

THE TRINITARIAN NATURE OF GOD AS CREATOR AND MAN'S AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM: THE CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEW

Klaas Runia

Dr. Runia, Netherlands, is Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Kampen.

1. In the years after World War II the *doctrine of God* has gradually become the *focus of attention* for both theologians and ordinary church members. The number of books published on this subject has become staggering, in particular during the last decade. There are several reasons for this special interest in this doctrine.

(a) We find ourselves right in the midst of an accelerating process of *secularization*. In the Western world, but increasingly also in the non-Western world (in particular in the big cities and among the younger generation), belief in God is no longer the natural presupposition of life. More and more people ask themselves the question, "Who is God?" Others go even further and ask, "Is there a God?" Others again have taken the next step and abandoned all faith in God as an antiquated illusion.

(b) Many leading philosophies and ideologies of our time are intentionally and brutally *atheistic*. They not only reject the idea of the existence of God, but also vigorously oppose all religion and in particular the Christian religion. Communism, e.g., which has about one-third of the world population in its iron grip, is based on an atheistic philosophy and tries to eradicate all religion by means of propaganda and persecution. In the so-called "free world" the thinking of many people, both scientists and non-scientists, is deeply influenced by the philosophy of evolutionism, which by definition has no place for the idea of God as the Creator and Supreme Ruler of the universe. One of the main schools of psychology, behaviorism (e.g., B. F. Skinner) not only rejects the idea of God, but also regards man as a being entirely determined by his inherited nature and by his environment.

(c) The encounter of Christianity with the *other world religions* has also brought the doctrine of God into new prominence. Those who live in a pagan country daily rub shoulders with adherents of other religions. But also on a global scale a new "dialogue" has started between Christianity and the other world religions. The latter all have their own conception of the Godhead and increasingly they challenge the Christian view of God, in particular the Christian doctrine of the Triune God.

2. In this paper we take *our starting point in the biblical doctrine of God*. We realize that by doing this we take a fundamental decision. It is not only a personal decision of faith, but also a theological decision of far-reaching significance.

Theoretically we could follow another pathway. We could, by means of an apologetic argument, try to lay a philosophical foundation and then

proceed to discuss the biblical doctrine of God as the building to be erected on this foundation. We believe, however, that such an approach is contrary to the nature of the Christian faith. In fact, we must go further and say that it is excluded by the biblical message itself. Our God is not the god of the philosophers (Pascal), but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ. Of him one can speak only from within the circle of faith. Or to put it in another way: everyone who wants to speak of God has to start with God's own self-revelation as recorded in Scripture.

This starting point means that we reject every possibility of developing a so-called "natural theology" as a stepping-stone towards a "revealed theology." Since the Middle Ages, especially since Thomas Aquinas, the "church father" of the medieval church, such a "natural theology," based on the so-called proofs for the existence of God, has been very popular, not only in Roman Catholic theology, but at times also in Protestant theology. The Roman Catholic Church even went so far as to make it the official doctrine of the church, when at the First Vatican Council (1870) it declared "to hold and teach that God, the beginning and end of all things, may be certainly known by the natural light of human reason by means of created things," yes that he can "be known by every one with facility, with firm assurance, and with no admixture of error" (*Credo of Christendom*). This view also explains the generally favorable attitude of the Roman Catholic Church toward other religions which are seen as a "preparation" for the Gospel. In some of these other religions themselves, the proofs for the existence of God also play an important part, e.g., in Islam.

There is, however, no basis for this approach in Scripture. To be sure, Scripture does teach that there is a *general self-revelation of God*, going out to all men through nature, history and man's own conscience (cf. Psa. 19:1ff.; Rom. 1:8ff.; 2:14, 15; Acts 14:17, 17: 26ff.), but this general revelation never leads to true knowledge of God on the side of sinful man. Paul clearly states concerning the Gentiles of his day that they "suppress the truth" of this revelation (Rom. 1:18), "For although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles" (vv. 21-23). This negative view of all human religion (including the so-called higher religions) is not contradicted by the words of the same apostle in Acts 17, for even there, although he approaches his listeners in a very positive way, he clearly states that they do not know the God who made the world and everything in it (Acts 17:23, 24). It is only through God's *special revelation*, that man can know God as he really is. Apart from this revelation man gropes in darkness and all his imaginations, however beautiful in themselves, are futile and do not lead to true knowledge of the true God.

