

## ARTICLES 8 & 9

### GOD IS ONE IN ESSENCE, YET DISTINGUISHED IN THREE PERSONS

#### SCRIPTURE PROOF OF THIS DOCTRINE

##### GOD IS ONE

When the apostles began their work of preaching the gospel, they preached that God is one. This is what they had learned from Scripture passages such as Deuteronomy 6:4: *“Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one!”* Therefore Paul stated in his letter to the Corinthians, and in his letter to Timothy, that *“there is one God”* (1 Corinthians 8:6 and 1 Timothy 2:5).

##### GOD IS THREE

In the Old Testament one finds evidence that God is also more than one. While God is one, He is also three. Says Article 9: *“The testimonies of Scripture which lead us to believe this Holy Trinity are written in many places of the Old Testament.”* DeBres then selected two texts from the Old Testament (Genesis 1:26,27 and Genesis 3:22) and commented on what he read in these texts, namely, that they suggest a plurality in this one God. Other passages in the Old Testament do likewise. For example, in Exodus 3:2-4 we read of God appearing to Moses in the burning bush. Here God is referred to as *“the Angel of the LORD.”* Moses also hears the voice of God addressing him. The Angel is God, but is also mentioned separately from God. The best explanation for the identity of the Angel of the LORD is that this is the second person of the Trinity: Christ pre-incarnate. In Psalm 139:1 David addresses God, *“O LORD, You have searched me and known me,”* but further on he speaks to the Spirit saying, in verse 7, *“where can I go from Your Spirit?”* Here godly attributes are ascribed to the Spirit.

Article 9 states that whereas the Old Testament is somewhat obscure with regard to the Trinity, the New Testament is much clearer. In the course of time God increasingly revealed more of Himself. In John 5:17 we read how Jesus upset the Jews by saying, *“My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.”* Why did this upset the Jews? One finds the answer in verse 18: *“Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He ... said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.”* In the verses 19 and 20 Jesus elaborated on this point in response to the Jews’ reaction: *“The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner ... For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will.”* Here Jesus is saying that the Father and the Son are one; the Son echoes, copies, the Father. To give life is a godly action and the Father and the Son are equally capable of doing this. Inherent in what Jesus says is that there exists a simultaneous unity and separation between the Father and the Son.

At the time of His ascension Jesus said to His disciples, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28:19). By placing the three divine persons on the same level, Jesus essentially said that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. Paul likewise, in his conclusion to his second letter to the Corinthians, spoke of a Triune God when he wrote: *“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all”* (2 Corinthians 13:14). The apostles, among the heathens of their day, as insisted on by Scripture, preached that God is one and that God is three. Those who accepted these two realities did so in faith.

#### ATTACKS ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The struggles that arose over the years concerning the doctrine of the Trinity caused the church fathers to introduce the term ‘TRINITY’ in an effort to express concisely the notion that God is both one and three: a ‘TRI-UNITY.’ How the doctrine of the Trinity was to be understood was much debated in the early years of church history. A group of teachers arose, known as ‘Monarchians’ (mono = one; arch = ruler) who insisted that God is ONE, thereby denying the reality that God is three. In time there arose two streams of Monarchians: the ‘Adoptionists’ and the ‘Modalists.’

##### Adoptionists:

The Adoptionists denied the Godhead of Christ. They claimed that Jesus of Nazareth was an ordinary man with earthly parents, Joseph and Mary. What set Him apart from other people was His godly character, His

overflowing love for God and His great zeal to glorify God by doing His will. God observed Jesus' great love for Him, and responded by pouring out His Spirit on Jesus, thereby making Him a holy person – and so adopting Him for Himself. They claimed that when the Bible speaks of Jesus as being the Son of God, it refers to this adoption of Jesus by God. The Holy Spirit was then understood to be a power, a strength, going out from God.

A well-known Adoptionist was Arius, who claimed that there was a time when Jesus did not exist. Present day Jehovah's Witnesses are also Adoptionists.

