

Spurgeon Room Studies ~ Knowing God ~ Fall 2018

Session 6

The Trinity

I. Introduction

- The doctrine of the Trinity is both difficult and dangerous. Difficult because it requires the diligent examination of Scripture in a serious and sustained manner. Dangerous because heresy looms on every side. But the rewards are great because this is who God *is*. We ought to desire to know Him as He has revealed Himself. We cannot truly love whom we do not know.
- “The study can at times seem technical and dry, but the rewards are great.”¹
- “I’ve often reflected on the rather obvious thought that when his disciples were about to have the world collapse in on them, our Lord spent so much time in the Upper Room speaking to them about the mystery of the Trinity. If anything could underline the necessity of Trinitarianism for practical Christianity, that must surely be it.”²

II. The Doctrine Stated

- *God eternally exists as three persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And each person is fully God, and there is one God.*³
- There is no contradiction in this statement. If it said, “God is one person and God is three persons,” that would be a contradiction. Or, “There is one God and there are three Gods,” etc.

Westminster Shorter Catechism

- *Question 5—Are there more Gods than one?*
A. *There is but one only, the living and true God.*
- *Question 6—How many persons are there in the Godhead?*
A. *There are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.*⁴

¹ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R, Phillipsburg, 2002, p.621.

² Sinclair Ferguson, quoted by Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, P&R, Phillipsburg, 2004, p. 1.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1994, p. 226.

⁴ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, questions 5 and 6.

III. Scriptural Foundations—Old Testament

- A. The doctrine of the Trinity is *latent* (concealed) in the Old Testament, *implicit* in the New Testament and was *formulated* in the history of the early church.
- B. “The Old Testament contains in seed form what is more fully made known in the NT. On that basis, we may reread the OT, just as we might reread the early chapters of a detective mystery, looking for clues that we missed the first time, but now are given fresh meaning by our knowledge of what comes later.... The original readers would not have grasped this, but we, with the full plot disclosed, can revisit the passage and see the clues there.”⁵
- C. Genesis 1.1-3—God, Spirit and Word all are active in creation.
- “In the beginning, **God** created the heavens and the earth.... And **the Spirit of God** was hovering over the face of the waters.... And God **said**, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” Cf. John 1.1
 - “Then God said, “Let **us** make man in **our** image, after **our** likeness.” Genesis 1.26
- D. The Angel of the LORD
1. Genesis 16.7-13; 21.17-18—The angel and Hagar
 2. Genesis 22.11-18—the offering of Isaac; cf. Genesis 12.3
 3. Genesis 31.11, 13—Jacob
 4. Additional references: Exodus 3.2-6; Judges 2.1-5; 6.11-24; 13.3-23.
- In these narrative portions of Scripture, the angel of the LORD is identified with God/the LORD, yet is in some way distinct from Him. No explanation is given for this puzzling arrangement.
- E. Theophany (a visible manifestation of God)
1. Genesis 18-19—appearances to Abraham; cf. 18.1, 2, 10, 22, 33; 19.1. A ‘mysterious oscillation.’ (Wainwright)
 2. Joshua 5.13-15—the captain of the LORD’s army

⁵ Letham, p. 20.

F. The Spirit of God

- Cf. Isaiah 63.7-14 where the LORD, the angel of the LORD and the Holy Spirit are all named. The LORD (7a) became their *Savior* (8b), the angel of his presence *saved* them (9a) and carried them (9b, cf. Deuteronomy 32.9, 11).

G. Psalm 45 (cf. Hebrews 1.8)

- One person is called God (or the LORD) and is distinguished from another who is said to be God.
 - “Your throne, O God is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.” (Psalm 45.6-7)
 - The New Testament writer of Hebrews quotes this passage and applies it to Christ/Messiah: “But of the Son, he says, ‘your throne, O God, is forever and ever...’” (Hebrews 1.8)

H. Summary

- “The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lit; the introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before. The mystery of the Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament revelation; but the mystery of the Trinity underlies the Old Testament revelation, and here and there almost comes into view. Thus, the Old Testament revelation of God is not corrected by the fuller revelation which follows it, but only perfected, extended and enlarged.”⁶