3. *Who then is God according to the Bible?* In the Scripture of the Old Testament, Israel's prophets, inspired by the Holy Spirit, have recorded the revelation of God as it came to the covenant people of old. The Old Testament, in the form in which it has been handed down

to us, starts with the proclamation: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). This is not just a general statement about some great architect who stands behind all that is visible to the human eye, but it is the confession Israel makes about him whom it had learned to know as the great Redeemer of his people. Yahweh, the covenant-God of Israel, of whom it confessed in the "Shema" (Israel's Creed), "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4), is the Creator. Especially in the second part of the book of Isaiah it is emphasized that Yahweh is the Creator. All the other gods are only the products of man's mind and hands (Isa. 40:19ff.). But "the Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth" (v. 28). He is the Lord and there is no other (45:6). "Thus says the Lord who created the heavens (He is God!), who formed the earth and made it (He established it . . .), "I am the Lord and there is no other" (v. 18).

In the beginning of all time he created the heavens and the earth. This means first of all that God is in no way dependent on the creation. He is not eternally co-existent with the creation, but he, the eternal God, preceded the creation which he made. He did not need the creation either. The act of creation is not a "necessary" but a "free" act of his divine will and power. He is therefore not in any way limited by the creation, but *transcends* it in his eternal glory. There is in Israel's faith *not a trace of pantheism*. He, the eternal God, is so great, so far beyond his creation that even "heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain" him (I Kings 8:27).

In the Old Testament it is in particular the attribute of God's *holiness* that emphasizes this unique transcendence of God. This attribute not only indicates that God is pure and far removed from all sin (the ethical aspect), but also and primarily that he is wholly other, the Majestic One, before whose face not only sinful men tremble (Exod. 19; Isa. 6:5), but the holy angels as well (Isa. 6:2, 3).

And yet this very same God maintains a continuous relationship with his creation. There is *no trace of deism* either in the Old Testament. God, the transcendent Creator, is from moment to moment involved in the existence and history of his creation. In one of the Reformation confessions, the Belgic Confession of 1563, we read: "We believe that the same good God, after he had created all things, did not forsake them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that he rules and governs them according to his holy will so that nothing happens in this world without his appointment" (article 13, *Creeds of Christendom*).

4. God the Creator of all that exists established a *special relationship with man*, the creature that, according to Genesis, was called into being on the last "day" of creation. Genesis 1 clearly indicates the special place of man within the whole structure of creation by the fact that his creation was preceded by a special "council" of God, in which God decided to create a being "in his own image, after his own likeness" (Gen. 1:26). "So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (1:27).

In the course of history many heavy tomes have been written on this topic of *man being in the image of God*. Undoubtedly this expression points to the secret of man's being. But what does it mean?

It has often been explained as indicating the rational and moral nature of man. In other words, it would be indicative of some inherent qualities, which distinguish man from the animals. It is to be questioned, however, whether such an explanation does justice to the expression as it is used in Scripture. The expression is a form of pictorial language which indicates a *special relationship* between God and man, namely, the relationship of a father and his child (cf. Gen. 5:3). To live in such a relationship man does need certain qualities (such as rationality and morality), but these qualities themselves do not constitute the image (cf. the fact that angels, who do possess the same qualities are not children of God, but servants!). The "image" presupposes the qualities but at the same time transcends them. It points to the very special relationship with God, into which man was created: the relationship of a child who may call God his Father.

