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*The  
Meaning and  
Significance  
of the  
Trinity*

BY GEOFFREY BINGHAM

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GEOFFREY C. BINGHAM

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

We have a number of reasons for wanting to study the meaning and significance of the Trinity. The first of these is that the Scriptures do not appear, explicitly to teach such a doctrine. We have to agree that the term “Trinity” appears nowhere in the Bible, and that no verse as such clearly states the doctrine of three persons constituting one God, or Godhead. We meet such statements as “The Lord thy God, is one Lord”, meaning that God is a unity, and not a plurality. For this reason we need to study the subject to see whether the term “Trinity”, and the idea behind it can be substantiated from Scripture.

Another reason, and perhaps a better one, is that if the doctrine of the Trinity is Scriptural, then it is deeply significant for our understanding of every doctrine of Scripture and indispensable to knowing the nature and action of God. If the doctrine is wrong then so called orthodox Christianity is, in fact, not correct. For this reason our understanding must be firmly established. At the same time we must avoid the idea of proving the doctrine correct simply in order to refute the errors of others. Often behind such a desire is an uneasiness about one’s own doctrinal position. Hence the use of so called “proof texts” and endless argumentation. There is nothing wrong in refuting the errors of others, but we should not study the doctrine simply for this purpose for we shall fail to see it in its own true light.

## **2. The Formal Arguments For The Trinity**

We have agreed that the term “Trinity” is not used as such in Scripture. It was, in fact, first used by Tertullian at the end of the second century, A.D. It is intended to convey the concept of three being in unity and constituting one Godhead. Whilst it is said that “The Father is God, The Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God”, this does not mean that each is a God, for this would mean Tri-theism, the unity of three Gods making one Godhead. Each is not a God, but God. Nor are the three Persons simply modes of God, that is to say,

the one Person expressing three aspects of His innate being, eg. Fatherhood, Sonship and spirithood Yet each is Person, but not as to constitute one individual over against the other, but rather the three are one both on the basis of their innate essence of Being, as also their being and relationship to love.

The formal argument for the Trinity is first of all to see evidences for the idea of the Trinity in the Old and New Testaments, that is to say, throughout Scriptures. Then it is usual to show that the Father has Deity or Godhead, that the Son likewise has Deity, and that the Holy Spirit too, has Deity. If the Scriptures indicate the principle of the Trinity and the Deity of each member of the Trinity, then it is clear that the truth of the Trinity is proven. Then we add to this material the operational work of God, in the ministry of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, showing that none works apart from the other, and that in fact their work is the expression and demonstration of their essential Being and unity. Let us proceed to these arguments.

### **[I] The Trinity and the Old Testament**

Before we deal with the actual material available in the Old Testament we have to observe two points. The first is that when man rejected God in Adam, and when he personally rejects the nature of God, a true understanding of God is lost. We can say, "Has been lost!" This is clear from the reading of Romans 1 :19–32. Even Adam could only know God as a man may know God, but rejection of God has caused Scripture to say, "There is none who understands God or seeks after him." See Romans 3:11, Psalm 14:1f, and Psalm 53:1f. Without new birth or the Spirit one cannot know God. See John 3:3–14 and I Corinthians 2:14.

The second point is that no man can fully see the glory of God. Moses is told this in Exodus 33:1–7–23. When God reveals Himself it is often in visions or statements, but man cannot comprehend the fullness of God. It may well be then that on the one hand he lost the knowledge of God as the triune God, and on the other that, by nature of the case, it is difficult to comprehend.

To these two points we may add an observation. It is this; many truths concerning God, and revelations of His nature are progressive in the Scriptures. We mean that the true nature of God cannot be fully known until history is completed. Along the way elements of the truth of God become revealed, and can be known. For this reason the idea of the Trinity need not necessarily be fully revealed from the beginning. In this case it need not seem strange if the fresher and fuller revelation of the New Testament were the one to reveal what is partly revealed in the Old Testament, and which to a degree implicit in it rather than explicit. Another way of saying this is that when God's being as Father is gradually unfolding to man, then the being of the Son cannot be totally clear, nor for that matter the being of the Spirit who is shown, in the New Testament to be both the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Likewise when redemption is seen only in its fullness in the New Testament, then the nature of God as Redeemer cannot be fully known, nor the work of the Son and the Spirit in redemption. We mean that when all of this is, in the Old Testament, the subject of prophecy, we are forced to wait until its action happens before we can grasp its reality.

### **[a] A Plural Sense in the Old Testament**

Linguistically we come across a plural sense in the very word for God, Elohim. The singular of this word is Eloah, and is rarely used. It is thought that Elohim is really a strengthening or intensification of the singular. However when both the Word and the Spirit are acting with Elohim at creation the plural sense is substantiated as significant. Hence when God says "Let us make man in our own image", this would mean (a) Man is then the reflection of everything that God is and (b) That man is also constituted of an internal dynamic unity. He is not a bare monolithic unity, but has an inner plurality of being although he is one personality.

The plural sense is used elsewhere (as in Isa. 6:8) and in particular when the creative activity of God is

personified under the name “Wisdom” as in Proverbs 8:22f (cf. Job 28:23–27) and the Spirit as in Exodus 31:3; Numbers 11:25, Judges 3:10 and other passages. In Isaiah 48:16 we read, “Come near to Me, listen to this: From the first I have not spoken in secret, from the time it took place, I was there. And now the Lord God has sent Me, and his Spirit”. This has not only a plural sense, but is quite Trinitarian.

