THE DOCTRINE OF GOD
Part IV: The Medieval and Reformation Church

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I. INTRODUCTION.

Thus far in the study of Theology Proper, specifically Trinitarianism, our focus has been upon the Ancient Church. The fourth century (from Nicea to Constantinople, 325–381) was the period of the most fruitful discussion and formulation of the doctrine of God. What was stated by Athanasius was clarified by the Cappadocians in the East, which in turn formed the basis for Augustine's domination in the West. The purpose of this lesson is to trace the discussion of the Trinity through the Medieval Period into the fringes of the Modern Era. In a very real sense Berkhof summarized this lesson plan when he wrote (*History of Christian Doctrine*, 94), "Later theology did not add materially to the doctrine of the Trinity." In reality there is no advance, only retrogression.

II. THE DOCTRINE OF GOD IN THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH.

The Medieval Age (ca. 600–1500) presented no actual advancement in the Trinitarian debate, only repetition of established doctrine (i.e., Nicea as clarified by Constantinople is simply assumed).

    A. In the Early Middle Ages (600–950 A.D.)

        1. **John of Damascus (d. 754),** generally considered the last of the Fathers in the Eastern Church and the systematizer of Eastern Theology, spoke to the issue of the Trinity, but brings

forward nothing new. In his *The Orthodox Faith* he recognized a singularity of essence wherein exists a plurality of persons ("It is impossible to say that the three hypostases of the deity, although they are united to one another, are one hypostasis," 233). Although he rejected Subordinationism, his great stress on the unity of the Son and Spirit in the Father has lead to charges that he wavered between unitarianism and tritheism.

2.   **Patriarch Photius** of the Eastern Church clashed in 867 with Nicholas I of Rome over the doctrine of Procession. Photius, using John of Damascus as a starting point, stressed that only the Father sends the Spirit, and that other view would denigrate the primacy of the Father. Nicholas argued that single procession de-evaluated the Son denying *homoousia*. Both were attempting to defend the faith and the issue went unresolved.

3.   **John Scotus Erigena** (d. 877) declared that the terms Father and Son are mere names to which there is no corresponding objective distinction of essence in the Godhead, which veers into a Modalism.

B.   **In the Later Middle Ages (950–1400 A.D.)**

The Later Middle Ages are demarcated in this writer's mind from the earlier period principally by the rise of Scholasticism and the intellectual life of the universities.

1.   **Rocellinus (d. 1125),** the founder of Medieval Nominalism, regarded the appellation of God, which is common to the three persons, as a mere name of species, and thus fell condemned at the Synod of Soissons (1093) for the charge of tritheism.

2.   **Abelard (d. 1142),** a disciple of Roscellinus, was not as radical as his teacher. His suspected error came from the fact that he identified the world-soul of the Platonic system with the Spirit. This appears to be a concession to his apologetic framework, because he affirmed the deity of the three persons. He held the doctrine of the Trinity to be a necessary idea of reason.

   N.B.   The difficulties of the Scholastics in stating the Trinity is ultimately the difficulty of Scholasticism, that is, they attempted to reduce spiritual truth to the pure, hot gold of rational simplicity. At times, rationalism judged the faith and determined its meaning.

3. **Anselm (d. 1109).** His views represent a direct lineage from Augustine; indeed, some would argue, and perhaps rightly so, that he stated Augustine's position more cogently than did his mentor. He clearly opposed both Monarchianism and tritheism. To him the Father begets, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds.

   N.B. It is this writer's opinion that the best pre-reformation theologians on the Trinity to read are Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Augustine, and Anselm.

