

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#28—Theology Proper—Part VII¹

The Holy Trinity

Paul Karleen

November 4, 2007

For studies in theology proper, if you have the book, you should read Bruce Ware's *Their God Is Too Small*. The table entitled "Topics and Readings for Theology Proper" includes Reymond's book along with the two books of charts by Wayne House and associates readings with the study topic. The topic of the next study is the prayer ministry of the Trinity.

A difficult doctrine

One of the hardest doctrines of the Bible to grasp is the teaching that God is three Persons and yet one God—the Trinity. But this does not mean that it cannot be one of the most precious areas of understanding for the believer. Statements such as "There is in the Divine Being but one indivisible essence" are certainly likely to turn most people off. And they do not seem to have much everyday relevance. Our study will emphasize practical points of the theology of the Trinity.

One reason the Trinity is difficult to understand is that it is not something we have any analogy for in our existence. It is found only in the Bible. Partly because of this, some have shown great skepticism. Thomas Jefferson said it was "incomprehensible jargon." Some have called it a fairy tale. If we look in the heavens, we see a revelation of God, but not of the Trinity. It cannot be proven. It cannot be illustrated. It is unique in the universe. Yet this uniqueness has a significant implication. Because of the existence of such a Being, I am obligated to acknowledge that I am created, I am derived, I am dependent and I must worship Him. In fact, any attempt to put away the biblical teaching on the Trinity must be viewed as an effort to make God like me.

Basic features of biblical teaching

There are several basic elements to the biblical picture of the Trinity. To begin with, God is both a unity and a plurality. His unity is stressed in the Bible in order that we might not fall into the very common error of polytheism, even when talking about the God of the Bible. That pronouncement of Dt. 6:4, so precious to the Jew, is evidence enough of God's singularity: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." As soon as we speak of separate Persons, it is easy to think of separate gods, but the Bible warns us against that.

Further, the God of the Bible is not one Person who shows Himself to human beings in three ways or forms (an error called Sabellianism). There are three separate Persons comprising one God. This is suggested or taught in such passages as the following:

Gen. 1:26

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

¹ Copyright 2007 by Paul S. Karleen. Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Gen. 11:7

The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

Ps. 2:7

I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.

Isa. 6:8

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

Mal. 3:1

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

Mt. 3:16-17

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

and Jn. 14:16-17

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

Mt. 28:19 and Jn. 10:30 underscore the equality of and agreement between the persons:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

I and the Father are one.

The many passages that teach the deity of Christ and of the Spirit demonstrate that each Person is just as much God as the others.

Apparent problems

But what about passages such as Phil. 2:5-8, where it appears that one of the Persons can be dominant over the other or have more power?

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

The Bible indicates that in God's program of dealing with humanity and the universe, especially in regard to providing salvation, the Persons of the Trinity are distinguished by certain things that they do. In Phil. 2 the incarnate second Person is said to change something in relation to his deity. Reading carefully we notice that He subordinated Himself—as the God-man—to the will of the Father in order to go to the cross for human beings. This was part of the outworking of the distinct roles of the Persons. The Holy Spirit did not become joined to humanity, nor did the Father. The Father never appeared to individuals, nor did the Spirit. Neither the second Person nor the Father is said to have directed the writers of Scripture: the Spirit did. And so it was the second Person who voluntarily submitted Himself to the Father for the sake of sinners.

We have already used several terms for the Persons of the Trinity. Actually the Bible never speaks of the first Person, second Person and third Person of the Trinity. As a matter of fact, it never uses the word Trinity. But all are convenient in helping us to understand this difficult doctrine. The Bible does speak of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. The word God can refer to the Trinity in general or to each of the Persons. *Lord* is used often of both the Father and the Son.

It is important that we understand that the second Person of the Trinity and the Jesus that we encounter beginning at Bethlehem are different in some important respects, and this also complicates the picture when we are talking about the second Person. *Jesus* is the name of the second Person of the Trinity joined to humanity. It is a name that began to be applied to the incarnate second Person in space and time—at Bethlehem. The second Person of the Trinity did not die on the Cross: the incarnate second Person, or Jesus, did.

It is important also to remember that the incarnation is still in effect. 'Incarnation' means 'in the flesh.' The incarnation began at Bethlehem and never stops.

A definition and its implications

It might be helpful at this point for us to provide a definition of the Trinity, keeping in mind that the Bible does not give such a succinct statement and does not use the term Trinity: There is only one true God, existing as a single Being comprised of three Persons who are equal in every way, yet distinct in their tasks and relations to humanity.

