

The Triune God in the Ministry of Jesus (Lk 3.21-22)

WestminsterReformedChurch.org

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4-25-2010

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Introduction

As we read our text for today (Lk 3.21-22), our thoughts have to move in the direction of the uniquely Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. However, Luke does not give us a definition of this doctrine. Nor does he comment on how the Jews of the apostolic church came to believe in the trinity against the background of OT belief in monotheism: **Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might** (Deut 6.3). Instead, he presents the triune God at work in the ministry of Jesus from its very beginning by the connection he makes between the baptism and praying of Jesus, the descent of the Spirit on Jesus in the form of a dove, and the speaking of the Father about Jesus. Because Luke suddenly but naturally presents the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together in relation to the ministry of Jesus, it seems best to do two things in the treatment of this text: we need to get some background to help us get the message. Thus, our title is "The Triune God in the Ministry of Jesus" and we have two points: background-historical revelation of the triune God, and message-covenant realization by the triune God.

1A. Historical revelation of the triune God

For background on the doctrine of the trinity, we should note the following things: the doctrine of the trinity is true by implication (it is implicit not explicit) and the doctrine is Christian by action, by redemptive deed (revealed by deed not word).

1B. The doctrine of the trinity is true by implication (it is implicit not explicit)

1) The doctrine of the trinity is implicit not explicit in its use of terms

We have some difficulties of terminology. Notably, the word "trinity" that we use to describe God is not a biblical term. Moreover, the words that we use in defining the trinity are not biblical words either. When we say, God is three persons in one essence, persons and essence are not used in the Bible to describe God.

However, this does not mean that the use of extra-biblical terms is a bad thing. To the contrary, God has given us, the church in history, the task of confession of our faith through better and better interpretation. To confess our faith, we have to use our own words by which we state what we understand the Scriptures to teach; we have to go beyond simply quoting Scripture since every heresy quotes Scripture.

The doctrine of the trinity is present in Scripture implicitly and we have the task of drawing out the explicit from the implicit. We can illustrate it like this: the doctrine is present in Scripture in the form of a solution and our work of interpretation draws out the crystals from the solvent. Doing that does not mean that the end product ceases to be Scriptural, the process brings the truth into clearer view because of questions and perspectives we have that the biblical authors did not address directly (Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," 22). As Warfield puts it, we take the fragmentary allusions and assemble them into their organic unity and when we do this "we are not passing from Scripture but entering more thoroughly into the meaning of Scripture" to "genuinely Scriptural doctrine" (22).

2) The doctrine of the trinity is implicit in the OT

All kinds of facts about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit simply jump up at us from the Gospel record of the dawning of the new day of redemption. Such details about God are not this explicit in the OT. It has been correctly affirmed that from the OT alone no one arrives at the doctrine of the trinity. Still, anyone who is acquainted with the doctrine can find the “underlying implication” of it in the OT (Warfield, 29). For this perspective, Warfield uses a dimly lighted room with chairs and furnishings that are difficult to see to illustrate the trinity in the OT. The NT shines a bright light on that room that “brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before” (30). Thus, Luke’s view of God stands in full accord with the OT. He does not diverge from belief in one God because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the one God of the OT. Luke is one with the NT writers on this point. “The God of the OT was their God, and their God was a Trinity, and their sense of the identity of the two was so complete that no question as to it was raised in their minds” (Warfield, 31-32).

3) The doctrine of the trinity is implicit in the NT

When you look at the NT, you find the doctrine of the trinity on every page in a multitude of fragmented details. Again, the trinity is the salt in the sea of the NT; you taste of God in this way as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit everywhere. It is not here and there but everywhere: “the doctrine of the Trinity does not appear in the NT in the making but already made”; it is there “in full completeness...leaving no trace of its growth”(Warfield, 32). The NT does not record any development of this doctrine, instead, “It everywhere presupposes the doctrine as the fixed possession of the Christian community; and the process by which it became the possession of the Christian community lies *behind* the New Testament (32, italics mine).

Therefore, Warfield can speak of the revelation of this doctrine in this striking way: “The Old Testament was before it and New Testament is after it” (33). How can this be? What does he mean? At the least, the OT is before this revelation in the sense that the doctrine is there but dimly in the shadows of a dark room in the shadows of OT promise. And, at the least, the NT is after it in the sense that it is already present on every page of the NT, but not as something that the NT writers explain. It is presupposed; it is a given; it is the salt in the sea.

Therefore, to quote Warfield again, “to the New Testament there is but one only living and true God; but that to it Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are each God in the fullest sense of the term; and yet Father, Son, and Spirit stand over against each other as I, and Thou, and He. In this composite fact the New Testament gives us the doctrine of the Trinity. For the doctrine of the Trinity is but the statement in well-guarded language of this composite fact” (35-36).

