

§ 5. Doctrine of God: Trinity
Lecture 8
The Three Persons of the Trinity

Last time we were together we looked in some detail at the Nicene Creed. I think as we begin today it would be useful to read it through one more time to refresh our memories before we proceed.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

But for those who say ‘there was when he was not’ and ‘before being born he was not’ and that ‘he came into existence out of nothing’ or who assert ‘the Son of God is from a different hypostasis or substance, or is created, or is subject to alteration or change’ – these the Catholic Church anathematizes

Last week we had a blizzard of terminology in discussing this creedal statement, and lest you go away confused let me pare it down to just a couple of essential terms that I think you should add to your theological vocabulary on the basis of the Creed. The first would be the word *homoousias*. That comes from the Greek words *homo* (meaning “the same” as in “homogenized” or “homosexual”), and then from the Greek word *ousia* which means “substance” or “essence.” The Creed declares that the Father and the Son (and by implication the Holy Spirit) are the same substance. They are the same essence. That is to say the Son is fully divine. He's not some sort of subordinate deity or a created thing however exalted. He is God. The Father and the Son have the same substance or essence.

The other word that would be helpful for you to know – *hypostasis*. A *hypostasis* is an individual. It means something that has properties – a property bearer. As I pointed out in the original Nicene Creed the word *hypostasis* is taken to be synonymous with substance – *ousia* or essence. That's why the Creed has this anathema appended to it condemning anyone who says that the Son is of a different *hypostasis* or substance. This is the term that created so much controversy in the Eastern church because to the Greek-speaking Eastern theologians *hypostasis* wasn't synonymous with substance. They weren't the

same meaning. *Hypostasis*, as I say, was an individual. So, for example, Paul and Cash and Jim are different individuals but they all share the same nature – humanity. They are individual instances or examples of the same substance. Their common substance is humanity, and they are individually different men. That's why over the course of that fourth century the church revised the Creed so that *hypostasis* and substance were no longer considered synonyms, and now the orthodox doctrine became that there are indeed three *hypostases* – three individuals – in one substance.¹ That became the Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. There's one substance – God. One divine essence. Then there are three individuals – three *hypostases* – that exemplify that divine essence: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Last Sunday you had said towards the end of class that the Father is in a sense greater than the Son or something to that effect. Is that correct? Is that what you're saying?

Dr. Craig: I think you're referring to this notion that the Son is begotten from the Father. I think I indicated (if my memory serves me right) that that could have been a way in which one might interpret the verse where Jesus says, *The Father is greater than I*. Because for these theologians the Father is the sort of fountainhead of the Trinity. He is the only one that is underived in his being. The Son is begotten from the Father. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Spirit and the Son have a kind of derivative being that the Father doesn't share. He is the only one that is unbegotten and underived. One could interpret that as an explanation of why Jesus said, *The Father is greater than I*, because he proceeds from the Father.

Student: I want to challenge that on one point. I am defining greatness in terms of value. In that sense I don't believe the Father has any more value than the Son nor the Holy Spirit. I believe they all have equal value. I looked into this, and what I saw was what I think might be helpful. Basically, when the Father begot the Son he didn't divide himself but he distributed himself. He gave a full infinite distribution of himself to Christ. Then of course to the Spirit which proceeds from both the Father and the Son. Again, you get that full distribution into the Holy Spirit also. Here's something that I would consider also to be worth bringing up. If you look at the narrative of creation, you see that the woman is begotten from the man in the sense that part of the man is taken from the man and then God fabricates that into a woman. But as far as value is concerned, even though the man proceeds the woman he's not of more value. Absolutely not. There is complete equality there. I believe that's a good analogy to say the Father and the Son have that same sort of

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value even though there might be in terms of authority or something like that – you do have the Father sending the Son and the Son and the Father sending the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Craig: I wasn't meaning to make a value judgment by the word “great.” I was using it more in a kind of metaphysical sense that one is derivative and the other one is underived. But you're quite right that it would be a mistake to say that the Father has, say, moral perfection and the Son does not. So, yes, I think that is a good reminder.

Student: I would explain that verse by saying in his incarnation “he was greater than I.” *Pleroma*, I think, is the theory of the fullness and how much Christ gave up – theologians have debated that. How much did he give up for the incarnation? We know he gave up quite a lot. He was not omniscient for one thing. So in his state at that time of course “the Father is greater than I.” But that doesn't mean in essence that he is greater than he is.

