

Place: Lurgan Baptist 13:10:2009

Reading: Matthew 3:13-17

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE FAITH

“ WE BELIEVE THAT,”

3. THE TRINITY IS SCRIPTURAL

Not far from the east coast of America there is an island that was discovered by Christopher Columbus. On first sighting it he formed a wrong opinion. He was a long way off, and all that he could see was three hills silhouetted against the sky. “ *Ah,*” he thought “ *here are three islands.*” When, however his ship got closer he found that they were not three islands at all, but just one island. It looked three from a distance, but when he got near he saw that it was only one. Do you know what he called the island ? “ *Trinidad,*” which is Spanish for “ *Trinity.*” Now the doctrine of the trinity is perhaps the most difficult and mysterious that is presented to us in the Scriptures. Its height and depth and length and breadth cannot be measured due to the fact that the finite is dealing with the Infinite. Here indeed is a deep subject, the Father-God, the Son-God, the Holy Spirit-God, yet not three gods but only God yet three persons in essence. The great Methodist preacher John Wesley once said, “ *Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will bring you a man that can comprehend the true God.*” C.H. Spurgeon once said, “ *Nothing will so enlarge the*

intellect and magnify the whole soul of man as a devout earnest, continued investigation of the whole subject of the trinity.” Yet the finite can never fully understand the infinite. Now we should try to understand all of God that we can, but we will never understand all of God that there is. The Lord Himself says, “ *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*” (Is 55:8-9) Augustine one of the eminent church fathers was walking one day on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, and he was musing on the great theme of the Trinity. He was at this time writing a book on that very subject. As he walked along the beach, he came across a small boy playing. The boy had dug a hole in the sand and with a tiny bucket was carrying water from the sea and emptying it into the hole he had made. “ *What are you doing ?*” asked Augustine. “ *I am pouring the ocean into this hole,*” answered the child. The great man burst out laughing. “ *Impossible,*” he cried. Just then the Holy Spirit spoke into his heart, “ *Not more impossible than what you are trying to do with your little book on the Trinity.*”

Augustine said that at that moment he realized that he had been trying to put an infinite God into his finite mind, and you cannot do that. The Infinite will never fit into the finite. We really can never understand the trinity, but as one person as wisely said “ *Define the Trinity and you will lose your mind, deny the Trinity and you will lose your soul.*” When it comes to the Constitution of this church it plainly states,

We believe in the Trinity of the Godhead.

In Spurgeon's Catechism we have this question. "*How many persons are there in the Godhead ?*" Answer.

“ There are three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one God, the same in essence, equal in power and glory.”

Now the term "*trinity*," does not itself occur in the Bible. It dates from the time of Theophilus of Antioch round about 170AD. The word "*Trinity*," comes from the Latin "*trinitas*," meaning "*threefold*," or "*three in one*." It arose from a need to express the doctrine tersely and also to preserve the truth against the false teaching of heretics. What do we mean then saying "*we believe in the Trinity of the Godhead ?*" Simply this, "***The One True God is one in every way, in nature, will and being, but One in three distinct persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.***" Now while my finite mind could not explain fully the doctrine of the Trinity, let's seek to break that definition down a little further, by noting a number of truths.

(1) THERE IS BUT ONE TRUE AND LIVING GOD

"*How many gods are there ?*" "*One*," replied the little boy. "*How do you know that ?*" "*Because there is only room for One for He fills heaven and earth.*" One of the most common objections brought against the doctrine of the Trinity is that it involves "*tritheism*," a "*belief in three gods.*" The truth of the matter is this that this doctrine stands opposed to "*tritheism*," and

"*polytheism*," which the Mormons hold on, which is there are many gods. Here is where we must begin. (1)

(a) HOW SCRIPTURAL THIS IS:

