

CHURCH DOGMATICS

BY

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VOLUME I

THE DOCTRINE OF THE WORD OF GOD

PART ONE

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concepts not only implies the menacing proximity of a philosophical criticism based on the immanent possibilities of meaning of these concepts—this can be borne, because in the long run it is incompetent as such. What it also implies is the menacing proximity of theological error. We, too, are unable to avoid the fact that every step of ours in this field is exposed to danger, whether the threat comes from the tritheistic heresy or the modalist heresy, or whether there be on either side suspicion of the opposite error. We, too, are unable to take a middle course in such a way that every misunderstanding is ruled out and our orthodoxy is unequivocally assured. We, too, can in this respect return only a relatively satisfactory answer to Augustine's question. On all sides good care is thus taken to see that the *mysterium trinitatis* remains a mystery. There can be no question of rationalising because rationalising is neither theologically nor philosophically possible here. That is to say, as philosophers we cannot give a full interpretation of the object with an apparatus of concepts already elucidated—for we always come up against the fact that from the standpoint of the object the decisive act of interpretation is an elucidation of the conceptual apparatus which is so radically ill-suited to this object. Again, as theologians we cannot really safeguard ourselves by means of this conceptual apparatus against the two opposing errors that threaten us here, for we always come up against the fact that in contrast to a theological language which uses this apparatus and is thus insecure, the truth creates the necessary safeguard for itself. Theology means rational wrestling with the mystery. But all rational wrestling with this mystery, the more serious it is, can lead only to its fresh and authentic interpretation and manifestation as a mystery. For this reason it is worth our while to engage in this rational wrestling with it. If we are not prepared for this we shall not even know what we are saying when we say that what is at issue here is God's mystery.

3. TRIUNITY

In the doctrine of the Trinity our concern is with unity in trinity and trinity in unity. We cannot advance beyond these two obviously one-sided and inadequate formulations. They are both one-sided and inadequate because a slight overemphasis on the unity is unavoidable in the first and a slight overemphasis on the trinity is unavoidable in the second. The term "triunity" is to be regarded as a conflation of the two formulae or rather as an indication of the conflation of the two to which we cannot attain and for which, then, we have no formula, but which we can know only as the incomprehensible truth of the object itself.

3. Triunity

"Triunity," we say. The common German word for Trinity ("Dreifaltigkeit"), as Luther once said, is "right bad German." It has an "odd sound." Luther was obviously objecting to the tritheistic ring reminiscent of the fatal *triplicitas*. He suggested instead a "Gedritt" in God (*Sermon on Lk. 9^{28f.}*, 1538, *W.A.*, 6, 230). But "triunity" ("Dreieinigkeit") is to be preferred because better than *trinitas* or *trias*, and certainly better than "Dreifaltigkeit" or even "Gedritt," it gives expression to both the decisive numerals, and its stress on the unity indicates that we are concerned here, not just about unity, but about the unity of a being one which is always also a becoming one. For this reason "Dreieinigkeit" is also to be preferred to "Dreieinheit."*

In practice, however, this concept of "triunity" can never be more than the dialectical union and distinction in the mutual relation between the two formulae that are one-sided and inadequate in themselves. We see on the one side how for those who hear and see revelation in the Bible the Father, Son and Spirit, or however we name the three elements in the biblical revelation, come together in the knowledge and concept of the one God. And we see on the other side how for them the source and goal of this knowledge and concept are never a sterile one but are rather the three, whatever we call them. In practice the concept of triunity is the movement of these two thoughts.

Ex uno omnia, per substantiae scilicet unitatem, et nihilominus custodiatur oikonomiae sacramentum, quae unitatem in trinitatem disponit, tres dirigens Patrem et Filium et Spiritum—tres autem non statu, sed gradu, nec substantia sed forma, nec potestate sed specie—unius autem substantiae et unius status et unius potestatis, quia unus Deus, ex quo et gradus isti et formae et species in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti deputantur (Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.*, 2). Calvin often (e.g., *Instit.*, I, 13, 17) referred to a saying of Gregory Nazianzus (*Orat.* 40, 41) which does in fact state very well this dialectic in the knowledge of the triune God: οὐ φθάνω τὸ ἐν νοῆσαι καὶ τοῖς τρισὶ περιλάμπωμαι· οὐ φθάνω τὰ τρία διελεῖν καὶ εἰς τὸ ἐν ἀναφέρειν. (Non possum unum cogitare quin trium fulgore mox circumfundar: nec tria possum discernere quin subito ad unum referar.) Similarly Gregory Naz. (*Orat.*, 31, 14) developed the thought that we can only think of God's act and will and essence as one, but then, remembering their distinct origins, we know three as the object of worship, even if we do not worship three alongside one another. The trinitarian dialectic is also very well presented in the "Preface on the All-Holiest Trinity" in the *Missale Romanum*: Domine sancte, Pater omnipotens, aeternae Deus! Qui cum unigenito Filio tuo et Spiritu Sancto unus es Deus, unus es Dominus: non in unius singularitate personae, sed in unius trinitate substantiae. Quod enim de tua gloria, revelante te, credimus, hoc de Filio tuo, hoc de Spiritu sancto, sine differentia discretionis sentimus. Ut in confessione verae sempiternaeque Deitatis et in personis proprietates et in essentia unitas et in maiestate adoretur aequalitas. It should be noted that in the three-membered conclusion to this passage *maiestas* counterbalances the *personae* and *essentia* in God, and *aequalitas* (obviously equivalent to ὁμοουσία) the *proprietates* and *unitas*, so that some effort is made to give a place of its own to the third thing to which the trinitarian dialectic points.

