work.<sup>42</sup>

In their attacks on the divinity of Christ the Socinians denied His equality with the Father and the possibility of the existence of two substances in one person—

---

<sup>34</sup> Trueman, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Philip Eveson produced a valuable summary of the historical context for John Owen's doctrine of Justification in his paper "The Case for Forensic Justification in John Owen", *Seeing the Lord* (Published by The Westminster Conference, 2000), pp. 28-31.

<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed summary of Owen's Christian life see Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), pp. 1-19. Trueman also shows that Owen engaged specifically with domestic manifestations of Arminianism, particularly the 1651 writings of John Goodwin, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>37</sup> *Works* X, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> John Owen, *The Death of Christ*, vol. X (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), p. 11ff.

<sup>39</sup> *Works* X, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Trueman, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

<sup>41</sup> For a list of the passages used by Arians see Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>42</sup> See Trueman's detailed discussion about the Socinian criticisms of orthodox Christology, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-154.

one human one divine—without any conflict between them. The issue of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son points towards two other important theological issues which Socinians deny: the eternal pre-existence of Christ and the role of Christ in creation.<sup>43</sup> Such attacks were viewed by Owen as attempts to undermine Trinitarianisms, because the denial of the consubstantiality of the Father with the Son led to a denial of the full humanity of Christ and his agency in creation and in the work of redemption.

Therefore, for Owen the defence of the doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely vital. Without a defence of this doctrine a whole range of other doctrines are severely affected. Owen sees the doctrine of the Trinity as being important for a correct understanding of other doctrines, such as the doctrine of God and His providence, the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of the covenants, the doctrine of salvation and the believer's communion with God, to mention just a few. In all these Owen sees that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have their distinctive roles to play. All three Persons of the Trinity work together for the salvation of sinners. These points are foundational in Owen's fight against Socinianism as well as against those with Arminian leanings.<sup>44</sup>

In his work on the doctrine of the Trinity, Owen's first attempt is to defend the doctrine of Christ and he does this in his magisterial work *Vindiciae Evangelicae* (1655). In his writings Owen responds to the attacks against the divinity of Christ and His participation in the work of creation and salvation. In doing this Owen points towards the Trinitarian structure of his soteriology.

His first attempt is to prove the two natures of Jesus Christ subsisting within the one person.<sup>45</sup> In his fight against the Socinian denial of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, Owen shows that such a denial is due to an incorrect usage of human rationality in theological thinking and points to the importance of God's revelation.

One serious effect of the denial of the doctrine of the Trinity by the Arminians is seen in the doctrine of God the Father and His providence. Owen sees that the problems raised by the Arminians focused upon the relationship between God and His creation.

The Arminians questioned the foreknowledge of God and denied the all-governing providence of the King of nations, replacing it with a general power and influence limited and used according to the inclination and will of every

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 157-164.

<sup>44</sup> Eveson, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>45</sup> *Works* XII, pp. 210ff.

particular individual. Thus, Arminians deny the irresistibility and uncontrollable power of God's will, affirming that often God wills and intends what He cannot accomplish. Owen sees that the Arminians' attempt is to free themselves from 'the supreme dominion of His all-ruling providence'<sup>46</sup> so that they can gain their own power in every action. This means that they deny the eternity and the unchangeableness of God's decree. They are doing this because 'they fear they should be kept within bounds from doing any thing but what his counsel hath determined should be done.'<sup>47</sup> When God is eternal and unchangeable, human free will is limited and its independency prejudiced. In order to deny these limitations, they choose to affirm that God's decrees are temporary and changeable.

In his defence of these doctrines against Socinians, Owen shows that in creation as well as in providence the doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely foundational. Carl Trueman draws attention to the fact that in Owen's theology, the Trinity does not have the status of an optional extra, but represent the necessary ontological framework of his entire soteriology.<sup>48</sup> For Owen, both the divine plan of salvation and Christ's work in accomplishing that salvation rest ultimately upon a correct understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Dealing with the importance of the Trinity in creation and salvation Trueman continues to shows that fundamental to Owen's doctrine of God is the traditional idea that all acts of God are acts of the whole God. Within each act, he says, there exists a specific economy in which each person of the Godhead plays a particular part. In creation and in providence the Trinity is absolutely foundational: The Father creates and governs through the Son by the Holy Spirit.<sup>49</sup> Owen explains Trinitarian unity in the act of creation in the following words:

So it is said God made all things; and so of all other works, whether in nature and in grace. And the reason hereof is, because the several persons are undivided in their operations, acting all by the same will, the same wisdom, the same power. Every person, therefore, is the author of every work of God, because each person is God, and the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations; and this ariseth from the unity of the persons in the same essence.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> *Works* X, p. 12.