### **[b] Operative Persons in the Old Testament**

If both the Word and the Spirit, in the Old Testament are personified, and could actually be persons, then there is no doubt that the Angel of the Lord is often portrayed as a person, yet one who has no less a position than God. He is no created being for He is identified with God Himself. Yet at the same time He is sent by God, “Behold I send an angel before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place which I have prepared. Give heed to him and hearken to his voice, do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; **for my name is in him**”. (Exod. 23:20–21). This is surely the same idea as in Exodus 33:22 where Moses cannot see God in himself, but the shaded glory as it passes by. In Genesis 16:7, 24:7 and 48:16 we see that the Angel of the Lord not only speaks for God but accepts homage that is designed only for God.

Wisdom, personified, as we have seen above, is also a person who is with God and acts for God. Hence we read Wisdom was “set up” (anointed) “from everlasting, or ever the earth was”; “brought forth when there were no depths”, and being before God was “daily his delight, always rejoicing before him”. At the same time He was “rejoicing in the habitable parts of the universe”. We see then that he, like the one of Isaiah 48: 16, has characteristics or attributes which are very like those of deity.

Without doubt the Spirit of the Lord in the Old Testament is likewise more than an abstract principle, or a human in operation. In Isaiah 11: 1, 42:1 and 61:1f He equips Messiah for His office and ministry. In other places He brings to life as well as creates.

(cf. Ezek. 37:9–10, Ps. 104:30). These details we shall see later, but our over-all conclusion from the Old Testament is that God does not work as a monolithic unity, but as one who expresses Himself in the operations of the Word, the Spirit, and the Angel of the Lord. The New Testament of course, spreads great light on these three, as such.

### **[ii] The Trinity and the New Testament**

We fail to understand the thrust of the New Testament unless we realise that when John the Baptist came speaking of both Messiah and the Spirit, that those who heard him knew in essence what he was saying, even if not all wanted to accept it. He was saying, in effect, “The Kingdom of heaven is at hand. This means its King, Messiah, is also close at hand. He is such as will be able to pour out the Holy Spirit”. In the Old Testament the figure of Messiah was a grand one. So was that of the Holy Spirit. In Isaiah 61:1f. Messiah is anointed with the Holy Spirit. John, even more was making the claim that Messiah would be the one to pour out the Spirit. This was limited to God in the Old Testament prophecies. Consequently Messiah was placed on a very high level, that is the level of Deity.

When we look at the person of Jesus Christ we find the following facts: He is spoken of as the Word by which creation took place (John 1:1–4). He comes into the world by a virginal birth in which the Holy Spirit is the one present to effect conception. He refuses the simple statement that He is a man come from God (John 3:1–2) and claims to be the bread of life sent down from heaven (cf. John 6:32f.), and to have personally come from heaven (John 3:12–13). He has come in order to seek and save that which was lost (Matt. 18:11), has authority to forgive sins (Matt. 9:6), and is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25) and as such will ultimately judge the world (John 5:19–24, Matt. 25:31).

The Holy Spirit, too, comes into view in a manner which transcends, if possible, that of the Old Testament. Being present in the birth narrative of John

and Jesus, He is the one who equips Jesus for His ministry, leads and aids Him in it, and raises Him from the dead, setting Him at the right hand of God. (cf. Rom. 8:11 and Eph. 1:19–21.) Likewise God as the Father is also present in the New Testament writings. His initiation of redemption, His presence with the Spirit and the Son are evidences of a remarkable work shared amongst these three. None of the things of which we have spoken is a proof of the Deity of the Son and the Spirit. However they are proof of a co-ordinated activity of work, and a common goal and plan. For this reason it is good to look at a number of Scriptures which speak of such a threefold work, e.g. Acts 2:32,33, “This Jesus . . . being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he hath shed forth this which you now see and hear”. I Peter 1:2 “Chosen and destined by God the Father, and sanctified for obedience to Christ Jesus”. Matthew 28:19, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. II Corinthians 12:14, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit”.

Having briefly seen the operation of three persons, we now proceed to the next point in our formal argument. It is to trace the Deity of the three, and then to see their essential unity.

### **[iii] The Deity of the Persons**

#### **[a] The Deity of the Father**

When it comes to the Deity of Him who is called Father, the evidences are very clear. In I Corinthians 8:5 Paul says, “For us there is one God, the Father”. In Ephesians 4:6, “One God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all”. Many times He is called, “The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”. There are of course, many references in the Old Testament to God as Father. See Isaiah 43:6–7, 63:16, 64:8, Malachi 2:10, amongst others. In the sermon on the mount Jesus often refers to God as the Father of men.

**[b] The Deity of the Son**

One problem we face is the fact that the man Jesus, born of the woman Mary was man as regards His essential being. Therefore His life and ministry were carried out as a man, and in particular as a man dependent upon God. From Philippians 2:7 it appears that He set aside His prerogatives of power and glory in order to be truly man. This does not mean He set aside His Deity, which would be impossible, but it does mean that when we see Him do great deeds we must not ascribe them to His innate Deity, but to the power of the Father and the Spirit at work both in and through Him. Hence Peter says, “Jesus of Nazareth whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, who went about doing all manner of good and healing those who were oppressed of the devil”, (Acts 10:38). Likewise Jesus said, “I do nothing of myself; the Father who dwells in me, he does the works”. (John 14:10).

