

The Trinity

In our discussion of the trinity the first issue we want to take up is the history of the doctrine of the trinity through Nicea and Chalcedon. And I want to share with you my pedagogical goals: why am I going to bother with this history? First of all, I want to contextualize the early creedal history of the church in terms of the church's response to the Christological and the trinitarian trends of the first four centuries. This is not merely a history lesson. The fact is, the early church debated about who Jesus is and how He relates to God. In other words, the early church's debates about Christology and the trinity are the same debates we have today. There does seem to be no new heresy under the sun. The second reason is I think it is important that we learn to appreciate something of the complexity of these issues. We need to realize that people who earnestly sought the Lord differed from one another and differed radically over important biblical and theological issues. What we need to learn is that doctrine does not just crawl out of the pages of Scripture. It must be sought. It must be won. And that message comes through most clearly by looking at this issue historically.

The early church was faced with a serious problem. How were they to combine the monotheistic confession of the Old Testament with this new content of the New Testament revelation? Clearly there is something about this New Testament that goes beyond mere monotheism. But the church had no precedents. It had no models. How could they even begin to think of Jesus as deity? There was no framework through which they could understand these new things. So in some respects the early history of the church was very much about seeking a suitable framework, a way to speak meaningfully and biblically about Jesus, about His relationship to the Father, and ultimately, about how the Holy Spirit relates to the two of them as well. As is usually the case in such matters, several frameworks were tried out and more than one existed at any one time by different groups. And so naturally there was competition and there was contention among these different frameworks.

I think it is best here to offer a taxonomy of these theological frameworks. Technically, these types we are going to talk about are Christological categories. That is to say, they articulate the way that the early church understood the status of Jesus Christ and His relationship to the Father, but each one carried its own particular set of broader implications for the doctrine of the trinity. This taxonomy is from J.N.D. Kelly in his book *Early Christian Doctrines*. I should give him the credit here.

The first position is called adoptionism. The adoptionist position suggests that there was a time at which the Son became divine. There was a time in which a peculiar relationship was conferred upon Him by the Father. I am going to reference Scripture for each one, because I want you to see that people who held different positions could also proof-text and cite Scripture. People who held this position could cite Psalm 2:7 and Hebrews 1:5, and you can look those texts up and imagine what they would look like through adoptionist eyes.

Another position that was common could be called identity. There were Christians who said that there was an identity within the biblical text between the Father and the Son. In other words, one is the other. The Father is Lord, Yahweh, and Jesus is Lord, *kurios*. And these folks could cite Isaiah 63:9 and Psalm 96:10.

Those Kelly calls the subordinationists or the derivationists noted that there are passages that clearly say that the Father is greater than the Son, and suggest that the Son came from the Father, and thus that the Son is somehow less than God. And they would turn to passages like Genesis 22:15 and John 14:28, where Jesus says, "The Father is greater than I."

Finally is the distinction tradition. There are passages which speak of one Lord and another Lord, thus drawing a numeric distinction in such a way that one is not the other, and people who hold to this position could cite Psalm 110:1 and Acts 2:34.

Now without telling you which one is orthodox, we will look at each a bit more. Let us first take the adoptionist tradition. The adoptionist model actually began in Jewish-Christian circles. For most Jews the new ideas of Christianity simply implied polytheism and thus they rejected the Christian revelation. But other Jews sought to find a middle way, a compromise, a synthesis between the old tradition of Judaism and this new thing called Christianity. So we do have a group of people who could be called Jews but who also want to make room for a teaching about Jesus. Now of course as we know, there was more than one variety of Judaism in the first and second centuries, and the position that we are here going to call Ebionism came out of the Pharisaic tradition of Judaism. If you recall, the Pharisees were extremely moralistic and rigorous in their application of the Old Testament law. So if we are going to synthesize Pharisaic Judaism and Christianity, what we might end up with is something that has the presuppositions of the Ebionites. So what they wanted to put together was, first, an emphasis upon monotheism and, second, a stress on a certain reading of the Old Testament law. They wanted to think of the salvific preeminence of the Mosaic Law. But Jesus is going to have to be understood through the priority of the first two. The first two principles are the starting points. You start with an emphasis on monotheism and you start with an emphasis with the Mosaic Law as the way to redemption. The question is: Where is Jesus going to fit into that?