<sup>47</sup> *Works* X, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Trueman, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>50</sup> *Works* III, p. 93.

He then continues to explain the distinction of this relation and order within the Trinity and then concludes saying that:

The reasons why the works of God are thus distinctly ascribed unto each person is because, in the undivided operation of the divine nature, each person doth the same work in the order of their subsistence; not one as instrument of the other, or merely employed by the other, but as one common principle of authority, wisdom, love and power.<sup>51</sup>

When Owen debates with the Socinians who, consistent with their anti-trinitarianism, ascribe the act of creation to the Father alone, based on Genesis 1:1, he answers again by asserting that ‘the Scripture plentifully ascribes this work also to the Son and the Holy Spirit.’<sup>52</sup> In order to establish the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity in the work of creation, Trueman concludes very effectively saying that ‘God’s external acts may, in one sense be acts of God in unity, but they presuppose the nature of God as Trinity.’<sup>53</sup>

The principle applied in creation is also applied by Owen in salvation. When Owen discusses God’s plan of salvation, he sees it as being ‘the great work of our blessed Trinity’.<sup>54</sup> The accomplishment of salvation is based upon specific, individual roles for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This was possible because within the unity of the Trinity there is the activity of distinct persons which Owen viewed as the result of a ‘transaction’ in eternity between the Father and the Son. At this point the doctrine of the Trinity becomes very important for Owen’s treatment on the Covenant of Redemption, which he thinks is the foundation of the covenant of grace.<sup>55</sup> In salvation the Father sends the Son and lays upon Him the punishment due to our sin. The Son comes into the world to offer Himself up to God for us and to intercede for all those for whom he gave Himself as an oblation.<sup>56</sup> The part ascribed to the Holy Spirit consists in His operation in the incarnation, the death and the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>57</sup> For each of these situations Owen rests his arguments on biblical texts and stands firmly within the framework of Reformed theology.

But this notion of the unity of the three persons plays also a key role in his understanding of Christ’s role in predestination. Owen’s major point of

---

<sup>51</sup> *Works* III, p. 93.

<sup>52</sup> *Works* XII, p. 142.

<sup>53</sup> Trueman, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

<sup>54</sup> *Works* X, p. 163.

<sup>55</sup> See S. Ferguson’s treatment on Owen’s Covenant of Redemption, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-27.

<sup>56</sup> *Works* X, pp. 174-177.

<sup>57</sup> *Works* X, pp. 178-179.



disagreement on this issue with the Arminians is that he regards predestination as originating solely in the being of God and not as a result of God's foreknowledge or of any human act of faith. He charges the Arminians for their attempt to 'demolish this rock of our salvation'.<sup>58</sup> And they do this in order to 'vindicate unto themselves a power and independent ability of doing good, of making themselves to differ from others, of attaining everlasting happiness, without going one step from without themselves'.<sup>59</sup> Owen sees predestination as being 'a part of God's providence concerning his creatures'.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, the doctrine of the Trinity plays for Owen an important part in the believer's communion with God. The Christian is the object of a great work of God the Spirit. Expounding on John Owen's *Communion with God*, Sinclair Ferguson shows that in terms of status and experience, he has been brought from a condition of alienation from God to communion with Him. Therefore, he concludes, the Christian life is nothing less than fellowship with God the Trinity, leading to the full assurance of faith.<sup>61</sup> Owen shows that our communion is a distinct one with each person of the Trinity.<sup>62</sup> With God the Father it is 'in free, undeserved and eternal love'<sup>63</sup>, with the Son it is in grace, as we receive from Him 'all manner of grace whatever; and therein have we fellowship with Him'<sup>64</sup>, and with the Spirit our communion is known through His various ministries performed in our life: His indwelling, anointing and sealing.<sup>65</sup> The apex of the Christian's communion with the Trinity is worship according to the rule of Scripture and under the guidance of the Spirit. Owen is careful to show that the Christian cannot worship one person and not worship the other two in the Trinity. True fellowship takes place only when each person of the Trinity is worshiped. This is the high calling and privilege of the Christian.

