

Associated Gospel Churches - Articles of Faith and Doctrine

The Trinity of the Godhead

Part 2 - Trinitarian Controversies

November 27, 2005

The Trinity of the Godhead

II. The Trinity of the Godhead

We believe that the Godhead eternally exists in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; and that these three are one God, having precisely the same nature, attributes and perfection, and are worthy of precisely the same homage, confidence and obedience.

Genesis 1:26, 3:22, 11:6-8; John 1:1-4; Isaiah 63:8-10;

Matthew 29:19-20; Acts 5:3-4; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Mark 12:29;

Revelation 1:4-6; Hebrews 1:1-3

The Trinity of the Godhead

Agree or disagree?

1. There is one God who manifests Himself in three forms (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) at different times.
2. There is one God who exists in three Persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).
3. There are three gods who together form one God.
4. The Son was created by the Father before the world began.
5. The Son and the Holy Spirit are of similar substance as the Father.
6. The Son and the Holy Spirit are of the same substance as the Father.
7. The Father is identical to the Son, who is identical to the Holy Spirit.
8. The Son is subordinate to the Father, and the Holy Spirit is subordinate to both the Father and the Son.

The Trinity of the Godhead

- 3 statements summarize Biblical teaching on the Trinity:

1. God is three persons

“We believe that the Godhead eternally exists in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”

2. Each person is fully God

“...and that these three... [have] precisely the same nature, attributes and perfection, and are worthy of precisely the same homage, confidence and obedience.”

3. There is one God

“and that these three are one God...”

The Trinity of the Godhead

- Errors arise from denying any of 3 statements:

1. Denying that God is three persons

- **Modalism (aka Sabellianism, modalistic monarchianism)**

2. Denying that each person is fully God

- **Dynamic monarchianism**
- **Arianism**
- **Subordinationism**
- **Adoptionism**
- **Socinianism**

3. Denying that there is one God

- **Tritheism**

The Trinity of the Godhead

- **Early Church Fathers on the Trinity:**
 - no clear conception of the Trinity by early Church Fathers
 - **some saw the Logos (i.e. the Word) as an impersonal force that became personal at creation**
 - others saw the Logos as personal and co-eternal with the Father -- sharing the divine essence, but still subordinate in some ways
 - **not much thought given to the Holy Spirit**
 - some considered Him subordinate to the Father and to the Son

The Trinity of the Godhead

- **Tertullian (c. 160-230 AD):**
 - first to assert clearly the tri-personality of God while maintaining substantial unity of the three persons
 - **defended concept of Trinity against monarchianism**
 - did not reach understanding of the Trinity that would be more fully developed later
 - **e.g. believed there was a time when the Son did not exist**

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Monarchianism**

- major 3rd century heresy

- 2 main types

- **Dynamic monarchianism**

- denied the true deity of Jesus Christ

- saw Jesus as a man penetrated and gradually deified by the Logos

- similarities to modern day Mormonism - “God is a glorified and perfected man.”

- **Modalistic monarchianism**

- aka. modalism, or Sabellianism (after Sabellius, its most important proponent)

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that God is Three Persons
 - Modalistic monarchianism
 - aka. modalism, or Sabellianism
 - taught one supreme monarch (i.e. one God) who is *one person* revealing himself at different times in *three modes*
 - sometimes as Father, other times as Son or Holy Spirit
 - Scriptures cited as supporting view include:
 - “I and the Father are one...” (John 10:30)
 - “He who has seen me has seen the Father...” (John 14:9)

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Denying that God is Three Persons**
 - **Modalistic monarchianism - Fatal flaws**
 - **must deny all the accounts of personal interactions between Persons of the Trinity**
 - e.g. Jesus praying to the Father; the Father speaking at Jesus' baptism; the Spirit interceding for us before God
 - **denies the independence of God**
 - if God exists as only 1 Person, He would have no ability to love and communicate without other persons in His Creation
 - thus, would be dependent on His Creation in some ways

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Denying that God is Three Persons**
 - **Modalistic monarchianism**
 - **opposed by Tertullian & Hippolytus in the West, by Origen in the East**
 - **Modern correlates:**
 - doctrinal position of United Pentecostal Church
 - “modalistic prayers”
 - e.g. “Dear Heavenly Father,... thank you for dying on the Cross...”