Here we find also the essential difference between man and the animals. The animals too are called into being by God and thus live in relationship with him, but they are not aware of it. Man is called into being, in order to live consciously "*coram Deo*," *before the face of God*. Yes, we may even go a step further and say that man is called into being in order to live *with God* and to *respond* to his divine Word. The deepest secret of man is that he is a "*responsive*" and therefore a "*responsible*" being. Or to put it in biblical language: man is created by God to be his *covenant-partner* and to live with God in a *relationship of love*. In order to be able to do this he has to be a rational being. Likewise he has to be a moral being who is free to respond in love to the love of God. This *freedom* is essential to man's being in the image of God. His answer to God's covenant-word has to be more than a mere "echo." A response of love must be a free response. At the same time this freedom cannot be an autonomous freedom. True freedom is a freedom that in childlike obedience listens to the word of the Father. This is clearly the meaning of the story about the tree of knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2.

Unfortunately man has misused the freedom given to him by God and has chosen the way of autonomous freedom. Listening to the persuasive voice of temptation ("you will be like God," Gen. 3:5), he "grasped the equality with God" (cf. Phil. 2:7) and thus became alienated, not only from his heavenly Father, but also from his fellowman and from his own nature and identity. His heart became so corrupt that he "lives in the passions of his flesh, following the desires of body and mind" (Eph. 2:3; cf. Gen. 6:5-7; Mark 7:21-23). As a sinner he is "dead through the trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1) and "by nature a child of wrath" (2:3).

All this does not mean that man, the sinner, is no longer responsible for his thoughts, words, and actions. He has not become an "automaton." The special relationship with God into which he was created still exists, even though it is in a perverted form. Every sinful thought, every sinful word and every sinful action is always a sin against the God in whose image he was created and for this very reason his guilt is so exceedingly great, that without the grace of God there is no escape for man from eternal perdition.

5. The great joy of the Christian message is that God himself did not forsake man, but established a *new covenant relationship*, not based on the fact of creation but on his own gracious love. Immediately after the Fall, God speaks the promise of grace, when in the words of the curse addressed to the serpent he says, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15).

The remainder of the Old Testament is the story of this promise as it is worked out by God in the Old Testament history of salvation: the new beginning after the Flood, the calling of Abraham, the Exodus from Egypt and the covenant with Israel at Sinai, the messianic sign as foreshadowed in David, etc.

In the Old Testament, however, it becomes increasingly clear that the new covenant relationship, too, continually founders through Israel's unfaithfulness. Instead of serving their gracious Lord they worship the idols of the nations around them. Israel is as the unfaithful wife of Hosea who gives herself to strange lovers (Hos. 1-3). "A spirit of harlotry has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the harlot" (Hos. 4:12).

The *prophets* therefore foretell a day of wrath in which the unfaithful people shall perish (cf. Amos 5:18). Yet they also know of a "remnant" that will survive out of this total destruction (cf. Amos 3:12, Isa. 1:9, 7:3, 10:20, 11:16, 28:5, 65:8-10; Ezek. 12:16; 14:22-23; Joel 2:32; Zeph. 3:12, 13; etc.). Gradually the picture of the one "*Servant of the Lord*" (the *Ebed Yahweh*) emerges, who will be the faithful covenant-partner and who as the suffering Messiah will be the Redeemer of his people (cf. Isa. 53).

But the centuries pass by and nothing seems to happen. Until the day arrives that he appears in the person of *Jesus of Nazareth*.

6. *Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?* According to the New Testament he is the son of Mary, a young virgin from Nazareth. He is a real human being, a being of flesh and blood (cf. John 1:14): "The Word became *flesh*"; also Heb. 2:14-18, 5:7-10). Yet he is different from all other human beings. The mystery of his being is his *unique relationship with God*. In the announcement of his birth to Mary by the angel Gabriel it is clearly stated, "He will be called the Son of the Most High...he will be called Holy, the Son of God" (Luke 1:32, 34). These expressions first of all indicate that he is the promised Messiah, for they are used here in a messianic context and refer back to similar indications in the Old Testament (cf. Psa. 2:7, 89:26, 27). But there are also obvious overtones in these expressions. They speak also of a relationship with God which goes beyond anything that ever existed before in the world of men.

When Jesus officially starts his messianic task by submitting himself to the baptism by John the Baptist, the voice from the cloud calls him, "My beloved Son" (cf. Matt. 3:17), words later repeated on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:15). Throughout the Gospels we notice that he himself is well aware of this unique relationship. He knows himself to be sent by God (cf. Matt. 10:40; Mark 9:37; Luke 9:48; 10:16). He calls God "Abba," which means "Daddy" (Mark 14:36). He even says, "He

who has seen Me, has seen the Father (John 14:9), and: "I am in the Father and the Father is in Me" (John 14:11).

