§ 5. Doctrine of God: Trinity
Lecture 3
Jesus as God in the New Testament

We are continuing our lesson on the doctrine of the Trinity. Before we re-plunge into that subject, however, I just want to alert some of you to the fact that every Thursday on our Reasonable Faith Facebook page we are putting up a new feature. It is a short video called “Join Me In My Study.” That is a double entendre. It is a pun. It is taken in my study at home – Jan does the video herself – but it is also about my current study of the doctrine of the atonement and gives you a chance to join with me as I study from week to week and share the things that I am learning in this video. So if you have the chance to look at the Reasonable Faith Facebook page, you’ll find there posted every Thursday afternoon this short two-to-five minute video, “Join Me In My Study,” which will, I think, prove stimulating to you as we struggle to understand this very difficult doctrine of the atonement.

Today, however, we want to look at perhaps the equally difficult doctrine of the Trinity. Last time we saw that the biblical writers affirm the deity of Christ. In doing so they confronted the difficulty of saying that Jesus is God but without saying that Jesus is the Father. This is problematic because, as I shared, the word for God in the Greek – \(\text{ho theos}\) (\(\text{ho}\) is the definite article “the” so “the God” literally) – refers to the Father. The New Testament Christians, while believing that Jesus was deity (was divine) did not think that he was the Father. That is why you don’t find many statements in the New Testament that Jesus is \(\text{ho theos}\) – that Jesus is God. That would be to say Jesus is the Father. Instead, as we saw, they picked a different term to characterize Jesus, and that was the term \(\text{kyrios}\) or Lord. \(\text{Kyrios}\) is the Greek word that translates the name of God in the Old Testament – Yahweh. The early Christians, as we saw, would call Jesus “Lord” and they would apply to him Old Testament passages about Yahweh saying that these are in reference to Christ. So you have the very odd situation that the New Testament writers, while shunning the label \(\text{theos}\) for Jesus, do affirm that Jesus is \(\text{kyrios}\). Thus you get these odd circumlocutions such as 1 Corinthians 8:6, “For us, there is one God the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ.” We find in the New Testament that the writers attempted to do everything they could to affirm the deity of Christ but without saying that he was the Father.

The third point that we want to come to that illustrates this is the fact that Christ is given the role of God. To Christ, these authors ascribed roles that are normally reserved for God.

For example, let’s look again at Colossians 1 beginning with verse 15 and following.
He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

Here the role of being the Creator of all reality other than God is ascribed to Christ.¹

Similarly, in John 1:1-3 we have the same teaching.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

Here, again, you have ascribed to Christ, the Word of God, the creation of all reality apart from God himself.

Finally, look at Hebrews 1:1-3a where you have the same teaching:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.

Here, just like Paul in Colossians 1 and John in John 1, Christ is said to be the creator of the world, he is the heir of all things just as Paul says he is the first-born of all creation, he reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature. The idea there is like a signet ring which is pressed into hot wax to seal a document or a letter. Just as that wax bears the imprint of the ring, so Christ bears the very stamp or imprint of the divine nature. He upholds the universe by his word of power, just as John says all things were created through him.

So the fact that we have in Colossians 1, Hebrews 1, and John 1 this same teaching about the cosmic Christ as the Creator and Sustainer of all things apart from God shows that this was the widespread conviction of the early church. This is not a doctrine taught by some idiosyncratic author. These are three different authors – Paul, an anonymous author of Hebrews, and then John of the Gospel of John. All of them teach the same thing with respect to Christ – that he is the Creator of the world. He plays the role of God in being the source of all reality apart from God.

Finally, sometimes the authors in the New Testament simply lose all restraint, and they come right out and say, yes, Jesus Christ is ho theos – Jesus is God. The best book that is written on this is by the very fine New Testament scholar Murray Harris. It is called Jesus as God. The subtitle is The New Testament Usage of Theos in Reference to Jesus.
Murray Harris was my Greek professor and spent a lifetime studying those passages in the New Testament which refer to Christ as *theos*. This is one of the few books that I would recommend to every Christian to read and have on his bookshelf. Given the centrality of the deity of Christ for Christian monotheism, I think this is really an indispensable tool. So put that on your gift list or on your book list – *Jesus as God* by Murray Harris.

What Harris points out is that there are several passages in the New Testament where the best interpretation – the most plausible exegesis – of these passages is that the New Testament writers are affirming that Jesus is *theos*. Let’s look at these passages together.

