

# “We Believe It on the Ground of the Word of God”

## A Sermon on Article Nine of the Belgic Confession.

*Texts: Luke 1:26-36; Genesis 1:26-27*

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### Article 9 – Scripture Proof of This Doctrine

All this we know both from the testimonies of Holy Scripture<sup>1</sup> and from the respective works of the three Persons, and especially those we perceive in ourselves. The testimonies of Scripture which lead us to believe this Holy Trinity are written in many places of the Old Testament. It is not necessary to mention them all; it is sufficient to select some with discretion.

In the book of Genesis God says, “Let Us make man in our image after our likeness...So God created man in His own image...; male and female He created them” (Gen 1:26-27). Also: “Behold, the man has become like one of Us” (Gen 3:22). From God’s saying, “Let Us make man in Our image,” it appears that there are more divine persons than one; and when He says, “God created,” He indicates that there is one God. It is true, He does not say how many persons there are, but what seems to be somewhat obscure in the Old Testament is very plain in the New Testament. For when our Lord was baptized in the river Jordan, the voice of the Father was heard, who said, “This is My beloved Son” (Mt 3:17); the Son was seen in the water, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form as a dove.<sup>2</sup> For the baptism of all believers Christ prescribed this formula: “Baptize all nations into the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). In the gospel according to Luke the angel Gabriel thus addressed Mary, the mother of our Lord: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (Lk 1:35). Likewise: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13:14). In all these places we are fully taught that there are three persons in one only divine essence.

Although this doctrine far surpasses all human understanding, nevertheless in this life we believe it on the ground of the Word of God, and we expect to enjoy its perfect knowledge and fruit hereafter in heaven.

Moreover, we must observe the distinct offices and works of these three Persons towards us. The Father is called our Creator by His power; the Son is our Saviour and Redeemer by His blood; the Holy Spirit is our Sanctifier by His dwelling in our hearts. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity has always been maintained and preserved in the true church since the time of the apostles to this very day, over against Jews, Muslims, and against false Christians and heretics such as Marcion, Mani, Praxeas, Sabellius, Paul of Samosata, Arius, and such like, who have been justly condemned by the orthodox fathers. In this doctrine, therefore, we willingly receive the three creeds, of the Apostles, of Nicea, and of Athanasius; likewise that which in accordance with them is agreed upon by the early fathers.

<sup>1</sup>Jn 14:16, 15:26; Acts 2:32-33; Rom 8:9; Gal 4:6; Tit 3:4-6; 1 Pt 1:2; 1 Jn 4:13-14; 1 Jn 5:1-12; Jude 20-21; Rev 1:4-5 <sup>2</sup>Mt 3:16

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In a culture such as ours, which is characterized by religious pluralism and a “god” with only one attribute (“niceness”), it is vital that we believe the correct things about God and, as a church, that we confess these doctrines before the unbelieving world around us. We do this so as to see people come to faith in the one true God, who reveals himself as three distinct persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But we also confess our belief in the Triune God as a testimony against those who tell us that Christians, Jews and Muslims all worship the same God, each in their own way.

We now come to article nine of our confession, which sets forth some of the more salient biblical evidence for the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. In this regard article nine presupposes the explanation of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity set forth in article eight. As Reformed Christians, we are also “catholic” Christians—not “Roman Catholics,” but catholic Christians in the sense that we believe and confess along with the entire Christian church that there is one true God, who is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We do not believe and confess that there are three Gods. We believe and confess that there is but one God who reveals himself as three distinct persons.

Echoing and restating the ecumenical creeds of the church, our confession speaks of the Holy Trinity in article eight as follows: “we believe in one only God, who is one single essence, in which are three persons, really, truly, and eternally distinct according to their incommunicable properties; namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” When we speak of the Godhead, there is one “what” (one divine essence) while there are three “whos” (three distinct persons). Having discussed the point that God is one and yet revealed as three distinct persons, our confession goes on to speak of the unique properties of each of these persons. “The Father is the cause, origin, and beginning of all things visible and invisible. The Son is the Word, the wisdom, and the image of the Father. The Holy Spirit is the eternal power and might who proceeds from the Father and the Son.” Finally, our confession goes on to refute the three main errors which arise when discussing the Trinity. “Nevertheless, God is not by this distinction divided into three [tri-theism], since the Holy Scriptures teach us that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each has His personal existence [contra modalism], distinguished by Their properties; but in such a way that these three persons are but one only God” [contra unitarianism].

