

§ 5. Doctrine of God: Trinity
Lecture 9
A Possible Model of the Trinity

We left off our discussion of the Trinity last time by saying that the doctrine of the Trinity that there are three persons who are one being is a logically coherent doctrine when properly understood. But that still leaves us with the question: how can three distinct persons be one being? How can you have three divine persons who are together one being?

Maybe we can get a start at this question by means of an analogy. I want to caution that there is no reason to think that there has to be an analogy to the doctrine of the Trinity among created things. But I think that analogies can be helpful as a springboard so to speak for philosophical reflection and for accurate formulation. So consider this analogy. In Greco-Roman mythology one of the labors of Hercules was to subdue the ferocious three-headed dog named Cerberus who guarded the gates of Hades. We can suppose that Cerberus, having three heads, must have had three brains and therefore three distinct states of consciousness. Each one would be whatever it is like to be a dog. Therefore Cerberus, although he is a sentient being, doesn't have a unified consciousness. Rather he has three consciousnesses. Even though he's one being, he has three consciousnesses. We could even give proper names to each of these consciousnesses. For example, rather whimsically, we can refer to them as Rover, Bowser, and Spike. These three centers of consciousness are entirely discreet, and when you think about it they might even come into conflict with one another. Still, in order for Cerberus to be viable as a biological organism not to speak of being able to function effectively as a guard dog, there has to be a considerable degree of cooperation among these three consciousnesses Rover, Bowser, and Spike.

Despite the diversity of his three mental states, Cerberus is clearly, I think, one dog. He is a single biological organism exemplifying a canine nature of some sort. Rover, Bowser, and Spike may also be said to be canine even though they're not three dogs. They are parts or aspects of the one three-headed dog Cerberus. So if Hercules were attempting to enter into Hades and Spike snarled at him or bit him on the leg Hercules might well say *Cerberus snarled at me* or *Cerberus attacked me*.

Now I have to confess that the church fathers would have resisted analogies like Cerberus. But I think once you give up the doctrine of divine simplicity (that God has no aspects or distinctions within his being) then Cerberus, I think, does seem to be what St. Augustine called an image of the Trinity among creatures. These are not exact analogies

but they are sort of a shadow image of what the Trinity is among creatures. You have here one biological organism – one dog – which has three centers of consciousness.

We can enhance the Cerberus story by imagining that Cerberus is rational and has self-consciousness. In that case Rover, Bowser, and Spike are plausibly personal agents. They are self-conscious, personal agents. Cerberus would therefore be a tri-personal being.¹

If we were asked what makes Cerberus a single being despite his three minds, I think we'd doubtlessly reply that it's because he has a single physical body. It's because he is a single biological organism that we would say Cerberus is one thing even though he has three mental states, three persons. But think about this. Suppose Cerberus were to be killed and his minds survive the death of his body. Suppose they're immortal and live beyond the death of his body. In what sense would they then still be one being? How would those three persons differ intrinsically from three exactly similar minds which have always been unembodied? Do you see the question? If he is one being because he is embodied in this canine organism, if the three minds survive the death of the body, how would they be any different than three minds that have just always existed unembodied? What would make them one being any more as opposed to three separate beings? And in the case of the Trinity, since the divine persons are (at least prior to the incarnation) unembodied then we can ask why do we have here one being rather than three individual beings?

This is a difficult question but maybe we can get some insight on it by reflecting on the nature of the soul. Souls are immaterial substances, and some philosophers think that animals have souls as well as human beings. On this view souls come in a wide spectrum of varying capacities and faculties. For example, higher animals like chimpanzees and dolphins have souls that are more richly endowed than the souls of lower animals like turtles and iguanas. What makes the human soul a person is the fact that the human soul is equipped with rational faculties of intellect and volition which enable it to be a self-reflective agent capable of self-determination. Animals don't have souls that are so richly endowed as to be self-reflective agents capable of self-determination.

When you think about it God is very much like an unembodied soul. In fact as a mental substance God just seems to be a soul of some sort. We normally would equate a rational soul with a person but that's because the human souls that we are acquainted with are persons. In our experience all of the rational souls that we're familiar with are individual persons. But the reason that human souls are individual persons is because each soul is equipped with one set of rational faculties which are sufficient for being a person. Suppose then that God is a soul which is endowed with three complete sets of rational

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faculties each of which is sufficient for personhood. In that case God, though one soul, would not be one person but rather he would be three persons for God would have three centers of self-consciousness, intentionality, and volition. God would clearly not be three discrete souls because these cognitive faculties are all faculties of just one soul. So God would be one soul which is tri-personal in nature. Just as our individual souls support one person because they are equipped with one set of rational faculties sufficient for personhood, we can think of God as a soul which is equipped with three sets of rational faculties, each sufficient for personhood.² This sort of model, I think, would seem to give a clear sense to the classical formula *three persons in one substance*.