First would be Hebrews 1:8-12. We already saw in the opening paragraph of the book of Hebrews that Christ is attributed to the role of God, is said to bear the stamp of the divine nature, he upholds the universe by his word of power.² Now look at what he says in verses 8-12. He says,

> But of the Son he says,

> ‘Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever, the righteous scepter is the scepter of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, thy God, has anointed thee with the oil of gladness beyond thy comrades.’

and,

> ‘Thou, Lord, didst found the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of thy hands; they will perish, but thou remainest; they will all grow old like a garment, like a mantle thou wilt roll them up, and they will be changed. But thou art the same, and thy years will never end.’

In verse 8, he says of the Son “thy throne, O God.” The Son is addressed as God – *theos*. This sentence could be translated “God is thy throne,” in which case the Son is not addressed as God. It could be translated in that way. But I think that the translation that I read is preferable because of the parallelism between verse 8 and verse 10. What you have here is Christ is addressed as both *theos* and *kyrios*. In verses 8, “Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever” and verse 10, “Thou, Lord, didst found the earth in the beginning.” So the parallelism here of God and Lord, I think, gives good reason for preferring the translation as I read it from the RSV.

Another passage – Titus 2:13. Here the author says, “we await our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” Look at that phrase “the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” The Greek here literally means “our great God and Savior.” That is whom we are talking about. It is *tou megalou theou kai soteros hemon*. *Megalou* from “mega” – that means “great.” *Theou* is the genitive of

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² 10:18


theos. So this first part is “great God.” And (kai). Soteros – that is from Savior. Then the possessive pronoun hemon means “our.” The bookends of this phrase are the definite article tou and then the possessive pronoun “our.” These are, as I say, bookends that frame the entire phrase that means “our great God and Savior.” Jesus is referred to here as not only our Savior but also as our God.

A third passage is Philippians 2:5-7. Here Paul says,

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Notice what it says here about Christ. It says that in his pre-incarnate state he was in the form of God. If there is any doubt about what that means, look at the next phrase – equality with God. He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. The word there for “grasped” means something to be clutched on to and held on to. He was willing to set that aside and to relinquish it and to humble himself and take the form of a servant.

In Philippians 2:5-7 we have this very strong assertion that the pre-incarnate Christ existed in the very form of God, but he didn’t grasp at or clutch or try to hold on to that equality with God, but humbled himself and took on human likeness.

Finally, we come to the writings of John where we find several expressions that equate Jesus with theos.

First would be in the Gospel of John 1:1 which we’ve already read but I want to look at it again: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The final phrase there kai theos en ho logos – the word order is inverted: “and God was the Word.” You might notice that theos does not have the definite article in front of it. Why is that? Because the definite article indicates the subject of the sentence. The fact that the article is not here shows that this is the predicate of the sentence. The sentence should not be translated “and God was the Word.” Rather, the article indicates that the sentence should be translated “and the Word was God.” In this case the presence of the article with ho logos shows that that is the subject of the sentence and that theos is the predicate. We saw that John goes on to then describe Christ as the Creator of the world, of all things apart from God.

John 1:18: “No one has ever seen God, the only God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.” Later copyists were so offended with this idea of the only begotten God that is in the Greek here that they changed it to Son. Your translations will probably indicate that as an alternative manuscript reading. Copyists changed “God” to the word “Son” here because they could not imagine this notion of the only begotten
God. Yet, that is what the best manuscripts read. The earliest manuscripts going back to AD 200 indicate that the original wording of this verse is “the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father he has made him known.” Here John makes quite clear what he already affirmed in verse 1 that the Word (or Jesus) is, in fact, God.

Turn to the end of the Gospel – John 20:28. Again, these are like bookends. In chapter 1 we saw that Jesus is affirmed to be God, and now in chapter 20 and verse 28 (at the end of John’s Gospel) we have Thomas’ confession. In verse 28 Thomas falls on his face at Jesus’ feet and answers him, “My Lord and my God!” In the Greek: ho theos mou kai ho kyrios mou – literally “the God of me” (mou is my) and “the Lord of me.” So Thomas is affirming that Christ is both ho theos and ho kyrios – he is Lord and God. This is the Christological climax of the Gospel of John – Thomas’ confession. It shows that Thomas understands Jesus to be exactly who John in his prologue says that he is. 4

Finally, look at 1 John 5:20: “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” The antecedent for the pronoun “this” is Christ - “in his Son, Jesus Christ” who is “the true God and eternal life.” John, here again, affirms the deity of Christ.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I was looking for clarity because usually when I read John 1, Hebrews 1, Colossians 1, the term “through” usually makes Jesus seem almost like a power of God or a utility or a tool of some kind that God, the Father, used to make. Not that he himself is the Creator. I’m not saying he is not. I’m saying I am trying to understand how in every one of those passages you used the word “through.” How does that make him the Creator and not a utility? Do you see what I am saying?

