

Doctrine Of A Trinity Subversive Of The Atonement.

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It will no doubt appear to many to be irreverent to speak thus of the doctrine of a trinity. But we think they must view the subject in a different light if they will calmly and candidly examine the arguments which we shall present. We know that we write with the deepest feelings of reverence for the Scriptures, and with the highest regard for every Scripture doctrine and Scripture fact. But reverence for the Scriptures does not necessarily embrace reverence for men's opinions of the Scriptures.

It is not our purpose to present any argument on the doctrine of the trinity, further than it has a bearing on the subject under consideration, namely, on the Atonement. And we are willing, confidently willing to leave the decision of the question with all who will carefully read our remarks, with an effort to divest themselves of prejudice, if they unfortunately possess it. The inconsistencies of Trinitarians, which must be pointed out to free the Scripture doctrine of the Atonement from reproaches under which it has too long lain, are the necessary outgrowth of their system of theology. No matter how able are the writers to whom we shall refer, they could never free themselves from inconsistencies without correcting their theology.

Many theologians really think that the Atonement, in respect to its dignity and efficacy, rests upon the doctrine of a trinity. But we fail to see any connection between the two. To the contrary, the advocates of that doctrine really fall into the difficulty which they seem anxious to avoid. Their difficulty consists in this: They take the denial of a trinity to be equivalent to a denial of the divinity of Christ. Were that the case, we should cling to the doctrine of a trinity as tenaciously as any can; but it is not the case. They who have read our remarks on the death of the Son of God know that we firmly believe in the divinity of Christ; but we cannot accept the idea of a trinity, as it is held by Trinitarians, without giving up our claim on the dignity of the sacrifice made for our redemption.

And here is shown how remarkably the widest extremes meet in theology. The highest Trinitarians and lowest Unitarians meet and are perfectly united on the death of Christ—the faith of both amounts to Socinianism. Unitarians believe that Christ was a prophet, an inspired teacher, but merely human; that his death was that of a human body only. Trinitarians hold that the term "Christ" comprehends two distinct and separate natures: one that was merely human; the other, the second person in the trinity, who dwelt in the flesh for a brief period, but could not possibly suffer, or die; that the Christ that died was only the human nature in which the divinity had dwelt. Both classes have a human offering, and nothing more. No matter how exalted the pre-existent Son was; no matter how glorious, how powerful, or even eternal; if the manhood only died, the sacrifice was only human. And so far as the vicarious death of Christ is concerned, this is Socinianism. Thus the remark is just, that the doctrine of a trinity degrades the Atonement, resting it solely on a human offering as a basis. A few quotations will show the correctness of this assertion.

"As God, he obeyed all the requirements of the law, and made it honorable in the justification of sinners; as man, he bore its curse on the tree, and endured its penalty."—Manual of Atonement, p. 25.

"The sufferings of Christ were endured in his human nature. Though possessing a divine nature, yet in that he could not suffer and die. His sufferings were endured in his human nature." Id., p. 88.

"It is no part of the doctrine of the Atonement that the divine nature, in the person of the Saviour, suffered."—Barnes on Atonement, p. 224.

"It was meet that the mediator should be man, that he might be capable of suffering death; for, as God, he could not die."—Buck's Theol. Dict., Art. Mediator.

"Trinitarians do not hold to the sufferings or death of divinity."—Mattison on the Trin., p. 39.

"His mediation between God and man is chiefly in his human nature, in which alone he was capable of suffering and dying."—Scott on 1 Tim. 2:5.

"I know not any scripture, fairly interpreted, that states the divine nature of our Lord to be begotten of God, or to be the Son of God."—Clarke on Heb. 1:8.

"Is it to be wondered that the human body in which this fullness of the Godhead dwelt, and in which the punishment due to our sins was borne upon the tree, should be exalted above all human and all created things?"— Id. on Phil. 2:9.

Dr. Clarke says the apostle John doubtless directed his first letter against the heretics then abounding. Of them he says:

"The Gnostics even denied that Christ suffered; the AEon, or Divine Being that dwelt in the man Christ Jesus, according to them, left him when he was taken by the Jews," &c.—Note on 1 John 1:8.

So far as that particular heresy of the Gnostics is concerned, it has become wide-spread and almost all-prevailing in the denominations of the present day. Indeed, we cannot see but Dr. Clarke himself was tainted with it, according to the quotations given above.

We trust that we have shown to the full conviction of every one who "trembles at the word" of the Lord, that the Son of God, who was in the beginning, by whom the worlds were made, suffered death for us; the oft-repeated declarations of theological writers that a mere human body died are, by the Scriptures, proved untrue. These writers take the doctrine of a trinity for their basis, and assume that Christ is the second person in the trinity, and could not die. Again, they assume that death is not a cessation of life; and between the two unscriptural assumptions they involve themselves in numerous difficulties, and load the doctrine of the Atonement with unreasonable contradictions. We would not needlessly place ourselves in opposition to the religious feelings of any class, but in order to clear the doctrine of the Atonement from the consequences of these assumptions, we are compelled to notice some of the prominent arguments presented in favor of the doctrine of a trinity.