So that's the model of the Trinity that I want to propose as a possibility.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Is it possible for any of the three persons to disagree with one another? In our experience you can have three persons but what if one disagrees with the other? Like, “I want to do this,” and I say, “No, no, I want to do this instead.” Is that possible to happen in the Godhead? If not, how does that affect the idea of God having free will?

Dr. Craig: I don't think it is possible. I kind of give a hint at that when I talked about Cerberus where you could have these three heads snarling at each other and getting in conflict. But with God I think what we want to say is that he is always in harmony with respect to what he knows, loves, and wills. There is a classical doctrine, especially among the Greek Church fathers, called *perichoresis* which helps to illuminate this. According to the doctrine of *perichoresis* there is a kind of interpenetration of the divine life among the persons of the Trinity considered in abstraction from the world – God existing alone just the three persons. What the Father wills, the Son and the Spirit also wills. What the Father loves, the Son and the Spirit also love. What the Father knows, the Son and the Spirit also know. So there is a complete unity and interpenetration of love, will, and knowledge among these three distinct persons so that disagreement would be impossible. I think that makes good sense in light of their perfect goodness, their perfect knowledge. It would seem that they would always be in harmony with each other.

Student: In light of that, and maybe this relates more of the incarnation, when Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane he asks “take this cup away from me.” Granted he goes through with it in the end obviously but there is still that moment where he is basically saying, *Do I really have to do this? I don't want to*. Would that have some more to do with the incarnation perhaps?

Dr. Craig: I think it is intimately connected with the incarnation. Here we see the *Logos* – the second person of the Trinity – in his so-called state of humiliation (this state in

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which he has given up his glory and magnificence that he had with the Father before the world began) and has entered into this state in which he identifies with human beings in their fallenness and finitude, and as such experiences all the limitations of human finitude. Physically he could grow tired, he could feel pain, he could get weary, he could get hungry or thirsty. Mentally he didn't know everything that was going on. He had to ask questions. The Scripture says that the boy Jesus increased in wisdom and knowledge as he grew older. He grew morally. The book of Hebrews says that he was perfected through what he suffered. So all of these would have relation to his human nature, and so I would say in his human nature Christ can pray to the Father, *Let this cup pass from me, nevertheless not my will but thine be done*. We'll talk more about that when we get to the doctrine of Christ, but you're quite right in seeing it intimately connected with the doctrine of the Trinity.

Student: The last couple weeks I've been trying to get my mind around this because it's difficult, but I found something in my old systematic theology book that I just wanted to get your opinion on. Louis Berkhof, a Reformed theologian from about a hundred years ago, says that as far as the Trinity is concerned here, "it brings distinction and distribution but no diversity or division in the divine being." Let me go on with a definition here. This is a definition that he gives: "The following necessary act of the first person in the Trinity whereby he within the divine being is the ground of a second personal subsistence like his own and puts the second person in possession of the whole divine essence without division, alienation, or change."³ Basically what he's saying there is that there is a distribution but since God is infinite there is an infinite distribution into the second and I guess also by extension the third person of the Trinity. I'm just wondering if you have any thoughts on that. But to me it also raises a question which is a speculative question in nature – why the number three? If God is infinite and can infinitely distribute himself why not an infinite distribution? Why three?

Dr. Craig: To answer the last question first, I don't think that any orthodox theologian that I know of think of the threeness of the Godhead as something that is due to God's will. It is not as though he said, "OK, let's be three persons rather than four or five." Rather, this is an essential property of the trinitarian nature. There couldn't have been more than three persons. This is an essential property of God just like omnipotence, omniscience, or moral perfection.

