

§ 5. Doctrine of God: Trinity

Lecture 5

The Early Greek Apologists

We've examined the scriptural data concerning the doctrine of the Trinity and saw that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons and yet each is God. We now want to turn to a historical survey of how great Christian thinkers have sought to formulate this doctrine into a systematic package.

We are going to begin with the early Greek apologists of the second century. These were men like Justin Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus, Athenagoras, and so on. You might not have ever heard of these men but these were some of the earliest Christian authors writing in defense of the Christian faith during the second century. Since they wrote in Greek they are known collectively as the Greek apologists.

These thinkers sought to connect the divine Word of the prologue of John's Gospel – the *Logos* – whom John says was in the beginning with God and who was God with the *Logos* as it plays a role in the thought of the Jewish Hellenistic philosopher Philo of Alexandria. When we say that Philo was a Hellenistic Jew what one means is that he was heavily influenced in his thought by Greek thought. Hellenistic comes from the Greek word *hellene* which means “Greek.” As a Hellenistic Jew, his thinking is pervaded by the categories of Greek philosophy. He lived in Alexandria in Egypt during the same time as the New Testament. He was born in 25 BC and died in AD 40.

The Christian apologists attempted to use the work of Philo in connection with the Gospel of John to articulate a sort of Logos Christology, or a doctrine of Christ, based on Philo's thinking. For Philo, the *Logos* is the reason or the mind of God who created the world and who imbued the world with its rational structure. Similarly, these Greek apologists also believed that the Father existing alone before the creation of the world had within himself (immanent within himself) his reason or Word which existed in him prior to creation. Then somehow this Word proceeded forth from God the Father rather like a spoken word proceeds forth from someone who utters that word and it becomes a distinct individual from the Father. It was through this individual – through the *Logos* – that the Father created the world, and the *Logos* then ultimately becomes incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth.

This procession of the *Logos* from the mind of the Father could be conceived to take place at the moment of creation when God created the world – that was the moment at which the *Logos* proceeded from the Father's mind. Or else, alternatively, it could be thought to be an eternal procession that never had a beginning. The church fathers were often fond of using the analogy of the sun's rays proceeding from the sun. As long as the sun exists – if the sun had existed eternally – the light beams would always be proceeding

from the sun. It is not as though they had a beginning to their procession. It was an eternal procession.

Let me read to you a statement by Athenagoras of this doctrine of the procession of the *Logos*, or the Son, from the Father.¹ Here is what Athenagoras writes:

The Son of God is the Word of the Father in Ideal Form and energizing power; for in his likeness and through him all things came into existence, which presupposes that the Father and the Son are one. Now since the Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son by a powerful unity of Spirit, the Son of God is the mind and reason of the Father . . . He is the first begotten of the Father. The term is used not because he came into existence (for God, who is eternal mind, had in himself his word or reason from the beginning, since he was eternally rational) but because he came forth to serve as Ideal Form and Energizing Power for everything material. . . . The . . . Holy Spirit . . . we regard as an effluence of God which flows forth from him and returns like a ray of the sun.

This is from his treatise entitled *A Plea for the Christians*, chapter 10.

According to the *Logos* doctrine, there is only one God but this God is not an undifferentiated unity. Rather certain aspects of his mind become expressed as distinct individuals.

The *Logos* doctrine of the Greek apologists thus involves a fundamental reinterpretation of the fatherhood of God. God is seen not to be merely the Father of all mankind or the Father of Israel or even simply the Father of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather he is the Father from whom the *Logos* is begotten before all worlds. The *Logos* is begotten of the Father from eternity. So Christ is not merely the only begotten Son of God in virtue of his incarnation. You might say that the reason Jesus is the only begotten Son of God is because he was born of a virgin, as in the Gospel of Luke. But what these Christian apologists were saying is that the Son is begotten of the Father even in his pre-incarnate deity. He proceeds out of the Father from eternity.