For both the Old and New Testaments testify to the unity of God. Now when we say that God is a unity, what do we mean ? Well, we don't mean that God is possessed of single personality, rather by the unity of God is meant oneness of essence and being as one and only God. You see, from his earliest years a little Jewish boy would be taught to recite the words of (Deut 6:4) "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.*" It was the most basic belief of the Jewish faith, built as it was, on the Old Testament. It was a belief from which no Jew could be shifted. He knew that "*the Lord he is God, there is none else beside him.*" (Deut 4:35) The Jew would think back to the time when the great temple of Solomon was dedicated. After praying urgently and at length to God. Solomon turned to the people and expressed his most heart felt desire, "*the Lord our God be with us, as he was with our fathers, let him not leave us nor forsake us that all the people of the earth may know that the Lord is God, and that there is none else.*" (1 Kings 8:57-60)

As you know when the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and when the Jew recited (Deut 6:4) he did it in that language as he still does today. Now our English language cannot perfectly translate what (Deut 6:4) means. It means more than "*The Lord our God is one Lord.*" That can taken as a statement that there is no other God but the Lord. He is the only One. It can also be

translated “ *The Lord our God. The Lord is one.*” He is *not just the only One. He who is the only One is one.* Do you recall the words of the Lord Jesus ? “ *I am my Father are one.*” (Jn 10:30) The theology of the great apostle was no different. “ *One Lord, one faith, one baptism.*” (Eph 4:5) So from Genesis to Revelation God is declared to be One, our universe itself bearing the imprint of one Almighty Agent is testimony to that fact. (a)

(b) HOW PRACTICAL THIS IS:

You see, it is precisely because there is no other “ *god,*” that idolatry is always viewed in the Scriptures as an offence. It usurps the place that is Gods by right. My do the words of the first commandment not contain practical implications for our lives ? “ *Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*” (Ex 20:3) Dr. G. Thomas states, “ *Rivals to God vary throughout the ages and preachers of this commandment today differ compared with the time of Moses.*” Yes, times have changed but let’s not imagine that idolatry is dead, for this modern world is full of it. Indeed at times it permeates its way into the Christian church so much so that John has to say, “ *little children keep yourselves from idols.*” (1 Jn 5:21) The people of Ephesus to whom John was writing were surrounded by literal idolatry. Of course an idol is any substitute for God. It may be anything that comes between my soul and God. Are you guilty of idolatry ? Is it time for you to pray,

**The dearest idol I have known
Whate’er that idol be
Help me to tear it from Thy throne
And worship only Thee**

(2) WHILE GOD IS ONE HE EXISTS AS THREE PERSONS

Let me quote the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “ *There are three persons within the Godhead, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost and these three are one God the same in substance, equal in power and glory.*” Now some folk believe that God has left us clues throughout this universe of His Trinitarian nature. Saint Patrick used the illustration of the *three green leaves of the shamrock* to convey to his congregation an intelligent conception of the three persons in the Godhead. We could use the illustration of a business firm. “ *Smith & Company.*” There are three brothers, John, Henry and Peter. It is one firm with one name but each brother is head of a department. The three work together without friction as a single unit. A skeptic one approached a Christian and questioned him about the possibility of the Trinity. “ *Tell me how the candle burns ?* ” asked the believer. “ *The tallow, the cotton, and the atmospheric air produce the light,*” answered the skeptic. “ *But they make one light, do they not, ?*” asked the believer. “ *Yes,*” came the reply of the one now convinced.