Especially with the doctrine of the Trinity, we should stress the practical connections with our lives, lest we see this teaching as dry and of little importance for us. In addition, applications will help us to understand the Trinity better.

To begin with, each of the Persons is equally worthy of worship, equally powerful and equally glorious. We often tend to forget to be thankful for each Person, perhaps thinking only of the work of the incarnate second Person. But all deserve our praise. And if we think of the Father as dwelling in glory, we should conceive of the Son and the Spirit the same way, especially in light of such passages as Heb. 4:14 and 9:24, where the Son is described as being in the presence of the Father, certainly sharing His glory.

While what we have just said stresses the equality of the Persons, their special functions have practical aspects, too. Each has a complex and extensive role, especially toward believers. We ought to cultivate, for example, the special presence of the Holy Spirit to teach and encourage us (Jn. 14:25) and the distinctive and crucial work of the Son in providing high priestly victory over temptation (Heb. 4:14).

At times we are careless with these special roles, however. One of the key features of the Son's work was to provide access to the presence of the Father (Heb. 10:19-22):

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

The Son is now occupied with keeping that way open, lest sin somehow close it, a ministry shown in Heb. 7:25:

Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

The incarnate Son is the permanent bridge to the Father. Because of this we approach the Father through Him, and of course all our approaching is done through prayer. That is the reason our prayer is to be directed to the Father on the basis of the work of the Son.

Certainly all three Persons are aware of our praying, but approaching the Father through the Son indicates that we understand the roles of the Persons concerning our salvation. This pattern is also the one presented in the New Testament in the prayers that we have recorded after the cross. Not praying this way may very well show that we do not understand the relation of the work of the Son and the work of the Father.

Another often neglected teaching associated with the Trinity is that the believer actually has all three Persons within him. We think most often of the Spirit's presence (Eph. 1:13; Jn 14:17), but Col. 1:27 and Jn. 14:20 and 23 teach the indwelling of the Son and Father. This alone—the spiritual presence of all three Persons of the Godhead—provides every believer with all the comfort, teaching and encouragement that he will ever need. None of us ever needs more of God, although we do need to submit ourselves more. And all three are active in keeping the believer secure (Eph. 1:13; Heb. 7:25; Jn. 10:29). We are thus triply guarded. There is enough here for endless contemplation—and thanks!

Certainly the Old Testament revelation touching the Trinity is scant compared to that in the New Testament. In the wisdom of God He told us little of what He is like as a Trinity until that Trinity acted on behalf of sinners to provide salvation. We find out what the Trinity is like when we see in full operation the Godhead's work for us. It takes the Trinity to save us—that's how sinful we are!

Errors Concerning God and the Trinity

Erroneous views of the Trinity and of the nature of God are highly instructive to us. We may take it as a biblical principle that the importance of a doctrine can be evaluated by the extent of satanic efforts to distort it. In this case, the doctrine of the Trinity ranks at the top.

Atheism, outright denial of the existence of God, is a position that many hold. If you are an atheist, you believe that man is alone and life is meaningless. This is the Soviet cosmonaut's view of the universe ("I can't see God, so He must not exist."). It is contradicted by evidence in nature, the conscience and the spiritual makeup of the individual, as well as by biblical teaching. At heart, it is a rejection of the self-revelation of the personal God of the Bible, who has on innumerable occasions communicated with human beings for their benefit. Many people are practical atheists because they have not bothered to inquire about the existence and character of God.

Agnosticism, the belief that one cannot know if God exists or not, amounts to a suspension of knowledge. As with atheism, it rejects the many self-disclosures of God. It is an affront to the God who has spoken, is based on pride and offers no hope for life now or after death. Both positions are contrary to the basic makeup of human beings, who desperately need contact with their Creator and have the spiritual capacity to interact with Him.

Pantheism is an often sophisticated but actually illogical view of God. It denies the existence of a personal God who interacts intelligently with human beings. Instead, God is the same thing as the universe, and, in turn, the universe is God. Of course, in this view we are part of God and He is part of us. If you are a pantheist, then you have to conclude that at any given moment you are sitting or standing on God for he is the chair or floor beneath you. Pantheism actually sacrifices God's personhood for His infinity, and, in some forms of the view, makes God physical, although in some variations everything is supposedly nonmaterial and spiritual, including the universe. Pantheism is an attempt to reduce God to identity with His creation.

Panentheism says that the universe is part of God and describes the position of some Open Theists. The effect is the same as with pantheism: it reduces God to identity with His creation.