4. **Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274),** the foremost teacher of the Dominican school and one of the greatest theologians of all time, built upon his mentor, Albertus Magnus, who suggested the means for arriving at truth (reason and faith). Aquinas moved into the realm of reason, things previously assigned to proof-by-faith though he never collapsed the two spheres believing that (it must be understood that he worked to fend the faith from the Aristolian approach of Islamic polemics by adopting an Aristolian approach; he sought to use the adversary's weapon against them) some Christian truths were not subject to rational verification (it must be understood that he worked to defend the faith from the Aristolian approach of Islamic polemics by adopting an Aristolian approach; he sought to use the adversary's weapon against them). He differed with Anselm, not in his concept of the Trinity, there he is quite orthodox, but in his insistence that God's existence can and must be proved by rational argument (Anselm held that proofs are unnecessary since God is self-evident). In fairness to Aquinas he did not, however, dissolve special revelation into natural (upper story into the low). Colin Brown has written (*Christianity and Western Thought*, 123), "Thomas does not see philosophy as an alternative track to theology which enables him to prove rationally and intellectually items of faith which ordinary people have to accept simply by faith. Rather, it is a tool for clarifying issues."

   N.B. Apart from heretical interpretations, which were readily confronted and rebutted, the conception of the Godhead remained unchallenged from 381 A.D.

III.   THE DOCTRINE OF GOD IN THE REFORMATION CHURCH.

The polarity of historic Catholicism into Protestant and Roman Catholic camps did not reflect radical divergence of opinion in all areas. Indeed, Reformation Protestants and Roman Catholics alike agreed on the doctrine of God and simply reaffirmed their convictions in a creedal fashion.

A.   In the Roman Catholic Church.

1.   **The Council of Trent (1545–63),** a reaction to the growth of Protestant opinions, as well as a reforming council spoke to the heated issues of that day (authority, justification, and the means of grace [sacraments]). The Tridentine Profession (1564), a creedal synopsis of the findings of Trent, in Article I states the dogmatic truth of Nicea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.). It reads:

> "I.   I, ------, with a firm faith believe and profess all and every one of the things contained in that creed which the holy Roman Church makes use of: 'I believe in one God, the Father Almighty...

2.   **The Decrees of Vatican I (1870)** do not speak to the issues of the Trinity simply because it was assumed by previous statement and it was not an issue that required clarification in that day (the issue in the nineteenth century was more fundamental—not trinitarianism, but authority and theism). Chapter I of the decrees of Vatican I reads:

> The holy Catholic Apostolic Roman church believes and confesses that there is one true and living God, Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immense, incomprehensible, infinite in intelligence, in will, and in all perfection, who, as being one, sole, absolutely simple and immutable spiritual substance, is to be declared as really and essentially distinct from the world, of supreme beatitude in and from himself, and ineffably exalted above all things which exist, or are conceivable, except himself.

> This one only true God, of his own goodness and almighty power, not for the increase or acquirement of his own happiness, but to manifest his perfection by the blessings which he bestows on creatures, and with absolute freedom

of counsel, created out of nothing, form the very first beginning of time, both the spiritual and the corporeal creature, to wit, the angelical and the mundane, and afterwards the human creature, as partaking, in a sense, of both, consisting of spirit and of body" (Harnack, *Creeds of Christendom*. II, 239).

3. **The Decrees of Vatican II (1963–65)** are silent on the topic of the Trinity. The three persons of the divine, single Godhead are assumed. The Trinity was simply not the focus of the council.

   N.B. The "de fide" statement of the church is simply: "In God there are three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Each of the three Persons possesses the one (numerical) Divine Essence" (Harnack, *Creeds of Christendom*. II, 52).

B. In the Protestant Tradition.

The Reformers do not reflect a departure from the ancient creeds of the church, indeed, as noted previously, Trinitarianism was not an issue in the Sixteenth Century. Therefore, a few, brief notices to sustain trinitarian orthodoxy will be sufficient.

1. **Martin Luther (d. 1546)** accepted the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity because he felt that it was supported by the Scriptures. ("Scriptures thus cleverly prove that there are three persons and one God. For I would believe neither the writings of Augustine nor the teachers of the church unless the New and Old Testaments would clearly show this doctrine of the Trinity" [*Works*, 39, 289]). The three-ness in one-ness to Luther is a stumbling block and must be appropriated by faith, he thinks the scholastics had erred by overstressing reason ("One should stick to the simple, clear, powerful words of Scripture" [*Works*, 37, 41]). He stated (*Works*, 10, 191), "If natural reason does not comprehend this, it is proper that faith alone should comprehend it; natural reason produces heresy and error but faith teaches and holds the truth for it sticks to the Scripture which does not lie or deceive." Althaus summarized Luther as follows (*The Theology of Martin Luther*, 200):