IV. Scriptural Foundations—New Testament

- “But ‘Trinity’ is not in the Bible!”
This is true with reference to the word itself. But the reality of one God in three persons is certainly in the Bible. The word *Trinity* is a combination of two concepts, *tri* and *unity*, giving us the compound noun *Trinity* or the adjective *Triune*. It represents a shorthand way of communicating an essential truth about the nature of God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture.
- “True, Trinitarian theology has always struggled to understand and express the threeness of the one God. The Western church preferred *persons*, the Eastern church *substances*, Augustine favored *relations*, while Calvin preferred

⁶ B.B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, P&R Publishing, Philadelphia, 1968, p. 30.

subsistencies. None of these words say perfectly everything that needs to be said. They all draw on human analogies that ultimately break down. The mystery of the God we serve remains infinitely beyond all our efforts to describe him with our broken concepts and finite words.... But Christian theology boldly makes this attempt, not out of irreverent curiosity or speculation, but because *this is how God has revealed himself to be.*"⁷

A. The Father and Jesus

1. There are but few references to God as *Father* in the OT. There is clear but limited confession of YHWH as father. Cf. Deuteronomy 32.6; Isaiah 63.16, Jeremiah 3.4, 19, etc.
2. When we get to the NT, this changes dramatically. "*Father* goes from being an occasional designation in the OT to his personal name in the NT in relation to Jesus Christ, his Son."⁸ This designation reveals a degree of intimacy never before seen.
3. The use of *Abba* (Aramaic) in the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. (Mark 14.36, and probably translated in Matthew 26.39, 42; Luke 22.42).⁹
4. Matthew 11.25-27—Jesus reveals the Father to whomever he chooses.
5. The Gospel of John uses *Father* 122 times, more than the other three gospels combined.
6. After the resurrection—Acts 2.33-36; Philippians 2.9-11; Ephesians 1.17; Hebrews 1.1-2.

B. Jesus Christ as God

1. Making himself equal with God—John 5.18; 8.58-59; Mark 14.60-64.
2. The *I am* statements: John 6.35; 8.12, 24, 28, 58; 10.11; 11.25; 14.6; 15.1; 18.5-8.
3. Additional Scripture references: John 1.1, 14; 20.28; Acts 20.28; Romans 9.5; Hebrews 1.8. Cf. class handout *Kelly Scott's Deity of Christ*.

C. The Holy Spirit

1. Present from the beginning (Genesis 1.1-2). References to His general presence and acts described by simile—wind, water and fire, etc.
2. Personal characteristics
 - a. "He grieves over human sin (Ephesians 4.30), persuades and convicts (John 14-16), intercedes for us with groanings that cannot be uttered (Romans 8.26-27), testifies (John 16.12-15), cries (Galatians 4.6), speaks

⁷ Timothy George, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2002, p. 85.

⁸ Letham, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁹ Peter Toon, *Our Triune God*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1996, pages 139-140.

(Mark 13.11 and par.), creates (Genesis 1.2; Luke 1.35), judges, leads Jesus throughout his life and ministry (Luke 1.35-4.22), and tells evangelists like Philip and apostles like Paul what to do (Acts 8.29, 39; 16.6-10). He has a mind (Romans 8.27). He can be blasphemed (Mark 3.28-29) which requires identity with God. Peter places Him in parallel with God when confronting Ananias: lying to the Holy Spirit is lying to God.”¹⁰

- b. The personal masculine pronoun is used of Him (John 16.7-15).
3. Triadic statements: Matthew 3.16-17; Romans 15.30; I Corinthians 12.4-6; 2 Corinthians 13.14; Galatians 4.4-6; Ephesians 2.18; 4.4-6; Hebrews 9.14.
4. Baptismal formula (Matthew 28.19)
In the name [singular] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

V. Development in the History of the Ancient Church

- “The doctrine of one God, the Father and creator, formed the background and indisputable premise of the Church’s faith.... The problem for theology was to integrate with it, intellectually, the fresh data of the specifically Christian revelation. Reduced to their simplest, these were the convictions that God had made Himself known in the Person of Jesus, the Messiah, raising Him from the dead and offering salvation to men through Him, and that He had poured out His Holy Spirit upon the Church.”¹¹
- The chief question: How did the early church pass from Jewish monotheism to Christian trinitarianism without landing in polytheism?

A. Two opposite heretical tendencies

1. **Modalism**—the idea that the one God displays Himself in different modes or forms.
 - “Sabellius held that the only God, the Father in the OT, had become the Son in the NT, and sanctified the church as the Holy Spirit after Pentecost. The three were merely successive modes of the uni-personal God.”¹²
(Modalism is also known as Sabellianism.)
2. **Subordinationism**—this view seeks to preserve the unity of God by subordinating the Son and Spirit to the Father in their eternal relations, but by doing so, denies the deity of Son and Spirit. To varying degrees, this was the majority report before the Council of Nicea.

