

CIRCULAR LETTER

BY REV. SAMUEL JONES

The Association of elders and brethren of the several Baptist churches in Pennsylvania and the colonies adjacent, held at Philadelphia, October 12th, 13th, and 14th, 1774.

Send our Christian salutation.

Beloved brethren, — Agreeable to the plan adopted at our last. Association, for the general letter to the churches, we come now to address you on the next article contained in our Confession of faith, which treats of the being and perfections of God, and includes the doctrine of the Trinity.

This is an important article; a foundation, a corner stone in the Christian faith. Remove this, and the whole superstructure will fall. Material then it is that we clearly conceive of, firmly believe, and without wavering, hold the same agreeable to the form of sound words, wherein it is held forth in divine revelation.

First. That there is an only living and true God, the supreme and eternal Jehovah, is manifest.

1. From the reason of things. Since there cannot be an effect without cause, there must be a first cause, self-existent and independent.
2. From the works of creation, all marvellous and astonishing from the least to the greatest. As also,
3. From those of Providence, in sustaining and well ordering the whole universe, through all the successive periods of time. And especially,
4. From the consciousness of a Supreme Being impressed on every rational soul. Above all,
5. From the holy Scriptures. Deuteronomy 6:4; 23:89; 4:35 Psalm lxxxvi.10; Isaiah 45:5.

Secondly. The perfections of God may be easily deduced from the same sources, especially his wisdom, power, and goodness infinite. And though his mercy, justice, truth, and holiness be not so clear from the works of creation and providence, yet there is a strong consciousness of these, as well as of his omniscience, omnipresence, &c., while they are also abundantly manifested by his word and Spirit.

Thirdly. Now, in this Divine and Infinite Being, there are three subsistences, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The Father, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son, or word, eternally begotten of the Father, John 1:14, 18; 3:16; 1 John 4:9; and the Holy Ghost proceeding from the Father and the Son, John 5:26, constituting, in the undivided essence of the Godhead, a trinity of persons, each of them possessed of all divine perfections, and every way coequal, and these three are one, the One God. 1 John 5:7.

That there are three appears through all the sacred writings, in reference to the works of creation, providence and grace, 1 Peter 1:2; in whose name baptism is administered, Matthew 28:19; and to whom divine worship and adoration are addressed, 2 Corinthians 13:14; and that these Three are One, or that there is One, and but one God, is no less clear as above.

Now, that we may further explain this doctrine, and remove some difficulties attending it, so far as the mysteriousness [sic] of the subject will admit, we shall endeavor to resolve the following queries.

Question 1. How can Three be One, and One Three?

Answer. Three are not said to be One, and One Three, in the same respect strictly. We do not say that there are Three persons in One person, nor that there are Three Gods in One God; but three persons or subsistences in the undivided essence of the One God.

Question 2. Why are these three subsistences called persons?

Answer 1. Because they are distinguished by personal relative properties; the Father begetting, the Son begotten, and the Holy Ghost proceeding.

2. They are styled I, Thou, and He. They speak, are spoken to, and spoken of.

3. They have each of them understanding and will. And besides,

4. They have personal characters, as Creator, Redeemer, Judge, Comforter, Intercessor, &c., and are covenanted with, sent, &c. Psalm 110:1, 3, 6, 7; John 8:16; 14:16, 17, 26.

In one word they have attributed to them and spoken of them every thing essential to and descriptive of personality.

Question 3. In what respect is Christ the only begotten Son of God?

Answer 1. Not with respect to his human nature; for he was the only begotten Son of God before. In that case the Spirit would have been the Father. And in his human nature he was manifested to be what he was before, namely, the only begotten of the Father.

2. Nor with respect to his resurrection; for he was so before he rose by his own power. And by his resurrection from the dead, he was manifested to be what he was before. Romans 1:4.

3. Nor yet with respect to his mediatorial office; for it is his sonship that adds lustre to this office, Hebrews 4:14, as well as efficacy. 1 John 1:7. Neither is there any thing in that office that should give rise to the title Son, only Son, only begotten. Further, this did not make the Son a son, but a priest. Hebrews 1:8; 7:28. And his priesthood and sonship are distinctly spoken of, Acts 8:37 9:20; while also in the capacity of a Mediator he was a servant.

4. It remains, then, that he was the only begotten Son of God by eternal generation, inconceivable and mysterious. He was his Son, John 5:18; 1 John 5:5; his own Son, Romans 8:3, 32; his only begotten Son, John 1:14, 18; 3:16; 1 John 4:9; was with him in the beginning, John 1:1; before his works of old, even from everlasting, Micah 5:2; Proverbs 8:22, 23.

Question 4. If he was the Son of God by generation as to his, divine nature, how could he be co-equal and co-eternal with the Father?

Answer. When we conceive of the Father and the Son, there is a priority in the order of nature, but not in the order of time. As God's eternal decrees, the mind and thought, the sun and light; though these be prior and successive among themselves in the order of nature, yet not in point of time. The instant the sun existed, light did exist also, proceeding, from it, or, as it were,

generated by it. So the instant there is a Father, there must be a Son; and as the Father exists a Father from eternity, so does the Son a Son.

Thus, dearly beloved, we have endeavored to set before you this essential article of our faith in as clear a manner as the narrowness of our limits, and the mysteriousness of the subject, would permit. But let no one presume to think that he can, by searching, find out the Almighty to perfection, nor vainly inquire where the Lord has not revealed. Let us rather be humbly thankful, that the Divine Majesty has condescended to make such wondrous discoveries of his being and perfections.

Let us set the Triune God before us in all our ways and enjoyments, and rejoice in him, who is worthy of our highest confidence and purest affection, worthy of all divine worship and adoration. Finally, brethren, let us be established in the present truth, nor suffer any to remove us from the firm basis of divine revelation. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all honor, glory, divine worship, praise, power and dominion, both now and evermore. Amen.

BENJAMIN MILLER, Moderator.

WILLIAM VANHORN, Clerk.

--Source: *Minutes of the Philadelphia Association*. A.D. Gillette, 1851. pp.164-166