In article nine the focus shifts away from an explanation of how there can be only one God who exists in three distinct persons, to a summary of the biblical evidence for the Trinity. In doing so, our confession attempts to make clear that this doctrine is taught in seed form in the Old Testament before coming to full flower in the New. But not only is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity clearly taught in the pages of God’s word, we also know in a personal experiential sense that the one God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is because the one God is three persons and these three persons relate to us in very personal ways. Yes, there is a place for “experience” in our tradition!

We know that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, especially through the Triune God’s redemptive work on our behalf, the results of which are manifest to us in very personal ways. While we do indeed learn of the Trinity by looking at Holy Scripture in which God tells us of himself and his divine nature, we also learn of the Trinity as we watch redemptive history unfold, and learn of what each person within the Godhead does to save us from our sins. As Christians, we all experience the effects of the Triune God’s saving work in our hearts, minds and in our lives in very real and personal ways.

After summarizing the biblical teaching, and restating the specific roles that each of the distinct persons

of the Trinity play to secure our redemption from sin, our confession concludes by identifying some of the most notorious heretics in church history, while at the same time affirming the Reformed church's allegiance to the so-called "catholic" or universal teaching of the church as set forth in the so-called ecumenical creeds: the Apostle's, the Nicene creed and the Athanasian creed. As we pointed out when we discussed *sola Scriptura*, not only must our confession reject the Roman Catholic church's exaltation of its own authority above that of Holy Scripture, we must also demonstrate that, unlike the Anabaptists, Reformed Christians are neither seditious, nor like certain Anabaptists, we do not hold, nor do we tolerate heretical views of the Holy Trinity, perhaps Christianity's most distinctive doctrine.

**W**e begin with a statement of how the doctrine of the Trinity is known, before listing the primary biblical evidence for the doctrine, taken from both testaments.

Our confession begins this article with a rather remarkable assertion: "All this [that is, what was affirmed in article eight] we know both from the testimonies of Holy Scripture and from the respective works of the three Persons, and especially those we perceive in ourselves." We should not be surprised that our confession begins with the assertion that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is based upon God's self-revelation of himself in the pages of Holy Scripture. If Scripture alone is divinely-inspired, possesses divine authority, and is absolutely sufficient [complete] in terms of what it reveals about the will of God and how we are saved from our sins, then we must listen to Holy Scripture, not human opinion, religious aspiration, nor religious experience to learn what God is like. We have been well prepared for the assertion which opens article nine to the effect that we know that there is one God who reveals himself in Scripture as three distinct persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But it is the subsequent assertion made by our confession, that we know that God is Triune "from the respective works of the three Persons" [Father, Son and Holy Spirit], "and especially those we perceive in ourselves" which gets our attention—especially in a day and age such as our own, where virtually everything people believe about God (virtually all of it incorrect) is derived from personal experience. What, exactly does our confession mean when it speaks of perceiving in ourselves the work of the three persons of the Godhead? Does this occur apart from Scripture? Is our confession contradicting itself?

One thing this assertion that we know God is triune from the respective works of the three persons we perceive in ourselves does not mean is that we come to a knowledge of the Holy Trinity apart from Holy Scripture,<sup>1</sup> nor that we come to a knowledge of the Trinity based solely upon our feelings, or our religious consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Rather, our confession is referring to the fact that as individual believers we may indeed reason backwards from the effects of God's grace upon us—i.e., that is our own personal experience of God's saving mercy—to those individual persons of the Godhead, who have showered us with such good and gracious gifts and who are revealed in Holy Scripture. The fact that we perceive of the Holy Trinity's work within us is the subjective confirmation of what the Bible has already proclaimed about the distinct persons of the Trinity and their individual work on our behalf.<sup>3</sup>

But what are these things we feel or perceive? These are the same things mentioned in our catechism as those things which are necessary for us to know to have true comfort in life and in death. These include

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<sup>1</sup> Osterhaven, *Our Confession of Faith*, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, p. 79.

the knowledge of my sin, the greatness of God's grace, and that sense of gratitude which fills my heart whenever I contemplate how sinful I am and how gracious God has been in saving me from my sins.

