

## Welcome to Theology – Fall 2020

Session 2 (Christian Doctrine, Chapters 5-6)

### Who is God? Doctrine of the Trinity

Small Group Discussion:

Describe your childhood understanding of God. How did that change over time and what caused it to change?

How do the children/teenagers in your life understand/picture God?

Are there images or explanations that you have that help you understand the Trinity? How would explain the Trinity to a child (or a neighbor)?

How do you feel about God as Three-in-One (ambivalent, confused, see it as essential, find it embarrassing, don't understand it, etc)?

Take a look at the following passages:

Matt 28:19, 2 Corinthians 13:13, Ephesians 4:4-6, 1 Corinthians 12:4

What do you notice about the order in which the name appear? In what kind of contexts do these names appear together?

*“Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty . . . God in three persons, blessed Trinity”*

*“I believe in God, the Father almighty . . . and in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord . . . I believe in the Holy Spirit.”*

*“I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit.”*

*“Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost.”*

*“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”*

Christians don't “believe in” the Doctrine of the Trinity (or any other doctrine) – we believe in a living God – but the God we believe in is the God this doctrine confesses, the one living and true God who is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

All our language about God is metaphorical/analogical (so when we use language like “Father” and “Son” and “Holy Spirit” we are talking about relationship rather than gender, and we could probably benefit from more balanced language for God that includes both masculine and feminine imagery – God is like both a father and mother to us - Council of Toledo of 675: the Son was created “out of the womb – uterus – of the Father”)

The Bible does not teach the Doctrine of the Trinity (nor use the words “trinity,” “three-in-one,” “one essence,” “one substance,” or “three persons”) – but it says things about God that make the doctrine necessary:

- 1) One God: Deuteronomy 6:4 “The Lord our God is one Lord” - Exodus 20:2-3, Mark 12:29-30, Ephesians 4:6
- 2) God the Son: Jesus is “God with us” = Immanuel (Matt. 1:23); John 10:30 “The Father and I are one”; John 14:9 “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” BUT ALSO Jesus is distinct from the Father; the Father has sent the Son -- John 5:19, John 4:34

- 3) God the Holy Spirit: Spirit is the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:11, 6:11, 7:40) BUT ALSO Spirit of the Son (John 14:16, Rom 8:9, 2 Cor 3:17) – in John 14:15-18 Jesus promises to pray to the Father to send the Spirit
- 4) All three listed at the same time: Matt 28:19, 2 Cor 13:13, Eph 4:4-6, 1 Cor 12:4

Understanding the Trinity: Centuries of debate, and solutions were rejected because they either emphasized the three parts of God so much that the oneness of God was challenged, or emphasized the oneness of God so much that it compromised the presence and work of each of the three.

We all tend towards a heresy of some kind (which tends to be your kind of heresy?)

- God is like a board of directors made of three equal partners each with certain jobs
- God is like a big boss with two agents
- God is like three players on a football team, each waiting to get into the game at a different time
- God is like a person who wears three hats – one God with three roles (like an actor who plays three different parts)

Church answer: “three persons of one substance” (three individual ways of being God – three simultaneous roles) – *one personal God who lives and works in three different ways at the same time*

Three works of God (creation; reconciliation-salvation; renewal-transformation):

- 1) God the Father: Creator, just Ruler, Protector, Preserver of the world (working over us)
- 2) God the Son: God’s self-giving work to reconcile, save and liberate needy, sinful creatures and the created world (working with and for us)
- 3) God the Holy Spirit: God’s work to renew and transform human beings, human communities, and our whole natural environment (working in and among us)

Three world of ONE God – all of God is involved in everything God does:

- 1) Creation is not only work of Father – also work of son (John 1:3 Col 1:16) and Spirit (Gen 1:2)
- 2) Reconciliation/redemption is not only work of Son – also work of God (2 Cor 5:19) and Spirit (Eph. 2:18)
- 3) Sanctification that renews us for fellowship with God and thankful service of God and neighbor is not only work of Spirit – also attributed to Father (1 Thess. 5:23) and Son (Eph. 5:26)

Takeaway: *The works of the Trinity are indivisible* (it has been said that all Christian heresies are at the core Trinitarian heresies)

Eastern Orthodox view of Trinity: Perichoresis (“peri”- “around”; “choresis” – “dancing”) – divine dance – *they are what they are only in relationship with the other* - it is the unity of a community of persons who love each other and live together in harmony – if in God’s own deepest inner being God is such a community-seeking God, then that is also what God is in relation to us

What does the Trinity mean for us? What is the payoff for our struggle with this difficult doctrine?

