

The Living God¹

Johan Heyns

1. Introduction

1. How can *a person* talk about God – a creature about his Creator, a sinful man about the Holy God? Should we not rather follow the inspired counsel of the prophet Habakkuk: *let all the earth keep silent before Him!* (Habakkuk 2:20)? Will there not be greater justice for Him in a silence about God? Does God himself not keep our mouths closed with his loftiness and glory, with his majesty and exaltation? But if we were to be silent, because we think that this would suit God better, what do we then do with the equally inspired words of the poet: Rejoice before the Lord, all the earth! (Ps. 100:1)? Do we dismiss this as an inexplicable contradiction in the Scripture? Fortunately, we do not have to do this. After all, the Scripture itself is proof that God has not been silent about Himself, and that we therefore may talk about Him and also should talk about Him. But then what is said must be something that suits God – a silent discourse as it were, in which the deep reverence for the living God will radically wipe out and make impossible in advance all signs of human pride in every word about Him and in every formulation concerning Him.

2. Assured of his calling, and with the help of many people – even non-Israelites – Solomon built a temple for the God of his people, ‘a fixed place for You – he says in his prayer – to live in forever’ (1 Kings 8:13). But at the same time, he nevertheless asks in the same consecration prayer: ‘Would God really live on earth? Look, the heavens, yes, the highest heaven cannot contain You, so how much less this house that I have built?’ (v 27). The tension in Solomon’s thought: a temple for God to live in forever, but a temple that cannot contain Him, is a dialectic also inherent in the building of a temple of concepts. Even if the building material originates from the revelation of the Scriptures, it is still a temple that cannot accommodate God in his majesty and his exaltation. And yet we are called to build such a temple of concepts in the formulation of our thoughts about God Himself, one that will not only be worthy of Him, but one that will at the very

1 Translated from Heyns, J.A. 1978. Dogmatiek. Pretoria: N.G. Kerkboekhandel Transvaal. 37-77.

least radiate his presence so clearly, that will bring Him praise, so that fellowship with Him will be something to be desired.

2. The existence of God

1. The fact that we have dealt first with the revelation, and then with God, does not mean that we are only now dealing with God. It has always been about God, because He is after all the Subject of the revelation. Without God there would be no revelation, but then the contrary is also true: without the revelation, we cannot know God. We must now pay attention to the existence of God, which is taken for granted in the revelation.

2. God exists; in other words, God *is*. But there *are* many things in the world: there *are* people, there *are* animals, there *are* houses, there *are* clouds. The typical thing about these things that *are*, is that they can be proved empirically by sensory perception. This is not the case with God, however, and therefore we must say: God *is* not – at least not in the way that other things *are*. The *is/are* of things and the *is* of God is not the characteristic that God and things have in common. God is not merely one among others or similar to other things that *are*. Naturally, He *is*, but in His own way – in his all contributory, all inclusive, all determining and all leading way. Therefore, the *is* of God is a Godly *is*. It is not a puzzle or a problem that can be solved or explained once and for all; it is an enigma and a mystery that can only be accepted and worshipped because, and only in as far as, it has been revealed to man. This is not to say that God's *being* and his revelation coincide. God's existence is not about his revelation. He also exists outside of his revelation, because He is unendingly more than and greater than what has been revealed to us. He is the Source and the Lord of his revelation, in other words, he is not dependent upon the revelation for his existence, just as He is not a prisoner of it. We know about God's existence, not from abstracting thoughts, but solely from His revelation to us, and it is with this revealed God that we have fellowship.

3. Nevertheless, in history, several attempts have been made not merely to accept the existence of God as a given, but also to prove it. The best known of the so-called proofs of God's existence – two of which are connected with the *world*, two with *man*, and one in *history* – are briefly the following:

The cosmological proof emanates from the law of the world and finds that this law is causally determined. For every effect there is a cause, while this cause itself is also caused. This chain of cause and effect leads to a cause that could not have been caused, in other words, a cause which

The Living God

must be the cause of everything. This Cause is God. From the changeable, the Unchangeable is brought about, and from the relative, the Absolute.

The teleological proof does not emanate from the causality but from the purposefulness in the world. There is a purpose for and with everything in the world. This purpose, beauty and harmony could not have originated of itself, and therefore there must be a Goal-setter who leads everything towards a future destination. This can only be God.

