

SERMONS

BY THE

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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SERMON VIII.

ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY.

MATT. xxviii. 19.

Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

IF the Scriptures merely spoke of the Son of God and of the Spirit of God as beings whom we ought to reverence and worship, we should surely be bound to inquire diligently and devoutly into the manner in which this reverence ought to be displayed. But when we are baptized in their names, this expressive rite and solemn memorial gives them still larger claims upon our attention. That we are admitted into the Christian covenant by a rite which bears a distinct reference to them, clearly implies the existence of some intimate relation between them and us. That we are baptized in their name, in common with that of the Father, invests them with inconceivable dignity. It cannot but arrest our regard, even at the very entrance and porch of Christianity, that the Son and the Spirit are placed on the same level with the Father. Should we not deem it strange indeed, if we were commanded to be baptized, with an exactly similar form of expression, in the name of persons infinitely inferior to, and wholly distinct from, the Father: if the form of baptism, for instance, were this;—Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Apostle Paul, and of the Power and Love of God? Add to which, the persons into whose names we are baptized bear a manifest relation to the Deity as well as to ourselves: “Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” In the name of the *Father*. Why not in the name of *God*? Why should the Divine Being be here styled the Father? He is so styled, evidently with respect to the Son, who is named together with him.—But we are to be baptized also in the name of the Son. The Son of whom? Doubtless of the Father.—And in the name of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of whom? Evidently of God, of the Father, and of the Son. The sacred names, thus introduced, were names already familiar to the Jews. The Holy Spirit, though not with a distinctness which enabled the Jews to comprehend much of his essence or origin, is often introduced into the Jewish Scriptures; and every pious Jew anticipated the coming of the Messiah, whom they were accustomed to call by the title of “the Son of God.” Our Saviour, also, had more completely familiarized them with these terms, and elevated their conceptions of the Divine Persons to whom they are applied, by his frequent mention of the

Son and of the Spirit. Nor is it superfluous to add, that the doctrine of the Trinity does not depend on a few passages, where, as in my text, the Father, the Son, or the Spirit, are mentioned, as it were, collectively; but upon a multitude of passages where they are separately introduced. If, therefore, this, and every passage which speaks of these Divine Persons collectively, were blotted out, still the doctrine would be triumphantly established by other passages; and is, in fact, interwoven with the very frame of Scripture.—I acknowledge, however, that there have been few points of doctrine more warmly disputed than this. It may therefore, I apprehend, be useful to endeavour to state the subject clearly, so as to obviate some misconceptions which prevail with regard to it, and to pave the way for its more cordial reception.

The doctrine of what is called “the Trinity,” concisely stated, is this—that, although there is only one God, this God is revealed to man as subsisting under three distinct Names and Persons —“the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost”— who are yet, in a sense to us mysterious and inscrutable, one God.—Let us more distinctly consider the several parts of the doctrine thus stated.

I. In the first place, *There is but one God.*—This truth is not only universally attested in Scripture, but is at once acquiesced in, as agreeable to all our pre-conceived notions of the Deity. The difficulty is, not in admitting the Unity of the Godhead, but in comprehending the distinction of Persons. But, to whatever extent we maintain this distinction, it is obvious that it must not be so held as to be incompatible with the Unity of the Divine Nature. Those, indeed, who deny the doctrine of the Trinity, chiefly ground their denial upon an alleged zeal for the Unity of God; and, by the name which they assume, desire evidently to be considered as the only persons who maintain this great truth. But it should be understood, that those who hold the doctrine of the Trinity, do, in the strongest sense, concur with them in the maintenance of this fundamental doctrine. They do not consider their own belief in the Three Divine Persons, as interfering with the doctrine of the Divine Unity. They maintain, as a fundamental truth which is to regulate and modify their belief in a Trinity of Persons, that there is one only eternal and infinite God. And, though they pretend not to explain or comprehend the consistency of this plurality of Persons with this Unity of Nature, they nevertheless, in the most unequivocal manner, admit and affirm it. It is true that, on this subject, some persons may have spoken rashly and unwarrantably, in representing the Three Persons to be so absolutely distinct as to be in all respects three different beings. Such representations, however, have not the countenance of our Church. And, in all our conceptions and explanations of the doctrine, let us carefully remember, that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spir-

it, are properly One. Let us not, with the view of rendering a necessarily mysterious subject familiar, so interpret it as to violate a fundamental principle of religion. It is a mistaken, as well as dishonest policy, to endeavour to preserve one part of the temple by the sacrifice of the rest.

