§ 5. Doctrine of God: Trinity  
Lecture 10  
The Ontological and Economic Trinity

As we are drawing to a close our discussion of the Trinity I have focused on a feature of the model that I think is of some interest, and that is that the model I've offered of the Trinity – of God as a tri-personal soul – does not feature (though it does not preclude) the derivation of one person of the Trinity from another. It does not include the notion of the Son's being eternally begotten from the Father. I suggested last time that I think it's good that the model leaves this an open question because the doctrine of the begetting of the Son from the Father in his divine (as opposed to human) nature is not biblically attested. It also seems to introduce an inevitable element of subordinationism into the Godhead which would seem to make the Son inferior to the Father because only the Father is unbegotten who exists in a self-existent way and the Son has the ground of his being in the Father and therefore has a kind of derivative existence which, to me at least, seems to make the Son arguably inferior to the Father.

It is very interesting to note that the early church fathers interpreted this Arian proof-text (John 14:28), “The Father is greater than I,” not in terms of Christ’s humanity but in terms of his being generated eternally from the Father. Athanasius, for example, affirms that the reason the Father is greater than the Son is because only the Father is unbegotten. Similarly Hilary (another church father) says, “The Father is greater than the Son: for manifestly He is greater Who makes another to be all that He Himself is, Who imparts to the Son by the mystery of the birth the image of His own unbegotten nature, Who begets Him from Himself into His own form” (On the Trinity 9.54). Doesn’t that make the Son therefore inferior to the Father if the Father is the source and the origin of the Son? Hilary denies it. Hilary says, “The Father therefore is greater, because He is Father: but the Son, because He is Son, is not less” (9.56). The Father is greater than the Son, but the Son is not less than the Father. That’s just to talk logical nonsense. That’s like saying that six is greater than three, but three is not less than six. That just doesn’t make logical sense.

Basil, one of the Cappadocian church fathers, sees the contradiction in Hilary’s statement, but he tries to avoid this contradiction by saying and I quote, “the evident solution is that the Greater refers to origination, while the Equal belongs to the Nature” (Fourth Theological Oration 9). So what Basil is saying is that the Father is greater in terms of origination (because he's unbegotten whereas the Son is begotten) but in terms of nature they both share the same nature and therefore are equal. This reply seems to me to raise all kinds of difficult questions. Doesn’t it belong to the nature of the Father as an individual person to be unbegotten? And doesn’t it belong to the nature of the Son as an individual person to be begotten? Or is there a possible world in which the Father is begotten and not unbegotten? Classical trinitarian theology would deny this. So how are
the Father and the Son equal in nature if greatness refers to origination and the manner of
their origination is essential to their individual natures. If you think about it suppose that
they are equal in nature but that the Father has the contingent property of being
unbegotten and the Son has the contingent property of being begotten. In that case they
have the same nature but the Father still has this contingent property of being unbegotten,
a property the Son lacks. Wouldn’t that make him greater than the Son at least in this
respect? It would seem to me that it would.

So at the end of the day what Basil has to say is that having self-existence is not after all a
perfection or a great-making property. He says and I quote, “That which is from such a
Cause is not inferior to that which has no Cause; for it would share the glory of the
Unoriginate, because it is from the Unoriginate” (Ibid.). That seems to me to be not a
convincing answer. To be dependent upon the unoriginated being for one’s existence is to
lack a ground of being in oneself alone, and that surely is not as great as to be a
self-existent being which is able to exist all on one’s own. It has the ground of its
existence in itself. This kind of derivative being is the same way in which creatures exist.
Creatures exist in virtue of being caused by another.

So despite the protestations to the contrary, it does seem to me that Nicaean orthodoxy
has not completely shed the sort of subordinationism that was introduced into the
doctrine of the Trinity by the early Greek apologists with their *Logos* doctrine.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Can you comment on John 6:57 which sounds like it could be used as a
proof-text by the Nicaeans where Jesus says, *I live because of the Father?*

*Dr. Craig:* Right, we did talk about that outside of class. I think I said when you look at
the context there what he’s talking about is the resurrection life. It’s not talking about
self-existence or these sorts of metaphysical issues. It’s talking about the resurrection life
that the Son has. So I don't think that taken in context is relevant to this.

