

Trinitarian Theology Seminar

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I. The Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit

- a) The word “trinity” is not found in the Bible. It is a doctrine to describe the reality of God to which the Bible gives witness.
- b) The term “trinity” emphasizes the oneness of the Godhead.
- c) The term “triunity” emphasizes the different “agents” of the Godhead.

II. The “Problem” of Monotheism

- a) At the heart of Jewish teaching was the radically counter-cultural idea that there is one God alone, not a pantheon of gods. (Deuteronomy 5:6 & 6:4)
- b) The Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, interpreted the Hebrew word for “one” (echad) to mean “only” or “unique.”
- c) Within the monotheistic tradition of Judaism there is a warning about “capturing” God with human language and images, and therefore latitude in understanding God’s essence. (Exodus 3:13-15)
- d) Exodus 3:14 (“ehyeh asher ehyeh”) can be translated “*I am who I am,*” or “*I will be what (who) I will be,*” or “*I will become who I will become,*” or “*I am becoming,*” or “*I will cause to be what I will cause to be,*” or “*I will be who I am/I am who I will be.*”
- e) God is grounded historically and named (“the God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob”), but is not limited by history and naming.

III. Trinitarian Inference in the Old Testament

- a) There is plurality in the God of creation. (Genesis 1:1-2 & 26a)

- b) The “ruach” was the spirit of God, and so was (Sophia) “Lady Wisdom.” (Proverbs 20-21)
- c) If the Spirit was pre-existent, where was Jesus? (John 1:1-4)
- d) We see the pre-existence of Jesus in the Old Testament. (Daniel 3:23-25)
- e) We see the pre-figuring of Jesus’ arrival and incarnation in the Old Testament. (Isaiah 9:6-7; Zechariah 9:9)
- f) We see Trinitarian theophany (divine appearances) in the Old Testament. (Genesis 18:1-2)

IV. The Trinity in the New Testament

- a) The triune godhead is represented by how the three interact and cooperate together. (Matthew 3:16-17; John 14:20, 25-26)
- b) The triune God defines the church’s mission, authority, and its source of power. (Matthew 28:18-20)
- c) The trinity was referenced as a formulaic source of blessing. (2nd Corinthians 13:13)
- d) In the New Testament we see a kind of dance between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Greek term for this is perichoresis, which is related to the English word “choreography.”
- e) The perichoresis illustrates the partnering and the mutual indwelling of the “persons” of the Trinity in a ceaseless overflowing and self-giving love.

“Dancing together implies mutuality, as partners move together and the movements of one influence those of the other. Dancing together involves unity, as the movements of all contribute to the dance, without losing the individuality of any. This metaphor can also depict an open Trinity who invites all creation to join the dance.” –Ruth Duck

V. God Exists *in and as* Community

- a) The unity (oneness) of God is bound up in the community (threeness) of God.
- b) The Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist together as one and the same nature or substance (*homoousion*), sharing a common life mission, yet as three distinct modes of being. (See the Nicene Creed)

“God is three. Notwithstanding we believe and teach that the same immense, one and indivisible God is in person inseparably and without confusion distinguished as Father, Son and Holy Spirit so, as the Father has begotten the Son from eternity, the Son is begotten by and ineffable generation, and the Holy Spirit truly proceeds from them both, and the same from eternity and is to be worshipped with both. Thus there are not three gods, but three persons, consubstantial, co-eternal, and coequal; distinct with respect to hypostases, and with respect to order, the one preceding the other yet without any inequality. For according to the nature or essence they are so joined together that they are one God, and the divine nature is common to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” –The Second Helvetic Confession

- c) The covenant community is an outgrowth of God’s inner community. As the Father sent the Son, and as the Father and Son sent the Holy Spirit, so too do Father, Son and Holy Spirit create and send the Church.

VI. Problems that Undermine Christian Trinitarian Doctrine

- a) A “Unitarianism” of the Father or the Son or Spirit that over-emphasizes one to the exclusion or neglect of others.
- b) A subordinationism (or adoptionism) that interprets the Godhead hierarchically. (Colossians 1:15-17)

- c) A modalism that defines God by virtue of certain actions associated with individual persons of the Trinity. (e.g. the Father is the creator; the Son is the redeemer and the Holy Spirit is the sustainer)

Questions:

1. Why is it important to insist that God is three-in-one?
2. What do we learn about how to live our lives as Christians based on our confession that God is triune?
3. How do we fall into anti-Trinitarian traps?

“From all eternity inside God, inside the mystery of God, inside God the Holy Trinity – the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit make room for each other, envelop each other, call attention to each other, glorify one another. It is the ceaseless exchange of vitality, the endless expense of spirit upon spirit in eternal triplicate life. The only competition in glory of this kind is to outdo one another in love.” –Cornelius Plantinga

Sources:

Christian Doctrine by Shirley Guthrie

Faith Seeking Understanding by Daniel Migliore

The Book of Confessions by PC (USA)

Jesus the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible by Eugen Pentiu

“The Triune God: Rich in Relationships” by Jurgen Moltmann

“The Trinity: Dancing Together” by Ruth Duck

“What’s So Important About the Trinity?” by Dennis Okholm