Dr. Craig: I was saying this is one way a person could interpret that verse. But you are offering another way. Actually what you are talking about there is Kenotic Christology based upon Philippians 2 where Christ is said to have emptied himself and taken on human form. When we get to the doctrine of Christ we will have a section on this issue of *kenosis* and whether or not the incarnation did involve this sort of divesting of certain divine attributes in becoming incarnate, like omniscience for example. So hold onto that. That will be later.²

Student: *Homoousias* is the same. Can you equate that to Spirit or life? Or is there some distinction?

Dr. Craig: No, I don't think so because the word simply means “same substance” and that could be applied to a horse or mare and a colt. A mare and a colt are the same substance because the one is begotten from the other. The term, though it's theologically useful, in and of itself doesn't carry these kinds of implications. It could be used of physical things.

Student: I'm thinking of where it says if God withdrew his Spirit all flesh would die.

Dr. Craig: In the case of God, immateriality and incorporeality does belong to the divine substance or essence. That's certainly true. Remember when we talked about the attributes of God I believe one of the attributes of God we discussed was immateriality or incorporeality. God is not a physical object. In that respect I think orthodox Christianity differs from Mormonism, for example, which conceives of God or gods as being physical humanoid objects. So that's true. But the term itself doesn't mean immaterial or spiritual.

END DISCUSSION

Now the question is: if there are three *hypostases* all exemplifying the divine nature, what are these? The opinion unanimously on the part of orthodox theologians is that these are

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persons. Three persons. It's very frequently said today (as I mentioned in an earlier class) that we must not read this affirmation that they are persons anachronistically by importing into it the modern psychological concept of a person. While this caution may be in order, still I think that it needs to be seriously qualified. What is true is that the word *hypostasis* does not mean person. They're not synonymous words. *Hypostasis* is an individual – a property bearer. Nevertheless when you talk about a rational *hypostasis* then this does come very close indeed to the modern concept of a person. For Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, the essence or nature of man is captured by the phrase “rational animal.” That's what human nature is. He is a rational animal. We have an animal body joined with a rational soul, and that differentiates us from mere animals. Animals have souls according to Aristotle, but they lack rationality. They have a sort of lower-order souls that don't have rationality. So it's this property of rationality that serves to distinguish human beings from other animals. So a rational *hypostasis* is what you can only refer to as a person. It is a person.

This was strongly emphasized by the Cappadocian church fathers – some of the most important of the post-Nicene church fathers. Cappadocia is in central Turkey today. If you ever get a chance to visit Cappadocia by all means go. It is unworldly this ancient region in central Turkey. Among the Cappadocian fathers were people like Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzus. There were two Gregory's. And then there was Basil of Caesarea. These Cappadocian fathers were very emphatic about the personal nature of these three *hypostases* in the Godhead.³ For example, Gregory of Nyssa illustrates the idea of three *hypostases* having one nature by pointing out Peter, James, and John. He says these are three *hypostases* – Peter, James, and John – all exemplifying the same human nature. I don't know how else you could take that than by saying that these are three persons who share the same human nature. Moreover they ascribe to the three divine *hypostases* properties which are constitutive of a personhood such as mutual knowledge of one another, mutual love, and mutual will. They emphasize that these three persons are always in concord, always in harmony, with each other, and so they cannot be separated or disagree with each other. But nevertheless they are characterized by mutual knowledge, love, and will. Gregory Nazianzus boasts that unlike the modalists he says we worship the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one Godhead – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. One nature in three personalities – intellectual, perfect, self-existent, numerically separate, but not separate in the Godhead.

The ascription of personal properties to these three individuals in the Godhead is especially evident in the Cappadocian fathers' strong emphasis upon the full equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son. You notice in the Nicene Creed the Holy Spirit gets short shrift. All it says is “and in the Holy Spirit” - we believe in him too. But

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the Cappadocian fathers emphasized that like the Son the Holy Spirit is a divine *hypostasis*. Basil, for example, says that the Holy Spirit is not only incorporeal, purely immaterial, and indivisible, but, “We are compelled to direct our thoughts on high and to think of an intelligent being boundless in power.” So the Holy Spirit is an intelligent being boundless in power. He quotes 1 Corinthians 2:11 where Paul says *who knows the person of a man except for the spirit that is in him*. He compares the Holy Spirit to the human spirit that is in each of us. He says in his sanctifying work the Holy Spirit makes people spiritual by bringing them into fellowship with himself.

So these Cappadocian fathers would have resisted fiercely any attempt to depersonalize the Holy Spirit and make him into some sort of impersonal divine force. I think it's evident that their intention was to affirm that there are really three persons in a rich psychological sense in the one God.