In the "Manual of Atonement," 1 John 5:20 is quoted as containing most conclusive evidence of a trinity and of the Supreme Deity of Christ. It is there claimed that he is called "the true God and eternal life." The whole verse reads thus: "And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life." A person must be strongly wedded to a theory who can read this verse and not see the distinction therein contained between the true God and the Son of God. "We are in him that is true." How? "In his Son Jesus Christ." The distinction between Christ and the true God is most clearly shown by the Saviour's own words in John 17:3: "That they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."

Much stress is laid on Isa. 9:6, as proving a trinity, which we have before quoted, as referring to our High Priest who shed his blood for us. The advocates of that theory will say that it refers to a trinity because Christ is called the everlasting Father. But for this reason, with others, we affirm that it can have no reference to a trinity. Is Christ the Father in the trinity? If so, how is he the Son? or if he is both Father and Son, how can there be a trinity? for a trinity is three persons. To recognize a trinity, the distinction between the Father and Son must be preserved. Christ is called "the second person in the trinity;" but if this text proves a trinity, or refers to it at all, it proves that he is not the second, but the first. And if he is the first, who is the second? It is very plain that this text has no reference to such a doctrine.

In seeking an explanation of this text, we must bear in mind the work of Christ as brought to view in this and parallel passages. These words refer to the "child born," the "son given," who, as we have seen, bears the title of God subordinate to his Father. And if an apostle could call himself the father of those whom he had begotten in the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15; 1 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4), how appropriately is this title applied to the Prince of Peace, who is, in a peculiar sense, the everlasting Father of all to whom he gives everlasting life. The New Jerusalem is called the Bride, the Lamb's wife (Rev. 21); Christ of course is the Bridegroom, the husband. But Paul says Jerusalem above is our mother. Gal. 4:26. If so, why not her husband, the bridegroom, be our father? Surely there is nothing inappropriate in this. But, as the New Jerusalem is not the mother of the unregenerate, these being reckoned the children of the bondwoman, so Christ is not called their father. They are not his

children, and he does not give them everlasting life. Therefore the title is applied to him in a subordinate and restricted sense. In its unrestricted and universal sense it applies only to the Supreme One, "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." 2 Cor. 11:31; Eph. 1:3; 1 Peter 1:3.

John 12:40, 41, has been supposed to prove the Supreme Deity of Christ, and therefore a trinity. "These things said Esaias, when he saw his [Christ's] glory, and spake of him." This refers to Isa. 6, which chapter speaks of "the King, the Lord [Jehovah] of hosts;" and it is thence inferred that Christ is that Lord of hosts. But those who quote this in such a manner should know (and some of them do know) that there are two words in Isa. 6 rendered Lord, just as there are in Ps. 110:1, which says: "The LORD said unto my Lord." The first is Jehovah; the second Adonai—the Father and Son. In Isa. 6:3, 5, 12, Jehovah is used; in verses 1, 8, 11, Adonai is used. Now John 12:40 is a quotation from Isa. 6:10, which refers to Adonai, the Son, and not to Jehovah. Many have been misled by a wrong application of this text. Those who know the fact above stated cannot honestly use it as it has been used in theological controversies.

Jer. 23:5, 6 is supposed to afford decisive proof of a trinity, in that the "Branch" which is raised up unto David shall be called Jehovah. Clarke, in his commentary, gives the following rendering of this text, from Dr. Blayney: "And this is the name by which Jehovah shall call him, our righteousness." He adds:

"Dr. Blayney thus accounts for his translation: Literally, according to the Hebrew idiom,—and this is his name by which Jehovah shall call our righteousness; a phrase exactly the same as, 'And Jehovah shall call him so,' which implies that God would make him such as he called him, that is, our righteousness, or the Author and Means of our salvation and our acceptance. So that by the same metonymy Christ is said to 'have been made of God unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.' 1 Cor. 1:30.

"I doubt not that some persons will be offended with me, for depriving them by this translation of a favorite argument for proving the Divinity of our Saviour from the Old Testament. But I cannot help it. I have done it with no ill design, but purely because I think, and am morally sure, that the text, as it stands, will not properly admit of any other construction. The Septuagint have so translated it before me in an age when there could not possibly be any bias or prejudice either for or against the forementioned doctrine—a doctrine which draws its decisive proofs from the New Testament only."