In conclusion, we see that for John Owen all God's dealing with men and all true knowledge of God are Trinitarian. In the work of salvation all three Persons of the Trinity work together for the salvation of sinners. With respect to men the Bible clearly emphasizes that no one knows the Father unless it is through Jesus, His Son and no one, comes to the Son unless he is led by the Spirit. So, the Holy Spirit leads us to the Son through whom we have access to the Father.

---

<sup>58</sup> *Works* X, p. 53.

<sup>59</sup> *Works* X, p. 53.

<sup>60</sup> *Works* X, p. 53.

<sup>61</sup> Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>62</sup> *Works* II, pp. 9ff.

<sup>63</sup> *Works* II, p. 19. See also Ferguson, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>64</sup> *Works* II, p. 47. See also Ferguson, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-92.

<sup>65</sup> Ferguson, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-98.

Trinitarianism is the way in which God revealed Himself to men and the way in which man is able to know God the Father.

*Francis Turretin (1623-1687)*

Francis Turretin did his theological work one century after Calvin.<sup>66</sup> His intention was to consolidate and preserve Reformed theology. His endeavour to achieve that has won him the description of a 'orthodox zealot'.<sup>67</sup> He sought to do so by using the theological methods of scholasticism, which laid emphasis on definition, logic and method. This development was necessary because Calvin had written his theology out of the exuberance of a revival of faith without time for sufficient attention to theological niceties. During the century after Calvin, the Lutherans, the Anabaptists and among the Reformed themselves a premium was placed upon definition and logic.

As a churchman, Turretin also felt an obligation to battle the rising tides of rationalism, tolerance and secularism which were about to engulf Europe.<sup>68</sup> When Turretin proposes to deal with the subject of the Holy Trinity he sees the subject as being important for discussions not because this 'adorable mystery' can be proved, but because the authority of the divine revelation alone proposes it to be received by faith and adored with love.<sup>69</sup> While he does this, Turretin explains the meaning of the words which describe the Trinity.<sup>70</sup> He is likewise concerned to say a few things about their use. This concern has arisen from the importunity of the heretics whom he identifies as the Arians, Sabellians and other anti-Trinitarians. In his treatment on the Trinity he also sees the Socinians and the Arminians, as being in fact in agreement with them in their thinking.<sup>71</sup>

Like Calvin before him, Turretin argues for the justifiable use of these terms in the church despite the fact that they do not occur in the Scriptures. Turretin suggests that these opponents reject the use of these words because they are 'unwilling to receive the things designed by them'. Once the cause of their rejection is identified Turretin sets up as objective to give reasons for their use, saying:

---

<sup>66</sup> Leith, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>67</sup> James T. Dennison, Jr., 'The Twilight of Scholasticism: Francis Turretin at the Dawn of the Enlightenment', in *Protestant Scholasticism*, edited by Carl Trueman and R. S. Clark (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1999), p. 245.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

<sup>69</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, translated by George Musgrave Ginger and edited by James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburgh: P&R, 1992), p. 253.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 253-257.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

Knowing that with the words they might abolish the doctrine also, we therefore did right in retaining them and insist on their use being not only lawful, but also beneficial and necessary for repressing the pertinacity of heretics and for bringing them out of their lurking places.<sup>72</sup>

The first allusions made by Turretin to the importance of this doctrine is expressed in his concern that by the rejection of these words, and implicitly the rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, the church can be contaminated by the seed of dissension and new doctrines veiled under new words.<sup>73</sup> Thus Turretin proceeds to show why the doctrine of the Trinity is a fundamental article of our faith. Its importance is first established not only against the Socinians, who deny it to be an article of faith, but also against the Remonstrants, who deny its place among the fundamental articles and its importance for the doctrine of salvation. For Turretin not only the denial, but also the simple ignorance of the Trinity is damnable and inconsistent with salvation.<sup>74</sup> Thus Turretin maintains that the doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely important for at least a few reasons.