We need then, to look at the pre-existence of the Son to see who He was before He became man. John 1 :1–4 says that He was the Word by whom everything was made. It says that when the beginning came, He was already there. He was in fact with God, that is face to face with God, as equal with Him. Some have endeavoured to translate “the word was God” as “the word was a god”. This is, however in contradiction to the syntax of the sentence. Likewise to say, “God was the (or, a) word” is contradictory. John 1:14 says this Word became flesh, that is the Son became the man Jesus. It adds that “We beheld his glory, the glory as of the Father . . .”

The same pre-existence is emphasised in Colossians 1 :15–17, where it is said that everything was created by Him. This obviously makes nonsense of saying He was created before or apart from these, for He could not then have created all things. Similarly in Hebrews 1:2 it is said that He made all the worlds, as a Son. I Corinthians 8:5–6 makes it clear that He was the mediator by which creation came into being, and this cancels any statement about His being a creature.

Other references are made to His pre-existence. In John 17:5 Jesus refers to the glory which He had with

the Father before the foundation of the world, and in 17:24 He repeats the thought, adding to this the love that God had for Him before the foundation of the world. Our conclusion then is that if He is Creator of the entire universe, of “things in heaven, and things on earth, visible and invisible, thrones and principalities and powers” (Col. 1:15–17) then He can have no less than Deity.

It is no wonder that many have identified Him, in the Old Testament, with the Angel of the Lord. Certainly, in the vision in the temple (cf. Isa. 6) it is said that the Lord was high and lifted up, and in John 12:41 (and context) it is clear that John understands the one seated on the throne to be the eternal Son Himself. Add to this Jesus’ statement, “Before Abraham was, I am”, and the Jew’s rage at this statement, and it is further dear that He is not simply man, and is greater, even than the angels, and this must be either some uncreated being lower than God, yet above angels, or He must have Deity Himself. We are bound to come to this latter conclusion.

However this is by no means the end of the matter. Jesus claims a unique relationship with God the Father. In John 5:17 He says, “My Father is working still, and I am working”. He meant, “My Father has ever worked, and will ever, and I work with him”. The Jews saw this as nothing less than a claim to Deity. John records, “This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath, but also called God his Father, making himself equal with God”. To the Jew His statement was a claim to Deity. Again in John 10:30 Jesus says, “I and the Father are one”. He does not simply mean, “As one, that is we agree together”, but, “We are one in being, essence and operation”. Again the Jews see it as a claim to Deity and seek to kill Him.

Jesus makes much of His relationship with God the Father, in the Gospel of John. He makes such statements as “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son, **that all may honour the Son even as they honour the Father**”. (John 5:23). “You know neither me nor my Father: if you knew me,

you would know my Father also". (John 8:19). "He who hates me, hates my Father also." (John 15:23). "He that has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9).

When it comes to the nature of the Sonship, it is clear from the first three Gospels that Jesus does not give Himself the title "Son of God" so much as it is given to Him. Peter (Matt. 16: 16f. ) says "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". The term "Son of God" is applied to Israel as a nation, to members of Israel as persons, to angels sometimes, but uniquely to Jesus. Hence when the high priest asks Jesus whether He is "the Messiah, the Son of God" Jesus replies in the affirmative, and the high priest calls it blasphemy (Matt. 26:63–64), meaning Christ has claimed Deity. In fact in Matthew 11:27 Jesus says that the Father has given all things into His hand, meaning the universe, men's salvation, and the outcome of the work of God. The thought is also repeated in John 3:35, where the statement is that the Father has **loved** the Son and given all things into His hands.

This leads us to the fact of His unique Sonship. In John 1: 14,18 and other places Jesus is called "the only Son", or "the only begotten Son" meaning that His Sonship is unique. Hence at His baptism the Father says "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased". The same thought is repeated at His Transfiguration, and a glance at Romans 1: 4, and Acts 13:33 (cf. Ps. 2:7 and context) shows that His Sonship is indeed unique. Hence the writer of Hebrews asks whether God has ever said to an angel, "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee". He goes on to point out that all the angels worship the Son when He comes into the world (Heb. 1:6, Luke 2:13–14), and it is of the Son that God says, "Thy throne, O God is for ever and ever, the righteous sceptre is the sceptre of thy kingdom". It is clear that it is this sort of thought that sent the high priest into a rage, the kind of claim which the leading Jews would have judged as blasphemous, because it constituted a claim to Deity. The use of Psalms 2. 45, and 110, help to establish the Deity of Christ.

Other elements add to these indications Thomas addresses Him as “My Lord and my God . and Jesus does not rebuke him. Paul says that “in him (the Son) dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily”. (Col. 2:9). Romans 9:5 has . . . Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever”. Titus 2:13 reads concerning the return of Christ, ‘awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ”. In I John 5:20 to be in Christ is to be in the true God. Hence it reads. “We are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life”.

Even now we have not finished. It is clear that the Son has a unique relationship with the Father, and that such a relationship could be accorded in this manner to no other creature. Yet the relationship issues in the action of the Son. Hence the Father does not come, in person to do the works of redemption and restoration. He actually sends His Son. This is stated forty times in John’s Gospel alone. Whilst the Father works in and with Him yet the Son goes from the Father, from heaven, and comes into this world, by incarnation. He solemnly affirms the Son by saying on two occasions that the Son is the Son, and on one by telling listeners to hear Him. (Matt. 3:17, 17:5). Jesus said the Father bears witness to Him (John 5:37) and claimed also that His relationship with the Father was such that no one could know God as the Father apart from Him, the Son. Hence God is called, particularly by Paul, “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”. This unique relationship is both recognised and emphasised. What is often missed is that the work the Son does is of the same quality as that which the Father does. That is why Jesus said, “My Father is always working, and I also am working”. Hence when He gave the Lord’s Prayer to His disciples He did not include Himself in it. God was particularly “My Father!”

