

*An Answer to Ablabius:
That We Should Not Think
of Saying
There Are Three Gods¹*

THE TEXT

By rights it is you, who are in the prime of all your inner powers, who ought to continue the war against the enemies of truth and not to shrink from the task. Thus we fathers may be gladdened by the noble efforts of our children. For this is what the law of nature presupposes. But since you have turned your ranks and direct toward us the assaults of those darts which are hurled by the opponents of truth, and bid us old men to quench with the shield of faith their "hot, burning coals"² and their missiles sharpened by knowledge (as they falsely call it), we accept the challenge. We make ourselves a pattern of ready obedience so that you, yourself, Ablabius, Christ's noble soldier, may give us an equal response to a similar challenge, should we ever summon you to such a contest.

It is no small matter which you have broached with us; nor is it such as to involve little damage if it is not properly examined. For the force of the question, on the surface, compels us to accept one of two totally incongruous views. (Either we must say there are three gods, which is blasphemy; or else we must deny divinity to the Son and the Holy Spirit, which is irreligious and absurd.)

The argument you state runs like this: Peter, James, and John are called three men, despite the fact they share in a single humanity. And there is nothing absurd in using the word for their nature in the plural, if those who are thus united in nature be many. If, then, general usage grants this, and no one forbids us to speak of two as two, or of more than two as three,

how is it that we in some way compromise our confession, by saying on the one hand that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have a single Godhead, and by denying on the other that we can speak of three gods? For in speaking of the mysteries [of the faith], we acknowledge three Persons and recognize there is no difference in nature between them.

As I have already said, it is very difficult to deal with the question. If, indeed, we could find something to support the mind in its uncertainty, so that it no longer doubted and wavered in the face of this extraordinary dilemma, it would be well. But if our rather feeble powers of reason prove unequal to the problem, we must guard the tradition we have received from the Fathers, as ever sure and immovable, and seek from the Lord a means of defending our faith. If this should be discovered by anyone endowed with grace, we shall give thanks to Him who granted the grace. If not, we shall none the less hold on to our unchangeable faith in those points which have been established.

Why is it, then, that we are accustomed to use the plural when we make a count of those who are shown to have the same nature? We say there are "so many men," and we do not call them all "one." And yet, when we refer to the divine nature, why does our dogma exclude a multitude of gods, and while enumerating the Persons, not admit their plural significance? Were one speaking superficially to simple folk, one might seem to give an answer by this, viz., that our doctrine refused to enumerate a number of gods in order to avoid similarity with Greek polytheism. Were we to speak of the Deity not in the singular, but in the plural, as they are accustomed to do, there might be thought to be some kinship between their doctrine and ours. Such an answer, given to rather naïve people, might seem satisfactory. (To others, however, who demand that one or other of the alternatives must stand—either that we should not acknowledge the divinity of the three Persons, or that we should, without hesitation, count as three those who share the same divinity—such an answer as we have just given would not suffice to resolve the problem.) We must, therefore, make our reply at greater length, tracking down the truth as best we can, for the question is no ordinary one.

Our first point is this: To use in the plural the word for the nature of those who do not³ differ in nature, and to speak of "many men," is a customary misuse of language. It is like

³ Adding *mē*.

¹ Ablabius: a younger bishop to whom two of Gregory's letters are addressed, Epistles 6 and 21.

² Ps. 120:4.

saying that there are many human natures. That this is so is clear from the following instance. When we address someone, we do not call him by the name of his nature. Since he would have that name in common with others, confusion would result; and everyone within hearing would think that he was being addressed. For the summons was not by an individual name, but by the name of a common nature. Rather do we distinguish him from the multitude by using his proper name, that name, I mean, which signifies a particular subject. There are many who have shared in the same nature—disciples, apostles, martyrs, for instance—but the “man” in them all is one. Hence, as we have said, the term “man” does not refer to the particularity of each, but to their common nature. For Luke is a man, as is Stephen. But that does not mean that if anyone is a man he is therefore Luke or Stephen. Rather does the distinction of persons arise from the individual differences we observe in each. When we see them together, we can count them. Yet the nature is one, united in itself, a unit completely indivisible, which is neither increased by addition nor diminished by subtraction, being and remaining essentially one, inseparable even when appearing in plurality, continuous and entire, and not divided by the individuals who share in it.

