

Lecture 17 – The Trinity

*“To the Great One in Three eternal praises be hence evermore.
His sovereign majesty may we in glory see, and to eternity love and adore.”*
Anonymous, 1759

Key Terms

The problem of monotheism, adoptionism, identity, subordinationism, distinction

Objectives

- *Identify and describe in their historical connections various approaches to understanding the trinity.
- *Explore possible responses to each approach which affirm strengths and correct weaknesses.
- *Consider how each approach may be manifested in attitudes of those who hold them.

Trinity

I. Introduction to the History of the Doctrine of the Trinity

A. Pedagogical goals

1. To put the various approaches to trinitarianism into historical context
2. To appreciate the complexity of the issues

B. The problem of the early church

1. How do we affirm monotheism in light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ?
2. The search for a suitable framework

C. J.N.D. Kelly’s Christological taxonomy (from his *Early Christian Doctrines*)

1. Adoptionism
2. Identity
3. Derivation (subordinationism)
4. Distinction: two lords

II. Adoptionism

A. The Ebionites

1. A form of Jewish (Pharisaic) Christianity
2. Jesus interpreted through the Mosaic law
3. Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary. His mission was exemplary rather than redemptive.
4. Jesus as prophetic mediator of the law
5. Anti-trinitarian

B. Dynamic monarchianism

1. Rationalist presuppositions
 - a. God is a simple being (no parts).
 - b. God is one (monotheism).
 - c. Dichotomy between spiritual and material reality; radical transcendence
 - d. The idea of an incarnation is nonsensical and impossible.
2. Theodotus of Byzantium (ca. 190)
 - a. The Christ is an impersonal endowment of power (*dynamis*). This power proceeds from God, but is not God.
 - b. As in Ebionism, Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary. His mission was exemplary rather than redemptive.
 - c. Anti-trinitarian

3. Depicted trinitarianism as irrational and polytheistic

“If the Father is one and the Son another, and if the Father is God and Christ God, then there is not one God, but two Gods are simultaneously brought forward, the Father and the Son.” Theodotus

III. Identity (Modalistic Monarchianism)

A. Fundamental commitments

1. Divine simplicity (no parts)
2. The unity of God; God is one (monotheism).
3. Christ is God.

B. Christ’s deity must be understood in the context of monotheism.

1. Ontological distinction between the Father and the Son constitutes polytheism. Thus there is agreement with Theodotus regarding trinitarianism.
2. God’s simplicity and unity are primary.
3. Thus the Father is the Son, and the Son is the Father.

C. Praxeas (ca. 210)

1. Father is the Godhead (monarchianism).
2. God projects Himself in different ways according to historical circumstances.

D. Sabellius

1. If Christ is God then He must be identical with the Father; otherwise He could not be God.
2. Patripassianism
3. Defended monotheism and deity of Christ, but without trinitarianism

E. The use of creational analogs

1. An ontological analogy
 - a. The Father is the sun.
 - b. The Son is the sun (the Father) as it is seen.
 - c. The Spirit is the sun (the Father) as it is felt within our hearts.
2. An historical analogy

Greek: *prosopon*
Latin: *persona*
-person

 - a. The Old Testament: the age of the Father
 - b. The Gospel era: the age of the Son
 - c. The Epistolary era: the age of the Spirit
3. An economic-functional analogy
 - a. The Father is the Creator and law-giver.
 - b. The Son is the Redeemer.
 - c. The Spirit is the Sanctifier-glorifier.
4. Tertullian (an orthodox trinitarian) described modalism via his own analogy. He likened the modalistic understanding of God to the changes which water undergoes when exposed to temperature variations: steam, liquid, ice.