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Denying that each Person is fully God**
 - **Arianism**
 - **major heresy of 4th century that denied the true and proper deity of the Son**
 - **started around 319 AD by Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria (died 336 AD)**
 - **first opposed by Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, then primarily by Athanasius (who would become bishop of Alexandria)**

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - **claimed that the Son was created by the Father before the creation of the world**
 - thus, did not exist before this time, nor did the Holy Spirit (i.e. is not eternal)
 - **saw the Son as the first and greatest of all created beings, and the one through whom all else was created**
 - worthy of praise and worship, but not equal to God in nature or attributes

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - believed that the Son was *homoi-ousios* (similar substance) with the Father, but not *homo-ousios* (same substance)
 - depended heavily on verses referring to Christ as God's "only begotten"
 - e.g. John 1:14; 3:16-18; 1 John 4:9
 - "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..." (John 3:16)

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - Some other passages used as supports
 - Colossians 1:15 - Christ the ‘firstborn of all creation’
 - Proverbs 8:22 (passage where wisdom is personified; seen by some as referring to Christ)
“The LORD brought me forth as the first of His works...”
 - passages in which Christ seems ‘inferior’ to the Father
John 5:19 - “...the Son can do nothing by Himself; He can only do what He sees His Father doing...”

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - resulted in Council of Nicea (325 AD), called by Emperor Constantine
 - Athanasius (age 29) attended as Alexander's secretary
 - against Arianism, Athanasius asserted
 - the Son is of the same essence (*homoousios*) as the Father, i.e. He is fully God
 - the Son existed eternally and was not created
 - the Son “begotten” by “eternal generation” from the essence of the Father (generation being an internal, necessary and eternal act of God)
 - our salvation requires that the Son must be fully God

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - Council of Nicea (325 AD)
 - a ‘compromise party’ emerged, led by Eusebius
 - tried to bring the two sides together by...
 - conceding almost everything to Alexander & Athanasius’ position...
 - BUT maintaining that the Son was *homoiousios* (similar substance) rather than *homoousios* (same substance) as the Father (it all boiled down to one little ‘i’ !!)
 - this position ultimately rejected

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Denying that each Person is fully God**
 - **Arianism**
 - **Council of Nicea (325 AD)**
 - **ultimately recognized Athanasius' position as correct and condemned Arius' teaching**
 - recognized the burden of Scripture that the Son is fully and completely God
 - whatever “begotten” meant, it could not mean that the Son was created
 - but decision tainted to some extent by pressure from Emperor Constantine in favor of Athanasius' position

Trinitarian Heresies

• Denying that each Person is fully God

– Arianism

• Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible, and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only-begotten, that is, *of the essence of the Father, God of God, and Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father (homoousion to patri)*; by whom all things were made in heaven and on earth; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he cometh to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - 50 years after Nicea marked by controversy
 - Arians continued to press their position; used their significant political power to prolong the controversy
 - Athanasius became focus of Arians' attacks
 - became bishop of Alexandria in 328 AD
 - endured false accusations, personal attacks
 - exiled 5 times, spent 17 years as fugitive in hiding
 - but continued writing and teaching against Arians
 - “*Athanasius contra mundum*” - “Athanasius against the world”

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - 50 years after Nicea marked by controversy
 - Church in the West largely followed ruling of Council of Nicea
 - Church in the East - more variable - various factions opposed to Council of Nicea
 - some said the Son was *heteroousios* (different substance) from the Father
 - others said the Son was *anomoios* (unlike the Father)
 - the majority were semi-Arian - believed the Son to be *homoiousios* (the compromise position at Nicea)

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - 50 years after Nicea marked by controversy
 - Councils of Arles and Milan (353-355 AD)
 - Emperor Constantius forces western bishops to fall in line with the Semi-Arian position
 - but “victory” results in breakdown of unity between groups opposed to Council of Nicea
 - Arians push harder complete adoption of their position
 - so do *heterousios* and *anomoios* groups
 - many Semi-Arians disagree; pushed into Nicene group

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - 50 years after Nicea marked by controversy
 - eventually, a younger “Nicene party” arose
 - disciples of the Eastern school of thought, but shaped by Athanasius and Nicene Creed
 - led by Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus
 - emphasized distinctives of the three Persons of the Trinity
 - vigorously defended unity of the 3 Persons and *homoousios* of both Son and Holy Spirit with Father
 - developed thought about the Holy Spirit

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - 50 years after Nicea marked by controversy
 - Council of Constantinople (381 AD)
 - drew Arian controversy to a close
 - modified original Nicene Creed
 - rejected Arian position - affirms that the Son is one substance with the Father
 - added that the Son was begotten of the Father “before all ages” - affirms that the Son is eternal
 - expanded sections on the the Son and the Holy Spirit

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - Nicene Creed (modified, 381 AD)

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, *begotten of the Father before all worlds*; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, *being of one substance with the Father*, by whom all things were made. Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets. And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - Nicene Creed (modified, 381 AD)
 - Council of Constantinople closed Arian controversy
 - Nicene Creed would also be centre of the later controversy over the “*filioque* clause”
 - 381 AD version stated that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father”
 - Western Church generally believed the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - Nicene Creed (modified, 381 AD)
 - The *filioque* controversy
 - Synod of Toledo (589 AD) inserted *filioque* (“and from the Son”); gained widespread use, then officially endorsed in 1017 AD
 - ultimately resulted in schism between Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Catholic) churches in 1054 AD
 - undercurrents - ecclesiastical politics and struggle over authority of the pope

