

The Trinity

by
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Chapter I

[Return to Bickersteth Page](#)

A deep conviction that many who refuse to acknowledge the Godhead of our Lord Jesus Christ have never duly examined one line of Scriptural argument, which presents to my own mind the most conclusive evidence of this foundation truth, induces me (though "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling") to ask their patient and prayerful perusal of this Treatise. My hesitation arises not from the least doubt of the security of the doctrine, but from [a] consciousness [of] how unequal I am to do justice to the proofs which establish it, from a most affectionate concern for the souls of those to whom I write, and from a deep assurance that in the rejection or cordial acceptance of this truth are bound up the issues of eternal death or eternal life (John 3:36; 2 John 9).

I am well aware that many larger and more elaborate treatises, written by far abler advocates, are within their reach; but sometimes an essay written by a neighbour will be read with courteous interest when volumes of far deeper research are passed by. And my lot has been cast where many Unitarians¹ reside. Their acts of kindness and benevolence are continually making themselves felt among us, and proofs are multiplied on every side of their own moral culture and of their desire for the moral elevation of the poor. Who that delights in things lovely and of good report can refrain from loving their excellences? I long over them, and yet my opportunities of intercourse are of necessity casual and limited. Hence, if it will not seem presumptuous, I know not how better to account for my present address than in the language of Paul on behalf of his kinsmen: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1).

Another motive weighs with me. May I ask the reader's forgiveness for any personal allusion, but I believe few can have passed through years of more incessant spiritual conflict than myself, and this long after I had embraced the gospel with the affections of my soul. Apparent Scriptural contradictions staggered me, for I found to my cost [that] the tempter could assail us as he assailed our Master, saying, "It is written" (Matt. 4:6). The battle raged over the whole field of revealed truth, though chiefly around the central fact of our holy faith--the Deity of the Son of God. The Bible was my only sword, prayer my only resource; until, through the infinite mercy of God, those very truths around which

1 I use the word "Unitarians" as the distinctive name they have assumed; but under protest, that it does not fairly set forth the points at issue betwixt us, if for no other reason, for this, that we cleave to the Unity of God as tenaciously as they.

skeptical doubts had once clustered most thickly became the strongest bulwarks to which, when assailed on other points, I used to resort. Since that time, in the course of my ministry during the last twelve years, I have had many difficulties brought before me by Unitarians and others, but scarcely ever a perplexity which had not been suggested to my own mind and over which I had not fought oftentimes a painful fight. So that at least I can say with Virgil's heroine, "Non ignara mali, miseris succurrere disco," and I can conceive no purer joy on earth than that of being permitted to lead some other tempest-tossed spirit to that faith where I have found security and peace. Those I address will at least find here no artificial fencing, for I am no trained swordsman in this controversy. But sometimes it has pleased God to overcome gigantic error not by the skilful gladiator clad in the panoply of learning, but by a few smooth stones from the sling of a shepherd boy.

And here, if any earnest student designs to give me his attention, I would ask him to pause and to pour out his heart in prayer that he may be guided into all truth. Such an inquirer feels with me that eternal life is wrapped up in the knowledge of "the only true God" and of "Jesus Christ whom He hath sent" (John 17:3); that "God is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6); and will therefore feel no difficulty in uniting with me in such or such like petitions, every clause of which is taken from Scripture:

Almighty God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:3), who inhabits eternity, who dwells in the high and holy place, but with him also who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite ones (Isa. 57:15), grant me to understand the fear of the LORD and to find the knowledge of God (Prov. 2:5). I cannot by searching find out Thee unto perfection (Job. 11:7), the King eternal, immortal, invisible (1 Tim. 1:17). But look down from heaven, and behold from the habitation of thy holiness and of the glory. Doubtless thou art my Father (Isa. 63:15,16). Show mercy upon me and be gracious unto me (Ex. 33:19). Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any way of grief in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Ps. 129:23,24; see margin). I plead the promise of Jesus: "If ye being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (Luke 11:13). Hear me speedily, O LORD, hide not thy face from me. Thy Spirit is good. Lead me (Ps. 143:7,10), for I ask in the name of Jesus, who is able to save to the uttermost those that come unto Thee by him, seeing he ever lives to make intercession for them (Heb. 7:25); and who has said, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13).

Oh, solemn and blessed pursuit! We are seeking the Lord. Strip the words, I pray you, of every unmeaning association; and yield your whole being, understanding, heart, conscience, will, to the momentous inquiry. Let us humble ourselves with the recollection, "Verily, thou art a God that hides thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour" (Isa. 45:15). Let

us encourage ourselves with the quickly succeeding assurance, "I said not unto the seed of Jacob, seek ye me in vain" (ver. 19). Thus, though there will, there must be, in the self-revelation of Him whose ways are past finding out, mysteries beyond the reach and range of our finite capacities, all necessary and saving knowledge is promised to the humble student; for the words of the Psalmist have lost nothing of their significance by the lapse of time. "Though the LORD be high, yet has he respect unto the lowly; but the proud he knows afar off" (Ps. 138:6). And again, "The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart and saves such as be of a contrite spirit" (Ps. 34:18).