4) The doctrine of the trinity is implicit in our context, Luke 1-3

No development of the trinity occurs in our text. Luke does not explain the doctrine of the trinity; his words in chapters 1-2 do not have the intention of giving development to the doctrine that now throws a bright light on the God of the OT.

Now, as we come to the account before us in Luke 3:21-22, it must hit us forcefully in the face to read about Jesus praying, the Holy Spirit descending, and the Father speaking. There is no attempt here by Luke to develop the doctrine of the trinity or to explain it. This doctrine is clearly present in fragmentary allusions in solution form. Just consider what is obvious here in the context of Luke 1-2. Jesus is **Christ the Lord** in language reserved in the OT for the Lord God (Lk 2:11), so He is one with God and He is God, but He has David as His father at the same time that He is the Son of God, the Most High (Lk 1:32: **He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David**). The one Lord God of the OT is now revealed as Christ the Lord *and He is the Son of the Most High*. In other words, the Lord God is

His Father. Back of the baptismal account is also the actions of the Holy Spirit who is identified with the Most High: **The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God** (Lk 1.35). It is easy to take this to mean that the power of the Most High is the Holy Spirit for He too is God Most High. That He is not merely a force or sheer power is clear from the fact that the Holy Spirit communicated with Simeon, informing him that he would not die before seeing the promised one: **And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ** (Lk 2.26). It is easy for us to conclude *by implication* that the teaching that God is one abides, and this one God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each member of the one true God is a distinct person because they speak of each other using the language of I, You, and He.

2B. Second, on background, the doctrine of the trinity is Christian by action

The fundamental question here is this: "How is the trinity revealed to us for the time between?"

It is a doctrine that has its roots in the redemptive deeds of redemptive history. Accordingly, Luke tells us that when Jesus began His public ministry by going through the door of repentance-baptism, He prayed and received His answer from the Holy Spirit who descended upon Him and He received His answer from the Father who spoke to Him in a voice from heaven. Thus, the revelation of the trinity is the effect of the accomplishment of redemption through the incarnate work of Christ; it waited on the completion of the process of that work for its revelation (so Warfield 33). Accordingly, when Jesus began His public ministry by baptism, a bright light shined on the truth of the trinity that is present like a dimly lit room in the OT. By the descent of the Spirit and the voice of the Father, the doctrine of the trinity so affected the thinking of the NT writers that it penetrated their writings like salt dissolved in the sea.

Therefore, we have this doctrine everywhere in the fabric of the NT by redemptive deed not word.

2A. Covenant realization by the triune God

In terms of the ministry of Jesus, covenant realization begins with His baptismal commitment. Luke puts the baptism of Jesus and of others on the same plane but adds some information that shows what is most important in his account, namely, Jesus was praying, the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended, and the Father spoke from heaven: **and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased"** (3.22).

Clearly, Luke directs our attention to the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. He does so to set the tone for the entire work of Jesus, the Christ. He wants us to view His ministry from a distinct angle, namely, as a matter of covenant realization by the triune God. So let us consider the baptism of Jesus and covenant fulfillment.

1B. The baptism of Jesus

Presumably, Jesus was baptized by John. Why was He baptized?

Consider again that John's baptism is repentance-baptism and the door of entry into the new Israel. How can these things apply to Christ? The question stands out when we recall not only the nature of John's baptism but also when we recall what John said about Jesus: **As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire"** (3.15-17). The coming one is stronger than John, worthier, and the giver of salvation and

condemnation (Jesus is far greater than John in status; John is not even worthy to be the Lord's slave, untying His sandals; Vos, BT, 343, His rank and character put Him beyond the need of John's baptism). He is the judge who exercises judgment on sinners. How can He submit to a baptism that is merely an outward sign of the reality that He grants? What does it mean for Him to submit to a baptism that symbolizes repentance and confession of sin? How can He receive a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (for the forgiveness of *His* sins)?

It does seem puzzling. It does not seem appropriate for Jesus to receive such a baptism, but Luke does not mention John's hesitancy in baptizing Jesus (Mat 3.14). Clearly, it was not a need of Jesus because this baptism was for sinners and Jesus was not a sinner. Matthew's account reports the necessity of Jesus's baptism to fulfill all righteousness, but Luke does not go down that path. He does not even tell us directly that John baptized Jesus; nor does He describe the baptism itself.