Polytheism, the belief in a plurality of gods (equal or differing in rank) is prevalent throughout the world, as is pantheism. This view clearly contradicts the biblical teaching that there is only one deity and that He is unique in power and position. In polytheism in general, the adherent can never know if he has pleased the right god. We might call this the Alka-Seltzer view of God. Like a medicine that covers all the bases, polytheism, by encouraging placating all the gods to obtain favor, assuages the conscience—at least it attempts to!

Deism is the view that God exists and can interact with human beings, but has withdrawn from contact with them. In some forms it involves denial of a Trinity, the incarnation, miracles, and other orthodox doctrines.²

Many organized groups, and individuals also, deny the equality of the Persons of the Trinity or the existence of the Trinity itself. This may be due to a denial of the deity of the Son or Spirit (for many the Spirit is just an "influence"), or to a rejection of the concept of the Trinity as mathematically incomprehensible. Jehovah's Witnesses are an example of a popularly presented denial of the deity of the Son and Spirit. They are strongly anti-Trinitarian: there is only one God, whose name is Jehovah. According to them, Satan himself originated the doctrine of the Trinity. In their literature the Trinity is sometimes represented as three gods in one person. The Son is not God, and the Spirit is not God and not a Person.

In Christian Science, actually religious pantheism, God is not personal, but is the whole universe, and the universe is God. In this system, angels are pure thoughts from God, the Holy Spirit is Christian Science and Jesus Christ was not deity.

Mormonism is a sophisticated version of polytheism. Latter-Day Saints say they believe in the Father, Son and Spirit, but these are for them only three of many gods. Among their gods are human beings who have, through works and time, become divine. The heart of the Mormon system involves the doing of good works leading to a physical existence after death, with the prospect of becoming a god. Such gods have physical bodies (another serious error of biblical understanding), have mates and engage in procreation.

Granted, the Trinity is not completely explainable in human language, and cannot be fully understood while we are under the limitations of our present existence. Still, such positions, if they are conscious, evidence an unwillingness to accept the data of Scripture. There can be no question that the downplaying of the deity of

² See M. H. Macdonald, "Deism," in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 304.

Christ, for instance, and His equality with the Father, is connected with erroneous views of salvation, since the Bible is quite clear that it took a perfect sacrifice—that could be provided only by deity—to take away sin. Denial of the deity of Christ always leads to auto-soteriology, the attempt at self-salvation.

Many of these errors that can be seen at the present time correspond to views held through the Church Age. For example, Arianism, propagated initially in the fourth century, held that the second and third Persons were created and are thus not eternal or deity. Many hold essentially the same position today. This and other errors concerning the Trinity tend to deny three key features of the Trinity taught in the Bible: the deity of the Son and the Spirit; the equality of all three Persons; and the distinctiveness of the three Persons.

No area of doctrine is more important, and none more rewarding to careful study—and devotional consideration—than that of the Trinity. Errors concerning the Person of God lead easily to errors concerning His work and relations to human beings. Many of the most significant movements away from orthodox positions have had errors concerning the Trinity at their core. On the other hand, the spiritual health of the believer is always helped by careful consideration of the nature of the God who both creates and saves.

Study questions

1. Internalize the definition of the Holy Trinity.
2. What does Mt. 3:16-17 teach about the Persons of the Trinity and their relations?
3. From Jn. 14-16 list as many relationships as you can between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Spirituality: God is not physical, but immaterial, incorporeal, invisible and alive.
16. Self-existence/Aseity: God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent.
17. Immensity: God is infinite in relation to space.
18. Eternality: God is infinite with regard to time.
19. Simplicity: God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts.
20. Pure actuality: There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way.
21. Necessity: God is uncaused and exists because he must exist.
22. Immutability: God is unchanging and unchangeable.
23. Impassibility: God is incapable of being changed or disturbed by what he experiences and is incapable of suffering.
24. Transcendence: God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him.
25. Immanence: God is present in the world.
26. Infinity: There are no limits to God's person and his perfections.
27. Omnipotence: God can do whatever he wills.
28. Omniscience: God knows everything there is to know.
29. Omnipresence: God is present everywhere in his creation

30. Holiness: God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin.
31. Goodness: A quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace
32. Truth: God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality
33. Love: God's continual communication of himself to his creatures.
34. Benevolence: God's goodness toward his creatures.
35. Mercy: God's goodness toward those who are helpless.
36. Grace: God's goodness toward sinners.
37. Glory: The greatness of God's perfections.
38. Trinity: There is only one true God, existing as a single Being comprised of three Persons who are equal in every way, yet distinct in their tasks and relations to humanity.