Dr. Craig: Yes, I do. I think we do want to affirm that Christ is the agent of creation. He is the Father’s agent of creation. That’s right. This is especially evident in this idea of the Logos (or the Word). This is one of the most interesting examples of the influence of philosophy upon the New Testament. This idea of the Logos (or Word of God) as the agent of creation – the means or instrument – by which God created the world is not unique to John or the New Testament. It characterizes a philosophical school called Middle Platonism which developed during the centuries after Plato wrote. Middle Platonists believed that the Logos, which is sort of the mind of God in a way, is the instrument of creation by which God creates the world. Hellenistic Jews – Greek-speaking Jews outside of Israel – like Philo of Alexandria, Egypt talk a great deal about the Logos as God’s agent of creation. You read Philo it is almost like reading the prologue of the Gospel of John. This is a very common idea in the ancient world that the

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Logos is the means by which God creates the world. But in Judaism, for Philo as for others, there is a clear dividing line between God who is alone uncreated and the rest of reality which is created and dependent on him. Things like God’s Word and God’s Wisdom belong on God’s side of the dividing line. These are personifications of attributes of God and belong on God’s side of the dividing line between Creator and creature. So, for example, some New Testament scholars have spoken of Christological monotheism. Christ – the Word of God – is divine. He is not a creature. He is not a product of any creative act of God. He is on God’s side of the dividing line between God and creation. So I think you are quite right in saying that on the New Testament doctrine we should think of the second person of the Trinity as the one through whom God creates the world. He is the agent of creation.

Student: A couple of months ago I talked about Jehovah’s Witnesses and one of the verses we talked about is Titus 2:13 where it says our great God and Savior Christ Jesus. All they do is just switch the comma. They say our great God, <comma> and Savior Jesus Christ, splitting those up. Is a proper understanding and explanation of the Greek that you went into when you translated that – would that inherently invalidate that explanation?

Dr. Craig: Right. That is Harris’ point. When you look at the way the Greek reads, the definite article and the possessive pronoun “our” frame the phrase and show that you can’t put the comma earlier and say “our great God, and our Savior.” That is not what it means. It is “our-great-God-and-Savior” - hyphenated if you will. That is because of the framing of the phrase grammatically by the definite article and the possessive pronoun at the end. It is really wonderful, I think.

Student: When I used to work for Boeing long ago, they tried to get the drawings of the airplanes into computers so there was a big project that tried to take the existing system and logicalize it and then use the most efficient logic and then physicalize it with a new technology. In that process, I can almost understand that God the Father is the logical system, and then God the Son is the physicalizing of that logic system. Do you think this is a proper analogy?

Dr. Craig: I see the point of the analogy because the word “Logos” is obviously the root from which we get our word “logical.” It can mean “reason” as well as “word.” For these Middle Platonists this was the mind of God. The Logos was that intellectual side or aspect of the divine being. They would compare it to the mind of an architect who was designing a city and then executing his plans. So, yes, I think that the analogy is apt and does emphasize the logical and rational nature of God and of the created order. In fact, I was once talking to a Russian Orthodox believer when we were in Russia. He said that
one of the reasons he liked evangelical Protestantism better than Catholicism was because in Catholicism the Holy Spirit is said to proceed from the Father and the Son. The Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Logos and then to us. Whereas in Greek Orthodoxy, the Spirit proceeds directly from the Father without passing through the filter of the Logos. That affords a more mystical approach to God—a kind of a-rational approach to God that he, as an Orthodox believer, found very congenial. He didn’t like your analogy of having this be logical—being a rational expression. He wanted to have a more mystical spirituality that he thought was better in line with the idea of the Spirit coming directly from the Father, rather than proceeding through the filter of the Logos. I think that would bear out the point of the analogy that you are making.