¹⁰ Letham, p. 60-61.

¹¹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1960, 1978, p. 87.

¹² Letham, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

B. Events leading up to the Council of Nicea (325 AD)

1. A dispute arose in Alexandria in 318 AD. Bishop Alexander had been lecturing on the unity of the Godhead when he was challenged by a young presbyter, Arius, who accused him of Sabellianism (modalism), which had been officially rejected by the church in the third-century.
2. Arius enlarged upon the views of Origen, the famous Alexandrian theologian. In the previous century, Origen had taught that the Son was co-eternal with the Father, but nevertheless saw the Son as an intermediary who created the world instead the Father. This was consistent with the Greek idea that it was not appropriate for the Father to create the world directly.¹³ This amounted to subordinationism.
3. But Arius went further than Origen, asserting that the Son was not only distinct from the Father, but inferior to Him; that the Son was created and not eternal, as was the Father. (This is similar to the Jehovah's Witness understanding of Jesus Christ.)

C. The Council of Nicea—325 AD

1. The council was called by the emperor, Constantine. His chief concern was for peace and unity. About 220 bishops attended, most of them from the eastern (Greek) part of the empire.
2. The council agreed upon a creed which defined orthodoxy and excluded Arianism.
3. Central to the debate was the word *homoousios* ["consubstantial"--of the same substance, essence] from the Greek words *homo-* 'same' and *ousios-* 'being' / 'essence.' The use of this word had been condemned fifty years before, when it was associated with Paul of Samosata, a modalist. Note—at this time the meaning of this word and others were not universally agreed upon.
4. Others at the council preferred the word *homoiousios*, meaning "of similar substance."
5. *Homoousios* carried the day and surprisingly, the creed was signed by almost all the bishops. However, it soon became apparent that while all signed, not all regarded the words as having the same meaning.
6. Constantine used his political power to enforce the decisions of Nicea. Those who refused to sign on were exiled.
7. A word about *words*.

D. *Athanasius Contra Mundum*

1. As deacon to Bishop Alexander, Athanasius was present at Nicea, though he did not take an active role. He had previously written on the divinity of Jesus Christ, tying

¹³ Harry Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1976, p. 93.

Christ's divinity to His work of redemption. "Thus taking a body like ours, because all men were liable to the corruption of death, he surrendered it to death instead of all and offered it to the Father."

2. "Perhaps the most important fact we need to grasp about this whole debate is that the issue is really the nature of the gospel and salvation. For Athanasius and for us the person of Christ is basic to His work. Only one who was truly God and truly man could be our Savior."¹⁴
3. Following their defeat at Nicea, the Arian party worked to gain political support. Athanasius succeeded Alexander as bishop of Alexandria in 328. The emperor Constantine called on him to reinstate Arius in the interest of unity, but Athanasius refused to comply.
4. This prompted Constantine to reply to Athanasius--"Now that you are acquainted with my will, grant unimpeded entry into the church to all who wish it. If I hear that you have stood in the way of any of them when they claim to be members of the church, or have denied them entry, I will immediately send someone who will depose you at my command and remove you from the country."
5. Athanasius was exiled or deposed five times. A great deal of political intrigue occurred during this time. Emperor Constantius, who succeeded Constantine upon his death, ordered all bishops to adopt an Arian creed or be deposed and exiled. Athanasius refused and eluded those sent to apprehend him. He spent the next five years in hiding. During that time, Arianism gained the upper hand.
6. Meanwhile Athanasius' popularity was on the rise. He enjoyed the support of the growing Egyptian monastic movement. (Monks were seen as successors to the martyrs and were highly regarded by the population at large.) He had still to endure two more periods of exile but with the support of the famous monk, Antony and the Cappadocian fathers—Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus—Arianism was losing ground. At the Council of Constantinople in 381 the decisions of Nicea were re-affirmed. An orthodox position on the Trinity was fully and finally established.
7. *Athanasius Contra Mundum* has become proverbial since almost single-handedly he stood against the tide. While there are just grounds for criticizing Athanasius, it is remarkable that he remained steadfast for the essential truth of the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ during a long period of theological and political conflict.

¹⁴ John Legg, *The Footsteps of God*, Evangelical Press, Hertfordshire, England, 1986, p. 31.