*Student:* This is related to the procession – that idea of the proceeding of the Son and
whatever. I always liked the example of the Trinity of ice water – not just water but the
system. A glass of ice water has cubes, it has water, and it has vapor over the top. I'm
working on a lesson this week – Trinity and the incarnation in our Bible study. I was
thinking about this. An extension of that is if water is a cube it becomes . . . not always as
a system, you’ve got some water and some vapor over the top . . . but the cube will
become water and the water will become vapor if just left. These are the same substance
(ontologically) but different functions. Steam is good in some places but not in others.
Water is good in some places but not in others. And cubes are good in some places and

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not in others. I see this related to being a functional or in terms of this differentiation of personalities.

*Dr. Craig:* However apt the analogy might be, it is only an analogy or an illustration. I don’t think that it goes to address the philosophical or theological point that I’m trying to make, and that is that having derivative being is not as great as having a ground of existence in yourself. Yet that is what the Nicene doctrine of the begetting of the Son affirms. It seems to me that that makes it difficult to think of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as fully equal.

*Student:* Are some of these people making this more complicated than it has to be?

*Dr. Craig:* I think so!

*Student:* In the beginning (as we know there was no beginning to the deity, he has no beginning), the second person of the Trinity was there – the *Logos.* He was there. The only thing that was begotten here for the incarnation was the body in which the second person of the Trinity agreed to abide to fulfill this atonement (which you are studying now).

He didn’t create the second person of the Trinity. He created the body in which the second person of the Trinity agreed to inhabit so that he could die for us. I don't understand all the problem with trying to say “was Christ created by God?” Well, the body of Jesus Christ was, yes, created by God, but the spirit (the soul) of Jesus Christ as the second person of the Trinity was most certainly not created by God.

*Dr. Craig:* I think the view you are expressing is similar to the view that I am wanting to propose. But it is not the view of classical Nicene orthodoxy. When we hear, I think as Christians today, that Jesus is the only begotten Son from the Father, we think of the incarnation, don’t we? We think of the virgin birth. We think of his human nature. But the point I'm making is that when you read the creed and the theologians leading up to it what they’re talking about is not Jesus being begotten in his human nature. They’re talking about him being begotten in his divine nature – that before the universe was created there was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit . . . Did I use the word “created?” I shouldn’t have said “created” if I did. I meant “begotten.” He is not created. He is begotten from the Father eternally. So in the Godhead from eternity prior to creation there is the Father who is unbegotten and then the Son who is derivative from the Father – begotten, the *Logos* is derivative from the Father – and then the Spirit derives from either one or both of them. If you find that, as you say, overly complicated I sympathize with you. But I'm trying to give you an accurate understanding of what the Nicene Creed affirms.

*Student:* Just one follow-up question. What’s wrong with those folks?
Dr. Craig: You know what? This is an excellent question. I think it is due to the Logos Christology of these early Greek apologists. Remember they were struggling to explain how the Father is divine and how the Son is divine and yet you don’t have two gods. That is a difficult question. The way they solved that was by saying that the Son is the Logos or the mind of the Father and it proceeded out of the Father as a sort of separate person. Nicene orthodoxy never really shed that Logos doctrine of the derivation of the second person from the first person of the Trinity.

Student: Considering John 12:48-50, I was curious about his volitions. If Jesus’ words that he spoke – the things that he said – was of the Father and not of him – are his own words, the things that he says, from the Father?