- 1) We are created in the image of God, then true humanity of human beings is realized only in community (God is community-seeking) – community of equals with mutual respect and openness (no one is inferior or superior) – our youth are community-seeking
- 2) Perichoresis – God is the model for us of self-giving love – we model self-giving love for our youth

*In the end, Doctrine of the Trinity is not trying to explain the mystery of God, trying to preserve the mystery*

*We end where we began: There is no way we can put one and three together when we think of the Christian faith in one personal God who has three distinct ways of being and acting as God. We inevitably emphasize either one at the expense of three or three at the expense of one. The Trinity is a mystery to be confessed, not a mathematical problem to be solved.*

Small Group Discussion:

Take a look at the Nicene Creed: Which phrases suggest a unity of Christ and the Holy Spirit and God? Which phrases suggest a distinction between God and Christ, and God and the Spirit?

We believe in one God,  
 the Father, the Almighty,  
 maker of heaven and earth,  
 of all that is,  
 seen and unseen.  
 We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
 the only Son of God,  
 eternally begotten of the Father,  
 God from God, Light from Light,  
 true God from true God,  
 begotten, not made,  
 of one Being with the Father;  
 through him all things were made.  
 For us and for our salvation  
 he came down from heaven,  
 was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
 and became truly human.  
 For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
 he suffered death and was buried.  
 On the third day he rose again  
 in accordance with the Scriptures;  
 he ascended into heaven  
 and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
 He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
 and his kingdom will have no end.  
 We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
 who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
 who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,  
 who has spoken through the prophets.  
 We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
 We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
 We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
 and the life of the world to come. Amen.

## What is God like? Doctrine of the attributes of God

Small Group Discussion:

What does it mean to believe in a “personal” God? What does it not mean?

How would you describe God? What are God’s characteristics?

*“God is dead. Which God? The god who was a great heavenly Grand-daddy is dead. The god who was there to answer all our questions, solve all our problems, protect us from the hurts and hard knocks of life, make our lives warm, safe, and comfortable, save us from all trouble (including the trouble we bring on ourselves). The god who made no demands of us but was there to do everything for us and give us everything we want. The god who automatically forgave us, no matter how we disobeyed that god and ignore or hurt other people. That god is dead – in fact, never was alive in the first place.*

*God the great heavenly (male) Tyrant is also dead – the ‘sovereign’ god who could do anything he wanted to and prove it by arbitrarily being sometimes cruel and sometimes kind, loving some people and hating or simply ignoring others, according to the whim of the moment. The god who sneaked around spying on us, trying to catch us doing something bad so he could get us. The god whose will it was easy to know because it was always against everything that was fun and pleasant, and always demanded of us just what we did not like and did not want to do. That god is dead. We may rejoice and be thankful that he too was never alive*

*Finally, that god is dead who was really only a great heavenly Idea, the god some especially educated people thought of in terms of abstract concepts like: The ‘Supreme Being.’ ‘Providence.’ Wisdom, Power, Justice, Goodness, and Truth. That god never did do anything anyway, was never a living, personal God. That god was only a Big Idea.*

*Which god is dead? All the gods that were really nothing but a projection of our own fears, wishes, insecurity, greed, or speculation. All gods made in our own image.”*

According to Scripture, God acts, speaks, knows, wills, decides, loves, rejoices, regrets, pleads, judges, rules, suffers, triumphs. God can be angry, compassionate, jealous, merciful – Anthropomorphic language (We ourselves are human, and we can think and speak only in a human way – all language about God, whether personal or impersonal, is anthropomorphic)

1) God is infinite, almighty, omnipresent, omniscient, beyond the greatest and highest we can imagine

2) God draws near to us as a parent to a child (maternal images: Isa 42:14, Hos 11:1-3, Isa 66:13)

The Paradox:

Exodus 33:7-23: God speaks to Moses face to face as one speaks to a friend, but Moses is only allowed to see God’s back (God remains hidden and terrible)

We must take both sides of paradox seriously: we cannot over-sentimentalize God, nor make God a threatening, unknown tyrant

Calvin (Institutes 1.5.9): “We know the most perfect way of seeing God, and the most suitable order, is not for us to attempt with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of his essence, which we ought more to adore than meticulously to search out, but for us to contemplate him in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself.”