* Editors' note. Since it is hardly possible to reproduce the nuance of *Dreieinigkeit* in recognisable English (cf. the "Three-in-Oneness" of the first edition), the term "triunity" is adopted here to render *Dreieinigkeit* rather than *Dreieinheit*.

The trinity of God obviously implies, then, the unity of Father, Son and Spirit among themselves. God's essence is indeed one, and even the different relations of origin do not entail separations. They rather imply—for where there is difference there is also fellowship—a definite participation of each mode of being in the other modes of being, and indeed, since the modes of being are in fact identical with the relations of origin, a complete participation of each mode of being in the other modes of being. Just as in revelation, according to the biblical witness, the one God may be known only in the Three and the Three only as the one God, so none of the Three may be known without the other Two but each of the Three only with the other Two.

It need not be specially proved that when the trinitarian distinction is in view in the Old Testament or the New the particular stress on one of God's modes of being never implies its separation from the others. What is always stated implicitly or explicitly—think of the express statements about the Father and the Son in John (e.g., Jn. 10^{30, 38}; 14^{10, 11}; 17¹¹) or the relation of Christ and the Spirit in Paul—is not, of course, the identity of the one mode of being with the others but the co-presence of the others in the one.

Since John of Damascus (*Ekdosis*, I, 8 and 14) this insight has found expression in theology in the doctrine of the perichoresis (*circumincessio*, passing into one another) of the divine persons. This states that the divine modes of being mutually condition and permeate one another so completely that one is always in the other two and the other two in the one. Sometimes this has been grounded more in the unity of the divine essence and sometimes more in the relations of origin as such. Both approaches are right and both are ultimately saying the same thing. *Nec enim Pater absque Filio cognoscitur, nec sine Patre Filius invenitur. Relatio quippe ipsa vocabuli personalis personas separari vetat, quas etiam, dum non simul nominat, simul insinuat. Nemo autem audire potest unum-quodque istorum nominum, in quo non intelligere cogatur et alterum* (Conc. Tolet., XI, Denz., No. 281). *Propter unitatem naturalem totus Pater in Filio et Spiritu sancto est, totus quoque Spiritus sanctus in Patre et Filio est. Nullus horum extra quemlibet ipsorum est* (Fulgentius, *De fide ad Petr.*, 1). *Est et enim totus Pater in Filio et communi Spiritu et Filius in Patre et eodem Spiritu et idem Spiritus in Patre et Filio . . . Tanta igitur . . . aequalitate sese complectuntur et sunt in se invicem, ut eorum nullus alium excedere aut sine eo esse probetur* (Anselm, *Monol.*, 59; cf. also Peter Lomb., *Sent.* I, dist. 19 E; Thomas Aquinas, *S. theol.*, I, qu. 45, art. 5). On the basis of this doctrine the inner life of God would appear to be a kind of uninterrupted cycle of the three modes of being, and we are glad to be reminded of the inappropriateness of the figure resulting from the literal meaning of *περιχώρησις* by the fact that instead of a temporal sequence the Latin Church adopted a spatial juxtaposition and thus preferred to speak in terms of *circumincessio* (dwelling in one another, *immanentia, inexistencia*) rather than *circumincessio*. In one way or the other this theologoumenon, which is not so far from the necessary biblical basis of genuine dogmatics as might at first sight appear, implies both a confirmation of the distinction in the modes of being, for none would be what it is (not even the Father) without its co-existence with the others, and also a relativisation of this distinction, for none exists as a special individual, but all three “in-exist” or exist only in concert as modes of being of the one God and Lord who posits Himself from eternity to eternity. Not unjustly, therefore, J. Pohle (*Lehrb. d. Dogm.*, Vol. I, 1902, p. 355) called the doctrine of perichoresis “the final sum of the two factors under discussion,” namely, the

doctrine of *unitas in trinitate* and *trinitas in unitate*. It must in fact be regarded as an important form of the dialectic needed to work out the concept of “trinity.”

To the unity of Father, Son and Spirit among themselves corresponds their unity *ad extra*. God's essence and work are not twofold but one. God's work is His essence in its relation to the reality which is distinct from Him and which is to be created or is created by Him. The work of God is the essence of God as the essence of Him who (N.B. in a free decision grounded in His essence but not constrained by His essence) is revealer, revelation and being revealed, or Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer. In this work of His, God is revealed to us. All we can know of God according to the witness of Scripture are His acts. All we can say of God, all the attributes we can assign to God, relate to these acts of His; not, then, to His essence as such. Though the work of God is the essence of God, it is necessary and important to distinguish His essence as such from His work, remembering that this work is grace, a free divine decision, and also remembering that we can know about God only because and to the extent that He gives Himself to us to be known. God's work is, of course, the work of the whole essence of God. God gives Himself entirely to man in His revelation, but not in such a way as to make Himself man's prisoner. He remains free in His working, in giving Himself.