These words point to a preparation of the heart. I ask not then, my friends, that you should inquire first of all into the nature of God's mysterious Being, the Deity of Jesus Christ, and the personality of the Holy Spirit. There is a prior investigation which demands your earnest heed, and which, pursued with prayerful study of the word of God, will by his grace awaken and cultivate that disposition of mind which is fitted for the after inquiry. Starting from those truths you acknowledge, what, I ask, is your relation to God, what your position before him as recorded in Scripture?

You admit that God is the Supreme Creator, and Father, and Governor, and Judge of all men. You confess that he is infinitely holy, and just, and good. You acknowledge that he is himself perfect love, and must of necessity require the perfect love of his creatures for the sake of his own glory and of their happiness. That grand epitome of his righteous code of government commends itself to your inmost conscience, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself" (Luke 10:27). If you look higher than man to the pure intelligences around the throne of glory, you can conceive no other law binding together the perfect society of heaven. It is the utterance of the mind of the blessed God. But now, looking abroad as a practical and thoughtful man upon the world as it is, what meets your eye? Selfishness, misery, discord, enmity, rebellion; in one word, sin. Some sights of woe move you to compassionate tears, and your heart is wrung for the calamities of human kind. Some deeds of rapine excite in you a righteous indignation, and you exclaim, "Such atrocities worthily deserve to be punished." You are pitiful and you are just. But remember, your sense of pity and of equity is only a faint reflection from that in the bosom of the infinite Jehovah. His compassions fail not (Lam. 3:22). His righteousness is everlasting (Ps. 119:142). He is Father and Legislator and Judge in one. Sin violates every obligation. It wounds the heart of the eternal Father. Listen to his pathetic appeal: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me" (Isa. 1:2). It sets at nought the wise regulations of the Lawgiver. He complains, "I gave them my statutes and showed them my judgments, which if a man do he shall even live in them. . . . Notwithstanding, the children rebelled against me; they walked not in my statutes, neither kept my judgments to do them" (Ezek. 20:11,21). It is provoking the judicial condemnation of Him who now expostulates, Knowest thou not "that the goodness of God leads thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasure up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render

to every man according to his deeds" (Rom. 2:4-6).

To inquire then what is the nature of sin, its character, course, and issue, is only the part of a rational, intelligent being. But herein, especially, it behooves us to lay aside all prejudice and pride, to remember how distasteful all revelations of our own corruptions must be to the natural heart, and to reflect that the plague, the diagnosis of which we would learn, itself impairs our perceptive faculties. Here, then, let us humble ourselves as a little child (Matt. 18:3,4). Here, as we open the sure word of God, let us answer with Samuel of old, "Speak, LORD; for thy servant hears" (1 Sam. 3:9). And here, if the probe cut deep, let us be assured, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Prov. 17:6), and loving is the correction of a Father who smites that he may heal and "bind up the broken-hearted" (Isa. 61:1).

This evil of sin is not superficial but radical. It pervades human life from the cradle to the grave: "Behold I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did by mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). "The thought of foolishness is sin" (Prov. 24:9). "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child" (Prov. 22:15). "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21). "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9). "From within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts . . . all these evil things come from within and defile the man" (Mark 7:21-23).

This evil is not partial but universal. None have escaped from it. "There is not a just man upon earth that does good and sins not" (Ecc. 7:20). "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). "All the world becomes guilty before God" (ver. 19). "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (ver. 23).

This evil is not self-remedial, but so far as lies in man, incurable (Jer. 30:15). "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one" (Job 14:4). "How then can man be just with God? Or how can he be clean that is born of a woman?" (Job 25:4). "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13:23).

This evil is fatal. "In the day that thou eat thereof, dying thou shalt die" (Gen. 2:17), was the warning of faithful love to Adam; and upon the fall, moral and spiritual death marched like a pestilence through man's noble soul. The land was as the garden of Eden before it, and behind it a desolate wilderness. Hence disease and decay, those symbols of a deeper malady. "And sin, when it is finished, brings forth death" (James 1:15). "Death passes upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom. 5:12). And to those who die in their sins, this death of the body is the awful introduction of that second death, of which the apostle writes, "Whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14,15).

Let us then return to the question, What is our own position by nature before God? (O merciful Father, teach me who write, and those who read these lines to know ourselves.)

Does not that law of perfect love condemn us? Does it not bring us in guilty before Him whose eyes are as a flame of fire? Have not we rebelled against the majesty of Jehovah? Have we not deeply wounded the paternal heart of Him who is infinite love? Alas, we have not escaped this universal corruption! We are convicts, self-condemned. We are sinners. Oh, to realize the true meaning of the word! When a man sins against his fellow, a child against his parent, a servant against his master, we appreciate the guilt. But who shall estimate the ingratitude of sin against God? All other facts are trivial compared with this--we are sinners. For sin uncleansed and unchecked is present defilement and final death.

Such is our position. A humiliating one in truth to the awakened conscience--guilty and therefore craving pardon, weak and therefore casting about for help, in darkness and therefore crying out for light. What must I do to be saved? Until this is answered, every other question is a grand impertinence: saved from sin, its guilt, its power, its issue? Lord, to whom shall we go? The cry pierces heaven and reaches the throne of the Eternal. Lord, to whom shall we go? And the response is given in the lively oracles of truth: "There is no other God beside me, a just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me. Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is none else" (Isa. 45:21,22).

[Return to Bickersteth Page](#)