If we think about this, a long list of biblical texts which teach this come into view. When we consider our sin, we are undone by the thought of God the Father's absolute holiness. When we come into the presence of the Holy God, like Isaiah we cry out: "*Woe to me!*" . . . *'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty'*" (Isaiah 6:5). Like Paul, we know that we are the worst of sinners. In 1 Timothy 1:15-16, Paul writes:

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.*

It is vital for us to notice that as soon as Paul contemplates his own sinfulness, he is also immediately moved to consider God's grace in the second person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ. And the thought of the unlimited patience of Jesus fills Paul's heart with gratitude. Likewise, who among us does not feel a profound sense of forgiveness and gratitude when we consider the words of our Lord in Matthew 11:28: "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*" It is Jesus who speaks these words—not the Father, nor the Holy Spirit.

The profound sense of an awareness of God's presence and favor is found throughout the New Testament. In Philippians 2:1-2, Paul puts it this way:

*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.*

The very thought of what Jesus and the Holy Spirit do to save us from our sins encourages, comforts us, and creates joy and love within our hearts, and confirms to us that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are both divine and distinct persons.

This means that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is no abstract, speculative doctrine we affirm begrudgingly to distinguish ourselves from other religions. When we encounter God the Father, in all his holiness, we are undone because we are guilty sinners. When we consider the gracious invitation of Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, to take from us our burdens, our hearts are filled with joy and thankfulness. When we are in fellowship with Jesus, through the person of the Holy Spirit, and the blessed Holy Spirit bears witness to us that we are God's children so that we can cry "Abba" to our father in heaven, then we have indeed "perceived" or "felt" the Triune God's work in a deep and profound personal way—dare I say it, we have had an "experience" of God's saving grace through the respective works of each of the persons of the Godhead. While we will never fully understand the mysteries of the Holy Trinity, nevertheless we must love and adore the persons of the Godhead, since we meet them not as theological proposition, but as individual persons. Our heavenly Father. Our blessed savior, Jesus. The wonderful comforter, the Holy Spirit.

This point is expressed in our confession as follows: "Although the doctrine [of the Holy Trinity] far surpasses all human understanding, nevertheless in this life we believe it on the ground of the Word of

God, and we expect to enjoy its perfect knowledge and fruit hereafter in heaven.” Yes, the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond our full understanding, but this is what God has revealed to us in his word, and what our experience of God’s holiness and mercy confirms in our minds, hearts and lives. We believe this doctrine on the ground of the word of God, in which it is clearly revealed to us, and we do so with the knowledge that one day—in heaven—we will no longer see a dim reflection of this doctrine as in a mirror, but we will see with our eyes and faith will give way to sight.

This is why our confession reiterates yet again that we can work backwards from our own experience as Christians to the truth that God has revealed in his word. As our confession puts it, “Moreover, we must observe the distinct offices and works of these three Persons towards us. The Father is called our Creator by His power; the Son is our Savior and Redeemer by His blood; the Holy Spirit is our Sanctifier by His dwelling in our hearts.” You need not fully understand all the mysteries of this great doctrine, you need not know the full history of the doctrine, you need not remember the names of all of the heretics and be able to both recount and refute all their heresies. But we all need to believe and confess that the one God is revealed to us as three distinct persons; our Creator, our Redeemer and our Sanctifier, and that the three persons of the Godhead, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, are the one true God.

Having affirmed that we know this doctrine from God’s word and that we feel the effects of the gracious work of each of the persons of the Godhead in our own lives as Christians, our confession goes on to make the following point: “The testimonies of Scripture which lead us to believe this Holy Trinity are written in many places of the Old Testament. It is not necessary to mention them all; it is sufficient to select some with discretion.”

Therefore, when our confession discusses the evidence from the Holy Trinity within the Old Testament, and later speaks of it as something hidden from plain sight, it is helpful to view the situation like a room filled with furniture, but which is very dimly lit. All of the furniture is present and nothing substantially changes when we turn on the lights, except we can now see what was already there all along. When Jesus steps out of the types and shadows of the Old Testament, he turns on the light of greater revelation and we can now see the evidence for the Trinity with much greater clarity.<sup>4</sup> This is Paul’s point in Galatians 4:4-6:

*But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’*

Notice the reference not only to the coming of Jesus Christ at the critical moment in redemptive history, but all three persons of the Holy Trinity are mentioned, as are the effects of God’s grace, which we feel in our own hearts.

In citing Old Testament evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity “with discretion”—in other words, the confession will mention only the most important biblical texts—we turn to two passages in the Book of Genesis which speak to the fact that there is more than one person in the Godhead. Our confession puts it this way: “In the book of Genesis God says, ‘Let Us make man in our image after our likeness . . . So God created man in His own image . . . ; male and female He created them’ (Gen 1:26-27). Also: ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us’ (Gen 3:22). From God’s saying, ‘Let Us make man in Our

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<sup>4</sup> Osterhaven, Our Confession of Faith, p. 62.

image,' it appears that there are more divine persons than one; and when He says, 'God created,' He indicates that there is one God. It is true, He does not say how many persons there are, but what seems to be somewhat obscure in the Old Testament is very plain in the New Testament."