Just as we speak of a people, a mob, an army, and an assembly always in the singular, and yet each of them entails plurality, so even the term “man” should properly and most accurately be used in the singular, even if those we observe to share in the same nature constitute a plurality. Thus it would be much better to correct our misguided habit and no longer use the word for a nature in the plural than by bondage to it to transfer the same error to our teaching about God. Yet it is impracticable to correct the habit, for how could you persuade anyone not to call those he observes having the same nature “many men”? Habit, indeed, is always hard to change. Hence, in not resisting the prevailing habit in the case of a lower nature, we should not go very far wrong. No damage arises from such a misguided use of words. In the case, however, of our teaching about God the indiscriminate⁴ use of words entails no similar freedom from danger. For trifles here are far from trifling. Therefore we must confess one God, as Scripture bears witness, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord,”⁵ even though the term “Godhead” embraces the holy Trinity. This I say in accordance with the principle which we have

⁴ Reading *adiaphoros* for *diaphoros*. ⁵ Deut. 6:4.

given in reference to human nature and by which we have learned that we must not use the word for this nature in the plural. We must now make a more careful examination of the word “Godhead,” in order that from the meaning attaching to the word we may get some help in clarifying the matter in hand.

Most people think that the word “Godhead” refers to God’s nature in a special way. Just as the heaven, the sun, or any other of the world’s elements is denoted by a proper name which signifies its subject, so they say that, in reference to the transcendent and divine nature, the word “Godhead” is fitly applied, like some proper name, to what it represents. We, however, following the suggestions of Holy Scripture, have learned that His nature cannot be named and is ineffable. We say that every name, whether invented by human custom or handed down by the Scriptures, is indicative of our conceptions of the divine nature, but does not signify what that nature is in itself. It is not very difficult to prove that this is the case. For, even without going into their origins, you will find that all terms that refer to the created world are accidentally applied to their subjects. We are content, in whatever way, to signify things by their names so as to avoid confusion in our knowledge of the things we refer to. But whatever terms there are to lead us to the knowledge of God, each of them contains a particular idea of its own; and you will not find any word among the terms especially applied to God which is without some meaning. From this it is clear that the divine nature in itself is not signified by any of these terms. Rather is some attribute declared by what is said. For we say, perhaps, that the divine is incorruptible or powerful or whatever else we are in the habit of saying. But in each of these terms we find a particular idea which by thought and expression we rightly attribute to the divine nature, but which does not express what that nature essentially is. For the subject, whatever it may be, is incorruptible, but our idea of incorruptibility is this: that that which is is not resolved into decay. In saying, then, that He is incorruptible, we tell what his nature does not suffer. But what that is which does not suffer corruption we have not defined. Or again, even if we say he is the creator of life, while we indicate by the expression what it is he creates, we do not reveal by the word what creates it. By the same principle, we find in all other cases that the significance attaching to divine names lies either in their forbidding wrong conceptions of the

divine nature or in their teaching right ones. But they do not contain an explanation of the nature in itself.)

We perceive, then, the varied operations of the transcendent power, and fit our way of speaking of him to each of the operations known to us. Now one of these is the power of viewing and seeing, or, one might say, of beholding.⁶ By it God surveys all things and oversees them all. He discerns our thoughts, and by his power of beholding penetrates even what is invisible. From this we suppose that "Godhead" (*theotēs*) is derived from "beholding" (*thea*), and that by general custom and the teaching of the Scriptures, he who is our beholder (*theatēs*) is called God (*theos*). Now if anyone admits that to behold and see are the same thing, and that the God who oversees all things both is and is called the overseer of the universe, let him consider whether this operation belongs to one of the Persons we believe to constitute the holy Trinity, or whether the power extends to the three Persons.) For if our interpretation of "Godhead" is the right one, and the things which are seen are said to be beheld (*theata*), and that which beholds them is called God (*theos*), no one of the Persons of the Trinity could properly be excluded from this form of address on the ground of the meaning of the word. For Scripture attributes sight equally to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. David says, "See, O God our defender."⁷ From this we learn that the power of sight is proper to the idea of God so far as he is conceived. For David said, "See, O Lord." But Jesus, too, sees the thoughts of those who condemn him because he forgives men's sins on his own authority. For it says, "Jesus, seeing their thoughts."⁸ And in reference to the Holy Spirit, Peter says to Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?"⁹ Thus he shows that the Holy Spirit, by whom the secret was disclosed to Peter, was a faithful witness and privy to what Ananias dared to do in secret. For Ananias became a thief of his own property, imagining he was escaping everyone's notice and hiding his sin. But at the same moment the Holy Spirit was in Peter and discerned his degraded and avaricious intention and Himself gave Peter the power to penetrate the secret; which He clearly could not have done had He been unable to discern what is hidden.