Adoptionism is going to be key here for the Ebionites. The Ebionites' story went like this: Jesus of Nazareth was the natural son of Joseph and Mary. He was not God incarnate. He was rather a prophet and a prophet of the Law. His mission was not to be a redeemer. What He was sent to do was to tell us how to rightly keep the law. He was sent to reveal how we might keep the Hebrew law. And He was sent to be an example. He was meant to be an embodiment of how you keep the Law. At His baptism, God empowered Him, commissioned Him, to function as that example, that exemplar. Again, His mission was not redemptive. It was prophetic. He is Messiah but the mission of the Messiah is to give the right interpretation of the Law and to give an example of law-keeping. Thus we have a tradition or a position that is not trinitarian in any way, shape, or form. It really has a unitarian understanding of God. Even though Ebionism survived well into the fourth century, it was already waning in the second century. As the church became more Gentile and less Jewish, Christians began to understand that this position did not do justice to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

But even as the Ebionites were passing from history, there were Gentile Christians who accepted and defended the doctrine of the radical oneness of God. They basically had the same starting point as the Ebionites. Here we talk about dynamic monarchians. The term 'monarchian' was actually coined by Pertuli of Carthage and it originally meant that these people defended the monarchy, the unity, the simplicity of God, over against polytheistic systems. Like the Ebionites, the dynamic monarchians insisted upon the monotheism of God, but their commitment to monotheism came more from rationalist philosophy than it did from the Old Testament, and their rationalism demanded a number of things. First, God is a simple being. That is to say, He has no parts. If God has parts, you can separate those parts and some part will be more fundamental than the other parts and the part that is more fundamental is what you should be calling God in the first place. Second, God is one, the same as monotheism. Third was a strict distinction between the physical and the material, and along with that, the association of God with the spiritual. This means, of course, no incarnation. If God is absolutely associated with the immaterial, the spiritual, He cannot come in contact with physical reality. Theodosius of Byzantium claimed that the divinity that was in Jesus of Nazareth was an impersonal power which proceeded from God, but this divinity that was in Jesus of Nazareth was not God. It was simply a power, thus the name

dynamic monarchianism. The word ‘dynamic’ comes from *dunamis*, meaning ‘power.’ In a manner that was very much like the Ebionites, Theodosius claimed that Jesus was inspired by the Spirit at His baptism and led an exemplary life of close communion with God. At His baptism, the Christ principle, this *dunamis*, descended on Jesus, who was already a supremely virtuous man, but at His baptism, the Christ adopted Jesus as God’s Son. From that day forward, He was able by the power of the indwelling Christ, or sometimes called the *Logos*, to perform miracles and He was blessed with extraordinary insight into the nature of men. Again, Jesus does not appear to be God here. The oneness of God is protected, but at the expense of Christ. At most, Jesus is a man who is indwelt, or possessed by God in such a scheme.

Before leaving the dynamic monarchians, we should at least note that they did not merely state their own position but they also entered into quite a bit of dialogue and critique with other positions. They critiqued those who held to a real distinction between the Father and the Son and not surprisingly, the dynamic monarchians said that people who hold to that distinction are polytheists. The argument went like this: if the Father is one and the Son another, and if the Father is God, and Christ is God, then there is not one God but two gods who are simultaneously brought forward—the Father and the Son. Do you see any holes in that? It looks pretty good actually. Like Ebionism, dynamic monarchianism did not survive, but its arguments against the true deity of Christ and its allegation that trinitarianism is merely a thin veil for polytheism will survive and will be reproduced by the Arians of the fourth century. We should note again before we pass on here that adoptionism is still with us. Classical liberalism has a lot in common with traditional adoptionism, as does Mormonism.

Far more numerous and far more long-lasting than dynamic monarchianism was a movement called modalism, or modalistic monarchianism. Like the dynamic monarchians, the modalistic monarchians also emphasized the unity and simplicity of God, but unlike the dynamic monarchians, the modalists did not want to limit or deny the deity of Christ. They wanted to say Jesus is God. That they shared the title of monarchians is perhaps unfortunate, because apart from their shared theological commitment to monotheism, the two movements have almost nothing in common. What did they insist upon? There were three things, that all of them passionately held: the simplicity of God, the oneness of God, and the deity of Christ. So they emphasized divine simplicity, monotheism, and the deity of Christ. But these were not all equally held commitments.