II. But, secondly, *Though God is One, yet he has revealed himself under three different characters and titles; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.*—The precise nature of the distinction here implied is not described in Scripture; nor, perhaps, is it conceivable by fallen man. It has, indeed, been agreed to express this distinction by the term “Person.” And this term is perhaps, as eligible as any other, whilst it is understood not to convey any real idea of the nature of this distinction, but merely to affirm that it exists and is not confined to a distinction of mere titles or attributes. Such various titles and attributes are frequent in Scripture. The Divine Being is introduced under the title of Jehovah and Elohim. He is described by his various attributes, as the “Eternal,” “Almighty,” the “Father of lights,” the “Lord of hosts.” But when the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are spoken of in Scripture, it is evident that these terms imply a distinction of a very different kind from that conveyed by these titles and attributes.—In this limited sense, it is, therefore, that we must here be considered as employing the term “Person.” It does not imply that distinction of nature or being, when applied to this doctrine, which is implied in the use of the term on other occasions.

But it may be asked, What then do we in fact believe as to the Divine Nature? I answer, We believe, that one and the same God is Three in a sense which we are able neither to express nor comprehend.—And this brings us to notice a *third* point, included in the brief statement of the doctrine of the Trinity delivered above.

III. The doctrine has been mentioned as “*mysterious*” and, *as to certain points, inscrutable to the human mind.*—It might be anticipated, that any Revelation respecting the Divine nature would, if in any degree minute, involve many points far beyond our comprehension. For with what are we familiar which is beyond the narrow range of our senses? We are acquainted, indeed, with some of the properties of animals, because these fall within the cognizance of sense; but when we attempt to speak even of our own mind, in what difficulties are we at once involved? Can we explain the manner in which the mind acts on the body; their union in the same person here; the distinct existence of the soul in a future state? Can we form the slightest conception of the manner in which spiritual beings exist at all;—beings who, without eyes, see; without

ears, hear; without limbs, move; without material organs, communicate their ideas and feelings? Thus shut out, then, from an acquaintance even with the lower orders of spiritual existence, can we wonder if that Divine nature, to which, perhaps, these orders approach no nearer than we to them, is incomprehensible to us? Such obscurity, indeed, affords a presumption in favour of the truth, rather than of the falsehood, of any Revelation which respects the nature of God. It is no more probable that we should comprehend the Divine Nature, than that an animal of the very lowest order—an animal, for instance, wanting the organs of sight, and touch, and hearing, and speech—should comprehend and delineate the faculties of man. Such, indeed, is the obscurity in which the Divine Nature is necessarily involved, that it matters little what terms are employed by us to describe it. Change the terms, yet the obscurity remains. They would either have no meaning affixed to them, or be understood in precisely the same sense with those employed for the same purpose before. Had the very terms adopted by us to express the doctrine of the Trinity been found in Scripture, the revelation of the doctrine itself would not have been more distinct or intelligible. Language could not have made that distinct which we have no faculties to comprehend.

Still, my brethren, though the doctrine of the Trinity is mysterious, and above our reason, *it is not contrary to our reason*. And this is a most important distinction. We do not believe or teach contradictions. We do not affirm that there are more Gods than one, or that God is One and Three in the same sense. To believe that any principle or nature is one, and at the same time three natures or principles, is contrary to reason. It cannot be required of the human mind, and is not required of the believer in the doctrine of the Trinity.