On this Dr. Clarke remarks: "I prefer the translation of Blayney to all others. . . As to those who put the sense of their creed upon the words, they must be content to stand out of the list of Hebrew critics. I believe Jesus to be Jehovah, but I doubt much whether this text calls him so."

We must be careful to distinguish between a criticism and an opinion. After clearly defining the doctrine of the text, Dr. Clarke tells us what he believes, which is not the doctrine of the text. And we are constrained to question its being the doctrine of the Scriptures. There must be a distinction between the Father and the Son; and that must be precisely the distinction between Jehovah and his Anointed One, Jesus the Christ. We have recently read an argument by a man of undoubted ability, who endeavors to prove that Jesus is Jehovah, by comparing the words of the prophets with those of the New Testament. Thus, the prophets say that Jehovah is the Saviour of men, and the New Testament says that Jesus is the Saviour; therefore Jesus is Jehovah.

That is apparently, but not really, an argument. They who speak thus seem to forget the teachings of the New Testament, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." 2 Cor. 5:19. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16. And again Jesus said: "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me." "He that sent me is with me; the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him." "The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself; but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works." John 7:16; 8:29; 14:10.

God hath indeed spoken unto us in these last days, but it is "by his Son." Heb. 1:1, 2. It is very true, "that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." 1 John 5:11. The Son comes in the name of the Father; he represents the Father to the world; he accomplishes the will and purpose of the Father in redemption. As Christ is the Son of God, and the only representative of the Father, it could not be considered strange that he should bear the name and title of his father; "for it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell." Col. 1:19. But the Son is not the Father; and therefore it cannot be that Christ is Jehovah, but was sent of Jehovah to do his will and work, and to make known the counsels of his grace.

As before remarked, the great mistake of Trinitarians, in arguing this subject, is this: they make no distinction between a denial of a trinity and a denial of the divinity of Christ. They see only the two extremes, between which the truth lies; and take every expression referring to the pre-existence of Christ as evidence of a trinity. The Scriptures abundantly teach the pre-existence of Christ and his divinity; but they are entirely silent in regard to a trinity. The declaration, that the divine Son of God could not die, is as far from the teachings of the Bible as darkness is from light. And we would ask the Trinitarian, to which of the two natures are we indebted for redemption? The answer must, of course, be, To that one which died or shed his blood for us; for "we have redemption through his blood." Then it is evident that if only the human nature died, our Redeemer is only human, and that the divine Son of God took no part in the work of redemption, for he could neither suffer nor die. Surely, we say right, that the doctrine of a trinity degrades the Atonement, by bringing the sacrifice, the blood of our purchase, down to the standard of Socinianism.

But we are not the only ones who see this difficulty in the Trinitarian views of the atoning sacrifice. Their own expressions betray a sense of the weakness of their position, and of the necessity of something more than a human offering for the redemption of man. Dr. Barnes, as quoted, says that "the divine nature in the person of Christ" could not suffer, nor die; yet, in speaking of the nature of the Atonement, he says:—

"If it be a part of the doctrine of the Atonement, and essential to that doctrine, that the Redeemer was divine, that he was 'God manifest in the flesh,' that there was in a proper sense an incarnation of Deity, then it is clear that such an incarnation, and the sufferings of such an one on a cross, were events adapted to make an impression on the universe at large, deeper by far than would be done by the sufferings of the guilty themselves." "All must feel that it was appropriate that the Eternal Father should command the sun to withdraw his beams, and the earth to tremble, and the rocks to rend—to spread a universal pall over the world—when his Son expired on the cross." "He had descended from Heaven, and had taken upon himself the form of a servant. He had subjected himself voluntarily to poverty, shame, and contempt; he had been bound, and scourged, and publicly rejected; he had submitted to a mock trial and to an unjust condemnation; he had borne his own cross to the place of crucifixion, and had voluntarily given himself up to be put to death in a form that involved the keenest torture that man could inflict." Pp. 255-7.

If it were true that the divine nature—that which "descended from Heaven"—could not suffer and die, such remarks as the above are only calculated to mislead; and it must appear to all that they betray a consciousness, on the part of the writer, that if the sacrifice was only human, as he had elsewhere said, the offering lacked in dignity, and the Atonement in efficacy.

The Manual of Atonement, as quoted, says he could only die as man; that in his divine nature he could neither suffer nor die; and yet uses the following words:—

"It was sin that drew Christ from the skies, and influenced him to lead a life of suffering in this world. It was sin that wounded his sacred head—that agonized his soul in the garden—that led him to Calvary—that nailed him to the cross, and drew out his heart's blood as a sin-atoning sacrifice."

Who would not suppose from the above that the very Christ that came "from the skies" died on the cross? Why is this language used? Evidently to make an impression of the enormity of the sin, and the value of the sacrifice, which could not be made by the death of a human being. That object might be accomplished without any contradiction, by allowing what the Scriptures plainly teach of the death of the Son of God.