In Genesis 1:26, we find the phrase "our image" which at the very least implies that there is more than one person in the Godhead. Derek Kidner contends that this is the "plural of fullness, which is found in the regular word for God (*elohim*) used with a singular verb; and this fullness glimpsed in the Old Testament, was to be unfolded as tri-unity, in the further 'we' and 'our' of John 14:23 (with 14:17)."<sup>5</sup> Then there are those Old Testament verses which also speak of more than one person in the Godhead. In Psalm 33:6 we read, "*by the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.*" Both the Lord and his word personified are mentioned. The same thing is found in Psalm 45:6-7, where the Psalmist writes

*Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.*

It is interesting to compare this verse with Hebrews 1:8-9.

*But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.'*

The author of the Book of Hebrews, believed the Psalmist was speaking of the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ.

Then, there are a series of other passages in which God is the speaker, and he mentions the Spirit as a distinct person. In Isaiah 48:16, the prophet records the word of the Lord: "*Come near me and listen to this: 'From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there.'* And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me, with his Spirit"; and Isaiah 61:1—"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." In these texts, the Lord himself speaks of the Spirit as a distinct person.

Based upon the fact of progressive revelation—that the covenant of grace progressively unfolds

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<sup>5</sup> It must be pointed out that most Jewish commentators (i.e., Philo) interpret this plurality as God addressing the heavenly court (including the Angelic Hosts, cf. Isaiah 6:8 for example). Meredith Kline, Gerhard von Rad and other contemporary commentators agree with this interpretation. But as Kidner argues, "any implication that others had a hand in creation is quite foreign to the chapter as a whole and to the challenge of Isaiah 40:14: 'With whom took he counsel?'" Keeping the redemptive-historical context in view, "It goes without saying that this passage, standing by itself, would not constitute a clear proof of the Trinity. There is, for instance, no mention of three here. But what is clearly indicated is that God, in His unity, has a certain plurality. This can also be related to verse 2 where the Spirit of God is mentioned. Thus, the first chapter of the Bible already gives a significant signal which points to the mighty mystery of the Tri-unity of God which is more clearly revealed in the rest of the pages of the Book of books." See Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), p. 52. For a complete discussion of the various interpretations and the proponents of them see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, The Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 1 (Waco: Word Inc., 1987), pp. 27-28. Wenham opts for the "heavenly court" interpretation stating that "Christians have traditionally seen this verse as adumbrating the Trinity. It is not universally admitted that this was not what the plural meant to the original author."

throughout redemptive history—the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is only slowly revealed with increasing clarity as redemptive history continues to unfold. Some have suggested that the reason for this progressive revelation of the Tri-unity of God has to do with the fact that the nations surrounding Israel were steeped in polytheistic paganism, and that it was important to stress God’s unity among such people, rather than speak of God’s plurality—which would have been very easily misconstrued by people who worshiped many “gods.” Progressive revelation is certainly in-line with what we believe and confess, which is that the Trinity is not an abstract doctrine, but is the revelation of a personal God, who exists in three distinct persons and who reveals himself according to the needs of his people.<sup>6</sup>

At God’s appointed time in redemptive history, God turned the lights (so to speak) in the person of Jesus Christ, who took to himself a true human nature to save us from our sins. With this notion of progressive revelation in mind, our confession goes on to speak of the revelation of the Trinity in the New Testament as follows: “When we come to the New Testament, that which was hidden from plain sight in the Old Testament is now brought out into the open. For when our Lord was baptized in the river Jordan, the voice of the Father was heard, who said, ‘This is My beloved Son’ (Matthew 3:17); the Son was seen in the water, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form as a dove. For the baptism of all believers Christ prescribed this formula: ‘Baptize all nations into the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’ (Matthew 28:19). In the gospel according to Luke the angel Gabriel thus addressed Mary, the mother of our Lord: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God’ (Luke 1:35). Likewise: ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all’ (2 Corinthians 13:14). In all these places we are fully taught that there are three persons in one only divine essence.”

