

THE TRINITY AND THE IMPERFECTION OF HUMAN INTELLECT.

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The difficulties which obstruct us when we attempt to define more clearly the doctrine of the Trinity, begin with the defects of language and with our own blunders in the use of words in other languages. Whatever may be the true doctrine—it has not pleased the Holy Ghost to employ any Greek noun in the plural to denote “the persons” in the Triune God.

The fact is most important that the Greek word “hypostasis” in Hebrews i. 3, does not mean “person” but means “basis,” or “foundation—” exactly “that which underlies personality.”

Now whether we accept the common translation, or vary it—Christ, as the express image of God’s person, as the impression or photograph of God’s hypostasis, is not in *this* passage represented as a distinct person but as the very portrait of the Father’s hypostasis.

This same word “hypostasis” is translated “*substance*” in Hebrews xi. 1, where faith is said to be “the *substance* of things hoped for,” i.e., the underlying foundation of things hoped for.

And the Greek word for “person” is certainly not this word but rather the word “*prosōpon*” which is translated “*person*” in 2 Corinthians ii. 10—“in the *person* of Christ.” The word “*prosopa*” is used in the plural for “persons” in Jude xvi. (“Respect of persons” is compounded from the same word “*prosopon*.”) Here then, before we can “recognize three persons in the true sense of that term, in the Godhead, three conscious acting subsistences,” we need a Greek word that shall not convey false doctrine.

To assume a second hypostasis—to say nothing of a third—is a manifest error.

We have not the slightest warrant from Scripture to affirm three hypostasis—three bases—three standings-under, to support Deity.

Surely that *would* be Tritheism—although the employment of this word “*hupostaseis*” has not been intended to avow, but to avoid, Tritheism.

On the other hand to declare three *prosopa*

would seem too much like a re-edition of the image of Brahma with its three faces.

Since I wrote my first paper on this subject, a friend has sent me Joseph Cook’s lecture on “Triunity and Tritheism.” I find that Cook adopts the word “hypostases” in the plural. He says “that three persons never meant three personalities, for these would be three gods.” But then he adds, “Let us use Archbishop Whately’s word ‘subsistence’ for that is the equivalent of the carefully chosen, sharply cut Greek term ‘hypostasis.’”

Unfortunately I cannot find in the Greek Testament any sanction for pluralizing this word in relation to God. If it be a “sharply cut Greek term” meaning “*subsistence*”—what is to become of our Lord’s statement in John vi. 57: “As the *living Father* hath sent me and I *live by* the Father, so he that eateth me even he shall live by me?”

Our Lord, no doubt, spoke of Himself as “the son of man;” but why did He ignore that separate *subsistence* of His own, in the Godhead?

Besides, where does God say, in Greek, that he has three “*hupostaseis*,” or, in meaning, that He has three *subsistences*?

We cannot be Revelation to each other. Nor can even the church be Revelation to us. Still it is remarkable that we cannot obtain either the Greek word, or the thought which has since been transferred into a Greek term, from either of the two earliest Creeds, the *only Greek Creeds*—viz.: the “Apostle’s” Creed and the “Nicene” Creed. In the latter (worded in Greek) Christ is declared to be “Light of Light” (Light out of Light) “true God of” (out of) “true God” “begotten, not made, being of the same essence with the Father.” But the early church *did not* promulgate three subsistences as sustaining one Godhead. (See Mosheim Century four, chapter five, section nine.)

I find already published in Cook’s lecture what I had intended to say of the Latin word “*persona*”—that it does not, in its most correct sense, mean the English word “person.” (See “Cicero’s *De Officiis*” Book I, chapters twenty-eight and thirty.) In the purest Latin “*persona*” means “character” represented.

The clause of the “Athanasian,” a later Latin, Creed, “*Neque confundentes personas, neque substantiam separantes*”—if it were Ciceronian Latin—ought to be translated