Now of course there are no perfect analogies of the Trinity for this truth is above our finite understanding,

but I believe some of these illustrations throw some light on a complex problem. My one thing is absolutely sure, that we are here in the realm of intellectual mystery, we are also in the realm of theological certainty. You see, since the beginning of human history God has revealed Himself as a Trinity. Indeed,

(a) The Trinity is IMPLICIT in the Old Testament:

For while the burden of the message of the Old Testament seems to be the unity of God, yet the Trinity is plainly implied. Look if you will at (Gen 1:26) The Hebrew word for God here is “*Elohim*,” and notice God refers to Himself in the plural. “*Let us make man in our image*,” but then in the very next verse we read, “*so God (Elohim) created man in His own image.*” (Gen 1:27) Do you see that the plural “*our*,” in (1:26) equals the singular “*His*,” in (1:27) You find exactly the same thing in the vision of Isaiah. Isaiah says, “*Also I heard the voice of the Lord saying, whom shall I (singular) send and who will got for us ?*” (plural) (Is 6:8) Once again you have the plural equal to the singular. And what shall we say about the appearances of Deity in the Old Testament ? Do you not in your reading of the Old Testament Scriptures come time and again face to face with the phrase “**the angel of the Lord ?**” And have you not observed that this phrase is distinguished from and at the same time identified with God ? Look if you will at (Gen 22:11-12) Do you see that phrase “*For now I know that thou fearest God*,” that’s the distinction, “*seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me*,” that’s the identification. (Joshua 5:14)

Now as the Old Testament revelation continues “*the angel of the Lord*,” is called the Son of God. (Dan 3:25) His personality and deity are clearly revealed. (Zech 3:1) He is of old even from everlasting (Micah 5:2) the mighty God (Is 9:6) who is to be born of a virgin (Is 7:14) and to bear the sins of many (Is 53:11) With regard to the Holy Spirit He is represented in the opening book of the Bible as moving on the face of the waters. (Gen 1:2) And in the books that follow He is represented as inspiring the prophets for “*holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.*” (2 Pet 1:21) So what are we saying ? We are saying that the doctrine of the Trinity is latent in the Old Testament but it is patent in the New Testament, for if (a) then,

(b) The Trinity is EXPLICIT in the New Testament:

1. At the Baptism of Christ:

“*And Jesus when He was baptized, went up straightway out of the water, and lo the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him, and lo a voice from heaven saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom, I am well pleased.*” (Matt3:16-17) The Father spoke from heaven, the Son was being baptized in the Jordan, and the Spirit descended in the form of a dove.

2. In the Teaching of Christ:

“*And I will pray the Father and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever.*”

(Jn 14:16) The Lord Jesus having been sent by the Father now promises to send the Spirit to take His place.

3. In the Commission of Christ:

Look if you will at (Matt 28:19-20) In giving us the baptismal formula Christ is making provision for keeping the doctrine of the Trinity constantly before the church. Each believer is baptized in the name (singular)of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Does the language here not imply that each name represents a person and that the persons are equal ?

4. In the Apostolic Benediction:

“ the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all. ”

(2 Cor 13:14) Do you see here that the personality and divinity of each of the persons of the Godhead are recognized every time this benediction is pronounced ?

James Merritt says, *“ the doctrine of the Trinity may be the greatest distinctive characteristic of Christianity. ”*

You see, no other religion in the world is, or ever has been a Trinitarian religion. Judaism, Islam, the Unitarians, and the Jehovah Witnesses all deny the doctrine of the Trinity. My even though the word *“ trinity, ”* is not found in the Bible the truth of the trinity is found throughout the Bible. (1) (2)

(3) THE FATHER, THE SON, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT ARE THREE DISTINCT PERSONS

That is to say these persons are not simply different modes of appearance God uses in His relationship to us. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is not the Father. Each is God. Each one is all of God. But each is distinct from the other. This truth is not hard to state, but it's impossible to understand. Some folk in trying to make this truth understandable, have merely succeeded in denying it. *Usually, one of three things have happened.* Some aware that the Scriptures teach that God exists as three persons, have ended denying that God is one. They have fallen into the error of thinking of the three Persons as three separate divine beings. They have become *tritheists*, those who believe in three gods.