By focusing upon those verses which clearly speak of three divine persons, our confession is laying out that line of biblical evidence which refutes both modalism and Arianism, two of the most pernicious of heresies. As we read in Matthew 3:17, when Jesus is baptized, all three persons of the Trinity are mentioned as distinct persons—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In Matthew 28:19, Matthew speaks of both the unity and plurality within the Godhead. God has one name, and yet three persons are clearly indicated, all three being equal in terms of their glory and power.<sup>7</sup> In the opening chapter of Luke’s gospel (our New Testament lesson this morning), when announcing the incarnation of our Lord,

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<sup>6</sup> De Jong, The Church’s Witness to the World, p. 187.

<sup>7</sup> This is perhaps the clearest reference to the Trinity found in the pages of the New Testament. As R. T. France notes, “It [baptism] is a commitment to (in the name is literally ‘into the name’, implying entrance into the allegiance) the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (all three of whom, interestingly, were involved in the event of Jesus’ own baptism, MT 3:16-17). Jesus thus takes his place along with the Father and the Spirit as the *object of worship* and of the disciple’s commitment. The experience of God in these three Persons is the essential basis of discipleship. At the same time the singular noun name (not ‘names’) underlies the unity of the three Persons. See R. T. France, Matthew, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), pp. 414-15. This cannot simply be attributed to a late date for the authorship of Matthew, or to some peculiar remark on his part. The same triple formula appears throughout the NT (see I Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; I Peter 1:2; Rev. 1:4-6). As D. A. Carson cautions us, “individually these texts do not prove there is any Trinitarian consciousness in the NT, since other threefold phrases occur (e.g. ‘God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels,’ I Tim. 5:21). But contributing evidence makes it difficult to deny the presence of Trinitarian thought in the NT documents: (1) The frequency of the God-Christ-Spirit formulas; (2) their context and use: it is impossible to imagine baptism into the name of God, Christ and the elect angels; (3) the recognition by NT writers that the attributes of Yahweh may be comprehensively applied to Jesus and, so far as we have evidence, to the Spirit.” See D. A. Carson, “Matthew” in Frank Gaebelstein, ed., Vol. 8 The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1984), p. 598. Thus this text does reveal a certain plurality and unity in the Godhead, including naming three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

the angel Gabriel speaks of all three persons of the Godhead in verse 35: “*The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”* Then, we have Paul’s benedictions from the two Corinthians letters, which reveal to us that there are three distinct persons in the Godhead, each possessing divine attributes and each of which is an object of worship and praise.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, our confession is perfectly correct to say, “In all these places we are fully taught that there are three persons in one only divine essence.” The clear teaching of the New Testament is that there is one God, and three distinct divine persons, and that all three persons are equal in terms of their power and glory, and all three are to be objects of worship of the people of God.

**H**aving set forth how the Trinity is made known, and summarizing the Old and New Testament teaching, our confession concludes its discussion of the Trinity by affirming the allegiance of the Reformed churches to the doctrine of the Trinity as taught by Catholic Christianity. Unlike the Anabaptists—some of whom were orthodox Trinitarians, while others were not—Reformed Christians are also “Catholic” Christians and will not tolerate Trinitarian heresy.

In wrapping up this discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity our confession now reminds us that the doctrine of the Trinity does indeed set the Christian God apart from all other religions—even other monotheistic religions such as Islam and Judaism. “The doctrine of the Holy Trinity has always been maintained and preserved in the true church since the time of the apostles to this very day, over against Jews, Muslims, and against false Christians and heretics such as Marcion, Mani, Praxeas, Sabellius, Paul of Samosata, Arius, and such like, who have been justly condemned by the orthodox fathers. In this doctrine, therefore, we willingly receive the three creeds, of the Apostles, of Nicea, and of Athanasius; likewise that which in accordance with them is agreed upon by the early fathers.”

While both Judaism and Islam are monotheistic religions, the God of Islam is a figment of Mohammed’s imagination. Not only is Allah unknowable because he is so utterly transcendent that to speak of him as a person would be to commit blasphemy, but the Koran explicitly attacks the Trinity as a pagan doctrine. “Say not ‘trinity,’ Desist. It will be better for you. For God is One God” (4:171). “They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a Trinity, for there is no God except One God” (5:76). Jews, on the other hand, believe in a personal God, but reject the Tri-unity of God (even though this is taught in the Old Testament), especially seen in the fact that Jews deny the deity of Christ, as well as the deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit. Jews do not worship a false God as much as they have an incorrect or heretical view of God.