The ontological proof begins with man and establishes that the idea of God is a phenomenon found in all humans. Only God can be responsible for this. Thus, it can be concluded that the existence of God originates from the thoughts or ideas about God.

The moral proof finds in man an ethical idea, because man, on the basis of his conscience, has an intuitive feeling about law and order, of good and evil, of responsibility and dedication. Mankind can only have received this moral characteristic from God.

The ethnological proof studies the history of peoples and cultures and finds that all people venerate some or other god or gods, and that they therefore practise religion. This phenomenon cannot be meaningfully explained unless the existence of God is accepted.

4. Earlier in history, a greater value was often afforded to the proofs of God's existence. Strictly speaking, however, we are not dealing here with *proof* of the existence of God. And this is for the simple reason that the existence of God *cannot* be proved. The danger of this does not lie only in a total overstraining of human reason, but also in the fact that the revelation itself becomes completely unnecessary. Yet this can surely not be viewed as completely valueless. It at least offers a proof of the reasonableness of the belief in the existence of God and a proof of the unreasonableness of the belief that God does not exist. Is the truth of what the poet said not also illustrated here: 'It is foolish to think that there is no God' (Ps.14:1, 53:2, 10:4)? God and faith belong together, because there is revelation between God and man. But God and reason also belong together, and if the existence of God cannot be proved by reason, it is accepted in faith. There are many 'proofs of the existence of God' to be found in faith: both in sacred history as well as in ordinary history.

5. The God that exists and in whom we believe is an *only* and *singular*, *spiritual* Being, according to art. 1 of the Belgic Confession (NGB). That God is *one* (Deut. 6:4) expresses his absolute uniqueness, and this is clear in both the Old and the New Testament. Different from the case of the

Canaanites or the Babylonians, the God of Israel has no part in families of gods. He stands in no family relationship with other gods and what he deserves may not be attributed to anyone or anything else. This does not mean that He is lonely and alone; He is after all the God of fellowship: inter-trinitarian within Himself and to the outside with man and with the entire cosmos. He is, however, alone in His Godliness. There are no other gods near Him, and He does not tolerate other gods alongside Him. While other gods in the old East were surrounded at the very least by spouses, such a thing could never happen in the sanctuaries of Israel. Worship, glorification, thanksgiving, supplication – all of these that are deserved exclusively by God – may also not be given to anyone else (Exod. 20:3; Josh. 24:17, 1 Kings 18:39; Ps. 86:8). Isaiah must convey the word of God to the people: ‘I am the First and I am the Last; Besides Me there is no God’ (44:6, cf. Isa. 45:5, Jer. 2:11, 16:20). Therefore there may be no other gods served besides this one and only God – creature of the human heart. These creations, artfully put together and decorated with silver and gold, are like scarecrows in a cucumber garden (Jer. 10:5); they have a mouth, but they don’t speak, they have eyes, but do not see; ears but do not hear; they have a nose, but do not smell; hands but do not touch; feet but they do not walk (Ps. 115:5ff). And above them all, yes, above the circle of the earth, God is enthroned and stretched across the heavens like a fine cloth and is spread like a tent in which to dwell (Isa. 40:22). That God is an only being is thus far more than merely monotheism. The deepest essence of God has, however, not yet been measured in saying that God is *one*. There are, after all, heathen religions that also have a monotheistic understanding of gods. But that this one God is God – the living, creating and recreating God and that this one God who is God is our God, and our God is forever (Ps. 48:15) – it is the only nature of the God of the Bible. Paul told it to the Corinthians like this: ‘We know that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no other God but one. For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth ... yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist’ (1 Cor. 8:4ff). Only of God can it be said in the true sense that He lives. That is why He is also the Source of all life.

We will also be able to express the difference between the idols and God – in the light of our earlier remarks – as follows: God is not, but the idols are – they are as the things are, and therefore essentially also no different from the things. God does not have a history of becoming other than that of his revelation, but the idols do, and in particular the history of the idols is the opposite of the text in Gen. 1:27: man creates his gods in his image and in his likeness.

6. God is a *simple* being. The reason for adding this qualification to the definition of the essence of God in art. 2 must initially be sought in the intensified struggle of the church against all kinds of heresies. In the first centuries already, the Gnostics had taught that in God there is a perpetual process of outflow and return of aeons (intermediate beings) who together constitute the spiritually invisible fullness of God. For them, God was therefore a composite being that was composed of separate parts. In later centuries a battle between the Socinians and the Remonstrants broke out. The Socinians did attribute Holy characteristics to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, but they claimed that they did not belong to the essence of God, while the Remonstrants declared that not everything that is in God belongs to God Himself or to his being.

