

H. Mystery versus complete rational penetrability in the formulation of the doctrine

Through the centuries Christian thinkers have attempted to state what the Scriptures teach about the triunity of God, and to prevent their formulations of the doctrine from error. Some have held that the Bible teaches that God is both one and three, and that any further statement intrudes into the realm of mystery which is forbidden to us. Any attempt to make this teaching more intelligible is labeled "rationalistic," and is condemned. Others have stated that the Bible teaches that God is both one in essence and three in Persons. This introduces terms which attempt to explain the different senses in which "one" and "three" are used, but also creates the problem of defining "essence" and "Person." Still others have pressed on to a rationally more penetrable statement of the doctrine, such as the view that the Father is the deity in its original, direct, unoriginated existence; the Son is the deity generated by the Father's exact idea or understanding of Himself; and the Spirit is the deity flowing out and proceeding in love from the Father and the Son; and thus there are three distinct subsistences in the divine essence: God, the idea or LOGOS of God, and the love or AGAPE of God; and thus there are three Persons. This view introduces the concepts of generation and procession into the discussion, but does so in a manner that seems to border on the heretical view that the Son and the Spirit are simply projections of God's thought and love, and not Persons in any meaningful sense.

It is true that along the continuum of formulations of the doctrine from the one end of complete mystery to the other end of complete rational understanding there have been some who have cried "It's a mystery!" before the Scriptures require us to do so, and others who have pressed on toward rational understanding until they have stumbled into the morass of speculation or the abyss of heresy. But surely somewhere between Charybdis' whirlpool of mystery and Scylla's rock of heresy there must be a course that the vessel of doctrinal construction can safely steer toward its desired haven -- truth concerning the nature of God. Our problem is to find that course, safely navigate it, and clearly chart it, so that