The first two were primary. The deity of Christ must be explained in terms of simplicity and oneness. Any suggestion that the Son was other than the Father, or a distinct person apart from the Father, would seem to the modalists to lead inescapably to the blasphemy of asserting two gods. Even though they want to say that Jesus is God, they do not want to head in the direction of polytheism. The modalists held to the oneness of God yet to the full deity of Christ by claiming that the distinctions within God that we see in the New Testament are more apparent than real. They are more linguistic than real. They are more historical than ontological. They did not deny the full deity of Christ. They simply identified it with the Father. Any distinction between the Father and the Son is purely verbal, not real. Christ is not numerically distinct from the Father in any way. The Father is the Son. The difference is merely one of name. Did you all catch on to what is going on here? I could be called Mike. I could be called Mr. Williams. I could be called Dr. Williams. I could be called “hey you.” But that is not four people, that is one. But according to the modalistic monarchians, what we have here is one God who goes by three names. One of the earliest proponents of modalism was Praxeas. Holding to the idea that the name Father signifies the Godhead, Praxeas contended that whenever the deity is present, wherever God is, it is a projection of the Father, the one simple God, the one single God. But this one God can be designated by the term ‘Father’ or ‘Son.’ The terms do not stand for real distinctions. They are merely names applicable at different times. Christ then is not separate from the Father in any way. You can put

it this way: Christ is the Father speaking in a different voice. Notice that Praxeas held that the entirety of God is present in Jesus. They actually held to a very high doctrine of the deity of Christ.

The best known modalist thinker was a fellow by the name of Sabellius. He emphasized the identification of the Father and Son to such an extent that he could say that the Father died on the cross. His thinking went like this: if Christ is God, as the Christian faith rightly insists, then He must be identical with the Father, otherwise, He could not be God. Consequently, if Christ suffered, the Father suffered, since there is no division in the Godhead. Now this doctrine of the suffering God has sometimes been called patripassianism. It complicates the issue because this school of thought has been very popular throughout the history of the church and it is going by many different names. If you were to write a paper on them, you would have to look up patripassianism, modalist monarchianism, Sabellianism, and about 15 other terms. But like Praxeas, Sabellius sought to define the oneness of God and the deity of Christ, as well as the Holy Spirit, but without falling into a polytheistic identity. He asked, "Have we one God or three gods?" Sabellius made his point by developing analogies. Remember we said the church was looking for frameworks. The creation of analogies was one way they tried to produce a framework for understanding the trinity. One of his popular analogies was the analogy of the sun. This one astronomical entity radiates both warmth and light. According to his model or analogy, the Father is the form of the sun, and the Son and Spirit are modes of the sun's self-expression where the Son is the sun as it is seen and the Spirit is the sun as it is felt. So you have here a kind of ontological analogy.

Yet, having said that, Sabellius did see some distinctions within God. It was not all merely verbal. There was, according to him, a certain kind of historical distinction within God. I should perhaps say that God distinguishes Himself historically. He could even say that God is one being in three persons. If you know anything about the classical language, you know it can really confuse things. He used the word *prosopon* and this word would later go to Latin as *persona* and come into English as 'person.' But originally, this word *prosopon* really meant something like 'a mask.' An actor playing a role in a drama wears a mask. And his idea is that God is able to change these masks as the circumstances arise and as the need arises. God wears three masks. He plays three different historical roles as He performs a number of historical operations. This means that Sabellius did distinguish between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in terms of history, which he divided into three dispensations: the Age of the Father, the Age of the Son, and the Age of the Spirit. But what was he saying there? In the Old Testament, we have the Father, but the Father incarnates as the Son. God changes His mask, and at Pentecost, the Son changes into the Spirit, and He changes His mask again. He could also think of these historical roles in functional terms. The Father is the Creator and the Lawgiver. The Son is the Redeemer. The Spirit is the Sanctifier or Glorifier. The orthodox theologian Tertullian of Carthage likened Sabellius' analogies to the changes that water undergoes when it is exposed to temperature variations. If you cool water sufficiently, it changes into ice. Should you heat it sufficiently, it will transform into steam. But whether it is vapor, liquid, or solid, it is water nevertheless. What is wrong with any of that? Is this the orthodox position? Is this the historical position of the church? It is in this direction that Tertullian and the tradition of distinction will move.