Yet it is not until his resurrection from the dead and the outpouring of the promised Spirit that the disciples fully realize how unique his relationship with God was. This was more than an extra-ordinary *human* relationship with God, his Sonship was even more than a *messianic* Sonship. His Sonship was so unique that he was no less than the *eternal Son of God* who had "come into the flesh" (I John 4:2). He was the revelation of God, because in him we meet with God himself. "What men saw in Jesus is eternally in the Unseen, and he 'who came from God and went to God' is the Son inseparable from the Father."

Likewise the disciples, after Pentecost, when they experienced the presence of the *promised Spirit*, began to realize that in this Spirit they had to do with God himself. He was not just a gift from God, but God himself dwelling in them.

7. In this way the *Christian doctrine of the Triune God* gradually developed. In its full-fledged form it is not yet found in the New Testament. Yet it may be called a *biblical* doctrine. We think here of a useful distinction made by Arthur W. Wainwright in his excellent book "*The Trinity in the New Testament*" (1962). He points out that the term "doctrine" can be taken in a twofold sense. First, it can be taken as a "formal statement of a position." In this sense the doctrine of the Trinity is not found in the Bible. "There is no formal statement of trinitarian doctrine in the New Testament as there is in the Athanasian Creed or in Augustine's *De Trinitate*." But the term "doctrine" can also be taken as "an answer, however fragmentary, to a problem." In this sense the doctrine does occur in the New Testament, for "the problem of the Trinity was in the minds of certain New Testament writers and... they made an attempt to answer it."

But why was there such a *problem*? To state it as briefly and as simply as possible, the New Testament writers, together with their fellow-believers in the Old Testament dispensation, uncompromisingly believed that *God is one*. Yet at the same time they believed also that *Jesus, the Messiah, is the Son of God*, and that in a unique sense. Again and again John speaks of the "only-begotten" Son of the Father. In the Synoptic Gospels we read more than once that he is the "beloved" Son, which is virtually equivalent to John's only-begotten. Afterwards the Nicene Creed stated it thus, "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God."

In this combination of divine one-ness and messianic Sonship we find the origin of the Trinity in the New Testament itself. As to its origin this doctrine has nothing to do with philosophical speculation, but it was born of the heart of the Christian faith, namely, the Christology. Dr. S. R. Franks points to the fact that there are three fundamental acts of God in history. First, there is God's choice of Israel as his peculiar people. To them he revealed himself under the sacred name of Yahweh. Second, comes the sending of Jesus, who was born of the stock of Israel. And third, is the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church, which is the Society of those confessing Jesus as Messiah (or Christ). God chose, God sent, God gave: the acknowledgment of these three

great moments of divine revelation is the starting point. But it was "the second or central act which was the original disturbing factor that set in motion the transformation of Jewish monotheism into the Christian doctrine of the Trinity."

The same is true of the *historical development* of the doctrine. The church of the first three centuries did not engage in the trinitarian controversies, because it was so fond of speculation (although it must be admitted that the Greek-speaking fathers of the East were not always free from speculation), but the controversy about the Trinity was basically a christological controversy. The basic issue was: Is Jesus Christ God, really and fully God (*vere Deus*)? If so, what does this mean with regard to the Being of God? At a later stage the same question was asked with regard to the Holy Spirit. But at that time the christological issue had already been settled and the controversy about the divinity and personality of the Holy Spirit was more in the nature of a consequence. The *core* of the doctrine of the Trinity was and is the *Christology*.

8. Without any doubt this most basic doctrine of the Christian faith is also *the most incomprehensible one*. It is therefore not surprising to see that all through the centuries it has been *opposed*, even within the Christian Church. In our own days it is again attacked by those who advocate a "new" Christology, namely, the idea that Jesus, the man of Nazareth, is the *perfect human* covenant-partner, raised by God himself. Also from outside the Christian faith this doctrine is continually opposed, especially by orthodox Jews and the followers of Mohammed. They all accuse the Christian Church of advocating a form of polytheism, namely, *tri-theism*.