**Student:** I think it is John where there is a passage where Jesus says, “I and the Father are one.” I think it is interesting in light of this whole discussion. We were talking about Jesus being distinct from God the Father. To me it seems to be referring to a very special relationship in the same way that we might talk about oneness in marriage even though we have two individuals. People say that God invented marriage as a way to help us understand the union the believer has with Christ. Do you think there is also that aspect that it helps us understand the Trinity in a way?

**Dr. Craig:** I do think that undoubtedly John thought of Jesus as God and thought that they had a deep underlying unity of nature and essence. We see that from the other passages. Maybe John interpreted that saying of Jesus “I and the Father are one” to have a deeper level of significance that we are one in nature or substance or essence. But on the surface of it at least it just seems to be that it is expressing we are in harmony with each other—I and the Father are of one mind on this. He prays that believers would also be one in the same way and one with him and the Father. At least on the surface, it doesn’t look like this is a deep metaphysical truth about the oneness of the Son with the Father. But, boy, given what John says elsewhere in his Gospel, it could well be that he saw that this had a deeper meaning than simply the surface meaning that I and the Father are of one mind on this or that we agree on this.

**END DISCUSSION**

The last point I want to make with respect to the affirmation of the deity of Christ in the New Testament is that there are many, many other passages which we will not take the time to read in which Christ functions as God. For example, receiving worship. This is unique to God. Only God can properly receive worship. And yet Christ receives worship in the New Testament. There are certain Christological titles given to him that seem to imply his deity. For example, “the Son of God.” This could just refer to his messianic status that he is especially anointed by God. But I think when you read the New

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Testament they think of Jesus as God’s Son in a special sense that the Hebrew kings or holy men could not be said to be God’s sons. Jesus is God’s Son in a special and unique sense that set him apart. Or Jesus’ claim to be “the Son of Man.” This is a title borrowed from Daniel 7 where Daniel has a vision of this divine-human figure which is called the Son of Man who comes before the throne of God and God gives to him all authority and power and dominion that all the people’s of the earth should worship and serve him. This is the title that Jesus applied to himself most frequently in the Gospels – that he was the Son of Man. The use of the definite article there – “the” Son of Man – I think shows that he is harking back to Daniel’s vision in chapter 7 of the Son of Man and not just referring to himself as a human being, as Ezekiel did when he called himself “a” son of man. Jesus always consistently used the definite article – he is “the” Son of Man.

The point is that these New Testament believers thought that the Jesus of Nazareth who had lived among them, who had died, who was raised from the dead by God, and ascended into heaven, that in some difficult to express way he was God himself. Now, he was not the Father. That’s clear. But he was equal to the Father. That is to say, he was God.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I know the Defenders class does apologetics or the defense of the essentials of the faith which I take to mean the things that constitute the Gospel. In other words, that is what you have to believe to have to be saved, and also does theology. Would you see the Trinity as falling under apologetics or theology? I don’t think when Paul and the apostles spread the Gospel in the book of Acts they asked people to believe in the Trinity. When you do your apologetics work around the world, do you typically defend the Trinity? Is that part of apologetics or is that just theology?

Dr. Craig: I think that it is primarily theology that we are doing here. We are examining Christian doctrine. But I would say given the rejection of this doctrine by, for example, Islam, which is the only world religion which has arisen with full knowledge of Christianity and in rejection of its teaching, it becomes imperative that we be able to state, articulate, and defend this doctrine of the Trinity. As I mentioned as well, it is denied by virtually all cultic or sectarian groups like Jehovah’s Witnesses, Latter Day Saints, Christian Science, and so forth. Therefore, it becomes an issue of apologetics because it is a central theological doctrine that is under attack from these various non-Christian groups. So I would see this as something that is involved in apologetics as well. Perhaps defensive apologetics rather than offensive apologetics. I don’t think one needs to try to prove that the Trinity is true. I think what one would do is say, “This is

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what we as Christians believe,” and then answer defensively the attacks or criticisms of the doctrine launched by Muslims and others.

Student: So the doctrine is entailed by the essentials?

Dr. Craig: Yes, I think so.

END DISCUSSION

The next person to be looked at is the person of the Holy Spirit. This is a good point at which to break. We will come back next time and look at the third person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit.  

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8 Total Running Time: 36:48 (Copyright © 2016 William Lane Craig)