This freedom of His is the basis of the distinction of the essence of God as such from His essence as the One who works and reveals Himself. On this freedom rests the incomprehensibility of God, the inadequacy of all knowledge of the revealed God. The trinity of God, too, is revealed to us only in God's work. This is why the trinity of God is incomprehensible to us. This is why all our knowledge of the trinity is inadequate. The comprehensibility with which it is presented to us, primarily in Scripture and secondarily in the Church doctrine of the Trinity, is a creaturely comprehensibility. It is absolutely and not just relatively different from the comprehensibility with which it exists for God Himself. It rests on the free grace of revelation alone that this comprehensibility in this absolute difference from its object is nevertheless not without truth. In this sense the trinity of God as we know it from God's work is truth. In a bridging of the gulf (from God's side) between divine and human comprehensibility it comes to pass that in the sphere and within the limits of human comprehensibility there is a true knowledge of God's essence generally and hence also of the trinity. In this sphere and within these limits revelation occurs. Otherwise how could it be revelation where this sphere is merely our sphere? How else could we perceive the trinity except in this sphere and within these limits? Only revelation as God's step towards us is, of course, the guarantee of its truth. As we cannot make the step

across the abyss, so we cannot be the guarantee. We can only let it be guaranteed for us. And we should not be surprised at the incomprehensibility in which it still remains for us as it becomes comprehensible to us. We should not confuse our comprehension and its allotted and appropriate truth with the truth of the triunity from which by God's grace it comes to our comprehension as this takes place in us with the appropriate and allotted truth. It is thus legitimate for us to differentiate the three modes of being of the one God on the basis of the revelation which takes place in the sphere and within the limits of human comprehensibility.

The revelation of God attested in Scripture forces us to make this differentiation. Scripture itself continually speaks in terms of these differentiations and it does so with great seriousness, i.e., in such a way that we are in no position to remove them without exegetical wresting. It shows us God in His work as revealer, revelation and being revealed, or as Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer, or as holiness, mercy and goodness. In these distinctions we can and should perceive the distinctions in the divine modes of being in the truth allotted and appropriate to us. The limit of our comprehension lies in the fact that even as we comprehend these distinctions we do not comprehend the distinctions in the divine modes of being as such. These do not consist in distinctions in God's acts and attributes. If we were to assume this we should be assuming three gods or a tripartite essence of God. God's work would then be a remarkable combination of three divine truths or powers or even individuals. Hence we must believe already that even though the distinctions in God's work take place in the sphere and within the limits of our comprehensibility, here also and especially they do not signify the last word in the hidden essence of God, and the distinctions in God Himself cannot rest in these distinctions.

But why should they not draw our attention to the incomprehensible distinctions in God Himself, to the distinctions which rest on the various ways in which God posits Himself and is His own origin in the hiddenness of His Godhead? Why should not the comprehensible distinctions in God's revelation, provisional though they are, confront us with the problem of His incomprehensible and eternal distinctions? One must say at least that they can be regarded as fit and proper to give us this hint. There is an analogy—we recall our exposition of the doctrine of relations in this regard—between the terms Father, Son and Spirit along with the other formulations of this triad in revelation on the one side, and on the other side the three divine modes of being which consist in the different relations of origin and in which we have come to know the truly incomprehensible eternal distinctions in God. In these analogies, which are not present in the world like the alleged *vestigia trinitatis* but which have been set up in the world by revelation,

and by which the mystery is not as it were abandoned and solved but rather denoted, and denoted precisely as a mystery, we have the truth of the triunity as it is assigned and appropriate to us. We shall not overestimate this truth. If we did, if we confused the analogy with the thing itself, if we equated the distinctions that are comprehensible to us with those that are not, in other words, if we thought we had comprehended the essence of God in comprehending His work, we should be plunged at once into the error of tritheism. But why should we on this account underestimate this truth? Even though we acknowledge the inaccessibility of the thing itself, why should we not accept it as a reference to the thing itself? *Abusus non tollit usum*: why should we not use this reference as it is meant to be used as the creation and gift of revelation?