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Arianism
 - Modern correlates
 - The Jehovah's Witnesses
 - deny that God exists as a Trinity
 - deny that Jesus is God
 - “He [Jesus] is the Son of God.... Jesus never claimed equality with God and thus is not part of a Trinity.”*
 - believe that Jesus was created by God before anything else
 - believe the Holy Spirit to be an impersonal force

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that each Person is fully God
 - Subordinationism
 - related to Arianism
 - believes that the Son is eternal (not created) but still not equal to God in substance or attributes
 - Son seen as inferior (subordinate) to the Father in substance
 - ‘*ontologic* subordination,’ not just ‘*economic* subordination’

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Denying that each Person is fully God**
 - **Subordinationism**
 - **advocated by Origen (c.185-254 AD)**
 - **advocated by many ‘semi-Arians’ during Arian controversy**
 - **influenced by Origen’s teachings**
 - **this position ruled out by Nicene Creed**

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Denying that each Person is fully God**
 - **Adoptionism**
 - **teaches that Jesus was not God, but an ordinary man who was ‘adopted’ as God’s Son at his baptism**

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Denying that each Person is fully God**
 - **Socinianism**
 - **after Laelius Socinus (1525-1562)**
 - **denies that God exists as a Trinity**
 - **denies eternal pre-existence of the Son**
 - **held that Christ was just a man, not of same substance as the Father**
 - **saw the Holy Spirit as a virtue or energy flowing from God to man**
 - **forerunners of Unitarian and modernist conceptions of God**

Trinitarian Heresies

- Denying that there is one God
 - Tritheism
 - belief that there are 3 Gods
 - Christians sometimes accused of tritheism
 - not a prominent belief in history of the Church
 - Mormonism seems to teach tritheism
 - “Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe in God the Father, in his Son Jesus Christ and in the Holy Ghost. The three make up the Godhead - one in purpose but separate in being.”
 - from *LDS Core Doctrines and Beliefs*

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Some observations & lessons**

1. **“There is nothing new under the sun”**

- **most modern day heresies are just old ones repackaged**

- e.g. Arianism --> Jehovah's Witnesses

- **importance of knowing Church History to help recognize “new” errors as they emerge**

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Some observations & lessons**

2. The importance of fundamentals

- **minor differences in fundamental doctrines can result in widely divergent endpoints**
 - e.g. *homoiousios* vs. *homoousios*
 - difference of one iota (“i”)
 - major impact on other doctrines (e.g. atonement, justification, etc.)
 - ultimately results in different religion altogether

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Some observations & lessons**

3. The majority view is not always the correct one

- **more people believing something does not necessarily make it right**
- **e.g. “*Athanasius contra mundum*”**
 - Athanasius at times seemed to stand alone against the world in his defense of doctrine of the Trinity
- **Scripture (not opinion polls!) must be “the only supreme authority in all matters of faith, teaching and behaviour.”**

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Some observations & lessons**

4. The importance of leaders who will defend the truth, even at great personal cost

- **Athanasius**

- faced personal attacks, false accusations, attempts on his life
- exiled 5 times, spent 17 years as a fugitive
- but continued to stand for truth and ultimately prevailed
 - ***Athanasian Creed*** - not written by Athanasius, but named after him

Trinitarian Heresies

- **Some observations & lessons**

5. The sovereignty of God in the life of the Church

- **raised Godly men at the right time to defend and advance the cause of truth**
- **overruled political and ecclesiastical powers who tried to order things for their own ends**
 - e.g. Councils of Arles and Milan (where Emperor Constantius imposed semi-Arian view) seemed a major victory for Arianism, but marked the beginning of its end as a major force in the Church
- **“...I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matt. 16:18)**

The Trinity of the Godhead

- **Summary**

- 3 statements summarizing Biblical teaching:

- 1. God is three persons**

“We believe that the Godhead eternally exists in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”

- 2. Each person is fully God**

“...and that these three... [have] precisely the same nature, attributes and perfection, and are worthy of precisely the same homage, confidence and obedience.”

- 3. There is one God**

“and that these three are one God...”

The Trinity of the Godhead

II. The Trinity of the Godhead

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Matthew 29:19-20; Acts 5:3-4; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Mark 12:29;

Revelation 1:4-6; Hebrews 1:1-3

Next class

**The Deity and the Virgin Birth of
our Lord Jesus Christ**

December 4, 2005

References

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- **Enroth, Ronald, et al.** *A Guide to Cults & New Religions.* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p.117-134.