

## 9. The Trinity (1)

John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xiii (1:120-159)

Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 87-89

### Introduction

We're continuing with the doctrine of God in session 9 of the Guided Reading Course, turning now to the doctrine of the Trinity. We'll begin with a short section from Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* (pp. 87-89), which provides a helpful introduction to some of the key concepts. Calvin's *Institutes*, I.xiii (1:120-159) forms the main body of the reading.

Please don't worry about reading the whole of the chapter on the Trinity in Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. Just look at the pages identified in the questions below. Then get stuck into Calvin.

This chapter of Calvin is quite long, but for our purposes some portions are significantly more important than others. I suggest you focus especially on section 6 and sections 16-20. Sections 21-23 are also worth looking at (see questions 11 to 13). The other sections are also good, of course, but given the constraints of time the above-noted sections are the best places to focus your attention. As before, let the notes and questions below help you.

Here's an outline of the chapter to help you find your way around:

Sections 1-2: Introductory material and brief discussion of Hebrews 1:3

Sections 3-5: Defence of the use of extra-biblical words.

Section 6: Definition of important words.

Sections 7-13: Proofs for the deity of the Son.

Sections 14-15: Proofs for the deity of the Spirit.

Sections 16-20: Discussion of the unity of the persons of the Trinity (section 16) and the distinctions between them (sections 17-19), with a concluding summary (section 20).

Sections 21-29: Refutation of trinitarian heresies.

If you're pressed for time in answering the questions (and this week I'll be surprised if you're not!), skip the questions marked with a \*.

### Questions for reflection

i. How would you explain the doctrine of the Trinity?

ii. Which biblical texts would you turn to if you were challenged to prove

- the deity of Christ?
- the deity of the Holy Spirit?
- the one-ness of God?
- the three-ness of God?

iii. Have you ever heard any illustrations or analogies for the Trinity? What do you think of them?

## Study questions on Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 87-89

1. What, according to Berkhof, do the persons of the Trinity have in common (p. 87-88)? How are they distinguished (p. 87-89)?

If you do have some spare time, you might find it helpful to look also at pp. 91-97. But don't let this stop you getting on to the reading from Calvin's *Institutes*.

\*2. What kind of "subordination" exists between the persons of the Trinity (p. 88)? What kind of "subordination" does not exist?

## Study questions on Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xiii (1:120-159)

3. By what "special mark" does the true God distinguish himself from idols (I.xiii.2)?

4. What two conclusions does Calvin draw from the statement in Hebrews 1:3 that "the Son of God is called 'the stamp of the Father's hypostasis'" (I.xiii.2)?

I.xiii.3-5 are an aside, in which Calvin defends the use of terms like "trinity" and "person" against critics who claim that such extra-biblical words should not be used in theology. Calvin argues that such terms aid the interpretation of Scripture and help to distinguish true doctrine from false. Don't worry too much about these sections.

I.xiii.6, on the other hand, is rather important, and worth grappling with. However, it's also extremely dense and hard to follow, so don't worry if you find it confusing. That's what the tutorial is for.

5. What does Calvin infer from John's statements that "the Word was always with God" and yet "the word was also God himself" (I.xiii.6)?

I.xiii.7-15 are a detailed scriptural demonstration of the deity of the Son and the Spirit. Though these doctrines are of course vitally important, these sections are less significant for our present purposes.

\*6. How does Calvin prove the deity of the Son in I.xiii.7-13? What do you make of his arguments?

\*7. How does Calvin prove the deity of the Spirit I.xiii.14-15? What do you make of his arguments?

8. What point does Calvin seek to prove from the two texts concerning baptism that he cites in I.xiii.16 (Eph 4:5 and Mt 28:19)? What do you think of this argument?

9. What does Calvin think about "analogies" of the Trinity drawn "from human affairs" (I.xiii.18)?

10. What distinctions between the Father, Son and Spirit does Calvin find in Scripture (I.xiii.18-19)?

11. In what three main ways have trinitarian heretics erred (I.xiii.21-22)?

\*12. Which errors are seen in the heresies of Servetus (I.xiii.22) and Valentine Gentile (the "similar monster" mentioned in I.xiii.23; compare footnote 51)? How are these errors manifested in each case?

\*13. Why do Valentine and his associates think that Calvin has "set up a quaternity" (I.xiii.25)? How does Calvin respond to this charge?

\*14. Why does the "order" (I.xiii.26) that exists between the Father and the Son not support Valentine's case? What kind of order does exist between the Father and the Son?