But someone will say that our manner of argument does not yet touch the question raised. For even granted that the term "Godhead" has reference to the common nature, that is no

⁶ *Theatikē*.

⁷ Ps. 84:9.

⁸ Matt. 9:4.

⁹ Acts 5:3.

proof we should not speak of "gods." On the contrary, it rather forces us to do so. For we find that people are not accustomed to use the singular when referring to many—not only when these share a common nature, but even when they are in the same business. Thus we speak of "many orators," or "surveyors," or "farmers," or "shoemakers," and so on. If, indeed, "Godhead" were a way of talking about God's nature, it would be more proper, following the line of reasoning given, to include the three Persons in the singular, and to speak about one God, since the nature is indivisible and inseparable. But since we have proved by the foregoing that the word "Godhead" signifies an operation and not a nature, our argument seems to be driven to the contrary conclusion. Hence we must rather speak of three gods who are beheld in the same operation, just as they do who speak of "three philosophers" or "three orators," or any other name derived from a profession, when there are many who share it.

I have taken pains to go into this matter fully by adducing our adversaries' objections, so that our teaching may be the more firmly fixed, being strengthened by the forcefulness of their contradictions. Let us now resume our argument.

We have fairly well proved by our argument that the word "Godhead" does not refer to a nature, but to an operation. Perhaps, then, someone might with good cause adduce the following reason why men who share the same profession with one another can be counted and referred to in the plural, while the Deity is spoken of in the singular as one God and one Godhead, despite the fact that the three Persons are not excluded from the significance attaching to "Godhead." He might argue that in the case of men, even if many share the same operation, each one separately and by himself undertakes the matter at hand. By his individual action each contributes nothing to the others engaged in the same task. For if there are many orators, their pursuit, being identical, bears the same name despite their plurality. Yet each one who follows this pursuit goes about it on his own. This one pleads in his special way, that one in his. In the case of men, therefore, since we can differentiate the action of each while they are engaged in the same task, they are rightly referred to in the plural. Each is distinguished from the others by his special environment and his particular way of handling the task.)

With regard to the divine nature, on the other hand, it is otherwise. We do not learn that the Father does something on

his own, in which the Son does not co-operate. Or again, that the Son acts on his own without the Spirit. (Rather does every operation which extends from God to creation and is designated according to our differing conceptions of it have its origin in the Father, proceed through the Son, and reach its completion by the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that the word for the operation is not divided among the persons involved. For the action of each in any matter is not separate and individualized. But whatever occurs, whether in reference to God's providence for us or to the government and constitution of the universe, occurs through the three Persons, and is not three separate things.)

We can grasp this by reference to a single instance. From Him, I say, who is the source of gifts, all things that share in this grace have obtained life. When, then, we inquire whence this good gift came to us, we find through the guidance of the Scriptures that it was through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But though we take it for granted that there are three Persons and names, we do not imagine that three different lives are granted us—one from each of them. Rather is it the same life which is produced by the Father, prepared by the Son, and depends on the will of the Holy Spirit.

Thus the holy Trinity brings to effect every operation in a similar way. (It is not by separate action according to the number of the Persons; but there is one motion and disposition of the good will which proceeds from the Father, through the Son, to the Spirit.) For we do not call those who produce a single life three life-givers; nor do we say they are three good beings who are seen to share the same goodness; nor do we speak of them in the plural in reference to all their other attributes. In the same way we cannot enumerate as three gods those who jointly, inseparably, and mutually exercise their divine power and activity of overseeing us and the whole creation.

When we learn from Scripture that it is the God of the universe who judges all the earth,¹⁰ we say he is the judge of all things through the Son. And again, when we hear that the Father judges no one,¹¹ we do not think that Scripture is at variance with itself. For he who judges all the earth does this through the Son to whom he has given all judgment. And everything done by the Only-begotten has reference to the Father, so that he both is the judge of all and yet judges no

¹⁰ Cf. Rom. 3:6.