### **Modalists:**

The Modalists (mode = form; ie, God takes on different forms) said that God can be compared to an earthly father who wears different hats, or assumes different roles, depending on where he is. For example, one might call his father 'Dad' at home, 'sir' at school, and 'elder' at church. So it is with God: He is one God who wears three different hats, ie, He was Father in the Old Testament, Son in the New Testament and Spirit after Pentecost. From this it follows that the person who died on the cross was simply 'the Father wearing the hat of Saviour' (so-called 'patripassionism').

### DEFENCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY: EARLY HISTORY

In the face of these heresies the early church was repeatedly called to defend the truth. Hence the Synod of Nicea was called together by Emperor Constantine in 325 AD. This synod declared Arius and the Adoptionists to be wrong in their view regarding the Trinity. However, Arius did not relent. Eventually his opponent, Athanasius, was declared wrong in his teaching and was exiled. In fact, in the course of the following years, the church effectively embraced the doctrine of Arius, namely, that Jesus is not the Son of God but is adopted by God. However, if Jesus is not the Son of God, there can be no salvation. Lord's Day 6 explains that it is impossible for a sinner to die and pay for the sins of others. Hence, in effect, the whole Christian faith was at stake.

God led events in such a way that Arius' teaching was once again condemned by the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD. This Council adopted a statement of faith that has become known as the Nicene Creed (*Book of Praise*, p.437). On comparing the Nicene Creed with the Apostles' Creed one notices that both can be divided into three parts, according to the persons of the Trinity. The Synod of 381 AD simply took the Apostles' Creed and elaborated on the articles it contained in order to fight heresy and to state more explicitly the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, the opening line of the Apostles' Creed: "*I believe in God the Father almighty,*" is expanded in the Nicene Creed to state: "*I believe in one God, the Father Almighty.*" Further, the second statement of the Apostles' Creed: "*I believe in Jesus Christ,*" is expanded in the second paragraph of the Nicene Creed to explain who Jesus Christ is: "*God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made....*" Again, the statement of the Apostles' Creed concerning the Holy Spirit: "*I believe in the Holy Spirit,*" is expanded in the fourth paragraph of the Nicene Creed to explain that He is God: "*the Lord and Giver of life.*" By placing in a creed what the church learned from the Word of God, the early church sought to arm the believers against the errors of the Adoptionists and the Modalists.

Not long afterward, the confession made in the Nicene Creed was threatened once again. The followers of Arius were not about to give up. However God preserved His church by granting that, in the course of time, yet another creed was formulated in defence of the doctrine of the Trinity. This newest creed, known as the Athanasian Creed, expanded further on the doctrine that the Son and the Spirit, together with the Father, are true God. This creed, printed in the *Book of Praise*, p.438, condemns the teaching of the Adoptionists and the Modalists. Article 3 states emphatically: "*And the catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.*"

### GOD: INCOMPREHENSIBLE

No, after having read all three creeds, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed, we may still be none the wiser as to how it is possible that the three Persons of God are one and how the one God is three Persons. The Adoptionists and the Modalists tried so hard to understand God. But no matter how hard we try, we will have to conclude that such is the greatness of God that He is beyond our understanding. This concept of '3=1' and '1=3' simply cannot be understood by the finite, human mind. The Adoptionists and the Modalists tried to bring God down to a human level so that people can understand how God is 'put together.' This is something we may never do on account of God's infinite greatness.

There is much God has allowed the human mind to understand. But understand my God? Understand the Trinity? No, I cannot. What shall I then do? Deny and reject it? No! All there is for me to do is to say with

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humility that yes, it is enough that the Bible tells me God is one yet three, three yet one. Though this appears to me to be a contradiction, God says it and therefore the only fitting response on my part is one of humble adoration: what a God I have!

Daily I struggle with the ups and downs of life. I do not understand the various things God allows to happen to me. But really, if I cannot understand who my God is, can I expect to understand why He does what He does, also in my life? No. In my struggles and concerns it is for me to accept humbly that whatever God does, He does well. He is Yahweh, my Father in Jesus Christ, and at the same time the infinitely great, sovereign Creator of the world. This great God is my Father and so I am safe, very safe, with Him.

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