The church on the other hand confesses – in the footsteps of the Scriptures – that God is a simple being. There is nothing in Him that is not truly God Himself. There is no composition of parts in Him, no process of changing from a lesser to a more perfect condition, no passive ability that would indicate latent and not yet completely developed possibilities. God is what He has, and what He has is Godly. One characteristic is also not closer to, or a better description, or a purer expression of the Godly Being than another. Even if a distinction were to be made between the different characteristics or virtues of God, not one of them could be separated or isolated from his being. When speaking of his power, or fairness, or wisdom, or love, one is speaking of God Himself. In Neo-Platonic philosophy, by Plotinus among others, the being of God is an empty, abstract concept without content. But in the Scriptures God is the eternal fullness of virtue and perfection, in which everything is essential to the godliness of God. Therefore, there can also not be any opposition between his perfections, between his love and his holiness, between his justice and his mercy. He is not partly love and partly holiness, or partly just and partly merciful. He is completely everything, and everything completely.

7. God is a *spiritual* being. Calvin says that it is this spiritual nature of God – to which all of the Scriptures bear witness – that forbids us to think of God in an earthly or fleshly way. Through all of the centuries the church has always seen the spirituality of God's being, an indication of his non-corporeality and non-material nature. There is, of course, no mention of hostility of God towards the material, because He Himself is the Creator of the material world. Rather, there is an exaltation above as well as a radical otherness from our bodily-material and time-spatial dimensional limitations when the essence of God is indicated as spiritual (John 4:24; cf. 2 Cor. 3:17; Deut. 4:12, 15). At the same time, God's spirituality can also not

be equated with that of the angels. In contrast to anything created, God is radically different in every way.

8, And yet the existence of God is also so different – and so spiritual – that He Himself cannot make himself known to us in typical human characteristics and functions. We do not hear only of the acts of God (among others that He hears, speaks, walks – Gen. 16:11; Mark 1:11; Gen. 3:8), but also of his faculties (among others, ears, eyes, hands – 2 Kings 19:16; Job 10:8) and his emotions (among others, love, anger, remorse – Deut. 7:8; Rom. 1:18; Gen. 6:6). The big question now, is how must this human-type talk about God (anthropomorphisms) be explained, especially in the light of his spiritual nature? Different possibilities have been attempted: *Christologically* – as a proclamation about God in terms of the person and work of Jesus Christ; *ontically* – as an indication of a form of corporeality that must be assigned to God's being itself; *anthropologically* – as a consequence of man created in the image of God; and *eschatologically* – as a foreshadowing of a possible future way of fellowship between God and man.

9. A satisfactory answer to the question in the sense of and in motivating for the anthropomorphisms can be given only against the broader background of the relationship between God and the creation. The radical and fundamental difference between God as Creator and his creation does not prevent God from also revealing himself in cosmic images – cosmomorphisms – to mankind: God is a mountain fortress (Ps. 91:2), a stronghold (Ps. 9:10) and a rock (Deut. 32:4); He is a sun and a shield (Ps. 84:12) and light (1 John 1:5); He is a shepherd (Ps. 80:2 cf. John 10:11), He has wings (Ps. 91:4) and He rides upon a cherub and soars on the wings of the wind (Ps. 18:11). Jesus says He is a way (John 14:6) and a door (John 10:9), bread (John 6:35) and a vine (John 15:1). In these comparisons between God and a rock, wings or the sun, we certainly do not have to do with identity, but rather with analogies – heterogeneous points of support that are placed in a specific comparative relationship with each other. Why does God do this and why *can* He do it? He can do it because the entire cosmos is created by Him and thus, creatively, is already meant to praise his virtues. And He does it to reveal himself and to make himself knowable to man. In God there is refuge and safety and therefore the Scriptures can say that He is a fortress. The original is with God, and the reflection or image is with the creation. We could also say that the archetypal is with God and the atypical is with the creation.