But are the *difficulties of the orthodox creed* still objected to us? I answer, there are difficulties upon every hypothesis which the objector may choose to adopt. In the attempt to avoid one class of difficulties, others are created quite as insurmountable. You may, perhaps, dismiss them from your theory, but then you transfer them to your Bibles. If, for instance, the Holy Spirit is not God, what, we may ask, is he? Clearly not an angel. Scripture ascribes to him none but Divine attributes. So decidedly is this the case, that unbelievers in the doctrine of the Trinity usually speak of him as an attribute of God. But, if a mere attribute, then what becomes of the passages describing his personality, and even distinguishing him from the Father? In like manner, if the Son is not God, who is he? How must we understand the title given to him—“the Son of God;” how the attributes of Divinity ascribed to him; how the worship offered, and accepted by him? Many, in the hope of escaping difficulties, have even reduced our Saviour to the rank of man. But what difficulties have these men not to en-

counter? What violence of criticism, what forced interpretations, what perversion of doubtful passages and denial of the authenticity of plain ones, have they not been compelled to employ? If, indeed, *all* difficulty could be escaped by any particular theory, then (although perhaps its very clearness would be suspicious) it might be worthy of examination. But, hitherto, all objections to the orthodox doctrine, if they have shifted or eluded the difficulty, have never removed it. The recesses of the Divine Nature constitute a depth that we have no eye to measure, and no line to fathom; and he who rashly presumes upon his powers, sinks only from one abyss of error and confusion to another.

But, again, it may be objected, that, “admitting the doctrine of the Trinity not to be contrary to reason, it is still a mystery, and, as such, ought not to be made an article of faith.”—In answer to this objection, it may be observed, that in this doctrine, as in most other objects of faith and knowledge, there are parts which are plain, and parts which are obscure. Thus, a man, by reflection, is infallibly conscious of his own thoughts, and judges whatever he perceives in himself to proceed from one common principle, which he calls his *soul*. But what this soul is, or how it acts upon the body, he cannot conceive. The nature of the soul, or of its operations, are no less mysterious than the sublimest truths of religion. Again; what idea can we form of *infinity* and *eternity*; and yet is it possible to do otherwise than believe them? Many similar instances might be produced to show how utterly unfounded in the nature of things is that system of reasoning which would teach us, that nothing is to be received as true which we cannot understand. If we attend to the necessary operations of our own minds, we shall surely have no difficulty in admitting, that much is true which we are unable to comprehend. Bring, my brethren, what you are required to believe of the Trinity, to this test. You are required to believe, that these three terms, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, are all applied in Scripture to the One Supreme God; that all the actions, offices, attributes which are ascribed to any of these names, are plainly attributed to, and do truly belong to, one and the same Divine Nature; that there are such frequent and evident assertions in Scripture of the Unity of God, and yet such plain distinctions signified by the terms Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as imply both a perfect Unity of nature, and yet a distinction in the Godhead; and that this distinction, whatever it may be, is not the same with that which we conceive betwixt the attributes of God—nor a mere difference of name, office, or relation—but some other distinction of which we have but a confused conception, and which we can express by no particular language. A more accurate acquaintance with spiritual beings, and especially with the Nature of God, might develop the mysterious parts of this doctrine. Till then, we profess our faith in them merely as mysterious.

But even yet the peculiar difficulty involved in the doctrine of the Trinity may be objected; viz. that the same Divine Person is both God and man. Certain it is, that the Scriptures assert the man Christ Jesus to be also the Son of God. He himself speaks of his existence before he “came into the world,” of “the glory which he had with the Father before the world began,” of his being in “the form of God” before he was in “the likeness of man.” It is also affirmed of him by the Apostle, that “in him dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.” And he himself adopts such language, with regard to the Divine Presence, as proves, at the least, that God was present with him in a sense distinct from that in which he was present in the temple, in the prophets, or in the heavens. Hence he suffered worship to be rendered to him, which was refused both by the prophets and by his own followers. Hence, also, he said to Philip, “Hast thou not seen *me*, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Show us the Father?” If the question be asked, How can God and Man be united? I must answer, that I know not. But neither can I conceive how the soul and body constitute one man.