In the vocabulary of older dogmatics what falls to be said about this positive relation between Father, Son and Spirit in God's work and Father, Son and Spirit in God's essence is the doctrine of appropriations (attributions, assignments). By the specific assigning of a word or deed to this or that person of the Godhead, there should be brought to our awareness, as Leo the Great taught (*Serm.*, 76, 2), the truth of the triunity which is in fact undivided in its work and which still exists in three persons. *Ob hoc enim quaedam sive sub Patris, sive sub Filii, sive sub Spiritus sancti appellatione promuntur, ut confessio fidelium in trinitate non erret: quae cum sit inseparabilis, nunquam intelligeretur esse trinitas, si semper inseparabiliter diceretur. Bene ergo ipsa difficultas loquendi cor nostrum ad intelligentiam trahit et per infirmitatem nostram coelestis doctrina nos adiuvat.* Augustine (*De doctr. chr.*, I, 5) appropriated *unitas* to the Father, *aequalitas* to the Son and *connexio* to the Spirit; Thomas Aquinas *potentia* to the Father, *sapientia* to the Son and *bonitas* to the Spirit (*S. theol.*, I, qu. 45, art. 6, ad. 2). Bonaventura (*Breviloq.*, I, 6) has a wealth of appropriations which he partly took over from older sources and partly indicated himself: unity to the Father, truth to the Son and goodness to the Holy Ghost, or eternity to the Father, appearance (*species*) to the Son and event (*usus, fruitio*) to the Spirit, or principle to the Father, execution to the Son and goal to the Spirit, or omnipotence to the Father, omniscience to the Son and benevolence to the Spirit. A particularly typical biblical appropriation was found quite early in the *ἐξ αὐτοῦ, δι' αὐτοῦ, εἰς αὐτόν* of Rom. 11³⁶. We naturally have an appropriation before us when in Luther's Catechism the concepts of Father and creation, Son and redemption and Holy Ghost and sanctification are brought into the well-known close relation to one another, and in this regard it should be noted that whenever Luther comes to speak of the Trinity he never fails to refer to the real unity of what seem to be, and not just seem to be but actually are, threefold statements about God's work. Naturally we find another appropriation in the ternary which Calvin preferred, obviously borrowing from the great mediaeval tradition: *principium, sapientia, virtus*.

The clearest and most complete definition of the concept of appropriation is that given by Thomas Aquinas: *appropriare nihil est aliud quam commune trahere ad proprium . . . non . . . ex hoc quod magis uni personae quam alii conveniat . . . sed ex hoc quod id quod est commune, maiorem habet similitudinem ad id quod est proprium personae unius quam cum proprio alterius* (*De verit. qu. 7, art. 3, cf. S. theol.*, I, qu. 39, art. 7–8). The rules to be noted in this definition are as

follows according to Roman Catholic dogmaticians (cf., e.g., B. Bartmann, *Lehrb. d. Dogm.*, 7th edn., Vol. I, 1928, p. 215):

1. The appropriation must not be arbitrary but must take place intelligibly. Not each and every triad, however significant in itself, is adapted even to denote truthfully the mystery of the triunity. There has to be a manifest kinship, similarity and analogy between the three things signifying and the three things signified, as there manifestly is between Father, Son and Spirit on the one hand and the three relations of origin on the other. If this is lacking the appropriation lacks significance.

2. The appropriation must not be exclusive. The appropriation of this or that quality or act of God to this or that mode of being must not be made a property of this mode of being or a distinction that is constitutive for it. What is appropriated belongs in fact to all the modes of being and the distinction between them cannot really be achieved by any appropriation, not even in the last analysis by the designations Father, Son and Spirit.

Evangelical dogmatics will have to add as a third and decisive rule that appropriations must not be invented freely. They are authentic when they are taken literally or materially or both from Holy Scripture, when they are a rendering or interpretation of the appropriations found there. If they are this they will certainly not be arbitrary or exclusive either.

Our statement concerning the comprehensibility of Father, Son and Spirit in God's work obviously requires—we are now enquiring into the unity of the three modes of being *ad extra* too—a dialectical counterpart. It may always be seen already on the margin of what has been said thus far, but it must now be emphasised, that also and precisely in God's work, in God's entry into the sphere of the creature and therefore into the sphere and the limits of our comprehensibility, God is one both in His eternal truth and also in the truth assigned and appropriate to us. It would be pagan mythology to present the work of God in the form of a dramatic entry and exit of now one and now another of the divine persons, of the surging up and down of half or totally individualised powers or forms or ideas, of a shifting co-existence and competition of the three hypostases. Again it is impossible to draw the line plainly and generally between permitted and commanded appropriations and this forbidden mythology. The one may often bear a confusing resemblance to the other. But the line has been drawn; to the involution and convolution of the three modes of being in the essence of God there corresponds exactly their involution and convolution in His work. The fact that He is particularly manifest for us in this indissolubly and characteristically distinct act or attribute in this or that mode of being may not and must not mean that we have not to believe and worship God in the other modes of being even though they are temporarily hidden from us. Just as Scripture is to be read in context as the witness to God's revelation, just as, e.g., Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost can only say together what they have to say, so we must say that all God's work, as we are to grasp it on the basis of His

revelation, is one act which occurs simultaneously and in concert in all His three modes of being. From creation by way of revelation and reconciliation to the coming redemption it is always true that He who acts here is the Father and the Son and the Spirit. And it is true of all the perfections that are to be declared in relation to this work of God that they are as much the perfections of the Father as of the Son and the Spirit. *Per appropriationem* this act or this attribute must now be given prominence in relation to this or that mode of being in order that this can be described as such. But only *per appropriationem* may this happen, and in no case, therefore, to the forgetting or denying of God's presence in all His modes of being, in His total being and act even over against us.