   "Since Luther found that the Scripture bears witness to God's Trinity, he thought about it just as seriously as about the other basic Christian truths. Several of his

series of theses and disputations deal with it; and he presented it in his sermons when the Christological texts used in the Christmas season, such as John 1 and Hebrews 1, demanded it. He was well aware of the medieval discussion of the doctrine. However, he rejects the "subtleties" of the scholastics who wanted to derive the Trinity from the nature of God and thus make it understandable to reason. He wishes to stick to and remain with the words of Scripture. In his interpretation of Scripture, he uses traditional concepts such as the eternal birth of the Son or that the works of God directed outside of himself are indivisible. Here, as elsewhere in the basic form of his doctrine of the Trinity, Luther follows the trail blazed by Augustine; for example, Luther says that the three persons cannot be theologically distinguished from each other by anything else than their respective relationships to one another as Father, Son, and Spirit."

The Lutheran standard, the *Augsburg Confession* (1530) reads:

"The churches, with common consent among us, do teach that the decree of the Nicene Synod concerning the unity of the divine essence and of the three persons is true, and without doubt to believed: to wit, that there is one divine essence which is called and is God, eternal, without body, indivisible (without part), of infinite power, wisdom, goodness, the Creator and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible; and that yet there are three persons of the same essence and power, who also are co-eternal, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. And they use the name of person in that signification in which the ecclesiastical writers (the fathers) have used it in this cause, to signify, not a part or quality in another, but that which properly subsists" (Harnack, *Creeds of Christendom*. III, 7).

2.   **John Calvin (d. 1564).** Little needs to be said of Calvin's views on the Trinity, but the purpose in turning to him is found in his brevity and clarity of statement. Book I of the *Institutes*, chapter 13, is devoted to this issue. I simply quote Calvin (I, 13. 2):

"But there is another special mark by which he designates himself, for the purpose of giving a more intimate

knowledge of his nature. While he proclaims his unity, he distinctly sets it before us as existing in three persons. These we must hold, unless the bare and empty name of Deity merely is a flutter in our brain without any genuine knowledge. Moreover, lest any one should dream of a three-fold God, or think that the simple essence is divided by the three Persons, we must here seek a brief and easy definition which may effectually guard us from error. But as some strongly inveigh against the term Person as being merely of human invention, let us first consider how far they have any ground for doing so...When the Apostle calls the Son of God 'the express image of his person' (Heb. 1:3), he undoubtedly does assign to the Father some subsistence in which he differs from the Son. For to hold with some interpreters that the term is equivalent to essence (as if Christ represented the substance of the Father like the impression of a seal upon wax), were not only harsh but absurd. For the essence of God being simple and undivided, and contained in himself entire, in full perfection, without partition or diminution, it is improper, nay, ridiculous, to call it his express image (caracthr). But because the Father, though distinguished by his own peculiar properties, has expressed himself wholly in the Son, he is said with perfect reason to have rendered his person (*hypostasis*) manifest in him. And this aptly accords with what is immediately added—viz. that he is 'the brightness of his glory.' The fair inference from the Apostle's words is, that there is a proper subsistence (*hypostasis*) of the Father which shines refulgent in the Son. From this, again, it is easy to infer that there is a subsistence (*hypostasis*) of the Son which distinguishes him from the Father. The same holds in the case of the Holy Spirit; for we will immediately prove both that he is God, and that he has a separate subsistence from the Father. This, moreover, is not a distinction of essence, which it were impious to multiply. If credit, then, is given to the Apostle's testimony, it follows that there are three persons (hypostases) in God. The Latins having used the word <u>Persona</u> to express the same thing as the Greek *hypostasis*, it betrays excessive fastidiousness and even perverseness to quarrel with the term. The most literal translation would be <u>subsistence</u>. Many have used <u>substance</u> in the same sense. Nor, indeed, was the use of the term Person confined to the Latin Church. For the

Greek Church in like manner, perhaps for the purpose of testifying their consent, have taught that there are three *prosopa* (<u>aspects</u>) in God. All these, however, whether Greeks or Latins, though differing as to the word, are perfectly agreed in substance."