We have every right, then, to conclude that the Son, being eternal, being one with the Father, and doing the very work of the Father is God. He may not only be called “the Son of God”, but also, “God the Son”.

We will see this even more when we look at the work of the Son before the creation, in creation, in redemption, and in the final end time.

### **[c] The Deity of the Holy Spirit**

In the thinking of some the word “Spirit” relates to insubstantiality, that is that which lacks material being. This is often associated with the Spirit being impersonal element. Hence the Spirit is often called “it” rather than being referred to as “He”. The Scriptures describe Him very clearly as having personal being. Personal being as we know it has will, intelligence and feeling, or rather exercises these three elements. Quite briefly it can be seen that the Spirit can be grieved, vexed, lied to, and quenched as one is who has given orders or revelations and is deliberately ignored. These elements can be seen in Ephesians 4:30, Isaiah 63:10, Acts 5:3, I Thessalonians 5:19.

His being as person is also indicated in that He is the Spirit of love, of power, and the fruits He produces relate to the affectional and character states of persons, such as love, joy, peace, long-suffering, self-control and so on. He is often indicated as relating to groups or persons and making communications with them, sometimes giving commands, aiding them in need, and guiding where it is necessary. See Galatians 5:22f, Romans 5:5, 15:30, Acts 8:29, 10:19, 13:1f, 15:28.

Once we have established the fact of His being person, we can proceed to see that He is also eternal Spirit. He is called such in Hebrew 9:14, but it is in Genesis we see that just as the Word (the Logos) was present already when creation began, so also was the Spirit. He was powerfully operative at that time, acting as the agent of creation. He was indeed the creative Spirit, or as He is also called “the Spirit of life”. See Romans 8:2–3, II Corinthians 3:6, Romans 8:9–11, and Ezekiel 37 :9–10. So essential is He in operation that the Psalmist writes (104:30) “When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created and thou renewest the face of the ground”. In Psalm 139:7 the writer asks. “Whither shall I go from thy Spirit, or whither shall I flee from thy presence?” as though God and the Spirit are one.

We will later see the work of the Father, the Son and the Spirit in the events of creation, redemption, and restoration, but it is clear that these matters cannot be understood as Trinitarian in operation unless we understand that the Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of the Lord”, “the Spirit of God”, “the Spirit of His Son”, “the Spirit of Jesus”, “the Spirit of Christ”, “the Spirit of the Father”. By these titles we understand that in the fellowship of the three members of the Godhead He is unique in relating to the other two in respect to their persons and their works. It is said of Him that He alone searches the deeps of God (I Cor. 2: 10–11) and it is apparent that only one who is of the same nature and essence as these others can be fitted and able to explore such deeps. This in fact presupposes His Deity.

We have seen that the Son is not simply a mode of the Father, for the Son was sent into the world, and returned again to the Father. Likewise the Spirit has been sent from God and is not simply a mode of Him, nor an emanation, but a person operating in the function of Deity, for what He does no influence or impersonal power could do. In fact it is impossible to speak of an impersonal power in the sense of God, for the Holy Spirit is rational in that He has choice, intelligence, feeling and action. In the Gospels we see Him coming to Jesus as the Messiah, anointing Him with power, leading, motivating and empowering Him for all tasks that He does, and then assisting Him in the events of the crucifixion, the resurrection and ascension. In the Book of Acts He is again in action in the events of Messiah and the Father as they are worked out in and through the church, the body of Christ in the world. It is ridiculous to think of any being having less than Deity who could outwork this ministry. This is particularly so because the events of the Father, Messiah and the Spirit working out in and through the church all lead up to the eschaton, the consummation of the age of mankind.

#### **[d] The Nature of the Trinity**

We are now in some position to come to a conclusion. It is this, that the Father has Deity, the Son has Deity and the Spirit has Deity.

In the development of Christian dogma, from the end of the second century through to the early fourth century, the doctrine of the Trinity had to be rationalised in terms of the current language, and in particular the Greek philosophical terms of the time. In this sense it was said that the Father, the Son and the Spirit were of the same essence. Whilst the term is not satisfactory it helps us to see that in their essential being there is no difference between the Father and Son and Spirit, yet in their function and operation they are seen by those manifestations which are consonant with their names or offices.

It was not surprising that certain heresies developed concerning the Trinity. They were, briefly, as follows:— **Monarchianism** which teaches that the Son is an attribute of God, and not of the same substance, nor even a person at all: **Modalism or Sabellianism** which holds that God is manifested, sometimes as Father, sometimes as Son, and sometimes as Holy spirit: **Patripassionsim** or the view that God the Father, the one person in the Godhead, came down to earth and suffered on the Cross—apparently renouncing and deserting the sovereignty of the universe whilst doing so! Swedenborg followed this heresy: **Tritheism** which falsely teaches that there are three Gods, as against the Trinitarian view that there are three persons in the Godhead, none being a god in himself: **Arianism**, which teaches that Christ was the first and highest created being, who in turn, created the Holy Spirit: **Unitarianism** which teaches that there is one God, Jesus is the best of men, but only a man and the Holy Spirit is only an influence.