¹¹ John 5:22.

one. For, as was said, he has committed all judgment to the Son; and all the judgment of the Son is not something alien to the Father's will. Hence no one can properly say either that there are two judges or that one of them is excluded from the authority and power of judgment.

In the same way, with reference to the word "Godhead," Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. And the Father exercises his power of overseeing or beholding (*theatikēn*), which we call "Godhead" (*theolēta*), through the Only-begotten, who by the Holy Spirit makes all power perfect, and who judges, as Isaiah says,¹² by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of fire. Thus he acts in accordance with the gospel saying made to the Jews. For he says, "If I by the Spirit of God cast out demons."¹³ By the unity of the action, he embraces every form of doing good in this instance. (For the word for the operation cannot be divided among many when they mutually bring to effect a single action.)

(As we have already said, the principle of the overseeing and beholding (*theatikēs*) power is a unity in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It issues from the Father, as from a spring. It is actualized by the Son; and its grace is perfected by the power of the Holy Spirit. No activity is distinguished among the Persons, as if it were brought to completion individually by each of them or separately apart from their joint supervision.) Rather is all providence, care and direction of everything, whether in the sensible creation or of heavenly nature, one and not three. The preservation of what exists, the rectifying of what is amiss, the instruction of what is set right, is directed by the holy Trinity. But it is not divided into three parts according to the number of the Persons acknowledged by the faith, so that each operation, viewed by itself, should be the work of the Father alone, or of the Only-begotten by himself, or of the Holy Spirit separately. But while, as the apostle says,¹⁴ the one and the same Spirit distributes his benefits to each one severally, this beneficent movement of the Spirit is not without beginning. Rather do we find that the power we conceive as preceding it, namely, the only-begotten God, effects everything. Apart from him nothing comes into being; and again, this source of goodness issues from the Father's will.

Every good thing and everything we name as good depends on the power and purpose which is without beginning. And it is brought to completion by the power of the Holy Spirit and

¹² Isa. 4:4.

¹³ Matt. 12:28.

¹⁴ Cf. I Cor. 12:11.

through the only-begotten God, immediately and independent of time. No delay exists or is to be conceived in the movement of the divine will from the Father through the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Now the Godhead is one of these good names and concepts; and hence the word cannot be rightly used in the plural, since the unity of operation forbids the plural number.

The Saviour of all men, especially of believers, is spoken of by the apostle¹⁵ as one. Yet no one argues from this expression that the Son does not save believers, or that those who share in salvation receive it apart from the Spirit. But God who is over all is the Saviour of all, while the Son brings salvation to effect by the grace of the Spirit. Yet on this account Scripture does not call them three Saviours, although salvation is recognized to come from the holy Trinity. In the same way they are not three gods according to the meaning we have given to the term "Godhead," although this expression attaches to the holy Trinity.

It does not seem to me entirely necessary for the proof of my present argument to refute opponents who claim that "Godhead" should not be conceived in terms of operation. For we believe that the divine nature is unlimited and incomprehensible, and hence we do not conceive of its being comprehended. But we declare that the nature is in every way to be thought of as infinite. What is altogether infinite is not limited in one respect and not in another, but infinity entirely transcends limitation. Therefore that which is without limit is certainly not limited by the word we use for it. In order, then, that our conception of the divine nature should remain unlimited, we say that the divine transcends every name for it. And one of these names is "Godhead." The same thing, then, cannot on the one hand be identical with the name, and yet on the other be conceived as transcending every name.

If, however, our opponents want to claim that "Godhead" refers to nature and not to operation, we shall revert to our former argument. [We shall say] that the habit of giving a plural significance to the word for a nature is mistaken. When a nature is observed in a larger or in a smaller number, neither increase nor diminution properly attaches to it. Only those things are enumerated by addition which are seen to be individually circumscribed. This circumscription is noted by bodily appearance, by size, by place, and by distinction of form and color. What is observed to transcend these things is beyond

¹⁵ Cf. I Tim. 4:10. The reference is to the Father.

circumscription by means of these categories. What is not circumscribed cannot be numbered; and what is not numbered cannot be observed in quantities.

We say of gold, when it is made into small coins, that it is one and that it is spoken of as such. While we speak of many coins or many staters,¹⁶ we find no multiplication of the nature of gold by reason of the numbers of staters. That is why we speak of "much gold" in view of a large quantity of plate or coins. But we do not say "many golds" on account of the quantity of the material, unless one speaks this way of "many gold [pieces],"¹⁷ such as darics or staters. In which case it is not the material but the coins which admit of the plural signification. For properly speaking we should not say "many gold [pieces]," but "many golden ones."