This opinion is reflected throughout the entire Reformed Tradition and stated in the sixteenth century, *The Westminster Confession* (1647) states (II, 1.3):

> "There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty...In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son"
> (Harnack, *Creeds of Christendom*. II, 606-08).

The *Shorter Catechism* of Westminster (1647) wonderfully reads:

> "<u>Question 4</u>. <u>What is God</u>?
> <u>Answer</u> - God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.
>
> "<u>Question 5</u>. <u>Are there more Gods than one</u>?
> <u>Answer</u> - There is but one only, the living and true God.
>
> "<u>Question 6</u>. <u>How many persons are there in the Godhead</u>?

> Answer - There are three persons in the Godhead: the
> Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost; and these three are
> one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory"
> (Harnack, *Creeds of Christendom*. III, 676-77).

3.   The Church of England stands within the same pale of
Orthodoxy as seen in the ***Thirty-Nine Articles* (Article 1).**

> "There is but one living and true God, everlasting,
> without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power,
> wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all
> things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this
> Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power,
> and eternity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost"
> (Harnack, *Creeds of Christendom*. III, 487-88).

C.   **In the Non-Protestant Tradition.**

This category may appear to be unintelligible so a word of explanation
is in order. The Romanists and Protestants within the context of the
Reformation subscribed to identical opinions on the Trinity; however,
with the renewal of interests in the study of Scripture came some
movements with heretical opinions on the Trinity due to the judgment
of the Scriptures by finite reasoning. These emerged in the
Reformation era, but are not reflective of Romanist or Protestant
theology at the point of Theology Proper.

1.   **The Socinians**

a)   The origins of Socinianism, which in reality is a
resurgence of the monarchian heresies of the third
century, are stated by McLachlan when he wrote
(*Socinianism in Seventeenth Century England*, 605-606):

> "Socinianism may be regarded as a blend of Italian
> rationalism with Polish Anabaptist tendencies. Its
> roots go down into the soil of Spain in the person of
> Michael Servetus, the author of the *Christianismi
> Restitutio*, a plan for a thorough reformation of
> Christianity by a return to the doctrine and
> teaching of the Christian religion in their original
> form. They also reached into Italy in the persons of
> those whom Calvin in scorn once called 'the
> academic sceptics'."

The movement came to flourish in Italy, parts of Eastern Europe, and particularly Poland where it sought political refuge. It broke forth as a schismatic movement from within the Reformed Church of Poland! The secular wing of the Renaissance, the Italian, was brought into Poland through the aristocracy.

b)   **The leaders of Socinianism,** other than Michael Servetus, were two: Laelius Socinus (1525–62), who appears to have been the theological fountainhead of the movement, and his nephew, Faustus Socinus, who was its chief defender and promulgator (b. 1539). Socinian ideas rapidly spread to Holland; From Holland into England where it affected John Biddle, the Father of English Unitarianism. The tremendous impact of it is noted by McLachlan (*Socinianism*, 337):

> "Considered thus, as a bearer of the liberal spirit of the Renaissance, Socinianism is of wider moment than just another form of Christian doctrine. It is part of the larger movement towards free inquiry, part of the break-away from medieval scholasticism in the direction of modern empiricism. To judge from the reactions against it on the orthodox side, the radical nature of the Socinian criticism was clearly recognized by many contemporaries, and its disintegrating influence upon old modes of Christian thought was more widely felt than has been generally admitted. The dominant form of antitrinitarianism in England in the seventeenth century, Socinianism was of greater importance than a mere doctrinal variant of Christianity. Like Arminianism, it reinforced, by attempting to carry out consistently to its conclusion, the great principle of the Reformation which affirmed the supremacy of private judgment. Like Arminianism, too, it was a liberating force, freeing men from the dominance of the prevalent Calvinistic theology. Owing much to humanism, perhaps more than any other religious movement in Europe, Socinianism was feared and hated by the orthodox as much for its rationalism and latitudinarianism as for its heterodox views of the Trinity and atonement. It

helped to pave the way for the 'Age of Reason',
when rationalism was no longer the monopoly of
obscure dissenting writers and preachers and a
group of latitudinarian divines."

c)   The theology of Socinianism is most clearly evidence in
the Racovian Catechism of 1574, a Polish Socinian
Confession. The confession attests to one divine essence
but then states that the one essence contains one person
(33-34):

"Prove to me that in the one essence of God, there
is but one Person?