This *Logos* doctrine of the Greek apologists was taken up into Western theology by the great church father and theologian Irenaeus in his treatise *Against Heresies*. Irenaeus identifies God's Word, or *Logos*, with the Son and he identifies God's Wisdom with the Holy Spirit. So God's Word is the Son; his Wisdom is the Holy Spirit. This then will be taken up into Western theology.

For better or worse, like it or not, this is one of the clearest examples of the influence of philosophical thinking upon theology because this doctrine (which then gets canonized at the Council of Nicaea later on) is formed out of a kind of synthesis between John's

¹ 5:05

Gospel and the thought of Philo of Alexandria and the Middle Platonism that he represented.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Would we say God is formless and the Son is the form of God?

Dr. Craig: That is what Athenagoras said, didn't he? He said that the *Logos* is the Word of the Father in "Ideal Form and energizing power." He says that in the quotation I read because he said he came forth to serve as "Ideal Form and energizing power for everything material." I take it that what he is reflecting there is Philo's doctrine of creation.² The idea there is that the pattern for the physical material world is in the mind of God the Creator, specifically in the *Logos*. Philo compares the *Logos* to the mind of an architect who is planning a city and who has the city planned all in his mind all laid out, and then hires construction workers to actually build the city on the plan that he has in mind. I suspect that that is what Athenagoras is thinking here in calling the Son the Ideal Form and the creating power of the physical world. This is, as I say, a kind of marriage of Greek philosophical thinking with John's Gospel.

Student: *Logos* means "Word," right?

Dr. Craig: Yes. Or "reason." It can mean either one.

Student: So Jesus is the only begotten of the Father because he is the only Word God ever spoke, or something like that? And the Spirit is God's Wisdom or God's thoughts? You can't really use reason at the same time if they are different anyway.

Dr. Craig: Obviously these fellows are really struggling here to try to make sense of this. Right? Because it is not easy to see the difference between reason and wisdom, is it? But what this reflects is biblical metaphors or personifications. In John's Gospel you have the *Logos* – the Word – which was in the beginning with God. Then the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth, John says. That is where you get this figure of the *Logos*. Wisdom comes from Proverbs 8 where Wisdom is personified as a woman who goes out into the streets and calls young men to come to her and learn of her and learn how to live properly. The author of Proverbs encourages his son – commands his son – to learn of wisdom, to get wisdom. Above all things, get wisdom. Sit at the feet of lady Wisdom and benefit. This is reflecting these biblical personifications of attributes of God. It made a nice triad. You've got the Father, you've got his Word, and you've got his Wisdom. That seemed to them to be a sort of pattern for the Trinity.

Student: When you say "seemed," you are not saying that all modern scholars see it this exact way? Because even in the Bible it says *who knows God except for his mind?* and that *we have God's mind because we have his Spirit*. That would make sense if we have

² 10:00

not necessarily a physical manifestation of God but like a spiritual one of his mind – that we have his Spirit. That is elsewhere, not just in the Gospel of John. What do modern scholars think? Do they agree with this doctrine of the Trinity?

Dr. Craig: I am glad you asked the question. As we'll see, I think that modern orthodox Christians would look back on this and see it as a first attempt at crafting a doctrine of the Trinity. Inadequate but groping, trying to figure out categories in which to express it. It is an attempt to do systematic theology. You've got this raw biblical data; now how do you make sense of it? Here is the earliest attempt to do it. I think in the end we'd say this is inadequate. It doesn't rise to the full character of what we want to say, but it is an attempt.

[The audio skips due to equipment failure.]

. . . the *Logos* would proceed from the Father at the moment of creation seems unacceptable. Even they themselves, I think, came to recognize that. With Athenagoras, for example, you have the procession eternal and not just beginning at the moment of creation as it was for some of them.

Student: It sounds like Athenagoras' statement is tying into Plato's Forms. There are the Forms – they came from God.

Dr. Craig: That is Athenagoras' view, and that is Philo's view.³ What you are mentioning is that in Plato's (who you will remember as one of the greatest of the ancient Greek philosophers) thought, this world is merely a shadow or a copy of a kind of ideal world in which perfect geometrical shapes exist – like triangles and circles. In this physical world there are no perfect triangles or circles.