Firstly, the doctrine of the Trinity is important for the possession of our eternal life. Based on the text of Scripture to have eternal life is conditioned by a knowledge of the Trinity. Or to put it in other words, eternal life is contained within the knowledge of the Trinity. The biblical text suggested by Turretin in support of this argument is the one where Christ asserted: ‘And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent’ (John 17:3). Here Jesus is not just a human being but the second Person of the Trinity sent by the Father in the world. For those who object that Jesus is here spoken of not as God, but as the Mediator sent by God, Turretin employs parallel passages where Scripture speaks of Him as of the true God, the primary object of faith.<sup>75</sup>

Secondly, Turretin explains that the doctrine of the Trinity is important because it contains the primary object of faith and worship, the confession of which our baptism necessarily includes (Matthew 29:19). He shows that those that are saved and confess their faith must know who God is and how He presents Himself to us in His word. For Turretin God is revealed in His word as one in essence and three in Persons. Whoever denies this does nothing else but to prove that he does not know God. A denial of the doctrine of the Trinity has a direct effect upon the worship. Turretin explains this aspect drawing attention to the

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 258-259.

<sup>73</sup> Idem.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>75</sup> Scripture texts are given in Ibid., p. 262.

fact that His deity is proven from invocation, because ‘grace and peace and other spiritual blessings (which can be expected from God alone) are sought from Christ no less than from the Father in the epistles of Paul.’<sup>76</sup> So far we notice that in his treatment of this doctrine, Turretin draws attention to a theoretical aspect of the Trinity as well as to a practical one. In the same context of worship, Turretin explains that the practical aspect of the doctrine is seen in the fact that it contributes to the gratitude and worship of God and to the consolation so that we may know that Christ has truly redeemed us and that our salvation is securely positioned. Thus we devote our faith and service to the Triune God who has revealed Himself to us.<sup>77</sup>

Thirdly, Turretin shows that the doctrine of the Trinity is important because it influences many other vital doctrines that are related to the mission and work of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Therefore a denial of the Trinity would automatically lead to a denial of these doctrines. Without them, says Turretin, we would not know the principal causes of salvation: the grace of the Father, the merit of the Son and the sanctification of the Holy Spirit, and consequently we would not know salvation itself. For Turretin to ascribe these qualities to a created being amounts to blasphemy, therefore the conclusion is that the Person to which these are ascribed can only be divine.

And fourthly and finally this doctrine is important because it distinguishes us from other religions such as Jews, Mohammedans and the heathen. Below Bavinck will say the same thing but using the expression ‘the differentiating earmark of our religion’.<sup>78</sup>

In conclusion, we see a striking similarity between the way in which all reformed theologians present the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity. The emphasis is on its importance for salvation and man’s relationship with God the Father.

#### *Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)*

Herman Bavinck was a leading theologian of the neo-Calvinist revival initiated a century ago in the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>79</sup> In his scholarly work he showed a remarkable sensitivity to nineteenth century developments. His first concern was to apply the full scholarly resources of his own age to a renewal of the

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>78</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 145.

<sup>79</sup> Walter, A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p.129.

dogmatic tradition represented by seventeenth century Reformed scholastic theology.

Like most reformed theologians before him, Bavinck always insisted on the primacy of Scripture. Bavinck traces back the historical battle against the doctrine of the Trinity and speaks about two major views which contradict this truth—Arianism and Sabellianism—and then cautions the church with regard to the importance of guarding the truth against these anti-trinitarian views.<sup>80</sup>

Bavinck makes sure to clarify that we are not dealing here with an abstract concept or a scientific proposition about the nature of Divinity, but with God who reveals Himself in His word as a Triune God.<sup>81</sup> He contests against those people who see no value in it for religious life. His attack against them is constructed upon the history of God's revelation as a Triune God. He proves that this doctrine is not the product of human discovery but a confession which was materially concluded in the Gospel and in the whole Word of God. In short, it is a doctrine which was inferred by Christian faith from the revelation of God.<sup>82</sup>

Such an approach makes this subject important for our study, and due to its nature demands from us an attitude characterised by holy respect, holy reverence and childlike awe. Bavinck considers this subject in the context of the Christian church which always confessed the revelation of God as the Triune God. He makes allusion to the Twelve Article of the Apostles' Creed, and in doing so he applies the principal established here from the outset, namely that all the reformed theologians have dealt with this doctrine in its historical context and in connection with what was going on in the tradition of the church before their time. The confession of the believer is that he believes in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ His only begotten Son, and in the Holy Spirit: he believes in the Triune God.<sup>83</sup>

The believer confesses that he has surrendered his life to God as Father, God as Son, and God as Holy Spirit. God has created him, redeemed him, sanctified him and glorified him as Father, Son and Spirit. In other words, what we have here is very similar to what we saw earlier in Turretin's treatment on this doctrine. At this point we can, therefore, say that the doctrine of the Trinity is important for our intellectual and practical aspects of our faith. The Triune God is important for our life and salvation.