As Christians we should be very patient with those who lay such charges against us. To those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit it must be an insurmountable stumbling-block. As a matter of fact, we ourselves must confess that this doctrine is entirely incomprehensible for us too.

But why then do we believe it? Is it a matter of: *Credo quia absurdum?* (I believe it because it is absurd?) No! It is: *Credo quia revelatum est a Deo* (I believe because it is revealed by God himself). I believe it, because I know that Jesus, my Savior, is God himself redeeming me. I believe it, because I know that the Holy Spirit who dwells in me is God himself dwelling in me. I do not believe some abstract doctrine that satisfies my desire for speculative thinking, but I believe because I have met God in this threefold way: as my Creator, as my Redeemer, as my Renewer.

At the same time it is imperative for Christians in all their thinking and speaking of this doctrine always to realize that *every formulation* of this mystery *remains inadequate*. We should never presume to think that we can grasp the innermost Being of God in our words and thoughts. All formulations, including those of the early Creeds, are only *attempts* to express the unthinkable. It has rightly been said that the doctrine of the Trinity "should not be treated as a self-sufficient description of God, but rather as the framework in which all revelation and our experience of God may be seen as a whole, and be saved from being a jumble of ideas and events."

9. Nevertheless, in spite of all its incomprehensibility and in spite of all the inadequacies of our formulations, this doctrine is the *very foundation of our Christian faith*. We mention the following points.

a. In this doctrine it becomes clear that God is the *truly living God*, the God who has life in himself, the God who is literally *full of life*. Some of the early church fathers used a rather peculiar expression. They said: God is *fertile*. In himself he has the fullness of inter-personal communication. This also makes clear that God in no way needed the world. He was not a lonely God, who therefore caused an emanation from himself, so that he would have an "over against." The doctrine of the Trinity is really and definitely *the end of all pantheism*. According to pantheism the universe is, as it were, God's counterpart, in which God comes to full self-development. In our days similar ideas are very popular in the form of "process" philosophy and theology. Although they reject a full-grown pantheism and prefer to speak of *pan-en-theism* (everything is rooted or grounded in God), they nevertheless maintain that God himself grows and is enriched by his contact with the world. The doctrine of the Trinity excludes all such notions. If God is triune in himself, in the depth of his own Being, then he does not need this world in order to come to a full unfolding of himself. Emil Brunner puts it thus, "Only if, in himself, from all eternity, God is the Loving One, no world is needed for him to be the Loving One."

b. At the same time the doctrine of the Trinity is of great importance for a proper understanding of the *doctrine of creation*. Brunner continues as follows, "On the contrary, the world as creation is the work of his Love." There is no necessary correlation between God and the world, at least not from God's side. "The relation between God and the world is one-sided: the world is derived from God, through God; he is its source. The world is determined by God; God is not determined by the world. This statement, however, is only true if it be true that, apart from the world, God is also the One who loves, who loves 'before all worlds.' From all eternity he loves his Son and therefore through his Son he creates the world." Athanasius already said: Because God is "fertile" in himself, i.e., because he is able to communicate himself inwardly, he is also able to communicate himself outwardly. Or to put it in more pictorial language: God is love, overflowing love in himself; God is life, self-giving life in himself; and the creation is the creaturely result of this overflowing love and this self-giving life. But it is this always "through the Son." It is not a natural continuation of the inward self-communication of God. But through the Son, God goes out from himself to create a world, which has both its foundation and its aim in God himself — "For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36; cf. I Cor. 8:6, where the "from" and "to" are predicated of God the Father, and the "through" of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son).

c. The doctrine of the Trinity is also of essential significance for the *doctrine of revelation*. Indeed, it is the basis of all revelation. Because God is able to reveal himself within himself as the Father in the Son through the Holy Spirit, he is also able to reveal himself to the world he has made, and again it is the self-revelation of the Father in the Son through the Holy Spirit. In the revelation "in the Son through

the Spirit" we do not receive some external information about God, but we have the guarantee that God himself is speaking to us and opening his divine heart to us. Instead of being abstract information (not to speak even of human speculation) revelation is really and fully self-communication.