## God in relation to us (“Our Father . . .”)

**God is Love** – not sometimes loving, and sometimes not, it is not our understanding of love which helps us understand God, we understand love because of who God is and what God has done

- God’s love is universal (not limited, no discrimination, no exclusiveness)
- God’s love is unconditional (NOT “I will love you if you . . .”)
- God loves first (makes the first move)

Soren Kierkegaard: “You loved us first, oh God. Alas, we speak of it as if you loved us first one time only, historically speaking, when in very truth, without ceasing, you love us first all the time. When I awaken in the morning and my soul turns at once toward you, you are first. You have already turned toward me. If I rise at dawn and in the very first second of my awakening my soul turns to you in prayer, you have beat me to it. You have already turned in love toward me. Thus, we speak ingratitude if, unthankful and unaware, we speak of you as having loved us first only one time.”

- God’s love is reconciling, helping, renewing
- God’s love is costly and self-giving

God’s love is love that enables us and empowers us to become different people, “new” people who realize our own true humanity as we learn to live in right relationship with God and our fellow human beings. It is love that sets us on our feet and sets us on the way toward becoming strong, active, responsible, people growing up into the “mature” humanity we see in Jesus Christ, loving God and other people with our whole selves . . . this love can be painful because it exposes and confronts our sinful humanity, demanding as well as enabling change in our lives

What would the church look like if its members loved each other as God loves us?

In light of our understanding of God’s love, could it be that instead of asking as we sometimes do whether God is really a loving God, we ought to ask first whether we Christians are really loving people?

## God is Just – God is both loving and just at the same time

- God’s loving justice: we understand justice to be neutral and unbiased (equal treatment of all people), but God is not a blind judge, but one who sees people uniquely and God’s justice is openly on the side of the poor, the weak, the excluded (Luke 1:52-53) - God’s justice gives people not what they deserve but what they need - God’s justice is not something terrible to be dreaded but a great blessing to be hoped for – God’s justice is not a terrible alternative to God’s love; it is God’s love (John Calvin: we come before the judge who is our advocate and who has taken our cause in hand to defend us)

- God’s just love: God loves precisely in the exercise of divine justice – God’s wrath punishes, overthrows, tears down and destroys sinful institutions and societies – including religious ones – the Old Testament speaks just as strongly of God’s self-giving and forgiving love as does the New Testament, and the New Testament speaks just as strongly of God’s demanding and punishing justice as does the Old Testament. God judges in order to help like a parent – the fact that God can become angry means that God really cares about us. Amos 3:2: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” – God’s judgment is serious, but God “pays the price” for our misdeeds

**God in heaven (“who art in heaven . . .”)**

- God is omnipotent: *God can only do that which is consistent with God's goodness and love* – the sovereign power of God who is for us and not against us
- God is omnipresent: Psalm 139 - there is no place where God's love and justice cannot be
- God is omniscient: this is not to deal with speculative questions like did God know that was going to happen, the biblical writers emphasize that God knows us, that kind of vulnerability would be terrifying if we didn't know how much God loves us
- God is eternal: does not mean the eternal absence of God above time, but the eternal presence of God in time – means that there has not been a time when God was not powerfully at work (Psalm 103:17)
- God is unchangeable: God is stubbornly dependable, not that God's mind cannot change, God isn't mercurial or fickle the ways humans can be and therefore untrustworthy (Malachi 3:6, James 1:17)

**Small Group Discussion:**

What does this mean for our children/youth? How has your understanding of God changed?  
How can we recognize the presence of God in the midst of suffering, failure, and disappointment?  
Why is it good news to say that God is all-powerful, ever-present, all-knowing, eternal, and unchangeable?