"This indeed may be seen from hence, that the
essence of God is one, not in kind but in number.
Wherefore it cannot, in any way, contain a plurality
of persons, since a person is nothing else than an
individual intelligent essence. Wherever, then,
there exist three numerical persons, there must
necessarily, in like manner, be reckoned three
individual essences; for in the same sense in which
it is affirmed that there is one numerical essence, it
must be held that there is also one numerical
person.

"Who is this one divine Person?

"The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

"How do you prove this?

"By most decisive testimonies of Scripture;—thus
Jesus says (John 17:3). 'This is life eternal, that
they might know THEE, (the Father) THE ONLY
TRUE GOD.' The apostle Paul writes to the
Corinthians (I Cor. 8:6), 'To us there is but ONE
GOD, THE FATHER, of whom all things:'—and
again, in addressing the Ephesians (chap. 4:6), he
said 'There is—ONE GOD AND FATHER OF ALL:
who is above all, and through all, and in you all.'

"How happens it, then, that Christians commonly
maintain that, with the Father, the SON and the

HOLY SPIRIT are persons in one and the same Deity?

"In this they lamentably err—deducing their arguments from passages of Scripture ill understood."

Calvin answers the anti-trinitarians, principally Severtus, mentor of Socinius, thusly (*Institutes*. I, 13.22):

"But as in our day have arisen certain frantic men, such as Servetus and others, who, by new devices, have thrown everything into confusion, it may be worthwhile briefly to discuss their fallacies...The name of Trinity was so much disliked, nay, detested, by Servetus, that he charged all whom he called Trinitarians with being Atheists. I say nothing of the insulting terms in which he thought proper to make his charges. The sum of his speculations was, that a threefold Deity is introduced wherever three Persons are said to exist in his essence, and that this Triad was imaginary, inasmuch as it was inconsistent with the unity of God. At the same time, he would have it that the Persons are certain external ideas which do not truly subsist in the Divine essence, but only figure God to us under this or that form: that at first, indeed, there was no distinction of God, because originally the Word was the same as the Spirit, but ever since Christ came forth God of God, another Spirit, also a God, had proceeded from him. But although he sometimes cloaks his absurdities in allegory, as when he says that the eternal Word of God was the Spirit of Christ with God, and the reflection of the idea, likewise that the Spirit was a shadow of Deity, he at last reduces the divinity of both to nothing; maintaining that, according to the mode of distribution, there is a part of God as well in the Son as in the Spirit, just as the same spirit substantially is a portion of God in us, and also in wood and stone. His absurd babbling concerning the person of the Mediator will be seen in its own place...The monstrous fiction that a person is nothing else than a visible appearance of the glory

of God, needs not a long refutation. For when John declares that before the world was created the Logos was God (John 1:1), he shows that he was something very different from an idea. But if even then, and from the remotest eternity, that Logos, who was God, was with the Father, and had his own distinct and peculiar glory with the Father (John 17:5), he certainly could not be an external or figurative splendour, but must necessarily have been a hypostasis which dwelt inherently in God himself. But although there is no mention made of the Spirit antecedent to the account of the creation, he is not there introduced as a shadow, but as the essential power of God, where Moses relates that the shapeless mass was upborne by him (Gen. 1:2). It is obvious that the eternal Spirit always existed in God, seeing he cherished and sustained the confused materials of heaven and earth before they possessed order or beauty. Assuredly he could not then be an image or representation of God, as Servetus dreams. But he is elsewhere forced to make a more open disclosure of his impiety when he says, that God by his eternal reason decreeing a Son to himself, in this way assumed a visible appearance. For if this be true, no other Divinity is left to Christ than is implied in his having been ordained a Son by God's eternal decree. Moreover, those phantoms which Servetus substitutes for the *hypostasis* he so transforms as to make new changes in God. But the most execrable heresy of all is his confounding both the Son and Spirit promiscuously with all the creatures. For he distinctly asserts, that there are parts and partitions in the essence of God, and that every such portion is God. This he does especially when he says, that the spirits of the faithful are co-eternal and consubstantial with God, although he elsewhere assigns a substantial divinity, not only to the soul of man, but to all created things.