As, then, there may be many golden staters, but gold is one, so we may be confronted with many who individually share in human nature, such as Peter, James, and John, yet the "man" [the human nature] in them is one. Even if the Scripture extends the word to a plural significance by saying, "Men swear by the greater,"¹⁸ or, "sons of men," and so on, we must realize that it here uses the prevailing mode of speech. It does not lay down rules how words ought to be used in one way or another. It does not record these phrases by way of giving technical instruction in the use of words. But it uses the word according to prevailing custom, having only this in view, that the word may be helpful to those who receive it. It does not use language with precision in matters where no harm arises in the understanding of the phrases. Indeed, it would be a lengthy task to list the inaccurate expressions from Scripture to prove my point. But where there is danger of a point of truth being perverted, we no longer find this careless and indifferent use of words in Scripture.

It is for this reason that Scripture allows "men" to be used in the plural because, by such an expression, no one would be misled to suppose there is a multitude of "humanities," or to think that, by the plural use of the word for that nature, many human natures are signified. But the word "God" it carefully uses in the singular, guarding against introducing different natures in the divine essence by the plural significance of "gods." Wherefore it says, "The Lord God is one Lord."¹⁹ By the word "Godhead" it proclaims, too, the only-begotten

¹⁶ A small gold coin.

¹⁸ Heb. 6:16.

¹⁷ In the Greek, "many golds."

¹⁹ Deut. 6:4.

God, and does not divide the unity into a duality so as to call the Father and the Son two gods, although each is called God by holy writers. The Father is God and the Son is God; and yet by the same affirmation God is one, because no distinction of nature or of operation is to be observed in the Godhead.

For if, as those who are misled suppose, there are differences of nature in the holy Trinity, it would follow that their number would be extended to a plurality of gods and divided by the divinity of essence in their subjects. But since the divine, single, and unchanging nature eschews all diversity of essence, in order to guard its unity, it admits of itself no plural significance. { But as it is said to be one nature, so all the other attributes are numbered in the singular—God, good, holy, saviour, righteous, judge, and any other conceivable attribute of God, whether one says these refer to his nature or to his operation }—a point we shall not dispute.

Should anyone cavil at our argument that, by refusing to acknowledge distinctions in the nature, it makes for an admixture and confusion of the Persons, we will give the following answer to such a charge. Although we acknowledge the nature is undifferentiated, we do not deny a distinction with respect to causality. That is the only way by which we distinguish one Person from the other, by believing, that is, that one is the cause and the other depends on the cause. Again, we recognize another distinction with regard to that which depends on the cause. There is that which depends on the first cause and that which is derived from what immediately depends on the first cause. Thus the attribute of being only-begotten without doubt remains with the Son, and we do not question that the Spirit is derived from the Father. For the mediation of the Son, while it guards his prerogative of being only-begotten, does not exclude the relation which the Spirit has by nature to the Father.

When we speak of a cause and that which depends on it, we do not, by these words, refer to nature. For no one would hold that cause and nature are identical. Rather do we indicate a difference in manner of existence. For in saying the one is caused and the other uncaused, we do not divide the nature by the principle of causality, but only explain that the Son does not exist without generation, nor the Father by generation. It is necessary for us first to believe that something exists, and then to examine in what way the object of our belief exists. The question of what exists is one thing: the manner of its

existence is another. To say that something exists without generation explains the mode of its existence. But what it is is not made evident by the expression. If you asked a gardener about some tree, whether it was planted or grew wild, and he replied either that it had or had not been planted, would his answer tell you what sort of tree it was? By no means. In telling you how it grew, he would leave the question of its nature obscure and unexplained. In the same way here, when we learn that he is unbegotten, we are taught the mode of his existence and how we must think of it. But we do not learn from the expression what he is.

When, then, we acknowledge such a distinction in the holy Trinity that we believe that one is the cause and the other depends on it, we can no longer be charged with dissolving the distinction of the Persons in the common nature. The principle of causality distinguishes, then, the Persons of the holy Trinity. It affirms that the one is uncaused, while the other depends on the cause. But the divine nature is in every way understood to be without distinction or difference. For this reason we rightly say there is one Godhead and one God, and express all the other attributes that befit the divine in the singular.