Dr. Craig: What you are referring to is verses in the twelfth chapter of John where Jesus says things like this: I have not spoken on my own authority. The Father who sent me has given me command on what to say and what to speak. What I say therefore I say as the Father has bidden me. You know elsewhere in John Jesus says something very similar of the Holy Spirit – He will not speak on his own authority but he will glorify me – which does indicate a kind of subordination of the Son to the Father. Now, having said that, that forms of very nice segue to the next section where I want to talk about the difference between the ontological Trinity (which is the Godhead in and of itself) and the economic Trinity (which is the roles played by these various persons in the plan of salvation). I think it’s the economic Trinity that is evident in these verses as we’ll see.

Student: How would you comment on the notion that the second person of the Trinity – the Son – is intrinsically linked to humanity? In other words, if you asked somebody to define Jesus Christ, they would define Jesus Christ as God in human form. In other words, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is intrinsically human and defined as having a human nature. For instance, I think of theophanies in the Old Testament. Whenever we see God personified and acting like a human we say that could be a theophany – that’s Jesus Christ. So would you say that the second person of the Trinity or Jesus Christ is intrinsically linked to his humanity and has always been and his existence outside of the world is just like we will exist? When we die and go to heaven we will still have a human soul even though we don't have a human body; Jesus Christ still has like a human soul because it's part of the definition of who he is.

Dr. Craig: I would strongly resist that. That would make the body of Christ essential to the second person of the Trinity, and I think that's very problematic. I don't think Jesus had a body prior to the incarnation, so it's not essential to him. Certainly prior (if you will) to the existence of the universe the second person of the Trinity didn't have a body or a human nature. So it's not essential. Moreover there are possible worlds which God
never creates and exists alone in which case the second person of the Trinity doesn't have a body. And there may even be possible worlds where there’s never an incarnation at all for whatever reason. So I think we should resist saying that having a human nature is intrinsic or essential to the nature of the second person to the Trinity. This seems to me to be a contingent property of the second person of the Trinity which is adopted for the sake of our salvation.

*Student:* Would you say the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, is exactly synonymous with Jesus Christ?

*Dr. Craig:* When you talk about synonymous, you’re talking about words, not things. Right? I don’t know how one would . . . probably you would not say that those words are synonymous: Son of God, Jesus Christ. What I would say is that they both refer to the same person. Those two expressions – the first of them, the Son of God, that's what linguists call a definite description like “the man in the gray suit,” “the chair next to the table,” “the highest building in New York.” Those are definite descriptions. The Son of God is a definite description. Jesus Christ is a proper name like Ben or Jim or Cindy. And what we would say is that in both cases those two linguistic expressions (one a definite description, one a proper name) both have the same person – the same entity – as their denotation or their referent. They refer to the same person.

*Student:* I may be misunderstanding where you're going so correct me if I'm wrong, but if you’re suggesting that Christ became the begotten upon the incarnation (if that is what you are suggesting) would it then be true that the Father wasn't “the Father” and the Son wasn’t “the Son” until the incarnation? They wouldn’t have had that relationship with each other?

*Dr. Craig:* Alright, we have been flirting with this question for some time. So let's now proceed to talk about that.

**END DISCUSSION**

Suppose that we drop from the doctrine of the Trinity the notion that the Son and the Spirit proceed eternally from the Father. Remember I said the model I've offered doesn't feature it though it doesn't preclude it. So let's suppose we drop that. How then should we understand the intra-trinitarian relations? Here I want to draw this distinction between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. By the ontological Trinity, I mean the Trinity as it exists in and of itself apart from God’s relationship to creation. This is the Trinity or God insofar as he exists in and of himself apart from any relation to the created order. The economic Trinity has reference to the different roles played by the persons of the Trinity in relation to the world and in particular to the plan of salvation. So the
question that is raised is: to what degree is the economic Trinity a reflection of the ontological Trinity?4

Here I want to mention a church father that is perhaps not so well known to you, but important in his own time – Marcellus of Ancyra. Marcellus was one of the leaders at the Council of Nicaea who championed the orthodox cause. But as Marcellus read the Gospel of John he noticed that the Logos is not referred to as “the Son” until after the incarnation. In fact you would be hard-pressed to find anywhere in the New Testament where there is a reference unambiguously to the pre-incarnate Christ as “the Son.” These observations led Marcellus to hypothesize that prior to creation the economic Trinity just did not exist. The Logos becomes “the Son” only with his incarnation. So on Marcellus’ view the relations in the economic Trinity do not always mirror the distinctions within the ontological Trinity.