Materially, though not literally, the theological rule with respect to the Trinity: *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*, is first found clearly in Augustine: *Sicut inseparabiles sunt, ita inseparabiliter operantur* (*De trin.*, I, 4). *Ad creaturam Pater et Filius et Spiritus sanctus unum principium, sicut unus creator et unus dominus* (*ib.*, V, 14). For: *Non potest operatio esse divina, ubi non solum aequalis est, verum etiam indiscreta natura* (*C. Adrian.*, 15). In the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church this insight has found its most precise expression in the statement of the *Conc. Florent.*, 1441 (*Denz.*, No. 704): *Pater et Filius et Spiritus sanctus non tria principia creaturae, sed unum principium*. The emphasis with which Luther supported this truth may be recalled again at this point. We must say of it, no less than of the doctrine of the perichoresis, that it is to some extent a proof by way of example in relation to the opposing statements about the *unitas in trinitate* and the *trinitas in unitate*. With the doctrine of appropriations it constitutes the other form of the dialectical outworking of the concept of triunity.

4. THE MEANING OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

By the doctrine of the Trinity we understand the Church doctrine of the unity of God in the three modes of being of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, or of the threefold otherness of the one God in the three modes of being of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. All that had and has to be expounded here in detail could and can expound only the unity in trinity and the trinity in unity. This doctrine as such does not stand in the texts of the Old and New Testament witness to God's revelation. It did not arise out of the historical situations to which these texts belong. It is exegesis of these texts in the speech, and this also means in the light of the questions, of a later situation. It belongs to the Church. It is a theologoumenon. It is dogma. We have asked (§ 8, 2) about its root, i.e., the possibility on the basis of which it could be a dogma in a Church which sought to regulate its doctrine by the biblical witness. And we have seen that this possibility lies in the fact that in the Bible revelation means the self-unveiling, imparted to men,

of the God who by nature cannot be unveiled to men. According to the biblical witness this matter is of such a nature that in the light of the three elements of God's veiling, unveiling and imparting we have cause to speak of the threefold otherness of the one God who has revealed Himself according to the witness of the Bible. The biblical witness to God's revelation sets us face to face with the possibility of interpreting the one statement that "God reveals Himself as the Lord" three times in different senses. This possibility is the biblical root of the doctrine of the Trinity. But in the Bible it remains on the level of possibility. We are now asking about the meaning of its actualisation. With what necessity and right did the Church formulate this dogma? It could do this. Did it have to do it? What insight was it expressing in the dogma and what reason have we, then, to take pains to understand it?

Now obviously we cannot discuss this question intelligently if the Church of earlier days which framed this theologoumenon and gave it the status of dogma has become so alien to us that we can view and evaluate it and its intentions only historically, i.e., in this case from outside, as strangers, not really thinking its thoughts with it.

This would be so, e.g., if we could not rise above the recollection that in the controversies before and after Nicaea a very considerable part was played by very non-theological antipathies in ecclesiastical and civil politics, in court relations, and in national and certainly economic matters as well; or if we could not rise above the recollection that the development of the dogma of the Trinity is unquestionably a chapter in the history of the philosophy of later antiquity, an offshoot of Stoic and Neo-Platonic Logos speculation; or if with the historical and systematic theologians of the school of A. Ritschl we could not rise above the recollection that the belief in revelation of the Christian world in which this dogma arose was shrouded beyond recognition in the mists of an ancient mystery religion nourished on Orientalisms of every possible kind, that it was embedded in a predominantly physical understanding of the revealed salvation, in a predominantly cosmic interest in the knowledge of revelation, in a predominantly sacramentally orientated piety with which we cannot really identify ourselves and the validity of which we shall perhaps have to call into serious question more from the standpoint of the Reformation than from that of the New Testament. If considerations of this kind, including perhaps a mere sense of reverence for a form sanctified by age, were to have the last word in regard to our participation in the rise of the dogma, what could this mean but that all these events, and the dogma as their result, and all later work attempted along the lines of the dogma, would be fundamentally alien to us? In relation to the decisive point of the dogma, namely, the Christian knowledge of God, we should then be faced by at least a deep suspicion if not an actual certainty that there is really nothing in it, that the only voice here is perhaps that of Byzantine politics, or Stoicism, or Neo-Platonism, or the ancient piety of the mysteries. And in this case any enquiry into the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity could be pursued only with the aloofness of an astonished and disapproving spectator, and might just as well be abandoned.

