

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 13 – Part 1

IN SCRIPTURE, FROM THE CREATION ONWARD, WE ARE TAUGHT ONE ESSENCE OF GOD, WHICH
CONTAINS THREE PERSONS

Up to this point in his Institutes Calvin has been discussing how we can know, or not know, who God is. While we can know something about God from the world around us, Calvin argues that knowing God means knowing the God we discover through the scriptures. In this chapter Calvin enters into his first discussion about what scripture teaches us about God. In this article we will look at the language that the church and Calvin have used to deal with the Trinity

First though a bit of historical background. As the church began to take its place as the official religion of the Roman Empire (in the early-300s) it began to debate the nature of Jesus and later the Spirit. Was Jesus human? Was Jesus divine? Was Jesus both? How was the Spirit related to God and to Jesus? The church held a series of Councils beginning in Nicaea (325 CE) in order to come to agreement. The creed which emerged from Nicaea (later called the Nicene Creed) and later Councils used language which was not entirely Biblical, but came from the Greek philosophical world, in order to deal with these questions. Calvin will use these terms in his defense of the Doctrine of the Trinity.

Summary: This lesson begins with Calvin reminding us that God is in fact ultimately unknowable because God's nature is "immeasurable and spiritual." (pg. 120) Nonetheless he writes that *"For he (God) so proclaims himself the sole God as to offer himself to be contemplated clearly in three persons."* (pg. 122) This observation then introduces us to the first term, "person." The Greek for this is "hypostasis" and means "individual existence." This term for Calvin and the church implies that Father, Son and Spirit have distinct realities/existences of their own...they are not merely God appearing in different disguises at different times. Calvin puts it this way. *"Therefore...it follows that there are in God three hypostasis."* (Pg. 123) This is critical if we are to make sense of Jesus praying to the Father, or the Spirit coming to Jesus. They are individual "persons".

The second term is "essence." The Greek word for this is "ousia" which means the most basic substance of something. Consider how we speak of the essence of things. When we do so we mean their basic reality. Essence for Calvin then is a description of the nature of God's oneness; in other words, God is one essence, one unity. *"For since the essence of God is simple and undivided, and he contains all in himself without portion or derivation, but in integral perfection..."* (pg. 122) Thus Calvin can speak of God being one essence but three persons.

While the terms essence, person and Trinity are not Biblical, Calvin believes that they help Christians better understand the nature of God. He in fact entitles one sub-section of this chapter, *"The expressions 'Trinity' and 'Person' aid the interpretation of Scripture and are therefore admissible."* (Pg. 123) Calvin sums up this teaching in this way: *"...that Father and Son and Spirit are one God, yet the Son is not the Father, nor is the Spirit the Son, but that they are differentiated by a peculiar quality."* (pg. 126)

What Calvin is attempting to do is to maintain the orthodox (meaning accepted by the majority of churches) belief that there is one God and not three; yet at the same time each of the three members of the God-head (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) are all distinct parts of God.

Reflection: This is probably the most difficult doctrine of the church. How is it that God can be one (monotheism) and yet be three (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). There have been a number of ways in which people have attempted to offer a way of thinking about this: fire, heat and light is one. My way is to think of the egg. It is one essence, the egg, but it has three parts, shell, yoke and white. You cannot say that the shell is the yoke, etc. But at the same time, they are all one. This is a simplistic image, yet I hope that it helps.

Questions:

1. What do you think of Calvin's willingness to use unbiblical language to describe such a important concept?
2. What does the Trinity mean to you?
3. How do you see Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one in God yet separate?