Similarly on the model that I’ve presented the persons of the ontological Trinity can be just as similar to one another as three individuals can be in terms of having the same knowledge, the same love, the same will, although each one from its own first-person perspective. It may well be arbitrary which person chooses to play the role of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Those titles have reference to the economic Trinity – the relations that are played by the three persons in the plan of salvation with respect to the created order. “The Son” is whichever one of the three becomes incarnate and takes on a human nature. “The Spirit” is the one who stands in the place of and continues the ministry of the Son. And “the Father” is the one who sends the Son and the Spirit. But in a possible world in which God did not create any world at all but just existed alone the economic Trinity would not exist even though the ontological Trinity would exist.

In contrast to Marcellus we don’t need to say that the economic Trinity began at the moment of creation as he thought. We could say that the economic Trinity exists eternally because the persons of the Godhead all knew the respective roles that they would play in the plan of salvation. They have foreknowledge of the different roles that they will play even if the deployment of that economy doesn't take place until the fullness of time when Christ eventually becomes incarnate and so forth so.

On this view the economic Trinity can be just as eternal as the ontological Trinity but it isn't fundamental to the nature of God or of the persons. Although they didn't agree with Marcellus’ rather maverick view, both Athanasius and the other members of the Nicene party continued to support him. Although he was pushing the boundaries of orthodoxy, they felt that he was still one of themselves and part of the orthodox party.

On this view within the economic Trinity there is subordination (or maybe a better word would be submission) of one person to another. As we’ve read in the Scripture a moment
ago, the Son submits to and does the Father’s will, and the Spirit speaks not on his own account but he speaks on behalf of the Son. This economic Trinity does not mirror or reflect differences in the ontological Trinity between the persons. Rather the economic Trinity is an expression of God’s free and loving condescension on our behalf for the sake of our salvation. So on this view the error of Logos Christology was conflating the economic Trinity with the ontological Trinity and thereby introducing this subordinationism right into the nature of God himself rather than seeing it as purely functional.  

So those are my comments on that issue. It is highly controversial, and I’ve tried to represent fairly what Nicene orthodoxy holds and how this view would differ from it. But the model doesn't preclude, as I say, the procession of one person from another but it just doesn’t include it, and it seems to me that that’s a strength of the model in light of these comments.

**START DISCUSSION**

**Student:** How would you respond to talking about existence and proceeding and begetting? Many Catholic theologians who are very obviously . . . they hold onto that Nicaean begotten thing. They would say that (I think even C. S. Lewis said this) when a dog begets a dog the dog is not better than it, it just makes another one of the same nature so therefore it's not better. It’s just proceeding or whatever. How would you respond to that? They would say God is the same way. God can only beget another God.

**Dr. Craig:** In the case of the dog begetting another dog, both dogs are contingent beings and are derived from another parent. But when we come to God, the Father is unoriginated. He is unbegotten and uncreated. The Son by contrast (though he is uncreated – he’s not a work) he’s not unbegotten. He doesn't therefore have the ground of his own existence in himself. He only exists in this kind of derivative way. My concern is that that makes him less great than the Father because it's greater to have the ground of your being in yourself alone rather than in another. I don't think, as I said earlier, this can be refuted by appealing to analogies. You've got to deal with the issue. Is it greater to be unbegotten in your being rather than derivative in your being? If you think that it is then I think you're going to sympathize with my struggles. If you think it's not greater than I think that would lead to a very peculiar view of God that there could be worlds in which God himself is begotten or derives from another – that he doesn't exist a se, in and of himself. It seems to me that God’s aseity or self existence is just absolutely fundamental to who God is. So this does seem to me to be a perfection. That's my struggle here.
Student: I just want to point something out here. I'm going to read something from the Athanasian Creed which is a little more developed than the Nicene Creed. I’ll read lines 25 to 27 real quick:

And in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped.