We have to realise that if we adopt this attitude we are saying that the Church of earlier days lost, so to speak, its theme, that it need no

longer concern us seriously in relation to what it was really intended to be, namely, the Church of Jesus Christ, and that its work does not have any relevance to us except perhaps as an object of contemplation from outside. If we evaluate it as we would evaluate a heresy or even an alien religion we are naturally in no position to ask seriously, i.e., sympathetically, about the meaning of its intention. But we have also to realise that this is a very daring and a very dangerous judgment. It is daring because in making it we are declaring that the Church of earlier days was basically a heresy or an alien religion—a judgment which is not indeed formally impossible, but which involves a heavy responsibility, especially when, as here, the issue is the line in dogmatic history along which, ever since the great and decisive battles of the 4th century, all the Church's significant theologians have unswervingly advanced, including the Reformers and their 17th century successors. And a judgment of this kind might well be dangerous because those in the Church who in this way want to see and understand others only from outside must face the question whether on the contrary it is not perhaps they themselves who are outsiders as the adherents of a heresy or even an alien religion. It is surely more normal and safer to start at least with the assumption that the Church of the earlier period, and specifically the Church of this earlier period, is one and the same as the Church which we know and which we like to call the Church, so that it makes sense to ask seriously, i.e., sympathetically, what it intended by this dogma. The assumption that Jesus Christ did not altogether abandon His Church in this age, and that, notwithstanding all the things that might justly be alleged against it, it is still in place to listen to it as one listens to the Church—this assumption would always seem to have a very definite advantage over its opposite. In any case we certainly need very weighty reasons if we decide to drop, as it were, the Church of any period, adopting that attitude of contemplation and evaluation from outside and no longer listening seriously to its voice. Are the reasons really so compelling in relation to the early period of the Church when the doctrine of the Trinity arose?

In the dogmatic and theological history of every age, not excluding that of Protestantism, secular factors have played a part which tends to cover over all else. For all the gloating with which it was done, it was a good thing that the work of Pietism and the Enlightenment in Church History established so incontrovertibly the fact that even in such periods of supreme decision as that in which the dogma of the Trinity arose the history of the Church was anything but a history of heroes and saints. Yet in this case we should be just and perceptive and allow that not only the Church of Byzantium but also that of Wittenberg and Geneva, and finally the purest Church of any of the quiet in the land, have always and everywhere been, when examined at close range, centres of frailties and scandals of every kind, and that on the basis of the Reformation doctrine of justification at all events it is neither fitting nor worth while to play off the worldliness of the Church against the seriousness of the insights it has perhaps

gained in spite of and in this worldliness. The same may be said about the indisputable connexion of the dogma with the philosophy of the age. By proving philosophical involvement we can reject the confessions and theology of any age and school, and we can do this the more effectively the less we see the beam in our own eye. For linguistically theologians have always depended on some philosophy and linguistically they always will. But instead of getting Pharisaically indignant about this and consigning whole periods to the limbo of a philosophy that is supposed to deny the Gospel—simply because our own philosophy is different—it is better to stick strictly to the one question what the theologians of the earlier period were really trying to say in the vocabulary of their philosophy. Caution is especially demanded when we insist on differences in the so-called piety of different periods and therefore claim that the piety out of which the dogma of the Trinity arose was completely different from our own piety with its sober focus, as they said some years ago, on "world-view and morality." What right have we to regard our own piety, even if its agreement with the Reformation and the New Testament seem ever so impeccable, as the only piety that is possible in the Church, and therefore to exalt it as a standard by which to measure the insights of past ages? Let us be sure of our own cause so far as we can. But antithetical rigidity especially in evaluating the subjective religion of others is something against which we can only issue a warning.

There seem to be no compelling reasons why we should so distrust the Church of the 4th century and its dogma that we abandon the question as to the meaning of this dogma.

On the other hand, if any one wishes to advance such reasons, we cannot rebut them with counter-arguments. There can be no contesting the formal possibility that any Church might be an apostate church which does not concern us and has nothing to say to us. If we do in fact deny this possibility, this is, as in all similar cases, a decision of faith, or, as we might say more cautiously, a decision which must regard itself as a decision of faith, which can have meaning only as a decision of faith, and for the justification of which we can only appeal in the last resort to the dogma itself and to Holy Scripture confronting both us and the dogma, asking whether the dogma, for all the undeniable and ineradicable limitation of its origin, does not express an insight, which a Church with an ear for Holy Scripture not only could reach but had to reach at a specific time; whether, by letting Scripture and the dogma speak for themselves, we can escape the conviction that divine truth is given human formulation here in a way in which it had to be formulated at some period, so that this formulation, once achieved, must never be lost or forgotten again; whether what took place here, while it was certainly exegesis and not infallible revelation, was not still the kind of exegesis that can be confidently described as not merely correct but also important. And if we answer this question in the affirmative, if we thus confess the possibility of regarding ourselves as in the same sphere as the Church of the past which perceived and confessed this dogma as such, i.e., as

being one and the same Church with it, if we thus enquire into the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity, this does not imply a purely accidental personal decision. We should take into account the fact that even to this day this decision is that not merely of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches but also basically of all the great Evangelical Churches as well.

None of them has actually revoked what took place when an express confirmation of the early symbols expressing the doctrine of the Trinity was made a constitutive part of the Reformation confessions in the 16th century. The liturgical recitation of the so-called Apostles' Creed, which is the practice in the Prussian and other territorial churches, repeats in its own fashion this significant event. And every baptism validly performed in our churches at least confronts us with the problem of the doctrine of the Trinity.