[At this point in the lecture, the power goes out in the lecture room.]

This is Plato's parable of the cave where he says people dwell in this shadowy world and need to be enlightened by getting in contact with the Forms. It is Platonic in the sense that Plato thought these Forms existed and the physical world is patterned on these Forms. But Plato didn't think these Forms were created by God. On the contrary, he thought that God looked to the Forms and then built the world on that model. They were independent of God. They were uncreated reality, and God simply created the physical world on the pattern of the Forms.

Well, for a Jewish monotheist like Philo, that was simply unacceptable. You couldn't have this independent, non-created reality existing along side of God. So he moved the Forms into the mind of God as God's ideas. Then it was on the basis of his own ideas that like an architect God planned and then built the physical world. You find this in the Greek apologists. Where they make an advance over Philo, I think, is that they think this *Logos* is not simply immanent in the mind of God (like the reason of an architect) but that

³ 15:00

somehow he comes forth from him as a separate individual. The *Logos* emanates out of God and becomes, as it were, another person. This way they get a multiplicity of persons who are divine. It is not a full trinitarian doctrine such as we'll find later on, but they are struggling to express it.

Student: I think the God that they said looked at the Forms were the little gods. [*inaudible*]. There were Greek philosophers that said the little gods are not the real God – there is one God.

Dr. Craig: OK. Fair enough. In Plato's *Timaeus*, he refers to this God who looks to the Ideal Forms and creates the world as a demiurge. This demiurge is, as you put it, a kind of lowercase-g god. But then where is God in Plato's system? The most you could get would be the Form of The Good, which is the highest Form. The Good. But the problem there is The Good is not a person. The Good is not a concrete reality. The Good is this abstract Form, and so it is not really God even though it is this sort of ultimate reality in Plato's view. The advance of people like Philo over Plato, I think, is that they say that this world of the Forms doesn't exist external to God. It exists in the mind of God, and the *Logos* who creates the world is not some sort of lower-class demiurge but the *Logos* is God himself.

Student: I wanted to go back to the word itself – *Logos*. It seems to me to be a really thick word. There is not a really good English translation. Is that safe to say?

Dr. Craig: What I would say is this. It is a rich – or as you put it, a thick – word. It can be translated by different English words. It is not that we fail to have English words to express it, but rather it has multiple meanings. There are other terms like this that are used in Scripture. I've been studying one this week.⁴ The term *dikaiosune* in the Greek. *Dikaiosune* can mean either righteousness or justice. So when Paul talks about the righteousness of God in Romans 3, this can also mean the justice of God. So you kind of have a pun in Romans 3:26. Paul says, “God is just and the justifier of him who has faith in Christ Jesus.” He is both just and the justifier. But at the same time, he talks about God's righteousness and how this is given to us in Christ. So the word is multivalent. It think that is also true of *Logos*. The word *Logos* is multivalent. It has different meanings. The context will determine the meaning that it has in that context. So when we read these quotations in English from these Greek apologists and we see words like “reason” or “Word” you have to understand that the English translators have chosen an English word that they think best captures the original in that context. But for a Greek reader, an original reader, of that, this may be a multivalent concept that has a richer meaning than we would realize.

Student: If you were talking to a Greek person and you said “*Logos* means Word or Reason” I feel like they would always say, “Close, but not exactly.” There is a nuance there that I don't know . . . we have to approach it from many different angles but that word to a real Greek means something that I don't think we . . . we have to really struggle with translating it.

Dr. Craig: *Logos* often does just mean “word.” So, right, I would just reiterate what I've just said. It is a multivalent term; it is a rich term, and the nuances might be lost on us through our English translations.

Student: I noticed when they described the *Logos* – the Greek apologist – they used words like “power” and what not. It sounds very impersonal. Did they believe that the *Logos* is a distinct person? How far were they in that department?