While modalism affirmed the equal deity of the three persons at the expense of their distinctness, and Arianism affirmed their distinctness at the expense of their equal deity, orthodox Christianity maintained both the equal deity and the personal distinctness of the three persons. Moreover they did this without surrendering their commitment to monotheism. There exists only one God who is three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

START DISCUSSION

Student: [inaudible]

Dr. Craig: I think it's a helpful contrast. Modalism affirmed the equal deity of the three persons but at the expense of their personal distinctness. Remember it collapsed the persons down to just a unitarian view of God. Modalism affirmed the equal deity of the persons but at the expense of their personal distinctness. By contrast, Arianism affirmed the personal distinctness of the three persons – the Father, the Son are not the same person on Arianism – but at the expense of their equal deity.⁴ Only the Father is God. The Son is a created thing however great or exalted. Modalism affirmed the equal deity at the expense of the distinct personhood. Arianism affirmed the distinct personhood at the expense of the equal deity. And orthodoxy maintained both the equal deity and personal distinctness of the three persons, and all the while still affirming monotheism – that there is one God.

Student: I'm going to propose a functional hypothesis. To relate a spiritual being (God) to a physical being (man), I thought deity may play a very clear functional role in such a relationship where Jesus is the visible form of the invisible God, and the Holy Spirit is the invisible form of the visible man. Through that, the relationship is possible.

Dr. Craig: Okay, so what you are talking about is a kind of functional Trinity whereas what we've been talking about so far is an ontological Trinity. Maybe that's a useful distinction to make at this point. The ontological Trinity would be the way God is in and of himself, and this functional Trinity that you are talking about is often called the economic Trinity. That is to say what are the different roles or functions that the persons play in the economy of the plan of salvation. Clearly the economic Trinity is rather different than the ontological Trinity. In the ontological Trinity the persons are all equal, but in the economic Trinity the Son is subordinated to the Father. The Father doesn't come and die on the cross. The Son does. And the Holy Spirit doesn't proclaim himself, he proclaims the Son and will only proclaim what he has been given to proclaim. So I think you're right in wanting to differentiate these different functions of the persons of the Trinity in the economic Trinity. But at this point at least that's not our concern. We are still trying to understand the ontological Trinity before we get to the economic Trinity, or the roles that they might play.

Student: In Revelation when it says *he now has become your Father*, that's the economic Trinity. Do they change roles?

Dr. Craig: I'm not sure what passage you're referring to.

Student: It says, *You'll know him as your Father* – talking about Christ – *and you will be his Son*. They are changing roles in the economic Trinity – the Father and the Son?

Dr. Craig: I don't know, I'd have to look at that. I think that certainly there are ways in which the Son could be thought of as sort of like a father. But I don't think that the Father ever abandons his role. It might be a more metaphorical way of speaking of the Son.

Student: Not ontologically.

Dr. Craig: I understand. You are saying functionally. I'd have to look at the passage.

END DISCUSSION

That completes the historical survey that I wanted to do with you of the doctrine of the Trinity. I think it does bear mentioning, at least, as we conclude this section that you can see how misleading it is when certain cultic groups like Jehovah's Witnesses or secular authors like Dan Brown say that at the Council of Nicaea 325 years after Christ the church voted to make Jesus divine and voted to adopt the doctrine of the Trinity. That is a gross misrepresentation. Right from the very beginning – from the *Logos* doctrine of the Greek apologists – Christ was regarded as divine. The modalists affirmed that he was divine. This wasn't some sort of late developing doctrine that the church suddenly voted on at Nicaea. What they were struggling to articulate is the relationship between these three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But it's not as though this was a

late developing doctrine that the church just sort of voted to adopt.⁵ Right from the very beginning Christ was affirmed to be God. That's in the pages of the New Testament. The question was how can he be God and not be the Father? How do you make sense of that? The doctrine of the Trinity was the church's attempt to make sense of that truth.

This brings us to the problem of the Trinity. Is this a logically comprehensible and defensible doctrine that there are three persons who are one God? At one level the problem seems to be that the doctrine of the Trinity looks logically incoherent because the doctrine of the Trinity says that the Father is God, that the Son is God, and yet the Father is not the Son. So if you say the Father is identical with God and you say the Son is identical with God then it follows from the transitivity of identity that the Father is identical to the Son. Yet that's not right. So how do you make sense of this idea that the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God, and yet the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Spirit? You have three distinct persons. Basically the problem is the transitivity of identity. If A is identical to B, and B is identical to C then A is identical to C. And yet in this case that fails.

START DISCUSSION

Student: In John 14 we had in the sermon today talks about *I am in the Father, and the Father is in me*. Equality can be considered the Father is a subset of God and God is a subset of the Father. That's in mathematics. Two sets are equal if both are subsets of each other.

Dr. Craig: OK, but the idea of subsets is not the same thing as identity. Let's take the set of natural numbers. A proper subset of that would be the set of even numbers. But obviously these are not the same set even though one is a subset of the other. So we can't avoid this problem occasioned by these identity relations through sets and subsets.