No one can say that he knows, and no one is competent to declare, that only pious reverence for a venerable landmark of Christianity has preserved some place for the doctrine of the Trinity in a more or less clear form even in the Evangelical Church as it is now ravaged by Modernism. This fact gives us the external right too, and indeed imposes upon us the task, of enquiring into its meaning at this point.

We should start with the fact that the rise of the doctrine of the Trinity, however varied the factors which contributed to it, was at least governed also by the need to clear up a question with which the Church saw itself confronted by Holy Scripture in the delivery of its message. Assuming that the Church is not only unfaithful by nature, as it has been, of course, in every age, but is also in some degree and sense faithful, so that in its proclamation it has tried to take up the witness of the Old and New Testaments, there can be no cause for surprise that it has come up against the question which found an answer in the doctrine of the Trinity. Nor can there be any cause for surprise that it came up against this particular question in such a relatively early period, nor need we be surprised at the violence of the conflicts into which it was plunged by this question and the inexorability with which it has adhered through the centuries to the broad line achieved at that time. The question which arose for it out of the commitment of its proclamation to Scripture, and which it answered in the doctrine of the Trinity, was in fact a basic and vital question of the first rank for Church preaching and therefore for Church theology too. We thus regard it as right and proper to put discussion of this question at the head of all dogmatics. This is a practical outworking of what many have said theoretically about its significance from the very earliest times.

But the question that is answered by the doctrine of the Trinity is a very specific question regarding the basic concept of the revelation of God or the basic fact of it as attested in Scripture.

Even if it be regarded as a mere offshoot of the Logos speculation of later antiquity one must at all events concede that its occasion at least is the manifestation of Jesus Christ understood as the revelation of the Logos. It is trying to discuss the deity of this revealed, incarnate Logos. Its second theme, the concept of the Spirit, points in the same direction. And when it speaks of God the Father it is dealing with the point of origin and relation of these two, the Son and the Spirit.

The specific question about revelation which is answered by the doctrine of the Trinity is, however, the question who it is that reveals Himself, the question of the subject of revelation. One may sum up the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity briefly and simply by saying that *God* is the One who reveals Himself. But if this meaning is to be fully perspicuous one must also reverse the emphasis and say that God is the One who *reveals* Himself. For the strictness and logic of the answer to the question about the subject of revelation consist in the fact that as we enquire into the interpretation of this answer we find ourselves referred back again to revelation itself. The Church doctrine of the Trinity is a self-enclosed circle. Its decisive and controlling concern is to say with exactitude and completeness that *God* is the Revealer. But how can it say this with exactitude and completeness unless it declares that none other than the *Revealer* is God? One might put this more simply by saying that the doctrine of the Trinity states that our God, namely, He who makes Himself ours in His revelation, is really God. And to the question, But who is God? there may then be given the no less simple answer, This God of ours. Is it not true that the main answer and the subsidiary answer are the simple but no less momentous presuppositions of all Christian thought and talk about God? The first and last criterion of Christian proclamation is whether it moves in the circle indicated by these two answers. Christian theology can be only an exercise in this movement. The question of the subject of revelation and therefore of all God's dealings with man, which the Bible itself does not answer but poses in all its sharpness, calls indeed for an answer. Can we not understand the haste with which men felt called to answer it and the undoubtedly extraordinary zeal with which they set about this work? Was this not precisely because it was such a simple and yet such a central matter? And could the question be answered in any other way? Or is this problem not really set in the Bible? Could it be answered otherwise than it has been answered in the doctrine of the Trinity?

The problem which we think we see posed in the Bible and which points towards the Church doctrine of the Trinity consists in the fact that the being and speech and action and therefore the self-revealing of God are described there in the moments of His self-veiling or self-unveiling or self-impartation to men, that His characteristic attributes are holiness, mercy and love, that His characteristic demonstrations