10, But in His revelation to mankind, God goes even further, or, better stated, there is yet another aspect of the revelation: He also clothes Himself in human images. He lets people know that He has human limbs,

and that he experiences typically human emotions. How should this be understood? We must still maintain the radical difference between God as Creator and mankind as his creation. Therefore we should say that God's being and God's revelation do not coincide – even though we must immediately add that there is no tension between His being and revelation, and that His being also does not disappear as an unrecognisable greatness behind his revelation. What we have of God in his revelation is genuine and true and reliable. If the relationship between God and man is that of an analogy and not an identity, and if man has corporeality and is equipped with limbs, then God has no human corporeality and no human limbs. And yet there is a comparability between the Godly and the human way of existing and doing – hence the analogy that can be understood only from an anthropomorphic viewpoint. And this we will probably have to explain in this way: God can speak and hear and see; in other words, He has the *functions* that are indicated by the mouth and ear and eye, *without having the actual limbs himself* (cf. Ps. 94:9; Hos. 11:9). God could therefore always hear, and when He created man, He gave him an ear to be able to hear (Exod. 4:11) – first to enable him to hear God, but also to hear his fellow man. In order to ensure that mankind understands that God can in fact hear, see, speak, and so forth, He explains in his revelation about his ear, eye, mouth, and other aspects. Calvin typically uses a simple image in this regard, to explain a deep-seated truth: just as educators speak to small children in their own language, so God speaks to people in a language suited to their level of understanding. Furthermore, where a shape that is *more* than or different from his spiritual existence is attributed to God in visions, such as in Isa. 6, Ezek. 1 and Dan. 7, we should understand this as an attempt to give expression to God as a living and doing person, rather than giving just a certain representation of the capacity of God's way of existence. The man-made way of talking about God – and all talking about God has an anthropomorphic character – is not the fruit of human imagination or prophetic reflection, but of the way that God revealed himself to us as humans, and this knowledge is not identical to, but is rather analogous with, the Divine view. Therefore we must explain the anthropomorphisms emanating from the revelation. God revealed himself in human form, because He created man in the image of God.

11. God is a *personal* being. The adjective personal is used here in a broad and comprehensive sense. That God is one being and three persons, comes into play later, when we deal with the trinity. Here we wish to show that his being, although it can never be fully expressed or meaningfully described by the word 'person', is actually personal in nature and that this one being can therefore also be three persons. That God is a personal being implies that He is not an *It* or a *Something*, or an *All* or a *First Cause*, but an

Himself unfolding *I* with an unending fullness of internal characteristics. To show God as any impersonal expression would be to completely miss the actuality of his Godliness, as we meet Him in his revelation. Of course, the concept of person can never satisfactorily describe the Godly being, and it must be seen only as 'analogically adequate'. But then this means that the human person may not be created in the image of the personal representation of God. This would make God a projection of the creative spirit of man. We may not define God according to an already given and fulfilled concept of person. Rather it is God who fills the concept of 'person' with a specific content. Admittedly, in the Bible people do talk *about* God; however, mostly they talk *with* God. And even where they talk about Him, this talking is not detached and neutral, but rather existential: in the knowledge that the existence of God is an appealing existence – it does not oblige man, who also has God to thank for his own being as a person, to make a specific positional choice about Him. As *I*, God is then an *opposite* with regard to his creation and man can address Him as *You*. As a personal *I*, God is not only a living being, but also a doing/acting being. The description of *his* in freedom-fulfilling actions should even be a central theme of the entire Scriptures. His actions are not the automatic occurrences of a will-less being but are instead deliberate and planned. He creates consciously because He wants to create, and He creates with a purpose. His plan in regard to the world is inclusive: it does not exclude, and in fact rather includes, mankind and man's resolve and planning. This is why the relationship of God and man – also illustrated concretely in the covenant – is dialogical in nature, and this dialogical solidarity with man of course finds its climax in the incarnation of God, where He comes to man as the incarnate Word, and calls man to an answerable and therefore responsible personal existence. This suggests action and reaction: God who acts and man who also acts in accordance with this. God speaks, commands, promises, seeks, punishes, forgives, and loves. Man listens or doesn't listen, is obedient or is not obedient, comes to God or flees from Him, bows before Him or resists Him, praises Him or curses Him. God takes the initiative in this relationship, and however man may react, whether positively or negatively, He retains the initiative and eventually reaches His goal. The person who refuses to fall in with God's plan will not derail that plan. God continues with His plan, because God is God.