> **N.B.** This type of Monarchianism is Sabellian or Modalistic.

2.   **The Unitarians of England.** Socinian opinions were rapidly

spread throughout Europe, particularly in Holland where they gained a hearing among the Remonstrant Party and in England. A Latin copy of the Racovian Catechism was presented to James I and publicly burned in 1614. McLachlan wrote (*Socinianism*, 163): "Before Biddle, Socinian opinions in England, though fairly extensive, were only thinly diffused. They existed rather as a latent element of thought silently circulated in books, rather than an open profession of worship. From 1640 on, however, contemporary references to Socinianism steadily increased in number." Socinian ideas penetrated Oxford where John Biddle was studying toward a BA and MA at Magdeln College, 1634–41. There the canon of Christ Church complained that it crept in "endeavoring to infect and poyson men's faith." Biddle argued "that Luther and Calvin deserve our gratitude for cleansing Christianity 'from sundry Idolatrous Pollutions of the Romane Antichrist', yet they did not go far enough: 'the dregs (are) still left behind, I mean the Gross Opinion touching three persons in God.'"

Unitarianism flowered in England under the direction of Biddle and Joseph Priestly, the discoverer of Oxygen (Servetus discovered the double circulation of blood). Because it stood outside the protection of the law, Socinian-Unitarians were unable to form any lasting organization or gather for worship. Not until 1813 (again in 1825 and 1844) were the religious and civil liberties enlarged to include all religious dissenters.

3.   **The Deists of England**. The influence of Socinian views upon England became manifest in two distinct movements: English Unitarianism and English Deism. Not all Unitarians were deists, but all deists had a unitarian concept of God. A good survey of the progression of Unitarian views in history is given by John Orr (*English Deism*, 34):

> "Some of the roots of deism go back into the series of bitter doctrinal controversies that raged in the early Christian church. The first and perhaps the greatest of these was the controversy over the doctrine of the Trinity. Trinitarianism, ably championed by Athanasius, won a difficult victory over creeds. But the defeated followers of Arius carried on the controversy in the protracted disputes that arose over the person and nature, or natures, of Christ. Through the Middle Ages there was an occasional outbreaking of debate on these doctrines. But

no widespread reviving of the old conflict came until the Reformation. Laelius and Faustus Socinus started the antitrinitarian movement known as **Socinianism** which spread widely and became especially strong in Poland. It resulted in seventeenth century England in a revival of the controversy over the doctrine of the Trinity. Many unitarians were not deists. But all deists had a unitarian conception of God and were sympathetic with the unitarians as against the trinitarians. Deism's spiritual ancestry leads back through unitarianism to Socinianism and on back to Arianism."

> **N.B.** The questioning of traditional religious views in the Reformation using the hermeneutic of reasonableness led to divergences that varied in extremes (mildly in Arminianism and Wesleyanism; radically in Socinianism, Unitarianism, and Deism). The radical usage of the "reasonableness hermeneutic" led to the rise of Religious Skepticism and the Enlightenment.