Nonetheless, Jesus' baptism is not distinguished from the baptism of others: **21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized** (3.21-22). He received a ceremonial washing, a washing away of His sins in symbol, in the symbolic purification ritual performed by John. This is striking! Moreover, He thus entered through the door into the new Israel, as the Israelite of Israelites. This clearly points us to our Lord's identification with the people who make up the new covenant people by repentance-baptism. The implication is that He is one with us in acknowledging His sins against the day judgment. To speak of His sins must refer to His voluntary ownership of them. This hints at how we have protection from the fires of divine judgment. Jesus will undergo the baptism of fire as the Israelite, the Isaac on the alter of sacrifice, the true son of Abraham. In His baptism, Jesus entered the covenant community to endure God's wrath against us because of our sins and to be punished for our sins in our place. As Vos puts it, "He undergoes the baptism in virtue of his identification with Israel...Jesus' identification with the people in their baptism had the proximate end of securing for them vicariously what the sacrament aimed at, the forgiveness of sin" (Biblical Theology, 344). That is why we can enter the new covenant community and go safely through the judgment. He entered to face the wrath of God so we could enter and not have to face God's wrath.

2B. Covenant fulfillment

Our text cites the historical-redemptive unfolding of covenant keeping acts of the Holy Trinity in the work of Christ inaugurated by baptism.

1) Jesus commits Himself to the Spirit and the Father in prayer as He commits Himself to represent the new covenant people owning their sins as His own to take them away. The Spirit descends upon Him as a sign of His blessing to enable Jesus to do the work set before Him, and the Father speaks from heaven indicating that He accepts and approves our Lord's commitment to own the sins of the new Israel and to receive a cleansing by fire to deliver them from divine wrath poured out in judgment.

2) The Father gave His word of acceptance and encouragement

This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him (Mat 17.5). According to Luke, God's love and good pleasure translate into election: **This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!** (Lk 9.35). The sovereign love of God is electing love; sovereign election is "loving election." Love is the fountain from which election, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification of sinners all flow (Rom 8.28-31).

Jesus belongs to the Father as His Son in a way that is distinct from all other human beings. We are sons of God because of Christ, but it can only be said of Jesus that He is "My Beloved Son."

Jesus, in His person and work, pleases the Father. That is good news for Christ to hear as He commits Himself to ministry by which He will undergo the cleansing of our sins by fire. In this very baptismal commitment, the Father says of Him, “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights” (Isa. 42.1). Election involves particularity and love. By the Father’s acceptance of our Lord’s commitment to ministry, Jesus becomes the true Isaac on the altar, the Beloved of His Father that was not spared from the knife of sacrifice. This servant is the suffering servant and the suffering will come from the Father’s hand (that is the deepest stroke that pierced Him on the cross). Therefore, this audible word to Jesus that others could also hear is a proclamation of the Gospel from the Father. It is good news to Jesus, the Israelite in whom the new Israel has its life and freedom. Thus, the good news to Him is good news for us. The beginning of Jesus ministry through His commitment to repentance and baptism is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Conclusion: God condescends to fulfill the covenant of redemption

We have a marvelous condescension of God toward us in the simple language of Jesus praying, the Spirit descending, and the Father speaking. God chooses to reveal Himself in history. He does so in a way that is accessible to us because we see the Holy Spirit take on the form of a dove and descend on Jesus while He prays and we hear the sound of the Father’s voice from heaven. By these actions in time on this earth, God reveals Himself as triune. He does this at the same time that He reveals His eternal purpose in its realization in history. We have a glimpse that, though but a glimpse, is radically clear in showing us that the triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) has a covenant relationship that relates to the realities of the created world and the needs of the human family fallen into sin. Lying behind the promises of OT that come to fulfillment in the NT is the eternal covenant of redemption between the members of the trinity. Words fail us in summarizing what we now see and hear as each member of the Godhead carries out His part in their agreement to redeem the fallen world. Jesus agreed to become one with the fallen human family by taking flesh in the incarnation so that as both fully God and fully man, He could embark on a saving ministry when He reached thirty years of age: **when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying... and... when he began his ministry, [He] was about thirty years of age...** As a man, He needed the work of the Spirit who descended upon Him in the form of a dove to let us see how the Spirit fulfilled His role in the eternal covenant by enabling our Lord to execute His task. In this way, the Spirit fulfills the task of application, first to Christ, and through His work to His covenant people. Moreover, in His baptismal commitment to a ministry that will save a new children of Abraham from their sins, Jesus pleased the Father in heaven.

Therefore, the expression of the Father’s approval of our Lord’s repentance-baptism reveals the Father’s saving will for all to see and hear. In short, this event that inaugurates the ministry of Jesus is good news of the forgiveness of sins in the formation of a new Israel that has its roots dug deep in the *pactum salutis*, in the eternal covenant of redemption. This is good news indeed to see and hear that our salvation is a work of the trinity that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit planned before the foundation of the world and that the triune God carries out in history in perfect accord with that plan.

To the triune God be all glory, now and forevermore, amen.