Dr. Craig: OK. I'm glad to have these questions, because you are pressing these same issues that I am wondering about. That is why I said that the *Logos* comes forth as a distinct – I use the word “individual.” I didn't use the word “person.” It is not entirely clear yet that they had the modern concept of a person, as a sort of self-conscious individual. Maybe they did, but it is just not altogether clear. I think it becomes clear when we get to these later thinkers, as we'll see in our next section. But it does make you wonder to what extent did they think of the *Logos* as a distinct person from the Father and the Spirit as a distinct person. How could the mind of the Father be a different person than the Father? If the mind of the Father proceeded out, then what happened to the Father's mind? Did he lose his mind? *[laughter]* You don't want to say that! Again, as I said before, these are groping attempts to try to express what we've seen in the New Testament.

Student: I say that because the *Logos* is obviously Jesus because it says the Word became flesh, and Jesus is clearly a person – somebody who has a will and speaks and all that. So it would seem would the *Logos* have to be a person?

Dr. Craig: Great question, and not always clear I would say.

Student: Can you shed some light on in what ways did these philosophers properly understand or misunderstand John's use of *Logos* in his Christology in the Gospel?

Dr. Craig: That is a really tough question because we don't know what really lies behind John's *Logos* doctrine in his opening chapter of his Gospel. I've done considerable study of this in connection with my work on God's aseity. It seems that John himself is reflecting the same tradition that you have embodied in Philo of Alexandria.⁵ The idea of the *Logos* as a creative principle of God's mind wasn't original to Philo. He expresses it clearly, but it is not his own idea. It is characteristic of what is called Middle Platonism.

⁵ 25:02

This Middle Platonism is what I talked about a moment ago when I said that these Middle Platonists took the Platonic realm of the Forms and put it in the mind of God as his ideas. It may well be that this is what John is reflecting – this kind of Middle Platonism – because so much of his vocabulary and emphases are to be found in Philo. The similarities – the parallels – are just stunning. They are really striking. But, at the end of the day, it is hard to know. I would say that most New Testament scholars would say that if John didn't know Philo's writings that at least the author of the prologue to John's Gospel comes out of the same Hellenizing Jewish tradition as Philo – this Middle Platonic view of thinking of the *Logos* as sort of the mind of God and the agent through whom God creates the world. What is striking about John, which Philo could never have said, is that the *Logos* became flesh and dwelt among us as a historical person. That is where John breaks the categories so to speak and where we need to recognize John's originality and contribution. He does think of the *Logos* as not some impersonal principle; he thinks it's Christ who has become incarnate for our benefit.

Student: It is interesting that the Platonic philosophy had an influence here. But where it is quite different – wasn't Plato the one who said the flesh was evil and the spirit was good?

Dr. Craig: I think you are thinking of Gnosticism.

Student: But isn't that based on Platonic philosophy though?

Dr. Craig: It is similar. Gnosticism had the idea that the world of the material and physical is positively evil, and it is the spiritual realm that is good and pure. I think that would be inaccurate to represent Plato that way. What Plato did think is that this Ideal Realm is more real than this realm. He thought that this physical world is just a sort of shadowy existence that isn't really very substantial. The real world is this Ideal Realm. But I don't think that he would therefore characterize the physical world as being evil in a way that the Gnostics did.

Student: In talking about systematic theology, sometimes some Christians get really defensive or scared about talking about philosophy and bringing that into theology. But it seems to me John is using a Hellenistic style of philosophy in the way he wrote his Gospel. Would you say that you can't separate the philosophy of what even a person like John, who is Jewish, is using in his own writing of the Gospel itself?

Dr. Craig: You are exactly right. I said that the Greek apologists' use of Philo was a great example of the influence of philosophy upon theology. But what you rightly said is, *Wait a minute! This has already happened in the Gospel of John!* Already in John's prologue you have the author of the fourth Gospel adopting these Middle Platonic categories talking about the *Logos*. This is not from the Old Testament or Jewish Wisdom literature. John's doctrine originates in this sort of Middle Platonism. So I think you are quite right

in saying that already in the pages of the New Testament we see the interplay of philosophy and theology together in formulating doctrine.

END DISCUSSION

Next week we will turn to another primitive Christology.⁶

⁶ Total Running Time: 31:02 (Copyright © 2016 William Lane Craig)