Because the Trinity is unique it is not surprising that we cannot understand it. Some people like to use analogies, for these seem to show what the Trinity is like. They do not, really, and often in fact demonstrate modalism, rather than the unity of the three persons, which is through their nature as love.

### **3. The Action and Significance of The Trinity**

One of our problems in dealing with a subject like the Trinity is that we are trying to form a mental concept, and then to fit into it all the elements we gather together concerning God. Knowledge of God in the Bible is not so much a set of abstract propositions, as it is that we come to know God by His acts. This is generally how we come to know anyone. We do not say that such acts do not lead to ideas about God, or that ideas about God are not in the Bible. We mean that God reveals Himself through what He does.

If we wish to understand the nature of the Trinity we must come to know what it means to say that God is Father, that the Son is the Son, and the Spirit the Spirit. We can know from two points of view (i) We learn about God from His acts. and (ii) We relate to God in His acts. In fact it is doubtful whether we can even learn about God from His acts unless we become practical participators in those acts, especially as they personally concern us. For this reason we are going to embark on a study of the acts of God, looking at their purpose and goal. In observing these we will discover the real nature of God, and hence, the Trinity, for we will be seeing the operations of each of the persons.

#### **[i] God's Purpose for Creation**

In Revelation 4:7–11 we read of the worship and joy of the heavenly creatures at the very fact of the God who creates. They burst into rapturous praise because God has cared to create the world. They say it is for His pleasure or His will that He does this. It would seem then that the key to understanding God's act would be to understand the nature and purpose of creation. In this we would be correct for Psalm 19 speaks of two things:—(a) That the universe is declaring the glory of God, and (b) That this relates to the law of God which is perfect. Romans 3:21 indicates that normally the nature of God, especially in His righteousness is known through His law. Romans 1:19–20 says that all that needs to be known about God can be seen through the visible, created things. Both His eternal power and His

Deity can be seen in the things which are made. Hebrews 11:1–3 tells us that faith—which is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen—aids us in believing that the worlds were made by His word of power, so that the things that are seen are made from things which do not appear.

For this reason we must not understand that God made something and so a Creator is demanded, so much as the kind of Creator is seen from the nature of what He created, and the purpose for which it is in operation. To put it another way— creation must be structured to function according to the will and nature of God. Whilst that will may be opposed, even by created things, yet in its ultimate that will must succeed and God be vindicated as successful in His creation, and so complete in His being. This means that when we come to consider creation we will not be looking at it as though some artefact is being made, so much as a whole process is being put in motion.

The plan or mystery of the plan of God is mentioned and unfolded in several places. These should be read closely. See Ephesians 1:3–14, 3:1–12, Colossians 1:24–27, Acts 3:19–21, Revelation 10:1–7. The fact that there is a plan is shown by the unity of the Scriptures which indicate that history moves in linear fashion to its appointed end. Christ, for His part showed that He did all things according to the will of God, and that in fact in the law, the psalms and the prophets all things were written concerning Himself, as they had happened and were yet to happen. He did what He did “in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled”. The early church was well aware of the plan so that Peter could say on the day of Pentecost, “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men”. Again, some time later Peter said, “And now brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled . . . repent therefore and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may

come from the presence of the Lord and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom the heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophet from of old". See Acts 2.23, 3:19–21.

The substance of the plan is as follows:— God is called the Father of glory (Eph. 1:17). Creation is to show that glory, and because the glory is not simply a spectacle— something to be looked at— but is a glory which accomplishes a goal, and acts in the process of that accomplishment, creation must likewise be the demonstration of God's acts. Each act is with purpose. Ultimately the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. (Hab. 2:14). At the same time the glory of God's sons—His family—will be unveiled (Rom. 8:18–23) God's glory is "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14) so that His sons "will be to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph. 1:4–5), and also "to the praise of His glory" (Eph. 1:12–14). In a way of speaking this glory of grace and glory of God will be the measure manifested of God's glory as Father. This is the "plan of the mystery". The very creation itself which is at present given to displaying God's glory will also be released into the same "liberty of the glory of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:21) and fully explicate the glory of the Creator.

### **[ii] God's Mode for Creation**

Hebrews 1:2 says that God created the ages by a Son. Hebrews 11:3 says that the ages were created by the Word of God. Colossians 1:15–17 informs us that not only was this visible world brought into being, but that principalities and powers, as well as "things in heaven" were created. We are therefore shown that God's universe is dynamic. The thought of "ages" suggests both movement and purpose. It is also necessary to see that God's will cannot be thwarted by anything which happens in time, or by reason of His created beings. If His plan were frustrated it would mean that He were not truly the sovereign God. We must come to this conclusion, then, that God has

incorporated everything which goes contrary to His will and uses it in His plan. We should be even bolder and say that He has planned all things, no matter what they are, and we may say this provided we do not make Him in any sense to be evil or the initiator of evil, however difficult it may appear to be to escape such a conclusion.

### [a] The Father in Creation

This is where we begin our understanding of the Trinitarian action of God in all history. We have to understand why it is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, are involved in creation, and following creation all the events which ensue, beginning with creation and operating until the “establishing of all things”—, that is the new creation.