Then there are others who have stressed the unity of God, that they deny the deity of the Son and the deity of the Holy Spirit. They have refused to accept these two persons as God. Thus, they deny the Trinity, affirming that in God, there is only one personality, namely God the Father. Such people are called *Arians or Unitarians*. You have seen, have you not church buildings bearing the name *“ The Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. ”* Today there are a total of 34 congregations with most of them being in Northern Ireland and just two in the Republic of Ireland. So on the one hand we have people ending up believing in three gods, on the other people denying both the deity of the Son and of the Spirit. Then there are others, aware that the Bible teaches that God is one, have thought of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as one and the same identical person. According to this view, God is but one Person, who like an actor, plays

three different parts. He appears successively as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *While He plays the part of one, the others do not exist.* Because God is thought of as merely appearing in different modes, this view is called “**modalism.**” It’s most famous proponent was Sebellius a presbyter from Ptolemais who lived about the middle of the third century.

Now its interesting that a form of “**modalism,**” is found in Oneness Pentecostalism which differs significantly from classic Pentecostalism. David Legge in his book “**Strongholds Shaken,**” tells us that in 1913 a Pentecostal teacher called R. E. McAlister of Toronto, began teaching that the doctrine of the Trinity was erroneous.

R. E. McAlister taught that Jesus Christ was the only God and that the three manifestations, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were simply manifestations of the Lord Jesus. He also claimed that God using (Acts 2:38) had given to him a revelation that baptism should be correctly administered in the name of Jesus alone. ***Does that ring a bell with any of you ? Do you know of churches that baptize only in the name of Jesus ? Why do they do it ? Why do they set aside the baptismal formula given by our Lord Jesus in (Matt 28:19) ?*** Is it because they have an aversion to the Trinity ? One thing is sure the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three distinct persons. Notice for example,

(a) WHAT THE TRIUNE GOD SAYS:

Look if you will at (Jn 12:28) Now notice here the Father says “**I,**” but then the Son says “**I,**” do you recall Christ’s words ? “*Father I have glorified thee on the*

earth, I have finished the work which thou givest me to do.” (Jn 17:4) But then the Holy Spirit says, “**I,**” for in (Acts 13:2) we read these words “*As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Ghost said separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.*”

As Stuart Olyott says “**There are three who are God, and each can say “I,” and none of them says “we.” But they have in common one infinite intelligence, power and will. So when we say that they are distinct Persons we do not mean that one is separate from the other as one person is from every other. They are but one God. To us, their mode of existence in the one substance is a profound mystery.**”

Of course, there are other passages where it is plain that the Three are distinct as “*one Spirit one Lord one God and Father.*” (Eph 4:4-6) Early in the gospel of Matthew we read the account of our Lord’s baptism. (3:13-4:1) As Christ comes up out of the water, the Spirit of God descends on Him, and at the same time the voice of the Father sounds from heaven, acknowledging Him as His well beloved Son. Could there be a clearer indication of the distinction between the Persons than this ? The Father in heaven, the Son on earth, and the Spirit descending ? What an answer to “**modalism,**” that says that God plays the part of one and the others do not exist. Here the three persons of the Godhead are appearing at the same time. Look again at the great commission. (Matt 28:19-20) Do you see the word “*and,*” ? Well, the use of that word is sufficient to indicate that the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy

Spirit is not the Father. And yet the unity of the Godhead is not broken, for the converts are to be baptized not in the “*names,*” but “*in the name.*” I think also,

(b) HOW THE TRIUNE GOD ACTS:

Establishes the fact that there are three distinct persons. There is, as it were, a division of labour within the trinity. To the Father is ascribed primarily the work of election and creation. (Gen 1:1 Rom 8:29) To the Son is ascribed primarily the work of redemption. (1 Pet 1:19) To the Holy Spirit is ascribed the work of regeneration and sanctification. (Jn 3:5 1 Pet 1:2) All of this leads to one truth. (3) Now as Sidlow Baxter would say “*Are you still with me ? Are you hanging in there ?*” Well, lets go a step further.

