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Lecture Series: The Doctrine of God

Lecture 7: “The Trinity”

THE TRINITY (*The following outline is adapted from Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, Chapter 14: “God in Three Persons: The Trinity”*)

Introduction: The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith. It answers the question: “What is God like in himself?” The biblical teaching on the Trinity tells us that all of God’s attributes are true of all three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) for each is fully God.

Definition: “God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.” (*Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, 226*).

Meaning: The word “trinity” means “tri-unity” or “three-in-oneness.” It summarizes the teaching of the Bible that God exists as three persons, yet he is one God.

BIBLICAL BASIS FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

A. The Doctrine of the Trinity Progressively Revealed in the Bible

Partial Revelation of the Trinity in the Old Testament

Old Testament passages implying that God exists as more than one person

Genesis 1:26

Genesis 3:22

Genesis 11:7

Isaiah 6:8

Old Testament passages where one person is called “God” or “Lord” and is distinguished from another person also said to be God

Psalms 45:6-7 (Heb. 1:8)

Psalms 110:1 (Matt. 22:41-46)

Isaiah 63:10

Isaiah 61:1

Malachi 3:1-2

Isaiah 48:16

Old Testament passages about “the angel of the LORD” who is distinct from the LORD himself and yet is called “God” or LORD”

Genesis 16:13

Exodus 3:2-6

Exodus 23:20-22

Numbers 22:35, 38

Judges 2:1-2; 6:11

Proverbs 8:22-31 “created” in verse 22 not *bara* “to create” but *qanah* “to get, acquire.”

Indicates God began to direct and make use of the powerful creative work of the Son in creation.

More Complete Revelation of the Trinity in the New Testament

Matthew 3:16-17

Matthew 28:19

I Corinthians 12:4-6

II Corinthians 13:14

Ephesians 4:4-6

I Peter 1:2

Jude 20-21

I John 5:7—This verse in the KJV based on a very small number of unreliable Greek manuscripts. Vast majority of Greek mss. omit it

B. Three Statements Summarize the Biblical Teaching on the Trinity

1. God Is Three Persons

2. Each Person Is Fully God

3. There Is One God

1. God Is Three Persons

The Father is not the Son

John 1:1-2

John 17:24

I John 2:1

Hebrews 7:25

The Father is not the Holy Spirit and the Son is not the Holy Spirit

John 14:26

Romans 8:27

Matthew 28:19

John 16:7

The Holy Spirit is a Distinct Person

The Holy Spirit is Put In a Coordinate Relationship With the Father and the Son

Matthew 28:19

I Cor. 12:4-6

II Cor. 13:14

Eph. 4:4-6

I Peter 1:2

The Masculine Pronoun is Applied to the Holy Spirit

John 14:26

John 15:26

John 16:13-14

The Name Counselor is Given to the Holy Spirit

John 14:16, 26

John 15:26

John 16:7

Other Personal Activities are Ascribed to the Holy Spirit

Teaching (John 14:26)

Bearing witness (John 15:26; Romans 8:16)

Interceding (Romans 8:26-27)

Searching the depths of God (I Cor. 2:10)

Knowing the thoughts of God (I Cor. 2:11)

Distributing gifts (I Cor. 12:11)

Forbidding activities (Acts 16:6-7)

Speaking (Acts 8:29)

Evaluating and approving (Acts 15:28)

Being grieved by sin (Eph. 4:30)

If the Holy Spirit is simply the power of God rather than a distinct person the following passages would not make sense

Luke 4:14

Acts 10:38

2. Each Person In The Trinity Is Fully God

God the Father is clearly God

Genesis 1:1

The Son is fully God (this will be developed further in the Doctrine of Christ)

John 1:1-4

John 20:28

Hebrews 1:3 Gk. *charakter* “exact duplicate” God the Son exactly duplicates the being or nature of God the Father

Hebrews 1:8

Hebrews 1:10 (Psa. 102:25)

Titus 2:13

II Peter 1:1

Romans 9:5

Isaiah 9:6

Isaiah 40:3 (Matt. 3:3)

Colossians 2:9

The Holy Spirit is fully God

Matthew 28:19

Acts 5:3-4

I Cor. 3:16

Psalm 139:7-8

I Cor. 2:10-11

John 3:5-7 with I John 3:9

3. *There Is One God*

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

I Kings 8:60

Isaiah 45:5-6

Isaiah 45:21-22

I Timothy 2:5

Romans 3:30

I Corinthians 8:6

James 2:19

4. Consequences of Denying Any Aspect of the Biblical Teaching About the Trinity

Consequence of denying that God is three persons: Then we would conclude that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are just different names for one person who acts differently at different times. This is the heresy called Modalism.