I think the problem with the model you are proposing when you say the Father is greater than the Son . . .

Dr. Craig: That is a view I am disagreeing with.

Student: Oh, you are?

Dr. Craig: I'm saying on my view there are three co-equal persons as the creed you read states. What I’m concerned is that on the Nicene view the Father is greater than the Son even though its proponents denied this.

Student: Oh, I see what you're saying. I was going to say if that really were the case in Scripture you would see a higher position of the Father than the Son. It would be kind of like when we prayed we would say something like “We pray to God the Father, and last but not least we also pray to the Son.” You would never pray like that.

Dr. Craig: Or worship! What about worship? Would worship be directed to the Son or only to the Father? I want to have as high a Christology as possible. Christology is the doctrine of Christ. We’ll talk about that later on. I think we want to elevate and magnify Christ as great as we can. The Scriptures speak of him as God. That is what I find so disquieting about this element of subordinationism that the Logos doctrine seems to introduce.6

Student: A quick question about the ontological vs. economic distinction. My question is if the economic is true, what basis is there for choosing which one would be subordinate so to say to the other one? If the ontological is true that they are all co-equal then how did they choose, so to say, which one is going to be subordinate to whom in the economic view? That seems arbitrary to me.

Dr. Craig: Right, it would seem to me that this is an arbitrary choice. God has freedom of the will to arbitrarily choose which person will play which role.

Student: Right. The Logos could be the Father, or the Holy Spirit could be the Son. It all could just be arbitrary.
Dr. Craig: I think that that is the essence of free will – to choose arbitrarily between two completely similar options.

Student: With this view then, the three persons of the Godhead preceded eternal and for whatever reason there was a three-person God. Correct?

Dr. Craig: Yes, there is and was and always will be.

Student: Are we saying that there was a council of the persons? Was their role always their role? Or was there actually a decision made who would be submitting to be put in a human body and serve the role of salvation and the Holy Spirit as well? In that view, it is a little disturbing because it sounds like there are three gods and they are making a decision. Is it that their roles were eternally determined in the past?

Dr. Craig: Did you say “eternally” or “internally?”

Student: Pick one! [laughter]

Dr. Craig: OK. I’ll pick “eternally.” Let me address what you’ve said. Marcellus’ view was that this was a temporal decision taken at some point in the finite past, like the moment of creation. I’m not comfortable with that view. It seems to me that in virtue of divine foreknowledge of the future that the three persons would know from eternity which roles they would play, and that therefore there is no reason to say the economic Trinity was decided upon at some time a finite number of years ago. This is an eternal sort of decision on the part of God, but it is a free decision. It is not one that he had to make.

Student: How much support does Marcellus’ idea have today among theologians?

Dr. Craig: I don’t know. This just isn’t talked about very much. I really don’t know. I should read a paper on this at the Evangelical Theological Society conference sometime and see if it raises a storm of controversy or whether or not it meets with a lot of resonance. I do not know.

Student: Could the ontological members of the Trinity have taken turns being Jesus?

Dr. Craig: That seems to me to be more problematic in view of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension into heaven. He always has the same body. An interesting question would be: suppose there are extraterrestrial, intelligent life on some other planet in some other galaxy, and they fall into sin, and God wants to have an incarnation there to redeem them and rescue them. Could one of the other members of the Trinity have become incarnate in that world to save those people? Maybe there is a Klingon savior that is a member of the Trinity. I don’t know!

END DISCUSSION
Now we are really pushing the boundaries! Next time I will offer a plausibility argument for the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity.\(^7\)