God *is* and God *acts* personally, therefore his dealings with man are described in personal categories. And with this Person-being of God, there is no contradiction or conflict with any other of his characteristics.

12. God is a *transcendental-immanent* being. In the deepest sense of the word, God is the only one that is *in* the world but is not *of* the world. He is not *of* the world, because He is the Creator of the world. As Creator, he

is radically different from the works of his hands (Ps. 102:26; Isa. 40:18; 1 Kings 8:60; cf. James 1:17, 18). He dwells in an inaccessible light (1 Tim. 6:16) and even heaven, where he has his throne (Ps. 103:19), cannot contain him (1 Kings 8:27). The reality of God is at odds with created reality, and then not in a purely static-spatial way, but rather in a dynamic one: creative-supportive with regard to the created reality, critical-judgmental in regard to the sinful reality, and merciful-conciliatory towards a penitent reality. He is qualitatively different, greater and more glorious even than any form in which he has shown himself – including in the human form: as Jesus of Nazareth. Never was he ever absorbed by creation, or manipulatively objectified, even when He, in his merciful wisdom, became Jesus Christ the man. We may also say: He did not leave heaven when He became man. God reigns sovereign over His creation, and therefore can never be locked in, or limited to, or in any way bounded by, his own creation.

The aspect of the Godly existence that we have emphasised up to this point is that of the transcendental. But inseparably attached to that, there is a second aspect that must be mentioned, namely the immanent. The latter aspect is, of course, not a rescinding of the former, but rather an enhancement to it. God exists on the other side of a creative frontier – and He never ever crosses this border, but on the other side is not the *outside* of the created reality. He also exists on the inside of this border, but in the same way as on the other side. This is the immanence of God. In Isaiah, God himself says: 'I live in the highest and in the safest place and with the broken and humble of spirit ...' (57:15). And Jesus says: 'If a man loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling in him' (John 14:23). God is *above* history and at the same time also *in* history; but being *in* history, he does not stop being *above* history. He is *in* the world, and *different* from the world, just as He is still God even when He is Jesus the man. God is in the world, in material, in plant, in animal, and in man, without any 'trans-substantiation' taking place – to borrow a word from the Roman Catholic Communion teaching. A simple image may help one to understand something of the mystery: the coin that the child has swallowed does not become flesh or blood, it remains a piece of metal. The Creator working in the world does not become one with that which He has created.

Both God's transcendence and His immanence must be sustained simultaneously and undiminished. Whoever emphasises his immanence alone runs the risk of lowering, in a pantheistic sense, the reality of God to a perspective of mere created reality. And whoever emphasises his transcendence alone allows the reality of God to disappear into the unknown, while God-like qualities are given to the created reality

(theism). In the model prayer, Jesus taught us the unity of these two perspectives in a striking way: 'Our Father (immanence) who is in Heaven' (transcendence).

13. The concept of heaven is used with different meanings. We will return to this when we learn about creation. At this point we are just pointing out the fact that the Bible often presents God as the God of Heaven: Ps. 33:13, 14, 103:19, 115:3, 136:26; Dan. 2:18; Jon. 1:9; Isa. 63:15; Deut. 4:36; Mark 1:11, Matt. 5:48, 6:9. In these and in other texts, the concept is expressed that heaven is where God lives. In this view, the emphasis is first and foremost on God's majesty and glory, his radical uniqueness and exaltedness, his holiness and inaccessibility. God is not of this world, but of another world, and therefore the concept of heaven is used. To express this aspect of God's being, another concept could be used, but in the deepest unfathomable mystery of the created heaven, an image is found that can be comprehended and that suits all people. God is eternal and omnipresent, and this is why the place cannot be a fixed one. This is why Solomon could pray upon the dedication of the temple: 'Look, the heavens, yes, the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house that I have built' (1 Kings 8:27). And Paul could say to the Greeks: 'The God who made this world and everything that is in it, He who is the Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by hands' (Acts 17:24). Nevertheless, this free and unfettered God is yet present in a specific way. First, of course in the man, Jesus. In Jesus, God found a time-and-space dwelling, where the fullness of the deity is physically present (Col. 2:9, 1:19). But then the Bible also often mentions places where God makes himself known in a special way, and where people experience his presence as a complete surprise. At Bet-el, Jacob called the 'terrible place' a house of God, which he experienced as a 'gateway to heaven' (Gen. 28:16, 17). But God also dwells in a burning bush (Exod. 3:2ff; Deut. 33:16), on Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:16), amidst his people (Exod. 25:8, 29:45, 46; Num. 5:3; 1 Kings 6:13; Ezek. 43:7), in Jerusalem (1 Chron. 23:25; Ezra 1:34), and on Zion (Ps. 9:12, 74:2, 132:13, 14). That God is present in Christ or in specific places is not, however, what is meant by the expression: *God is in heaven*. This does indicate a specific way or a place of being present, but then not a presence, on the basis of becoming man or of the revelation. Heaven is God's dwelling place, and still more closely described: heaven is the *where* of God's existence and the *from whence* of his acts. God is in heaven and from heaven; He acts without ever leaving heaven. From heaven, God looks down on the earth; He rules, and He reigns (Ps. 33:13, 14). Therefore heaven is not merely an indication of a place, but rather a dynamic point of departure: He is there, and He acts from there. Heaven is the indication of God's presence and