Consequence of denying that each person is fully God: If we simply hold that God is three persons and that there is one God, then we might be tempted to say that some of the "persons" in this one God are not fully God, but are only subordinate or created parts of God. This is the solution taken by those who deny the full deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. But to hold this position, they must deny an entire category of biblical teaching which says that each person in the Trinity is fully God (see above)

Consequence of denying that there is one God: This would result in a belief in three gods, something clearly contrary to Scripture.

5. No Analogy Adequately Teaches About the Trinity

Analogy of a three-leaf clover

Analogy of a tree: roots, trunk, branches

Analogy of the three forms of water: steam, water, ice

C. Doctrinal Errors About The Trinity

1. Modalism

2. Arianism

3. Tritheism

1. Modalism: This error claims there is one person who appears to us in three forms

Meaning: God is only one person who appears to people in different "modes" at different times

Names for this error

"Sabellianism" (Sabellius, Rome, Third Century AD)

"Modalistic monarchianism" There is only one monarch in the universe and that is God himself, who consists of only one person.

Attempts to support Modalism

John 10:30

John 14:9

Fatal Shortcomings of Modalism

Denies the personal relationships within the Trinity

Denies the independence of God

2. Arianism: This view denies the fully deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit

The Arian Controversy (Arius, a Bishop of Alexandria, views condemned at the Council of Nicea AD 325. Died AD 336)

Teaching: Arius taught that Christ was a supernatural heavenly being created by God before the creation of the rest of the universe and “similar” to God in his nature, but not of exactly the same nature. Arius said Christ is “of a similar nature” to the Father (*homoiousios*); but he cannot be said to be “of the same nature” as the Father (*homoousios*).

Texts

“only begotten” John 1:14; 3:16, 18

“first-born of all creation” Colossians 1:15

Refutation of the teaching of Arianism

Colossians 1:15 (Hebrews 12:16)

Proverbs 8:22

Revelation 3:14 (Rev. 22:13; Rev. 1:8)

“only begotten” in Nicene Creed of AD 325

“of the same substance as the Father” *homoousios*

Subordinationism

Teaching: Arianism held that the Son was created and not divine. Subordinationism held that the Son was eternal (not created) and divine, but still not equal to the Father in being or attributes. The Son was inferior or “subordinate” in being to God the Father. Origen (184-254) taught this view.

Condemned at the Council of Nicea AD 325. The most influential in affirming the correct doctrine of the Trinity was Athanasius.

Biblical teaching: The orthodox doctrine is that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father in role or function, but is equal to the Father in being and attributes.

Adoptionism

Teaching: A third false teaching related to Arianism in that it denies the deity of the Son and deity of the Holy Spirit. This is the view that Jesus lived as an ordinary man until his baptism, but then God “adopted” Jesus as his “Son” and conferred on him supernatural powers. He is only an exalted man whom God called his “Son” in a unique sense.

Modern views similar: Many modern people who think of Jesus as a great man and someone especially empowered by God, but not really divine, would fall into the adoptionist category.

Council of Constantinople AD 381: Reaffirmed the Nicene statements and added a statement on the deity of the Holy Spirit

The Nicene Creed (AD 325; revised at Constantinople AD 381)

I believe in one God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets. And one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Filioque Clause

Meaning: *Filioque* is a Latin term meaning “and from the Son.” Not in the first (325) or second (381) versions of the Nicene Creed, but inserted in AD 589 at a regional church council in Toledo.

Statement: Added so the Nicene Creed then said that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father *and the Son* (filioque).”

Purpose: Added in light of John 15:26 and 16:7. The phrase was understood to speak of the *eternal* relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Son, something the Bible never explicitly discusses.