d. But above all, the doctrine of the Trinity is of importance for our *salvation*, for this doctrine is the answer to the question whether or not our salvation is really God's work. In the final analysis this is the reason why the Church is so vitally interested in the divinity of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit. The vital question in the Christology is: Do we really meet with God himself in Jesus Christ? This was the concern of Athanasius, the champion of trinitarian orthodoxy over against Arius. Read only the following short quotations from his writings. "Nothing created can unite the creatures with God." "God alone can unite the creature with God." "No one could make us the children of God save he who is the true and essential Son of the Father," Luther said the same when he stated that the Reconciler must be God himself, "Because by no other means than that of an eternal person could we be rescued from our terrible fall into sin and eternal death; such a person alone could have power over sin and death, to expiate our sin and to give us instead righteousness and eternal life; no angel or creature could do this, but it must be done by God himself." The same vital question is at stake in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Here too everything depends on the question whether or not we really meet with God himself. Again we quote Athanasius: "If the Holy Spirit were a creature, we would have no fellowship with God in him; in that case we would be alien to the divine nature, so that we in no sense would have fellowship with it." H. Berkhof writes, "If the Spirit is not God himself, but something less, he cannot reconcile us to God nor recreate us according to the image of the Son. In that case our redemption can only be expressed in terms of semi-Pelagianism, or deeper knowledge, or of a moral improvement."

10. Because this doctrine of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Triune God, is unknown to *all other religions*, it is not surprising to see that none of them knows the *secret of real redemption: redemption by God himself*. In all other religions salvation is always a work of man himself. It is "*auto-soteria*."

This is true even of Judaism and Islam. Although the *Jews* share with us the knowledge of the Old Testament, the book of God's salvation in the old dispensation, their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah bars them from reading the full message of salvation in the Old Testament. The apostle Paul writes: "To this day, when they read the old covenant (The Old Testament), that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away" (II Cor. 3:14). All they know is the "written code" of the law and in vain they try to attain eternal life by keeping it.

The *followers of Mohammed*, who also claim to be descendants of Abraham, who even recognize Moses and Jesus as great prophets, but at the same time subordinate them to their own, still greater prophet, do not know real salvation either. Their religion too is a religion of

"*auto-soteria*." Even though they call Allah "merciful, forgiving and kind," these words do not really function in their doctrine of God. The "theology" of Islam is hard and cruel. It is basically a religion of reward and revenge. In the Koran we read, "So he who has done an atom's weight of good shall see it. And he who has done an atom's weight of evil shall see it." In agreement with these words the author of the "*Letters on Islam*" writes in the introduction, "He who is faithful and performs the good, motivated by the love of good is not afraid of death, and he is happy in this world and the next." Such a man does not need salvation by God. He saves himself.

The same is true of *all other religions*, whether one takes the so-called primitive religions or the so-called higher religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, etc. None of them knows of real salvation by God himself. In all these religions, in as far as the idea of God plays a part in them (Confucianism, for instance, is basically a system of moral behavior), the Godhead is always seen, either as the supernatural being whom man has to placate and please by his good works, or as the deepest ground of being, into which (on purpose we use the pronoun "which," for one can hardly speak of this ground of being in personal terms!) all that exists one day will return.

Only the *Christian faith* has a message of real salvation, because it knows that in Jesus Christ God himself came to redeem us and that in the Holy Spirit God himself dwells in us with his grace in Jesus Christ. Redemption is *real* redemption because it is fully and wholly God's work.

11. The foregoing does not mean, however, that therefore man acts only like a puppet, moved by the strings in the divine hand. On the contrary, no religion accords such a *high place to man* as Christianity does. First (as we have seen before) it teaches that man was created "in the image of God," created for a very special relationship with God. This relationship is so essential to man's being, that it is not even destroyed by his fall into sin. Man himself has perverted this relationship. Instead of living before the face of God he lives with his back toward God. But even a perverted relationship still means a relationship. Man cannot escape from God, but even in his worst rebellion remains a "*homo religiosus*." His rebellion, yes, even his denial and rejection of God, is of a religious nature.