action, not based on or in his incarnation or revelation, but based on his essence. We are thus also able to say: where God is, heaven is, although the opposite cannot be claimed as a result of nuances of meaning in relation to the concept of heaven. As *God-in-heaven* he is also *God-on-earth* – he does not ever exist in any other way than as *God-in-heaven*, even when He is in a person's heart. That God is not a converging, indwelling Being in the creation, but a Being that is radically different from the work of his hands, is expressed in the declaration that God is in heaven. But in this all-encompassing declaration of reverence, it is not emphasised only that heaven is God's glorious dwelling that is naturally closed to the child of man, but also that He has opened, and still opens, heaven to the children of man without this causing heaven to stop being the centre and middle point from which Godly life shines forth.

3. Trinity of God

1. *That* the singular and only spiritual being that we call God is also a personal God, we heard in the previous section. *How* He exists as a personal God is described more closely in what is known as the study of the Trinity of God. Here, perhaps more than in any other doctrine in the dogma, human limitations become so overwhelming, especially with regard to insight and concepts, that absolute silence appears to be the only correct and appropriate reaction. And yet we are called to approach even this holy topic of the nature of God's personal existence in a thoughtful and systematic manner. As in all other sections of doctrine, we are of course also directed exclusively to the revelation, and yet we must – as has in fact also happened in the past – make use of concepts that do *not* originate from the revelation. This makes the task of formulation so difficult, and in fact also gives it something of a still preliminary character.

2. The classical definition of the Trinity is that God is one being and three persons (*una substantia tres personae*), yet neither of the two key words *being* or *persons* is used in the Scriptures to refer to God. This has led on the one hand to a total rejection of the Trinity of God and on the other hand to an imaginative, but non-Biblical, speculation about the Trinity – which we will get to later.

3. Whenever there is mention of three *persons* in relation to God, the concept of *person* should not be handled according to any kind of philosophical or psychological context, nor should it be dealt with according to what is currently understood by personality, namely a characteristic of an independent individual with a consciousness of self and possibilities of self-determination. For Calvin, *person* in this context simply meant: (a) a way of life or an independence (*subsistentia*) that (b)

exists in the essence of God, (c) has a specific relationship to the ways of existence below, and (d) is distinguished from others by characteristics that cannot be shared.

4. What evidence is there in the Scriptures that can be offered for the trinity of the divine *Persons*? In this connection, first a general remark on the Scriptural evidence of the Old Testament: that the Old Testament only, or even mainly, emphasises the unity of the Divine Being, while the trinity of the Persons is not encountered here, is not correct. The Three-in-one is not a given exclusively in the New Testament. But what is certainly true is that the trinity of Persons is still not found clearly or visibly in the Old Testament. As is the case with many other truths, greater clarity has come only with the progress of historical revelation. This does not for one moment imply that God was not already a trinitarian God in Old Testament times – He has always been a Trinity. It was just that in the Old Testament, this was not as clearly revealed. Therefore, in this regard, the Old Testament texts need to be interpreted from the point of view of the New Testament.