It is God the Father who initiates creation. Peter says we may entrust ourselves to a faithful Creator. (I Pet.4: 19), meaning that creation is good, as God has made it, and we can rest upon His nature as Creator. It is this message which Paul seeks to communicate to pagans (Acts 14:15–17) when he says God has gone on doing good and giving them rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying their hearts with food and gladness. To other pagans he points out that God gives to men breath, and life, and everything (Acts 17: 24–26). The Sermon on the Mount discloses the goodness of the Creator. Yet the full truth is that God has created as **Father**. This also comes through in the Sermon on the Mount. It is disclosed in the fact that God’s world, as created, is an harmonious functional unity. Its principles of action are often called the moral law, but this law may be better known as the law of love — “Love is the fulfilling (or ‘fullness’) of the law”. Passages such as the following should be read to show the Father-nature of God in creation:— Malachi 2:10, Isaiah 63:16, 64:8, Matthew 5:43–48, 6:7–11, Ephesians 3:9, I Timothy 4:4 and 6:17.

The deepest truth of creation is that before creation God had planned that His sons should be before Him, holy and blameless, indeed had planned that they should be His sons. This is seen in passages such as

Isaiah 43:6–71 (cf. 6:21), John 11:51–52, Ephesians 1:3–5, 3:7–11, Colossians 1:27–29 and Romans 8:28–30 (cf. I John 3:1–3). We must conclude then that the work of God as Creator was simultaneously—by nature of the case—the work of God as Father. In some sense the universe must have been intended as a home. Hence Paul’s two statements (a) That all fatherhood (or familyhood) is derived from God and (b) There is one God and Father of all who is above all, and through all, and in all. This is the equivalent of Paul’s other statement, “For us there is one God, the Father . . .” (See Eph. 3:15, 4:6, and I Cor. 8:6).

### [b] The Son in Creation

It is clear that when God says, “Let us make man in our own image” that the plural sense of the persons must be included. The lineaments of that image must contain the elements of fatherhood, sonship and spirit. They must reflect the total nature of God. Man must be essentially trinitarian in being, though not Trinitarian. He must derive from the totality of the Godhead. For this reason the Son must be the mediator of the creation. And, of course, He is. This is made very clear in John 1:1–4, Colossians 1:15–17, I Corinthians 8:6, and Hebrews 1:2. All things are made by Him. In Him is life, the light of men. The ages are created by a Son. In Him all things are created.

We can say then, that as creation is formed paternally, so it is also structured filially. This is why later, as man was formed in the image of God, the Son can become incarnate in the “likeness of (sinful) flesh”, that is to say actual flesh, actual humanity. We resist the temptation, here to enlarge upon the powers of the Son, and the significance of His act of creation, but we must pause to see one factor which is most significant of the plan of God. It is this, that in creation is inherent the final climax and goal of God’s plan, namely that in Christ men and women shall become the sons of God, fitted for the eternal home. We mean that the creation of itself does not lead men to the predestined sonship, but it is **in Christ** that this is purposed. Therefore when the Father and the Son create they create with this in mind.

The creation at the beginning is in view of the creation, or new creation at the end of time.

### **[c] The Spirit in Creation**

The Spirit, of course is in creation. We have seen that He is the mighty creative Spirit, the “Spirit of life” (cf. Gen. 1:1–3, Ps. 104:29–30, Ps. 139:7 Ezek. 37 :9–10, Rom. 8:2–3, II Cor. 3:6). “When you send forth your Spirit they are created” the Psalmist cried. When God breathes into man, and gives to man “ life and breath and everything” it is through the Spirit.

Who is this Spirit? We might ask similarly, “Who is this Father? Who is this Son?” We cannot know their natures except by what they do, and until we see what they do we will not know. We have seen that it is this Spirit who searches “ the deeps of God “ who communicates God to us. We have also seen that His fruit represents His own innate nature — love, joy peace, longsuffering, and so on. When then He is the agent of creation He must grace creation with His essential nature. Creation must have the ministry of the Spirit across it. His lineaments, to, must be in man, and in all things.

When to this we add the fact that He is simultaneously the Spirit of the Father (Matt. 10:20 cf. John chapters 14–16) and the Spirit of the Son (Gal. 4:6) we see how apt He is as agent of the Father and Son in the work of creation. We can also see that “ Spirit” is indispensable to the true nature of things. This makes so much sense of “God is Spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth, and such the Father ever seeketh to worship him”. (John 4:20f.) Truly “deep calls unto deep”, and “like unto like”.

### **[iii] God’s Communication with Creation**

That Creation which having been brought into being, lies concealed, is a mystery to itself. This is why fear can be generated. Where there is guilt there is always fear of fate, but where there is the revelation of destiny fear has no place. The Scriptures tell us that the

creation itself reveals the nature of God, hence there is no need for fear where there is conformity with God. However God has done more than communicate through His creation. He has chosen to communicate to man His divine intention. Whilst “the mystery of the plan has been hid in God for ages” (Eph. 3:9) yet it is not because God would not communicate it. Acts 3:19–21, Luke 1:68–70 and following, and Revelation 10:1–7 show us that God has announced His plan by His prophets “which have been since the world began”. Jesus said that Abel was the first of the prophets to be killed, and we assume that from the beginning of man’s history God’s ultimate intention for His people was known. This makes the rebellion of man more reprehensible for it means he consciously rejected God’s plan for him. This is why man determined to destroy or deny the glory of God — His plan for men’s eternal destiny. Man tried desperately to alter that plan. Paul shows that this plan has been deliberately revealed to man through Christ and the Spirit.