Our confession moves on to list a veritable “who’s who” of heretics, including **Marcion** (who formulated his own canon of Scripture so as to remove all “Jewish elements” and who taught the heresy of docetism, and introduced the idea of a second God, the *Demiurge*, who was the lawgiver and judge, unlike the

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<sup>8</sup> As D. A. Carson notes above, the New Testament is replete with such triple formulas. Again, keeping the redemptive-historical context in view, the New Testament does not reveal the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity as such. What it does reveal is three distinct persons, each possessing divine attributes and each described as objects of worship and praise. Ralph Martin concludes that “It was inevitable that the church should seek to develop a doctrine that expressed (as best it could) its understanding of God. Paul never confounded the distinction between God and Jesus Christ (cf. Phil 2:11).” See Ralph Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 40 (Waco: Word Books, 1986), pp. 496-97. It was not until various controversies arose (i.e., confrontation with Judaism, the gnostics, Marcion, etc.) that the church was forced to advance the simple Trinitarian formula beyond these triple affirmations found in the New Testament to philosophical discussions of the “substance” of the Godhead culminating in the Nicene Creed. Also useful in this regard is B. B. Warfield’s essay, “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” in *Biblical Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), pp. 213-231.

higher God, who was a God of grace and love. It was the loving Father who sent the Son—who appeared to be man—and it was the Demiurge, who ensured his crucifixion), **Manes** (the father of Manicheism, who taught that God is Light and that Jesus appeared in the form of a man to help us overcome sin and wickedness), **Praexas** (who taught that Christ was a visible manifestation of God the father, so that when Christ died on the cross, the father truly suffered); **Sabellius** (a modalist—who taught that the father created the world, then came as the redeemer, and from the days of the Ascension is manifest as the Spirit. There is one God, who manifests himself in three names); **Paul of Samasota** (who taught that the man Jesus was adopted by God and filled with the divine logos and therefore exalted to the status of deity) and **Arius**, (who taught that the first creation of God was the Son, who in turn, created everything else. This means that Jesus is not fully God, nor is he eternal).

The presence of such heresies which will plague the church until Christ comes again, explains why we as Reformed Christians affirm the value of the ecumenical creeds which carefully state the Trinity and ward off these errors, even though we do not elevate these creeds to the status of Holy Scripture. The heresies the men taught, and mentioned in our confession, will appear again and again. Satan is not very original, but he is very persistent. I will never forget Bob Godfrey warning us in his church history classes to pay careful attention to these men and their errors, because all of these heresies will appear again in our own age (many of them on channel 40 and TBN).

Sure enough, listen to this quote from T. D. Jakes: “We have one God, but he is Father in creation, Son in redemption, and Holy Spirit in regeneration.”<sup>9</sup> Or this one from Benny Hinn: “God has a body, soul and spirit. Jesus has a body, soul and spirit. Holy Spirit has a body, soul and spirit. There’s nine of them!”<sup>10</sup> And we could go on and on. Trinitarian heresies abound every bit as much today as they did during the first five centuries of the church. Jehovah’s Witnesses teach the same heresy as Arius. United Pentecostals are modalists. Mormons are polytheists. And all of them will come to your door and tell that the word “Trinity” is not found in the Bible and that it is a pagan doctrine. The question is, will you be ready for them when they come. What do you believe and what will you confess to them? When your Jewish friend or Muslim neighbor blurts out, “we all worship the same God,” what will you tell them? Will you be prepared to give them an answer?

As we conclude, let us say it one more time. The Trinity is a mystery beyond our full comprehension. Yet when we believe and confess that God the Father is our Creator, God the Son is our Redeemer, and that God the Holy Spirit is our Sanctifier (that is, we work back from our personal encounter with the persons of the Godhead), we must believe that there is one God who is revealed in Holy Scripture as three distinct persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yes, this doctrine is revealed in God’s word, but we also know that God is Triune because we feel the gracious work of each of the three persons of the Trinity in our own lives. When we are convicted of our sins, when we look to Christ for forgiveness and our hearts are melted by his words, “go in peace, your sins are forgiven,” and when the Holy Spirit convinces us without words, that we are Christ’s and that God is our Father, we cry out “Abba, Father” as an expression of our love for God. In all these ways we perceive the works of each of the three persons of the Godhead in our lives, and we know that God is Triune. And we believe it on the ground that this doctrine is clearly taught in the word of God.

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<sup>9</sup> T. D. Jakes, radio interview with *Living By the Word*, August 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Benny Hinn, Benny Hinn broadcast, recorded 10/13/90