are denoted in the New Testament by Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost, and that His name is correspondingly the name of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The Bible does not state expressly that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are of equal essence and are thus in the same sense God Himself. Nor does it state expressly that thus and only thus, as Father, Son and Holy Ghost, God is God. These two express declarations, which go beyond the witness of the Bible, are the twofold content of the Church doctrine of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity means on the one side, as a rejection of Subordinationism, the express statement that the three moments do not mean a more and a less in God's being as God. The Father is not to be understood as the true God in distinction from the Son and the Spirit, and the Son and the Spirit are not, in distinction from the Father, favoured and glorified creatures, vital forces aroused and set in motion by God, and as such and in this sense revealers. But it is God who reveals Himself equally as the Father in His self-veiling and holiness, as the Son in His self-unveiling and mercy, and as the Spirit in His self-impartation and love. Father, Son and Spirit are the one, single, and equal God. The subject of revelation attested in the Bible, no matter what may be His being, speech and action, is the one Lord, not a demi-god, either descended or ascended. Communion with the One who reveals Himself there always and in all circumstances means for man that this God meets him as a Thou meets an I and unites with him as a Thou unites with an I. Not otherwise! Totally excluded is a communion with this God of the kind that we can have with creatures, namely, of such a kind that the Thou can be changed by an I into an It or He over which or whom the I gains control. Also and particularly as Son and Spirit, the One who reveals Himself according to the witness of Scripture does not become an It or He, but remains Thou. And in remaining Thou He remains the Lord. The subject of revelation is the subject that remains indissolubly subject. One cannot get behind this subject. It cannot become object. All Subordinationism rests on the intention of making the One who reveals Himself there the kind of subject we ourselves are, a creature whose Thouness has limits we can survey, grasp and master, which can be objectified, in face of which the I can assert itself. Note well that according to Subordinationist teaching even the Father, who is supposedly thought of as the Creator, is in fact dragged into the creaturely sphere. According to this view His relation to Son and Spirit is that of idea to manifestation. Standing in this comprehensible relation, He shows Himself to be an entity that can be projected and dominated by the I. Subordinationism finally means the denial of revelation, the drawing of divine subjectivity into human subjectivity, and by way of polytheism the isolation of man

with himself in his own world in which there is finally no Thou and therefore no Lord. It was against this possibility that the Church was striking when it rejected Arianism and every form of Subordinationism. We ask whether it did well in this regard or not.

The doctrine of the Trinity means on the other side, as the rejection of Modalism, the express declaration that the three moments are not alien to God's being as God. The position is not that we have to seek the true God beyond these three moments in a higher being in which He is not Father, Son and Spirit. The revelation of God and therefore His being as Father, Son and Spirit is not an economy which is foreign to His essence and which is bounded as it were above and within, so that we have to ask about the hidden Fourth if we are really to ask about God. On the contrary, when we ask about God, we can only ask about the One who reveals Himself. The One who according to the witness of Scripture is and speaks and acts as Father, Son and Spirit, in self-veiling, self-unveiling and self-imparting, in holiness, mercy and love, this and no other is God. For man community with God means strictly and exclusively communion with the One who reveals Himself and who is subject, and indeed indissolubly subject, in His revelation. The indissolubility of His being as subject is guaranteed by the knowledge of the ultimate reality of the three modes of being in the essence of God above and behind which there is nothing higher. Totally excluded here is all communion that means evading His revelation or transcending the reality in which He shows and gives Himself. God is precisely the One He is in showing and giving Himself. If we hasten past the One who according to the biblical witness addresses us in threefold approach as a Thou we can only rush into the void. Modalism finally entails a denial of God. Our God and only our God, namely, the God who makes Himself ours in His revelation, is God. The relativising of this God which takes place in the doctrine of a real God beyond the revealed God implies a relativising, i.e., a denying, of the one true God. Here, too, there is no Thou, no Lord. Here, too, man clearly wants to get behind God, namely, behind God as He really shows and gives Himself, and therefore behind what He is, for the two are one and the same. Here, too, we have an objectifying of God. Here, too, the divine subjectivity is sucked up into the human subjectivity which enquires about a God that does not exist. Here too, but this time by way of mysticism, man finally finds himself alone with himself in his own world. This possibility, which in its root and crown is the same as the first, is what the Church wanted to guard against when it rejected Sabellianism and every form of Modalism. And again we ask whether it did well in this regard or not.

The doctrine of the Trinity tells us—this is the positive thing which it was defending on the polemical fronts—how far the One who

reveals Himself according to the witness of Scripture can in fact be our *God* and how far He can in fact be *our* God. He can be our God because in all His modes of being He is equal to Himself, one and the same Lord. In terms of the doctrine of the Trinity knowledge of revelation as it may arise from the witness of Scripture means in all three moments of the event knowledge of the Lord as the One who meets us and unites Himself to us. And this Lord can be our God, He can meet us and unite Himself to us, because He is God in His three modes of being as Father, Son and Spirit, because creation, reconciliation and redemption, the whole being, speech and action in which He wills to be our God, have their basis and prototype in His own essence, in His own being as God. As Father, Son and Spirit God is, so to speak, ours in advance. Thus the doctrine of the Trinity tells us that the God who reveals Himself according to Scripture is both to be feared and also to be loved, to be feared because He can be God and to be loved because He can be our God. That He *is* these two things the doctrine of the Trinity as such cannot tell us. No dogma and no theology as such can. The doctrine of the Trinity as such is not the Word of God which might tell us. But if there is a ministry to this Word of God, a proclamation which can become the Word of God, and a ministry to this ministry, dogmatics as critical reflection on the proper content of proclamation, then the question as to the subject of revelation, to which the doctrine of the Trinity is an answer, must be the first step in this reflection. Scripture, in which the problem of the doctrine of the Trinity is posed, is always the measure and judge of the solution to this problem. It stands above the dogma of the Church and therefore above the critical reflection to which we let ourselves be led by the dogma of the Church. But all things considered we venture to think that, pending better instruction, this leading is an appropriate one.

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