But with respect to the first question, I think it's really important when we hear these theological formulations that we demand clear meanings of them, that these aren't just fancy words but they have clear meanings. Certainly I think we want to agree that there isn't alienation among the persons of the Trinity (or I think he said change; I think that's

true). But diversity – he affirmed distinctness. I don't see how you can have distinction without diversity. That would be what I understand by diversity. I would say that that kind of distinctness or diversity is necessary in virtue of there being three persons. I take very seriously and literally the idea that we have here three first-person perspectives each of which can say *I think that* and stands to the other in an “I-thou” relationship – *you think that, I think that*. So we have three centers of self-consciousness which are therefore necessarily distinct and diverse. Now there are views of the Trinity that deny that. Sometimes the view that I'm laying out here is called a social trinitarianism which takes very seriously and literally the three persons or centers of self-consciousness. So-called Latin trinitarianism that characterizes people like Thomas Aquinas tends to think of the three persons of the Trinity as just relations. That insofar as God is the subject he is I, and insofar as he is the object he is the Son. It seems to me that that's no different than when I think of me or if I love myself – “me” is the object of my love. Or if I even hit myself, “me” is simply the object of “I.” But it's the same person. So I don't think those kinds of views of the Trinity take seriously enough the notion that we have here three distinct persons each of which has a first-person perspective on things.

Student: One of my favorite G.K. Chesterton quotes is he says that paganism was all the rage then Christianity became the biggest thing and everything since then has been boring. The Trinity, I think, is connected with that. What doctrine is like the Trinity? In connection with that, too, when a couple times I've talked . . . this is just more of a conversational apologetics thing . . . when I've talked to some very scientifically-minded people, they quote people like Dawkins that say if you think you understand quantum theory then you don't really understand quantum theory. After I've explained the Trinity (because they asked questions and they say it is hard for me to understand), it's like, well, then that should fit right in with what you think about quantum theory. Why not embrace that part of it?⁴ The Trinity is the deepest part of theology, and that's why it is hard for us to wrap our brain around it.

Dr. Craig: The reason scientists believe in quantum theory is because there's good evidence for it even if it is very, very difficult to understand and perhaps nobody can make sense out of it. Similarly, with respect to the Trinity, I think what we would want to say is there is good evidence to believe that God exists and that he's revealed himself in a unique way in the person of Jesus of Nazareth who was himself divine. What I've proposed here is not an attempt to say this is the way it is. That would be presumptuous. That would be what Martin Luther would call a *theology of glory* where you claim to have special insight into the divine being. What I've suggested is this is a coherent model. This makes sense of the doctrine and therefore removes any rational objection to

it that Muslims, cultists, or other unitarians might propose. I think this is a really good model for thinking of the Trinity. But, as I say, it is just a possibility.

Student: Maybe I would modify your concept just a little by saying this: we don't know much at all about the soul, do we? I mean, we have some hints in Scripture that the spirit is a division of the soul which is especially responsible for our communication with God, and that is what has to be regenerated when we're saved. If we've got that division maybe we have many other divisions, too. Frankly I don't know any way on this side of eternity to know what those divisions are. But maybe if we think of the three members of the Trinity as sharing portions of their soul, rather than having the same soul (which I know you don't mean completely because if you have the exact same soul you'd have the same volition, personality, and awareness) but maybe they share enough whatever the subdivisions of these souls are that you would say the same essence, but of course then retain their individuality as you have said by maintaining that for yourself. Maybe they don't have to have the exact same soul but people are spoken of as "soul mates" . . . it is impossible for us to share our soul with somebody else, but maybe the Trinity is shared.

Dr. Craig: I just want to resist any slide into tri-theism. You have got to have one being here which is God. So we have to be very careful lest you get three souls like Cerberus – when he dies you seem to have these three canine souls.

Student: I wouldn't push it that far but wouldn't you think you could have the essence as being the same – you do have one God. If enough of the soul is shared – this would be known only to God – we don't know how much has to be shared, but enough is shared that it is one God. There is not three Gods.

Another thing. I've always had problems with this idea that in Gethsemane Jesus was afraid to die on the cross. He had to know essentially all his days that he was here to be sacrificed. He told his disciples, *I am going. I'm coming back.* He had to know that. With all the strength he had, I just have found that difficult to believe. I want to throw this out. It might be a little controversial. Some of you may have heard it; maybe some of you haven't. If you look at Hebrews 5:7, during the days of Jesus' life on Earth, "he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death and he was heard because of his reverent submission." Now I'm told that in the Greek the structure is God answered that prayer in the affirmative. So we all say how could he have done that? He had to go the cross. Yes, if the cup is going to the cross. But I have come to believe that Satan tried to kill him physically in the Garden of Gethsemane and that's what he was praying for. *Don't let him kill me so that I can go to the cross.* God answered that in the affirmative. He died on the cross rather than dying from Satan. If you think of the story, remember how he told the disciples to stay away and stay back. He may have just been under physical . . . Satan may have just been

pulling out every bit of power he had to deprive Christ of his life to keep him from going to the cross. This is a theory that quite a few people agree with. One of them is Vernon McGee (he died several years ago) – he is a well known Bible teacher who now has *Through The Bible With Vernon McGee* going all around the world.⁵ When I first heard that I didn't agree with it. But over the decades I've come to agree. I'll just throw that out.