5. Instead of a trinity of persons, we find references to the plurality of God in the following texts. According to Gen. 1:2 it is not God who glides over the waters, but the *Spirit of God*. In light of much other information, this ‘Something’ or ‘Someone’ of God cannot be the ‘wind’ or the ‘breath’ of God, but must be the Holy Spirit. Not only does the Spirit of God go forth and represent Him, but He is also viewed as an independent being alongside God (Judg. 3:10; Isa. 61:1; Ps. 33:6) that can be changed by a disobedient people into an enemy that contends against them (Isa. 63:9, 10). Yet the people received a promise from God that his Spirit will remain in their midst if they repent (Hag. 2:5). When God says: Let Us make man ... (Gen. 1:26 cf. Gen. 3:22), this is not a plurality of majesty, and God is not addressing the angels here, or, in a polytheistic sense, other gods as fellow creators, but is rather an indication of the fullness of life that God has in Himself and shares in fellowship with Himself (Isa. 6:8; Luke 1:21). In various texts we hear of the *Angel of the Lord* (*malak Jahwe*), who not only represents the Lord as Messenger, but who, as visible manifestation of God, is one with Him on the one hand, and yet is also separate from Him (Gen. 16; Exod. 3; Judges 5:23; Num. 22; Judges 13; cf. Isa. 63:9). As opposed to the Spirit, who is more of power that is independent or going forth from the Lord, that fulfils man and brings man into motion, the Angel of the Lord is more a personal representative who carries messages. We find a similar suggestion in the ‘*glory of God*’ and the ‘*face of God*’. This is identified as being with God on the one hand, and as independent alongside God on the other (Exod. 33:18ff). More clearly, we find the indication of Christ in the prophetic prediction of his coming (cf. Isa. 9:5) and unmistakably in

the prophecy of the pouring out of the Spirit in Isa. 32:15 (cf. Ezek. 36:27; Joel 2:28).

6. In the following texts, the plurality is depicted clearly as a trinity: Jesus says to his disciples 'Baptise them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19, cf. Eph. 1:17). In a certain sense it is also a summary of what Jesus learned about the Father and the Holy Spirit during his earthly life. He speaks many times of being of and with the Father (among others, Matt. 11:25–27, 16:17; Mark 13:32) and of the Spirit (Mark 13:11; Luke 11:13, 12:12; John 12:27, 14:26, 15:26, 16:13). But also in the rest of the New Testament, we read of the Father (Acts 2:33; Rom. 1:7; Eph. 2:18; 1 John 1:2), the Son (Matt. 11:19; Mark 2:28; John 10:36, 11:4; Rom. 1:4) and the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:2, 2:33; Rom. 5:5; 1 Cor. 2:13; Hebr. 2:4).

7. This trinity in God has different commonalities: not one of Them is less or more than *God*, but all three receive divine honour and worship; all three are represented as *persons*; and all three *act* to the inside and to the outside. But each of them also has an unshareable individuality and, together with that, an unchangeable identity. The *Father* is not the Son or the Holy Spirit. He also does not arise from the Son or the Holy Spirit. He sends forth the Son and the Spirit and is not sent forth by Them to the world. The *Son* is not the Father or the Holy Spirit. He does go forth from the Father, but not from the Spirit. He alone is the Word through whom creation is done and who in the fullness of time became man. The *Holy Spirit* is not the Son or the Father. He is the only one that goes forth from the Father and from the Son, and he is poured upon man on Pentecost Day.

8. A particular task is attached to each of the three Persons, without the other two being completely excluded from these tasks. The *Father* is responsible for *creation*, although the Son and the Holy Spirit are also involved in this (1 Cor. 12:6; 1 Cor. 8:6; Isa. 64:8; Matt. 10:29; John 5:17; John 6:32; John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16; Gen. 1:2; Ps. 33:6; Ps. 104:30). The *Son* is responsible for *salvation*, although the Father and the Spirit are also involved in this (John 1:29; Rom. 3:24; John 10:29, 25, 37; Luke 1:35; John 16:13). The Holy Spirit is responsible for fulfilment, although the Father and the Son are also involved in this (Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:10, 13, 23; 3:19; 1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 1:22).