Dr. Scott, who says his death was only in his human nature, further says:—

"'I am he that liveth;' the ever-living, self-existent God, to whom as mediator it was given to have life in himself, and to be the life of men; and who had also been obedient to death for sinners; but behold he was alive as the first-fruits of the resurrection, to die no more."—Note on Rev. 1:18.

"This same person, who created and upholds all worlds, as the high priest of his people, purged away the guilt of their sins, by himself, and the sacrifice of his death upon the cross."—Note on Heb. 1:3.

If it was given to the "self-existent God" to have life in himself, by whom was it given? Here is a plain declaration that "the ever-living, self-existent God" died for sinners, which we cannot believe, and Dr. Scott did not believe, for he contradicted it elsewhere. The self-existent God could not purge away our sin "by himself,"

but the Son of God could "by himself" (as Paul says, Heb. 1:3), and the self-existent God could by his Son; for God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

Dr. Clarke, in his Commentary, says:—

"Considering him (Paul) as writing under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, then we have from the plain, grammatical meaning of the words which he has used, the fullest demonstration (for the Spirit of God cannot lie) that He who died for our sins, and rose again for our justification, and in whose blood we have redemption, was God over all."—Clarke on Col. 1.

In view of the remark from the same author, which we before quoted, that the suffering or punishment due to our sins was borne in the human body, the above is a most remarkable statement. In the former quotations he said that the divine nature was not the Son of God; that the Godhead dwelt in a human body, and it was the human body that endured the punishment due to our sins; and in the latter quotation he says that "he who died for our sins, and rose again for our justification, and in whose blood we have redemption, was God over all." Can it be possible that he thought that the human nature, in distinction from the divine nature which dwelt therein, is God over all? We very well know that he thought the divine nature which dwelt in the human was God; and if the human nature, which died for us, was also God, then he certainly has presented to us two Gods, namely, a divine God and a human God! And each one is God over all. We think he has fallen into the same inconsistency which was manifested by the Manual of Atonement, by Dr. Scott, and by Dr. Barnes. Each said that divinity or the divine nature could not suffer nor die, and each said that the pre-existing divinity suffered and died. Dr. Scott even said that the self-existent God died as our mediator. We believe that the doctrine of the trinity lies at the foundation of these errors on the part of these able authors. The Bible is not, and should not be made, responsible for such inconsistencies. They are not at all necessary to an understanding of the Bible or the doctrine of the Atonement. On the contrary, they prevent an understanding of the truth, and cause the teachings of the Scriptures to appear confused and uncertain in the eyes of all who trust in the wisdom of the wise of this world.

Dr. John Harris, in his first volume on Theological Science—the Pre-Adamite Earth—has very forcibly stated the truth concerning the pre-existence and manifestation of the Redeemer. He says:—

"For (epsilon)(nu) (alpha)(delta)(chi)(eta) [in the beginning] even then He already (eta)(nu) [was]. The assertion of his pre-existence is included alike in (alpha) (delta) (chi) (eta) and in (eta)(nu). For when every created thing had yet to be, He already was. He comprehends every being in himself." P. 31.

And of the manifestation of this pre-existent one he further says:—

"His disciples subsequently declared that the life had been manifested, and that they had seen it; that that which was from the beginning they had handled and seen, even the Word of Life." P. 34.

Now, when the disciples also declare that that Word which they saw and handled was put to death on the cross, and rose from the dead, we cannot avoid the conclusion that that which was from the beginning, which was before all things, actually died for man. Of course we cannot believe what men say about his being co-equal with God in every respect, and that the divine Son of God could not suffer nor die. These are mere human words.

But that the Word, or Logos, was the Son of God, that he was before all things, that he was made flesh, that he was seen and handled of men, that he was put to death, that he was raised from the dead—these are the words of inspiration. "What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord."

"The mystery of godliness," the mystery of the incarnation, is great indeed. It is to be doubted whether a finite mind will ever be able to comprehend it. This does not speak against it as a fact; for we may accept a fact revealed, when we cannot comprehend the nature of the fact. We may believe that a certain star is thousands of millions of miles from the earth, but the human mind can have no just conception of such a distance. We believe in the being of the omnipotent God, but we cannot comprehend his being. We believe that he who was glorified with the Father before the world was, was made flesh, and dwelt among men; in whom, as the Methodist Discipline justly expressed it, were two natures joined together in one person, never to be divided; who truly suffered and died for us. What a sacrifice for guilty man? What an offering to the immutable law of Jehovah! What a vindication of the mercy and justice of the Father!

"Here's love and grief beyond degree; The Lord of glory dies for men!"

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" See 1 Cor. 2:8; Rom. 11:33.