And when God in his unfathomable love calls man to a renewed relationship by the preaching of the Gospel, the *Holy Spirit* by this very same Gospel *enables man to respond* to the call. Man is not a robot, mechanically pushed around by the divine engineer, but man is called to respond as man: to respond in faith, in love, in obedience, in worship and adoration.

If some of the *other religions or philosophies* seem to give a more exalted place to man, then this is only seeming. For instance, some religions make man semi-divine. All pantheistic religions tell man that he is an aspect of the all-embracing totality, which is God. At the same time these very same religions leave man to his own fate. They offer him no solution for the problem of suffering, nor do they offer him redemption from sin and guilt. In fact, they declare that evil is

only a hallucination, which should be recognized as such in order to be delivered from it.

Some philosophies make man autonomous. Their message is that man is the master of his own fate. And thus they leave him with his lonely despair, for the evil powers that rule over this world keep him in bondage and all his so-called autonomy does not offer him any escape from this bondage.

Without the redeeming love of God, man is the most pitiable of all creatures. Without this redeeming love, man knows neither himself nor God. Only when the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached to him and accepted by him, is he delivered from this terrible ignorance. "In the face of Jesus Christ" (II Cor. 4:6) he not only begins to see the awful guilt of his sin, but he also sees the astonishing light of God's redeeming love. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit in his heart he not only begins to hate and fight against sin, he also wants to offer his whole life as a sacrifice of love to the God who redeemed him at such a price: the death of his own Son. The deepest desire of his heart is to praise the God who created and redeemed and renewed him, and he sings with the church of all ages, yes, with the holy angels in heaven:

"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty,
All Thy works shall praise Thy name, in earth and sky and sea;
Holy, Holy, Holy, Merciful and Mighty!
God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity!"

12. But how does one preach this Gospel of the Triune God? How does one preach it to adherents of other faiths in Asia and Africa? How does one preach it to unbelievers in the secularized Western world? Is the message of the Triune God not an insurmountable stumbling block to them all? Will they not reject the message of redemption because of this doctrine that seems to defy all logic?

All through the history of the Christian Church attempts have been made to make this doctrine more acceptable by using *analogies and illustrations*, derived from the creation itself, in particular from the nature of man. Augustine, for instance, likened the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to the root, the trunk, and the branches of a tree, or to a river, a fountain, and the draught of water from the fountain, or to man's memory, understanding and will. In recent years Dorothy Sayers, tried to find an analogy in the mind of man: the creative idea, the creative energy, and the creative power. Likewise Leonard Hodgson used the analogy of the human self with its three activities of thinking, feeling, and willing.

Although we greatly admire the ingenuity of these authors and also respect their genuinely evangelistic motives, yet we believe that this is not the right way to preach the Gospel of the Triune God. No "trinity" in this created world can ever help us to understand the mystery of God's being. Every analogy falls short. For in this world we either have three separate entities which are not really one, or we have one entity which is not really triune.

The only way to preach this Gospel is to follow the New Testament pattern. The New Testament witness begins with the Gospel of

Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Christ. Jesus himself proclaims the coming of the Kingdom which is already present in himself, in his words and deeds (cf. Luke 11:20). When after his death and resurrection and after the outpouring of the Spirit his disciples go into all the world to preach the Gospel to all nations (Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:19; Luke 24:47, 48; Acts 1:8), they proclaim the message of the crucified and risen Savior. In their proclamation, new dimensions are added to the original preaching of Jesus, because they see his life through the prism of the resurrection and they are enlightened by the Paraclete who now has come to guide them into all the truth (John 16:13, 14). Yes, the Holy Spirit himself dwells in them as the guarantee, the first installment (arrabon) of the great inheritance (Eph. 1:14; cf. II Cor. 1:22).