Significance: Eventually this apparently insignificant doctrinal issue led to the split between western (Roman Catholic) Christianity and eastern Christianity (consisting today of various branches of eastern orthodox Christianity, such as the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox church) in AD 1054. Underlying political issue was the relation of the Eastern church to the authority of the Pope.

Is there a correct position? If the Son together with the Father sends the Spirit into the world, by analogy it would seem appropriate to say that this reflects eternal ordering of their relationships. But this is such an obscure point of doctrine (the relationship of the Son and the Spirit before creation) that it certainly did not warrant division in the church.

The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Essential to hold to the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit

The atonement is at stake if Jesus is a mere created being

Justification by faith alone is threatened if we deny the full deity of the Son

If Jesus is merely a creature, no matter how great, it would be idolatry to worship him (Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 5:12-14)

If Jesus is a created being, then salvation is credited to a creature and not to God himself

If there is no Trinity, then the independence and personal nature of God are at stake

If there is no Trinity, the unity of the universe is at stake

Christianity stands or falls with the confession of the deity of Christ and of the Trinity.

“In the confession of the Trinity throbs the heart of the Christian religion: every error results from, or upon deeper reflection may be traced to, a wrong view of this doctrine” Herman Bavink, The Doctrine of God, 285.

3. Tritheism: Denies That There Is Only One God

Meaning: This error says that God is three persons and each person is fully God; therefore, there are three Gods.

Similar to many ancient pagan religions that held to a multiplicity of gods.

No modern groups advocate tritheism. It is possible that many Christians today tend toward this view by recognizing the distinct personhood of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but seldom being aware of the unity of God as one undivided being.

D. Distinctions Between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

The Persons of the Trinity Have Different Primary Functions in Relating to the World

Different functions in the work of creation

God the Father spoke the creative words

God the Son carried out these creative decrees (John 1:3)

God the Holy Spirit was “moving” over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:2)

Distinct functions in the work of redemption

God the Father planned redemption (John 3:16; Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:9-10)

God the Son accomplished redemption for us (John 6:38; Hebrews 10:5-7)

God the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son to apply redemption to us (John 14:26; 16:7; 15:26)

Regeneration (John 3:5-8)

Sanctification (Romans 8:13; 15:16; I Peter 1:2)

Empowerment for service (Acts 1:8; I Cor. 12:7-11)

The Persons of the Trinity Eternally Existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

These roles could not have been reversed

These relationships are eternal and not something that only occurred in time

There are no differences in deity, attributes, or essential nature between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person is fully God and has all the attributes of God. The only distinctions between the members of the Trinity are in the ways they relate to each other and to creation.

Eternal equality in being but subordination in role

The Relationship Between the Three Persons and the Being of God

Each person is completely and fully God.

Each person has all the attributes of God

The distinction between the persons is not one of “being” but a difference in “relationships”

The Existence of Three Persons in One God is Beyond Our Understanding

“The Trinity is a mystery...man cannot comprehend it and make it intelligible. It is intelligible in some of its relations and modes of manifestation, but unintelligible in its essential nature...The real difficulty lies in the relation in which the persons in the Godhead stand to the divine essence and to one another; and this is a difficulty which the Church cannot remove, but only try to reduce to its proper proportion by a proper definition of terms. It has never tried to explain the mystery of the Trinity but only sought to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity in such a manner that the errors which endangered it were warded off.” (*Berkhof, Systematic Theology*, 89).

E. Application

The unity and diversity in God himself is reflected in the relationship of marriage

God created man in his own image as male and female (Gen. 1:27)

In marriage two individuals become one in body, mind, and spirit (I Cor. 6:16-20; Eph. 5:31)

The relationship between man and woman in marriage is a picture of the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Trinity (I Cor. 11:3)

The unity and diversity in God himself is reflected in the church

In the church we have “many members” yet “one body” (I Cor. 12:12).

When we see a diversity of spiritual gifts in the church we ought to thank God that this allows us to glorify him by reflecting something of the unity and diversity of the Trinity.

Eventually the entire universe will partake of this unity of purpose with every diverse part contributing to the worship of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Phil. 2:10-11)

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