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-158.

<sup>81</sup> Bavinck, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

In order to deal with the subject in some more detail we need to show that Bavinck, like Turretin before him, asserts right from the beginning that the doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely vital for a correct knowledge of who and what God is.<sup>84</sup> The fullest content and the profoundest meaning of all the attributes of His being are to be achieved only in this holy Trinity. Bavinck continues to describe the unity that exists in the Divine Being. He does that by alluding to the works and order of creation and then concludes with a sharp affirmation regarding the importance of this doctrine, saying: ‘Therefore, the article of the holy trinity is the heart and core of our confession, the differentiating earmark of our religion, and the praise and comfort of all true believers of Christ.’<sup>85</sup>

Bavinck also makes clear that the doctrine of the Trinity is important for the work of creation and salvation given to the people of Israel in the Old Testament.<sup>86</sup> He supports this affirmation making reference to the teaching of the Old Testament where God brings everything into being by His Word and Spirit. This truth is expressed most gloriously in the words and songs of the Psalms. God speaks and is done; He commands and it stands fast.

But alongside this word of power and wisdom comes the Spirit of God as the Mediator of the creation. Just as God is power and wisdom He Himself is Spirit in His being, that Spirit by which He can dwell in the world and be always and everywhere present in it. At the beginning that Spirit moved upon the face of the waters and He remains active in all that was created.

And this self-diversity of God comes out even more in the works of re-creation. Then it is not Elohim, but Jehovah, not God in general, but the Lord, the God of the covenant, who reveals Himself and who makes Himself known in wonders of redemption and salvation. Referring to the Angel of the Lord, Bavinck distinguishes Him from God, and yet presents him one in Name with God Himself, and in power, in redemption and blessing in worshipfulness and honour.

Bavinck proceeds to explain how much more evident is the importance of this doctrine in the New Testament and points to the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is important for a correct understanding of incarnation, atonement and resurrection. The promises and announcements made in the Old Testament are

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>86</sup> A detail account about the specific works performed by each Person of the Trinity in the Old Testament is given in Ibid., pp. 146-151.

fully satisfied in the New Testament. In this respect Bavinck shows that the unity or oneness of God is the point of departure of all New Testament revelation. But in the New Testament out of this oneness the difference in the Divine being comes out into much clearer light. This happens first in the great redemptive events of incarnation, satisfaction and outpouring. Bavinck maintains that the work of salvation is a work of God from beginning to end, but there are three high moments in it: election, forgiveness and renewal, and these three point to a threefold cause in the Divine being: that is, to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>87</sup> Father, Son and Spirit are in their oneness and their distinction the fullness of the perfected revelation of God. According to the apostles the whole good and salvation of man is contained in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.<sup>88</sup>

Just as all things are *of* the Father and *through* the Son, they all exist and rest *in* the Holy Spirit. The good pleasure, the foreknowledge, the power, the love, the kingdom and the strength are the Father's. The Mediatorship, the reconciliation, the grace, and the redemption are the Son's. The regeneration, the renewal, the sanctification, the redemption are the Spirit's. Just as no one comes to the Father but through the Son, so no one can say that Jesus is the Lord except through the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit we have fellowship with the Father and the Son. It is in the Holy Spirit that God Himself through Christ dwells in our hearts. And if this all be so, then the Holy Spirit is, together with the Son and the Father, the one, true God, and is to be eternally lauded and praised as such.<sup>89</sup>

## FINAL CONCLUSIONS

There are several conclusions that we could draw from our consideration of this doctrine. The main purpose of all the Reformed theologians in their study on the doctrine of the Trinity was to secure the Biblical message and to safeguard the Biblical truth with respect to this teaching. They spoke and wrote according the Scriptures. Their desire was to prove from Scripture that Reformed theology has to do with one God who is personally and always related to his creation in three ways: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The insistence that the object of faith is the Triune God has been a characteristic of Reformed theology. The God whom Christians worship is the Lord God who creates the heavens and the earth and the Holy Spirit who gives comfort, as well as the God who encounters his people and redeems them in Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>87</sup> For full details see *Ibid.*, pp. 151-158.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