(4) WITHIN THE GODHEAD THERE IS A CERTAIN DEFINITE ORDER

The Father is first, the Son is second, and the Holy Spirit is third. (Eph 1:3 1 Jn 4:24) This does not mean that one has existed before another, for each Person is eternally God. Nor does it mean that one Person is senior, the second lesser, and the third junior, for each Person is God in His own right, and the Persons are equal. **Each Person is fully God, co-equal, co-existent, and co-eternal.** It is simply a recognition of the relationships with the Godhead, and these relationships are seen in the way God acts. Everything that God does *springs from* the Father. He is first. It comes to pass *through* the Son. He is second. And it is *effected* by the Holy Spirit. He is third.

All God’s works are works of the three Persons jointly. Now we must state again that the Persons of the Trinity are coequal. There is no senior or junior. Yet there is this harmonious order of the Godhead when God acts. This is the way God works. We can see this clearly in,

(a) THE WORK OF CREATION:

“*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,*” (Gen 1:1) And yet it was His Son “*by whom He made the worlds.*” (Heb 1:2) But it is quite clear that it was the Holy Spirit who effected the work “*and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.*” (Gen 1:2 Ps 104:30) God the Father did it, through the Son, by means of the Holy Spirit.

(b) THE WORK OF SALVATION:

It was God the Father who gave us believers to His Son. Do you recall the words of the Lord Jesus ? “*All that the Father giveth me shall come to me,*” (Jn 6:37-40) So we have been given to Christ who was sent into the world to save us. It was God the Son “*who was delivered for our offences and was raised again for our justification.*” (Rom 4:25) But it is God the Holy Spirit who brings us into the enjoyment and benefit of what Christ has obtained for us. (1 Cor 2:1-5 1 Thes 1:5-10) The work of the Holy Spirit follows the work of the Son, just as the work of the Son follows that of the Father. Now in saying, that is a certain definite order within the Godhead we must also stress that,

(5) THIS ORDER DOES NOT IMPLY THAT THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT DO NOT POSSESS TRUE AND EQUAL DIVINITY

Have we not hinted at this already ? There is no junior or senior within the Godhead. The Persons of the trinity are co-equal. The Scriptures insist upon their equal divinity.

(a) The Father is God: Paul says, “ *To us there is but one God, the Father of whom are all things.* ” (1 Cor 8:6)

(b) The Son is God: Do you recall that remarkable confession of Thomas ? “ *My Lord and my God.* ” (Jn 20:28)

(c) The Holy Spirit is God: Peter said to Ananias “ *Thou has not lied unto men but unto God.* ” (Acts 5:4) You see, you cannot lie to an influence, you can only lie to a person and this person is God. (2 Cor 3:18) Now seeing that the Lord Jesus is actually God and seeing that the Holy Spirit is actually God, it should not surprise us to find that the attributes which belong to the Father are ascribed to the Son and Holy Spirit. For e.g.,

Is God the Father Eternal ? (Ps 90:2) Then God the Son is eternal (Rev 1:8, 17) and God the Holy Spirit is eternal. (Heb 9:14)

Is God the Father Holy ? (Rev 15:4) Then God the Son is holy (Acts 3:14) and God the Holy Spirit is holy. (Lk 1:15)

Is God the Father Omnipotent ? (1 Pet 1:5) Then God the Son is omnipotent (2 Cor 12:9) and God the Holy Spirit is omnipotent (Rom 15:19)

My we believe “ **The Trinity is Scriptural,**” we may not understand it, but we accept what the Scriptures say about it. Can I commend a book to you that I have drawn from for this difficult subject. Its called “ *The Three are One,* ” by Stuart Olyott, you’ll find it most helpful. But now that we have the doctrine of the Trinity in our minds what are we going to do with it ? Well, lets try and “ *earth,* ” this doctrine and see how it relates to