4.   **The American Unitarians** emerged as the direct antecedent of English Unitarianism. Unitarianism began to take form as an embryonic movement in the mid-eighteenth century in New England and flowered at the turn of the nineteenth century in its major spokesman, William Ellery Channing (d. 1842), the famous pastor of Federal Street Church, Boston. In 1819 Channing delivered an ordination address for Jared Sparks in Baltimore, Maryland, that became the first printed definition of the movement. The sermon was entitled "Unitarian Christianity." Stating his objections with Orthodox Christianity, he began with the Trinity (*Works of William Ellery Channing*, 371):

> "I.   In the first place, we believe in the doctrine of God's UNITY, or that there is one God, and only one. To this truth we give infinite importance, and we feel ourselves bound to take heed lest any man spoil us of it by vain philosophy. The proposition that there is one God seems to us exceedingly plain. We understand by it that there is one being, one mind, one person, one intelligent agent, and one only, to whom underived and infinite perfection and dominion belong. We conceive that these words could have conveyed no other meaning to the simple and

uncultivated people who were set apart to be the depositaries of this great truth, and who were utterly incapable of understanding those hairbreadth distinctions between being and person which the sagacity of later ages has discovered. We find no intimation that this language was to be taken in an unusual sense, or that God's unity was a quite different thing from the oneness of other intelligent beings."

Then Channing lists three proofs for his position.

a)   "We object to the doctrine of the Trinity, that, whilst acknowledging in words, it subverts in effect the unity of God" (371). He wrote (371):

>   "We do, then, with all earnestness, though without reproaching our brethren, protest the irrational and unscriptural doctrine of the Trinity. 'To us,' as to the Apostle and the primitive Christians, 'there is one God, even the Father.' With Jesus, we worship the Father, as the only living and true God. We are astonished that any man can read the New Testament and avoid the conviction that the Father alone is God. We hear our Saviour continually appropriating this character to the Father. We find the Father continually distinguished from Jesus by this title. 'God sent his Son.' 'God anointed Jesus.' Now, how singular and inexplicable is this phraseology, which fills the New Testament, if this title belong equally to Jesus, and if a principal object of this book is to reveal him as God, as partaking equally with the Father in supreme divinity! We challenge our opponents to adduce one passage in the New Testament where the word God means three persons, where it is not limited to one person, and where, unless turned from its usual sense by the connection, it does not mean the Father."

b)   It is irrational to think that the Apostle could have held such an irrational doctrine and not be called upon to defend it (372).

>   "We are persuaded that, had three divine persons

been announced by the first preachers of
Christianity, all equal and all infinite, one of whom
was the very Jesus who had lately died on the
cross, this peculiarity of Christianity would have
almost absorbed every other, and the great labor of
the Apostles would have been to repel the continual
assaults which it would have awakened."

c)   It divides and distracts loyalty in worship. "We also think
that the doctrine of the Trinity injures devotion, not only
by joining to the Father other objects of worship, but by
taking from the Father the supreme affection which is his
due" (373). Again, he wrote (373):

"We do believe that the worship of a bleeding,
suffering God tends strongly to absorb the mind,
and to draw it from other objects, just as the
human tenderness of the Virgin Mary has given her
so conspicuous a place in the devotions of the
Church of Rome. We believe, too, that this worship,
though attractive, is not most fitted to spiritualize
the mind, that it awakens human transport rather
than that deep veneration of the moral perfections
of God which is the essence of piety."

N.B.   Unitarianism later developed a radical fringe that
was deeply pantheistic, Transcendentalism, under
such literary luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson,
Theodore Parker, and Henry David Thoreau. The
single deity was seen as nature; the
creature/creature distinctive were lost.
Transcendentalism has a modern counterpart in
the New Age Movement.

IV.   CONCLUSION.

The purpose of this lesson has been to trace the development of the doctrine
of God through the Medieval and Reformation Churches. The Medieval
period witnessed little development in trinitarianism apart from clarification
within changing cultural-religious viewpoints (i.e., the attempts to rationalize
the Trinity in the context of Scholasticism). The Reformation era saw
Romanists and traditional Protestants affirm the Trinity. Within the context
of the Reformation came a concerted attempt to subvert trinitarianism which

became the basis for both Christian Rationalism and later Christian Liberalism. Socinianism emerged as an idealogy spurred by Servetus which brought about the rise of English Unitarianism, Deism and American Unitarianism. While these four movements have vast differences, they share the same "Enlightenment Hermeneutic" with its disgust for trinitarianism.