Dr. Craig: All right. Well, you're certainly free to throw it out. I think that one would be desirous of having a better textual warrant for it. It seems like one has a sort of gap there and so you just make up this hypothesis to stick in the gap without any textual warrant for saying that that's what was going on. Whereas you have Jesus saying, *Let this cup pass from me, nevertheless not my will but thine be done*, it seems very much that the cup which he says he has to drink is his death on the cross and he's willing to in the end take it but he would have God have it pass from him. What is the difficulty? Oh, the difficulty was you said Jesus knows that he is going to die. That's true, but remember in his finite human consciousness it's not as though Jesus is omniscient and knows everything. He is still at that moment willing to pray *if there's some way to do this without my dying then let's do it that way but nevertheless I'll do your will*.

Student: I'm just saying the closest thing to a prooftext would be Hebrews 5:7 which implies that God answered in the affirmative.

Dr. Craig: The problem is it doesn't mention Satan trying to kill him, and that's my concern.

Student: But it says death.

Dr. Craig: OK.

Student: What I thought about was the cup that he drank was his Father's wrath. That's what I think. That's what he was in agony over - not dying. The fact that he was drinking his Father's wrath on himself.

Dr. Craig: And one would need to look earlier in the Gospels where Jesus talks about the cup and what that means. When he says to the disciples, *You want to be at his right and left hand in the Kingdom*. He said something like that: *are you able to drink the cup that I have to drink; are you willing to be baptized with the baptism I have to undergo*. It does seem that, I think, it's talking about what you are referring to.

Student: God passes over us and puts all the wrath on Jesus.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, that's the doctrine of the atonement that I've been studying lately.

Student: Back to the analogy of the Cerberus. It seems like it's lacking in that it puts forth either three Fathers, three Sons, or three Holy Spirits. It has a real benefit in helping us in seeing the atonement of the cross.

Dr. Craig: Okay, that forms a wonderful segue to the next section that I want to address but let me just see if there's any final comment on this before we move on.

Student: I thought this is interesting. If marriage is to live out according to God's design and purpose then that unity is like a unit but two different souls. I thought it's interesting that Jesus Christ is the second Adam so in the beginning before the fall of man God and Adam (Adam and Eve, man) are in unity, almost like Jesus and God are in unity until after man fell. Then Jesus in unity wants to restore (that's the marriage between Christ and the church) that unity back to God. I just thought that is the heaven that God wanted to realize.

Dr. Craig: I think that while the marriage analogy can be a useful springboard for thinking about the Trinity, in the end we're still looking for something that makes these two one being, and it's not enough just to have unity of love or unity of will and harmony. That can exist among diverse beings.⁶ What we're still looking for is something that would make these three persons one being, and that is what my model is attempting to get at.

Student: I think these personalities relate to function. You can have these diversities and unity if you talk about function and integrating those three by function. In answer to modalists, unitarians, or Muslims, most of them talk about the Spirit of God. That's another personality. They talk about, in the case of Muslims, a lot of them the Qur'an is God. So you have multiple persons being identified as God. In the case of the modalist, if you got redemption ongoing (we talked about this a little bit last week) which was Christ's mission, if he changed into the Spirit whose function is to convict in righteousness and judgment you would have an offset to redemption. These are just some thoughts in support of the trinitarian concept.

Dr. Craig: It seems to me that functions alone aren't going to provide a diversity of persons though the different functions of the persons might address the question someone earlier was raising as to what differentiates the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in terms of perhaps the functions they play.

END DISCUSSION

Let me go on to that right now and we will conclude our time together today by looking at this.

⁶ 30:01

Some of you may have noticed that the model that I gave doesn't include the derivation of one person from the other which is enshrined in the confession of the Nicene Creed that the Son is begotten of the Father, light of light, very God of very God, begotten not made. The model doesn't preclude that either. It just leaves it an open question. So if you want to add the derivation of one person from another, you are free to do so. But on the model as I've laid it out, God could just exist eternally with his three sets of cognitive faculties and capacities. Three self-consciousnesses. I, frankly, think this is a strength of the model because although the doctrine of the generation of the Son from the Father and the procession of the Spirit is a part of Nicene orthodoxy, nevertheless it seems to be a relic of this old *Logos* Christology of the Greek apologists which has no warrant in the biblical text and seems to me to introduce a kind of subordinationism into the Godhead which anybody who wants to affirm the full deity of Christ ought to find really troubling.