9. In the light of the abovementioned, we may now summarise as follows: *as a being, God is individual, but as a person, He is a trinity*. The Persons in God are not mere characteristics but are eternally divine ways of existence who all share fully the entire divine Being, which is still one in number, with all of its virtues and perfections. The division of Persons therefore does not mean that there is a division of the Divine Being – that

would mean that there was a triad of gods (tri-theism). But while each Person is the Divine Being, and therefore in both essence and intent fully equal (*homo-ousioi*), each Person nevertheless has an unshareable characteristic: the Father has his Fatherhood (*paternitas*), the Son has his Son-ship (*filiatio*), and the Holy Spirit has his point of departure (*spiratio*) from the Father and from the Son. From this there appears to be an irreversible order in the relationship of the three Persons to each other, upon the grounds of which we talk about the Father as the first, the Son as the second, and the Holy Spirit as the third Person. However there is no suggestion at any time of any form of isolation or separateness of the Persons in relation to each other. Quite the opposite. The unity of the Persons will even have to be seen as a mutual penetration of each other (*perichoresis* or *communio divinarum personarum*). Furthermore, the implication is that the fixed order in which the three Persons exist has no single gradation according to which one Person would be higher or somehow more than the others, who would then be lower or less. Each idea of subordinationism is rendered principally impossible by a biblical trinity doctrine.

10, The question of whether the trinity of Persons, as we have learned to know God in his revelation, is also a trinity in God himself, was answered in the negative in approximately the year 200 by Sabellius, who originated from Africa. According to Sabellius, God has two major characteristics, namely expansion and contraction. Through the expansion a multiplicity originates that is referred to as the triad of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, while through the contraction, this multiplicity is resolved into the single, individual Divine Being (the *Monas*). The three Persons therefore do not always exist *alongside each other* but originated historically in succession *after each other* and also in such a way that when the dispensation of the Father was ended in the Old Testament, He disappeared as the Father and the Son then appeared. After this, the Son also disappeared and then the Holy Spirit appeared. The trinity of the revelation is therefore not at the same time an immanent or ontic trinity. The three Persons are consequently only three temporary modes of existence of the singular Divinity – from which the term modalism is derived. In this presentation the concept of ‘person’ goes back to the original meaning of the Greek word *prosopon*, in other words, ‘mask’. How it became ‘person’ from here on, is obvious. The actor could thus imitate different people by changing his mask. The mask is therefore an artificial face that is used for a specific purpose. The transition from ‘face’ to ‘person’ is also obvious, because the face is seen as the outward appearance of a person’s inner being, thus representing the whole person. Sabellius prefers to use the word *prosopon* so that this presentation – later also defended by Marcellus

of Ancyra, Joachim of Fiore, Schleiermacher, and R. Seeberg, among others – can properly be described as the prosoponic, in other words, as the masking trinity view. From as far back as the year 218, the church on many occasions made its objection to this un-Biblical presentation of the Trinity of God very clear.

11. The meaning of the confession of the Divine Trinity is so huge and so fundamental that it is difficult to express in words. As a doctrine about the Divine way of existence, it gives an indication – it cannot and does not wish to be more than this – of the unfathomable depths and richness of life and fellowship in God himself. He is the true Life, in Whom there is unity in the variety, and variety in the unity; in Whom both order and harmony are present in absolute perfection. Indeed, God has so much in and of Himself that He certainly does not need creation. Understood in this way, the Trinity provides the evidence of the self-sufficiency of God and the insignificance of the entire creation. But in fact, just because of that, we learn from this the vast background to creation: the origin of the Father, the execution and salvation by the Son, and the consummation by the Holy Spirit: with this one creation this same God keeps himself busy in triplicate, to his honour and glorification!

The triune God is not the transcendent of the historically developing process of the world, and He is even less the cosmic-immanent principle of being. He is the transcendent Creator and Sustainer in Jesus Christ as Saviour and in the Holy Spirit as Consummator immanent in the cosmos, and yet also in very essence different from the creation. In Himself he unites the constant movement of the *generatio* of the Son and the *spiratio* of the Holy Spirit as the foundation of the creation and his revelation to the outside. In brief: the doctrine of the Trinity celebrates the fullness of the Divine life in theology!

As an essential part of theology, the doctrine of the Trinity also establishes the indispensable foundation for all other doctrines but especially for Christology and Pneumatology. Those who do not understand in the doctrine of the Trinity that the Son and the Holy Spirit together with the Father, that God is forever, may easily fall into a glorification of the man Jesus in Christology, and will end up in a superficial moralism; and in may see in Pneumatology the Holy Spirit as a Divine power and thus drown spiritually in the swamp of mysticism.

To sum up, the heart of Christian religion is to be found in the Trinity doctrine. Because through the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the revelation of God to the salvation of mankind is made possible.