In this way the richness of the Christian faith *unfolds itself* in the preaching of the early church. The Gospel is not a theological doctrine, which like a philosophical system tries to explain the essence of all reality and in particular of the divine reality, but it is the ever-richer unfolding of *God's self-revelation in the history of salvation*, which has its center in the coming of God's Son and the subsequent coming of God's Spirit.

The only way for us to preach the Christian message of the Triune God is to follow in the footsteps of the New Testament apostles and preachers. As William Fulton puts it, "The Christian faith in the incarnation of the Divine Word...in the man Christ Jesus, with whom the believer is united through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, constitutes the distinctive basis of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity." Only when we take our starting point in this basis, are we able to preach this Gospel to non-Christians in our day, whether they be adherents of other religions or secularized people in the modern Western world. We have to *confront them with Jesus Christ* and, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, lead them first to faith in Jesus Christ as their Redeemer. Once they have accepted Jesus Christ and have experienced his presence in their hearts and lives through the indwelling Spirit, the way is open to "explain" to them the mystery of God's Triune Being.

Even then we have to be very careful in our *choice of words and concepts*. We should never, under any circumstances, forget that all that we say about the Triune Being of God is only a matter of "pointing to" the mystery. We should never forget that this doctrine is not an adequate self-sufficient description of God, but only the framework in which all revelation and our experience of God may be seen as a whole. We should also keep in mind that some of the terms and concepts used by the ancient church have changed their meaning and actually had better be avoided in our day. For example, the term "*Person*," which in the days of the church fathers was a rather neutral word (Greek: *prosopon*; Latin: *persona*), indicative of a *personal relationship*, today means a self-conscious, autonomous *individual*. If therefore we use this term today, we can hardly escape from a kind of tri-theism. Today it might be better to speak of *the one God existing in three different ways*. At the same time, in order to avoid the pitfall of modalism, we must add that *the one God exists in three different personal ways*. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not three different ways of manifestation only (modalism).

God not only *reveals* himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Again we are at the end of all our thinking and we can only agree with Augustine, when he wrote, "We say three persons, not that we wish to say it, but that we may not be reduced to silence." Indeed, the church may not be reduced to silence at this point. It has to preach the *full* Gospel of salvation and therefore it has to speak of *God the Father* who so loved the world that he gave *his only-begotten Son*, so that every one who believes in him (the work of *the Holy Spirit!*) may not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16). This one text, the glorious summary of the Christian Gospel of salvation, is at the same time the foundation of the Christian doctrine of the Triune God, a God who not only created us, but who also saves us and through his renewing power leads us to eternal life.

TRINITARIAN NATURE OF GOD REPORT

Chairman: Ian Rennie

Secretary: Ian McDowell

The group supported Dr. Runia's paper. The following paragraphs mention some of its implications for those engaged in evangelization, which the group discussed.

1. The historical revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ in Scripture is the necessary basic doctrinal requirement of evangelism in any religious or cultural environment.
2. It is not imperative for a worker to preach the doctrine of the Trinity at an early stage of evangelism. This may well wait until people become Christians and obtain by the Holy Spirit the capacity to receive the doctrine. This point applies also to the doctrines of the person and work of the Holy Spirit.
3. Though a presentation of the Gospel may be comparatively simple in content, as long as it contains an adequate scriptural explanation of the person and work of Christ, God is well able to reveal himself in the hearts of hearers whom he loves and whom he created.
4. Presentation of Jesus Christ by philosophical arguments, or by reference to God's creation, or by appeal to man's sense of his own need, or by sharing his presence in his church, allows useful points of contact for subsequent preaching of Christ in revelation; but these approaches must be regarded as pre-evangelism and not as a substitute for true Gospel preaching.
5. While the explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity may have a place in apologetic or defensive preaching in order to counter prevailing misconceptions such as pantheism or deism, at some point the speaker must require response to the historic Christ whom the Bible reveals.

Notwithstanding all the foregoing, the group emphasized that only the biblical doctrine of the Trinity as given in orthodox historic confessions of faith implies a full-orbed world view which meets the whole need of man. Therefore all Christians should be taught the doctrine of the Trinity as fully as possible in post-evangelistic ministry both for their own souls' need and to counter the various related heresies current in evangelical spheres today.