Biblically speaking, the vast majority of contemporary New Testament scholars recognize that the word which is translated in the authorized version as “only begotten” (namely *monogenes*) means simply “unique” or “one and only.” It does not mean “only begotten.” It means “unique” or “one and only.” Most of your modern translations will translate verses like John 1:14 and others not as “only begotten” but as “God the one and only” or something of that sort. It's true that when this is used in the context of a family then to say that a child is *monogenes* is an only child would imply that he's only begotten. It doesn't mean only begotten but it would imply that this child is only begotten. But when you look at the biblical references to *monogenes* which would include verses like John 1:14 or John 1:18 when it says *the only begotten God* or *God the one and only who is in the bosom of the Father has made the Father known* they're not talking in these verses about some kind of pre-creation or eternal procession of the divine Son from the Father.⁷ Rather, they seem to be connected with the historical Jesus being God's Son. It is in virtue of the incarnation that Jesus is God's special Son. Look for example at Luke 1:35 as an illustration of this. Luke 1:35 – this is the annunciation to Mary by the angel. In verse 35 the angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God.” Here Jesus being the Son is connected with the virginal conception. It's because Jesus had no human father that he could be called God's special Son. If that's right then Jesus being *monogenes* has less to do with the Trinity than with the incarnation.

You can see this primitive understanding of Jesus' Sonship still in the letters of the very early post-apostolic church father Ignatius. Ignatius describes Christ as “one Physician, of flesh and of spirit, begotten and unbegotten, . . . both of Mary and of God” (*Ephesians* 7). Here Ignatius associates Jesus being begotten with his flesh being begotten of Mary,

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but insofar as he is Spirit and of God he is unbegotten he says. There is no idea here in Ignatius at least that Christ is begotten in his divine nature.

The transference of Jesus being God's Son from Jesus of Nazareth to the pre-incarnate *Logos* seems to be an invention of these early Greek apologists. I think it has helped to depreciate the importance of the historical Jesus for Christian faith.

Theologically speaking, orthodox theology rejects firmly any depreciation of the Son with regard to the Father. For example, Athanasius writes, "They that depreciate the Only-Begotten Son of God blaspheme God, defaming His perfection and accusing Him of imperfection, and render themselves liable to the severest chastisement" (*In illud omnia mihi tradita sunt* 6). Here what Athanasius is condemning is subordinationism which is a doctrine inspired by Gnostic or Neo-Platonic thought which conceived of God as "the One" - a kind of undifferentiated unity which then in a kind of series of stair steps descends down to the world and in which you could have these kind of intermediate stages that are not equal to the One but are kind of lower-class deities. For example, Origen who was trained under the Neo-Platonist philosopher Ammonius Saccas, says this about the Son. He speaks of the Son as a deity of the second rank having a sort of derivative divinity as far removed from that of the Father as he himself is from creatures. He says the Son's divinity is as far from the Father's divinity as it is from the creatures below him. That kind of subordinationism was rejected by the church fathers. Origen was condemned for holding such a view. Yet at the same time these very same theologians continued to affirm the doctrine that the *Logos* is begotten of the Father. The Son in their view derives his being from God the Father.⁸ Athanasius says this: "the Son has His being not of Himself but of the Father" (*On the Opinion of Dionysius* 15). Hilary (another church father) declares that "He is not the source of His own being. . . . it is from His [the Father's] abiding nature that the Son draws His existence through birth" (*On the Trinity* 9.53; 6.14; cf. 4.9). These same theologians that affirmed the full equality of the Son and the Father also affirmed that the Son doesn't have existence in himself but derives his being from the Father. I don't think that, despite their assurances to the contrary, this can do anything but diminish the Son because he becomes an effect which is contingent upon the Father. Even if this eternal procession takes place necessarily and apart from the Father's will, the Son is less than the Father because the Father alone exists *a se*, that is to say through himself or of himself. He has aseity. The Father exists *a se* while the Son exists through another.

There is much more that I want to say about that, but we are out of time. I will simply leave you with that to think about for the coming week. Next time we'll look at this and

⁸ 40:02

bring it to a close as to whether or not we need to affirm that the Son is begotten or generated by the Father and the Spirit proceeding from the Son. That's next week.⁹

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