#### **[iv] The–Trinitarian Ministry of Redemption**

##### **[a] The Father**

As we can come to understand God in creation, so we see Him more fully through redemption. By redemption we mean that act by means of which man is released from the consequences of his sin—eternal death. We also mean that release from the powers of Satan, his evil hosts, the corrupt world system, and the fleshliness of man which delights in evil, but is destroyed because of it. We mean the full release into new and eternal life.

Some see the fall of man into sin by his rebellion against God as a part failure of creation. This is why they see redemption as an expedient of God to meet a fearful contingency. They see it as God’s corrective for the regrettable failure of man. However it is more than that. God had planned redemption from before the foundation of the world. This is clear from such Scriptures as I Peter 1:18–20, Revelation 13:8, I Peter 1:1, Ephesians 1:4–7 and other passages.

Only by creation can we see how splendid God made man, and only by the fall the dreadful nature of his venture into evil. Only by the flood can we see something of the wrath of God, and only by His covenant with Noah His mercy and grace. In the Covenant with Abraham, and its outworking with Israel we can see the grace of God working in history. All of this leads in a purposeful sweep towards the events of the New Testament.

What is probably difficult for us to understand is that God does not become a Redeemer in history because the necessity is forced upon Him, but that He is essentially of His nature eternally the God of grace and love. When Isaiah says, “Thou, Lord art our Father, our Redeemer from of old is thy name” (63:19) he means that ‘Father’ and ‘Redeemer’ are almost synonymous. Who knows of a true father who will not seek to liberate his child from trouble and danger and destruction? When we say that redemption is inherent in creation we are not speaking mechanistically. We mean that God had planned that creation should go through the processes of redemption, in accordance with His Father–nature. This, of course, in no way excuses man of his responsibility for his own sin and rebellion. Redemption is entirely a matter of grace.

### **[b] The Son**

We must understand that redemption, planned from before the foundation of the world does not commence with the baptism of Christ or even incarnation, but with creation. Hence we would expect to find the Son working throughout time; any other conclusion is inadmissible. This is what we do find. When Jesus said, “My Father has always been working and I also work”, He did not limit this to the time of ministry. He had said, “Before Abraham was, I am” and also that “Abraham rejoiced to see my day”. Consonant with this the early church understood “Christ in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:26–27). They saw that the burden of the prophets had been “Thus it behoved Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name amongst all nations” (Luke 24: 44f.).

They also understood that Israel had all eaten of special food and drink, especially from the Rock, and the Rock that & loved them in the wilderness was Christ (I Cor. 10:1–4). John, as we have seen, said that it was the glory of the Son which Isaiah had seen in the temple. The mysterious figures of the Angel of the Lord and even Melchisedec the high priest, could well have been this very one in action. Some see the Shekinah glory as the Son tabernacled amongst God's people (cf. John 1:14).

What, however, is clear is that in His coming He was fulfilling the historic plan of God. His relationship with the Father is seen in all the Gospels, especially in the Gospel of John. He made the claim that He was uniquely related to the Father and it was His will He was doing. Later we will see how intimate was that action.

### **[c] The Spirit**

From creation onwards the Spirit is always present. Any manual on the subject of the person and work of the Spirit will show that He was present in the primal families of the world, in the patriarchs, and in Israel. He is the one who aids in the building of the tabernacle and its furniture, who leads God's people in the wilderness, and who inspires the prophets. From Him come the intimations of the Suffering Servant, the Messiah of God, for it is by Him, the Spirit, that God anoints His Messiah. It is apparent that the Spirit is always occupied in the work of redemption.

The New Testament opens with the Spirit being purposefully present in the narratives of the births of John and Jesus. There is expectancy concerning the Kingdom and the outpouring of the Spirit which is to usher in the Kingdom. Christ is to baptise in (or with) this Spirit, and is Himself thus baptised. Following this He commences His ministry, the Spirit giving Him power to execute the will of God (cf. Acts 10:38, Luke 4:17f., Isa. 61:1, Matt. 12:14ff . especially v. 28).

Jesus does nothing but by the Spirit of God. Born of the Spirit, baptised and aided by Him, He also offers Himself through this eternal Spirit, on the Cross (Heb. 9:14).

He is raised by the Spirit from the dead, and seated by Him at the right hand of God—the true place of the triumphant Messiah. (cf. Rom. 8: 11, Eph.1: 19–21) . All of this shows us that He is present for the work of redemption.

### **[v] The Trinitarian Work of Restoration**

The Scriptures see a day of the Lord which is at once the action of final judgement upon all evil, and the liberation of the elect of God. They also see the time between the ascension of Christ and His return as a period in which the people of God are being sanctified and glorified, whilst evil waxes worse and worse, in preparation for its judgement. The climax of history can be described as “Then comes the end when He shall have put down all rule and authority and power, when all things are under his feet, and he shall give the Kingdom to the Father that God may be all in all”. (I Cor. 15:24–28). That is, the Son works through history until the end comes.

At the same time God as Father is said to be working. It is He who raised Christ from the dead by His glory and set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, and causes all powers to become subject to Christ. When Christ returns it is in “the glory of the Father”, and when every knee bows to Christ as Lord it is really “to the glory of the Father”. (cf. Matt.16:27, Phil. 2:9–11).