1. SALVATION:

Do you know why the study of the Trinity is so vitally important ? Because if it were not for the Trinity, there would be no salvation and there would be no one saved. For in salvation each Person of the Godhead, plays a vital part and each part is necessary for salvation to be accomplished. Look if you will with me at (Eph 1:3-4) In this chapter we are told of the role of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit plays in the salvation of all sinners. Notice:

- God **THOUGHT** our Salvation: “ *Blessed according as He hath chosen us in Him* ”
- (1:3-4) Salvation was in the mind of God the Father before the world came into existence or sin came into the world.
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- Christ **BOUGHT** our Salvation: “ *In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of his grace.* ” (1:7)
The Son left heaven, obeying the Father even to the point of death, and shed His precious blood, that we might have the one thing we need for our sins forgiveness.
- The Holy Spirit **WROUGHT** our Salvation: for look if you will at (1:13) Christ make it plain when he said “ *that which is born of the flesh is flesh that which is born of the spirit is Spirit.* ” (Jn 3:6)

To put it another way, **God is the Love of salvation, Christ is the Lord of salvation, the Holy Spirit is the Life of salvation.** Do you know how the old hymn puts it,

**O the love that sought me,
O, the blood that bought me
O, the grace that brought me to the fold.**

Now is a belief in the Trinity necessary in order to be saved ? Well, listen to the words of the Lord Jesus.
“ *And this is life eternal, that they may know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.* ”
(Jn 17:3) Do you profess to have eternal life ? Well, let me ask you, do you know the only true God ? Not the god of your imagination, but the God of the Bible. Well, you cannot get to know God the Father unless you go through God the Son. Christ said, “ *no man cometh unto the*

Father but by me. ” (Jn 14:6) Furthermore, you cannot get to the Son unless you are brought by the Holy Spirit. (Jn 3:8) So Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all involved in your salvation.

2. SUPPLICATION:

You see, the Father is first and prayer should be addressed to Him. Is this not what the Lord Jesus taught when He said, “ *When ye pray say, Our Father* ” (Lk 11:2) Is this not how the apostles prayed ? Speaking of his own prayers Paul writes, “ *I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ” (Eph 3:14) And when they praise God both Peter and Paul begin, “ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* ” (Eph 1:3 1 Pet 1:3) You see, when we pray we go to the Father through the Son (Jn 14:6) depending on the Spirit. (Rom 8:26-27) Now do you know something ? Some of us are guilty of “ **modalism,** ” in our prayers ! For often we begin by praying to God the Father, but shortly afterwards we proceed to thank **Him** for dying on the cross. We fall into the mistake of saying of the Father what can only be said of the Son. Now God does not only listen to our words, He looks on our hearts and yet is it not dangerous to have wrong views of God ? Wrong views of God expressed in public prayers which possibly could be harmful to those who hear them. (1) (2)

(3) SCRIPTURE:

For where and where alone is this mystery of the Trinity revealed ? In the Scriptures. How did the Scriptures come to be written. “ *Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.* ” (2 Pet 2:21) And what is the chief subject of the Scriptures ? “ *They are they which testify of me,* ” said the Lord Jesus. (Jn 5:39) How can the Scriptures be properly described ? “ *Every word proceedeth out of the mouth of God.* ” (Matt 4:4) So this mystery of the trinity is revealed in a God given, Christ centred, Spirit inspired book. For this is the Word of the Triune God Himself.

Should this truth of the trinity not lead us to worship ? We cannot fathom this mystery. My we are but mere creatures, worms of the dust, but He is God. No reaction is fitting except to cast ourselves before Him, to believe and adore. So we adore the Father, we adore the Son, we adore the Holy Spirit. Like the seraphim before His throne, three times we say “ *holy,* ” **for He is three.** Yet we say, “ *Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts,* ” (Is 6:3) **for He is One.** Well, that’s the truth of the Trinity, and it so profound and yet so beautiful. Three in one, One in three, and the one in the middle died for me.