Although sometimes it is difficult even for Christians to hold the Trinity of Persons together in the unity of a single divine being, yet, as Gerald Bray shows, without the Trinity there would be no Christianity.<sup>90</sup> Our belief in the saving work of Christ the Son of God, and in the indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit demands that we worship God in this Trinitarian way. All the reformed theologians studied in the content of this article agree that the doctrine of the Trinity points towards the importance of the Holy Trinity both for our mind and heart. All the reformed theologians wrote as churchmen, concerned with preaching, worship and pastoral care. But they also wrote as good exegetes of Scripture which was stimulating intellectually and challenging spiritually. They were all aware of the fact that an incorrect presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity will directly affect the standing ground of the believer—the message of the Bible. And without a defence of this doctrine a whole range of other doctrines are severely affected.

Therefore, the reformed theologians knew that by its confession the church is able, on the one hand, to take a strong position against the heresies of Arianism, Modalism, Socinianism, and on the other hand, to influence a correct understanding of other important doctrines of the Bible.

Reformed theology maintains both the unity and diversity in the being of God. The Divine being is one: there is but one Being that is God and that may be called God. They showed that the unity of the world, of mankind, of truth, of virtue, of justice, and of beauty depends upon the unity of God. The moment that unity of God is denied or understressed the door is open to polytheism. The reformed theologians explained that according to Scripture, this unity comprises difference, or distinction, or diversity. It is that diversity which comes to expression in the three persons or modes of being of God. These three persons are not merely three modes of revelation. They are modes of being. Father, Son and Spirit share one and the same Divine nature and characteristics. God is our Creator who brought us into being by His will as creatures distinct from Him in kind. He is our Redeemer who saves us by the riches of grace. He is our Sanctifier who dwells in us as in His temple. As the triune God He is one God and is above us, for us, and in us.

But in Reformed theology the doctrine of the Trinity is also of the greatest importance for the spiritual life of the believer. Quite unjustifiably it is sometimes maintained that the doctrine of the trinity is merely a philosophically

---

<sup>90</sup> Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p. 111. See also the discussion “All Analogies have Shortcomings”, in Grudem, *op. cit.*, pp. 240-241.



abstracted dogma and that it possesses no value for religion and life. But when we believe in the trinity we notice that this doctrine stands in an intimate relationship with our experience as the children of God. We believe that God the Father is the Creator of all things and He supplies for every need of body and soul. He is faithful and Almighty and will do He has promised to do. He has sent the Son who was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit. He is our Saviour, who redeemed us with His own blood, died and rose again and is now ascended in glory and constantly intercedes for us with the Father. Christ has sent His Spirit who is working in us and leads us into all truth, preserving us for our eternal inheritance.

Thus, the confession of the Trinity is the sum of the Christian religion. Without it neither the creation nor the redemption nor the sanctification can be purely maintained. Every departure from this confession leads to error in the other vital and fundamental doctrines. We can truly proclaim the mighty works of God only when we recognize and confess them as the one great work of Father, Son and Spirit.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bavinck, Herman, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

Berkhof, Louis, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1963).

*The History of Christian Doctrines* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1959).

Bray, Gerald, *The Doctrine of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993).

Calvin, John, *A Compend of the Institutes of the Christian Religion* ed. Hugh T. Kerr (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976).

*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 1, Book 1, Ch. XIII, 4 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

Dennison, Jr., James T., 'The Twilight of Scholasticism: Francis Turretin at the Dawn of the Enlightenment', in *Protestant Scholasticism* edited by Carl Trueman and R. S. Clark (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1999).

Elwell Walter, A., (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

Eveson, Philip, 'The Case for Forensic Justification in John Owen', *Seeing the Lord* (Published by the Westminster Conference, 2000).

Ferguson, Sinclair B., *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987).

Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

Leith, John H., *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1978).

Letham, Robert, 'The God We Proclaim', *Reformation Today* No. 122, July-August 1991, 5-16.

McGrath, Alister F., *Historical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

Needham, N.R., *2000 years of Christ's Power*, Part II: The Middle Ages (London: Grace Publications, 2000).

Niesel, Wilhelm, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

Owen, John, *Communion with God*, vol. II (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987).

*The Holy Spirit*, vol. III (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994).

*The Death of Christ*, vol. X (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1993).

*The Gospel Defended*, vol. XII (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991).

Trueman, Carl R., *The Claims of Truth, John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998).

Turretin, Francis, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1 translated by George Musgrave Ginger and edited by James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburgh: P&R, 1992).