Yet, again, it is the Spirit who is working. He is sent at Pentecost by both Father and Son, and comes to bear witness to Christ (John 15:25–26, Acts 1:8). He works through the church, bringing the people of God to know and do the will of God. He brings conviction to the world, and causes the justification of God to release men from guilt. Through Him men are washed, sanctified and justified. (I Cor. 6:9–11, Titus 3:3–7). It will be He who in the last days is “the breath of His (Christ’s) mouth” who will destroy evil (cf. Isa. 11: 1–4, II Thess. 2:8) and who welcomes the returning Son (Rev. 22:17). Throughout the age of redemption and restoration He is the Spirit of the Father and the Son.

By Him both Father and Son indwell God's people (John 14:23 Gal. 4:6, Matt. 10:20, and Eph. 3:16f ).

We conclude then, that from creation to creation, the work of the Trinity is a perfectly co-ordinated one. Having been planned it is executed purposefully, and in detail. Father, Son and Spirit work together in a harmony which spells no less than love, and completes the eternal plan. Each has His own ministry, and all three work as one. Each is indispensable to the other. What they do reveals what they are. There is no metaphysical mystery in regard to their being. What man needs to know he can know—as a man can know —through God's action, as revealed in His Word, and as experienced by the objects of His revelation and love.

#### **4. Conclusion — The Trinitarian Revelation**

If the outcome of Trinitarian action is as God planned it, then His nature is vindicated. Being called the “Father of glory” it is interesting to see that Christ comes “in the glory of the Father” and “to the glory of the Father”. It is also significant in His last recorded prayer before His betrayal that He asked to have that glory restored which had been His before the foundation of the world, i.e. prior to Creation. Paul speaks of “awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ”, and Peter speaks of the Holy Spirit as being “the spirit of glory”. (See Titus 2:13, I Pet. 4:14.)

In Isaiah 43:6–7 (cf. Isaiah 60:21) we read that God commands the north and the south to disgorge His sons. He calls them from afar, to Himself for “they are my sons whom I have created for my glory, whom I have formed and made”. This accords with the sons spoken of in Ephesians 1: 3–14 who are “ for the praise of the glory of His grace”, and “the praise of his glory”. The term, then, “ Father of glory “ shows us that God is planning, in history to have that family which will outline His glory as Father. That these cannot be His sons apart from the Son and the Spirit is the great

teaching of the New Testament. They came to the Father through the Son, and to the Son through the Spirit. Having come the Father, the Son and the Spirit indwell the hearts of the redeemed.

This truth of indwelling is astonishing. It leads us back directly to the fact and truth of Creation. Man was made totally in the total image of God. For this reason he is able to be indwelt. The lineaments of that Trinity accord with his creational self as it was unimpaired by sin, and now with his new-creational self restored by God. The amazing and exciting fact now begins to appear—man is a creature destined to be indwelt by the Trinity and restored to his full being by redemption. Even more his sonship was planned, not primarily to be complete and matured by the initial Creation, but to be total by virtue of the New Creation, the external objective work of the Trinity in redemption, and the internal and subjective application of that through the indwelling Trinity.

We see now the goal and triumph of God in His Trinitarian action and Person. He has brought, through glorification, His own sons to that place of fulfilment whereby they can fellowship with the very Godhead, and be partakers in the divine nature. Out of the crucible of failure and suffering, out of the chaos of sin and loss, and through the suffering of the act of redemption God has achieved His goal and plan.

One thing only needs to be said. It is of the relationship and action within the Godhead. Church history shows us the theological wrecks which resulted from imposing human standards upon the persons of the Trinity. Adoptionism was a false view of the Son which said that Christ only became Son at His baptism, or by what He accomplished in the work of redemption. Adoptionism sought to safeguard the authority of the Father, but it failed. Likewise others confused the principle of subordination with that of inferiority. The Athanasian Creed was a brilliant work created to assure men of the equality of the persons of the Trinity, for Arian attacks had been made upon the Deity of the Son.

The truth is that subordination does not denote inferiority, but the basic structures of authority. We cannot avoid seeing that all history leads to the glory of the Father. For this purpose the Son is always subject to the Father, for that is true essential Sonship. Likewise, the Spirit being the Spirit of the Father and the Son seeks to glorify both by His ministry. The conclusion is that all serve, in the essence of their love, their eternal plan and purpose to reveal their being of glory as one God, not simply retaining but manifesting that most marvellous and adorable inner dynamic unity of essential love. How else can it be said?

On the Cross the Father's glory, given to the Son portrays the Father as Father. We say it is a human way—God needed that glory to reject Christ (as Man—for—men) in order to reconcile the world to Himself. He was in Christ, doing this. He made Christ to be sin; He laid on Him the iniquity of man, setting Him forth as a propitiation. The Son, for His part offered Himself up for us, but His offering was total filial obedience— never before seen in this manner, measure, or quality. Yet even the Son had to offer Himself through the eternal Spirit. What love! What compassion! What a display of the might of co-ordinated holy love! This is the true Trinitarian revelation of its own Godhead.

For us the significance is this, that God is known by His action and revelation. Made in His image, and now re-created in the same, we are being changed from one stage of glory unto another. Our inner structures too, are in a manner of speaking, trinitarian. We are made for love, though not apart from God. Our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ, and we are partakers in the divine nature. All we are cries out for God, and all we are finds its true being in Him. Hence we seek to baptise men and women into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and we say to them as to ourselves, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you, always”.