Student: Mathematics says both have to be subsets of each other.

Dr. Craig: The natural numbers are not a subset of the even numbers because it's got all the odd numbers.

Student: So they wouldn't be equal, but if they were subsets of each other than they would be.

Dr. Craig: Oh. So you're saying it's an improper subset. A subset of the natural numbers just is the natural numbers. That's true. Then it would be identical. But then you don't really have two distinct sets. You've got the same set. Right?

Student: I know. But in John 14 what was quoted today in Scripture he said, *Show us the Father . . . I've been with you so long you don't know me? I am in the Father, and the Father is in me .*

Dr. Craig: That still leaves the question how do we make sense of that? What does that mean?

END DISCUSSION

Let me suggest a proposed solution. One solution is to say that the Trinity is God. If you want to make an identity statement then God is identical to the Trinity. If someone says, “Who or what is God?” the answer would be the Trinity. The Trinity is God. This triune substance is God. But obviously the Trinity is not identical to the Father nor identical to the Son because the Son is one person, not three. The Father is one person, not three. So the Trinity is not identical to the persons. These persons are therefore not instances of the divine nature of God. The Trinity is an instance of the divine nature. This tri-personal being.⁶ That's why the Trinity is not a fourth god in addition to the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. There's only one God and that God is the Trinity.

Now you might say but aren't the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit God? Don't you want to affirm that? Not in the sense of an identity statement. When one says that the Father is God, one is not making an identity statement. When one says the Son “is” God, one is not making an identity statement. Rather this “is” is an “is” of predication, not of identity. For example, if I say “Elizabeth is queen” I'm not saying that Elizabeth is identical to the queen. I am saying she holds the office or the role or the title of being queen. But it would be possible for there to be co-regents. Right? Sometimes that happens. There's more than one king or more than one queen. So when we say “Elizabeth is queen” you're not making an identity statement; you're making a predication. You're predicating being queen of Elizabeth. You're making a statement like this: “Elizabeth is regal.” You're saying she is the queen in that sense. Not an identity statement but you're assigning a predicate. Elizabeth is regal.

So when we say the Father is God, this is a way of saying the Father is divine. When we say the Son is God, that's a way of saying the Son is divine. You're making a predication of the Father and the Son. You're predicating full divinity of the Father and the Son. You're not making an identity statement. Otherwise you would get three gods.

So properly speaking the true identity statement would be “the Trinity is God.” When we say the Father is God, the Son is God, those are not identity statements, rather they are predications. They are predicating properties of the Father and the Son, namely the property of being fully divine.

⁶ 30:10

START DISCUSSION

Student: We often hear in the secular society and inclusiveness that all roads lead to the Father or to God, the God of Abraham, the Jewish God, the Hindu, the Muslim, Allah. I think when they use the word in that sense of God, and I would say no it's not Allah. It's not the same god. The true god is the triune God. So we can't think of God in the same way if you are a Muslim, even though I think society puts that "god" to cover all conceptions of a higher being.

Dr. Craig: That is well put. She is absolutely right. There is a kind of dictionary definition of the word "god." It would be something like "the Supreme Being" or "the greatest reality." And in that sense you can talk about different gods generically speaking. But what we're talking about here is in an even more specific metaphysical sense, not the dictionary definition of the word "god" in English. We mean, "What is the being or the substance that is identical with God?" And I'm suggesting we think of this as the Trinity – the Godhead.

Student: I would go so far as to say we don't believe in the same god.

Dr. Craig: I would, too, and I've defended that in print as well.

Student: When you look at the Jewish concept of God, Yahweh, even though it's not distinguished in three persons conceptually I think in the early times . . . can you comment on Yahweh? Was that understood to be three persons? Or just monotheism?

Dr. Craig: Jews did not understand there to be three persons in the Godhead. They thought there was one person who is God. What these early Christian Jews believed was on the basis of Jesus in fact there was a kind of further, deeper progressive revelation of who God is. And it turns out that God is in fact three persons unbeknownst to his people to whom he had not yet revealed that truth. This is a truth that is only disclosed with the coming of Christ.

Student: So they worship the same God but the revelation of who he was in its entirety was not known at that time.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, I think that's correct.

END DISCUSSION

All right. That brings us to the end of our time. What we will do next time is try to address the question: how can there be three persons that all are divine – three divine persons – and yet there not be three separate beings? Three gods? How can you have three persons who is each divine and yet not have three gods? That's what we'll talk about next Sunday.⁷

⁷ Total Running Time: 36:38 (Copyright © 2016 William Lane Craig)