If the astonishing facts of the union of God and man in the same Person, of his birth, and of his death, be alleged against the truth of the doctrine, I desire the objector to consider the stupendous object his birth and death were designed to accomplish. Had man remained in his original estate, and had there been no need of redemption, possibly (for I desire to speak with the deepest humility on such a subject) the Divine Being might not have revealed himself to man under these distinct characters. It is possible that the different titles and relations by which God has been pleased to express this distinction in the Godhead should be chiefly considered with reference to the great work of salvation, and as tending to that grand consummation of all things, when the Son of God “shall have delivered up the kingdom to God even the Father,” and when “the Son also himself shall be subject to him that did put all things under him, that God may be all in all.” Our belief as to the work of redemption is this, that the only Supreme God, upon his foreknowledge of the fall of man, decreed to redeem mankind by a Person chosen and qualified for this work through the fulness of the Divine Nature dwelling in him; and, in consideration of his passion and intercession, to impart such gifts, graces, and spiritual assistances as would be sufficient to render this Redemption effectual to the saving of mankind. Now, with a view to this great design of saving mankind, and to the plan and method of the Divine Wisdom in the execution of it; and in order to give us as full and distinct apprehensions as we are able to receive, of the misery of our condition, the difficulty of deliverance, and the unspeakable goodness of God in our restoration, and to fill us with gratitude and love; God has been pleased to reveal

himself to us, under several personal relations, such as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—the Father, the Saviour, the Comforter: by which titles and all others analogous to these, we are directed to consider some such kind of distinction and subordination of offices and relations in the Divine Nature, as the terms made use of do commonly import. Thus when God is pleased to represent his love to mankind by the highest image of nature, that of a father sacrificing an only and well-beloved son, the exact transcript of himself, we are to believe, that, by the sufferings and death of Christ, God has given us greater proofs of his love than any man is capable of giving to another: but that such an action of an earthly parent suggests the nearest and most impressive conception of what our heavenly Father has done for us, though at the same time a conception infinitely short of the reality.

In conclusion, I would beg to say a few words on the disposition of mind with which this great subject should be approached and regarded.

In the first place, Let us approach it with *humility* and a *deep conviction of our own ignorance*.—God has mercifully given us, as it were, some glimpses of his nature; and let us not use the light he has bestowed, to question the truth of his own Revelation. It may be designed for the trial of our humility, that something mysterious should be revealed to us; in the same manner as affliction may be designed for the trial of our patience. It is not for us to say, “It cannot be thus; I cannot believe;” but rather, “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.”

Again: *Avoid a spirit of presumptuous curiosity*.—Reason not upon the mysteries of religion, as upon topics within the cognizance of human faculties “The secret things,” my brethren, “belong unto the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed to us, and to our children, that we may do them.”

In the third place, Beware of *regarding this* or *any* other doctrine of religion, as a *merely speculative* subject.—All religion tends to practice. And that doctrine which teaches us that it is the Son of God who died to save the world, and the Spirit of God who lives to sanctify it, ought to exercise a large, a lasting, an habitual influence upon every feeling, and resolution, and affection of the mind.

Once more: Beware, under the pretence of simplifying the doctrine, of *explaining it away*, and *substituting a theory* of your own.—God, my brethren, dispenses salvation in his own appointed way. And, having revealed this way, man must expect salvation in no other. Different ages have had their peculiar temptations upon the subject of the Trinity. Former periods of the Church have been chiefly remarkable for their subtle attempts to explain it: the present is, perhaps, not less characterised by attempts to subvert it. Be it your endeavour, my brethren, neither to add to the Revelation of God, nor to take from it.

On the whole, approach the doctrine with reverence, and embrace it with gratitude and joy. Acknowledge the Son who is thus proclaimed to you, and pray for the Comforter who is thus promised. Learn your need of the salvation and the grace which they respectively communicate; and you will then also learn to value the doctrine. Receive and honour them as they require to be honoured; and they will enable you, by the sanctity of your life and the triumphs of your death, to vindicate the faith you embrace. “Baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” enlist, with your whole heart, under the banner of the Gospel: and God will “give you the victory, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”