

ORIGIN of the TRINITY – LESSON 3

– Developments in the Early Church; The Creeds ; What Does Martin Luther Say?; Quotes from Pastor Holm’s Sermon

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Goals – Gather information as to whether the concept of the Trinity is biblically based and a reasonable conclusion to be drawn from the Bible – both Old and New Testaments.

Gather information about the necessity of the theological debate, evaluation, “in-fighting”, and even church power politics. Why did it occur?

Present and ask critical questions about the resulting theology. Might we have reached a different conclusion or presented it with a different twist?

Recap of First Two Weeks – Reviewed and discussed Old Testament references; reviewed and discussed New Testament References; discussed what we are trying to accomplish; briefly introduced week three topics listed in the outline below.

Developments in the Early Church – Read/discuss Summary and Footnote.

Discussion of the Creeds – Participant should prepare and lead the discussion.

Discussion of Marty’s Explanations – Participant should prepare and lead the discussion.

Review Pastor Holm’s sermon – For discussion.

Developments in the Early Church

Through the interactions of society, politics, and various Christian religions of the day, the early church gained a theology. This happened over several painful centuries after the death of Christ. And the struggles continued for almost two millennia with shocking situations and events until almost modern times. One of the most significant things the Church gained in the first few centuries was the doctrine of the Trinity. At the same time the church gained a hierarchy of church leaders who could run the church and guarantee its adherence to proper belief and practice.

Early on there were struggles between factions of the early Christian community. It is important to point out that if some other form of Christianity had won the early “competition” for dominance, our familiar doctrines might never have become the “standard”. This includes our concept of only one God, the creator and His son who is both human and divine – and the doctrine of the Trinity might never have developed. Our creeds and the New Testament itself could have been much different. If other factions had prevailed, Christians might never have had the Old Testament – or they may have had ONLY the Old Testament. If it had happened

differently, the Roman empire may not have embraced Christianity and it could have ended up a very non-descript part of the current world. It is somewhat disconcerting to know that at one time or another, all of the non-canonical books were revered as sacred, inspired, and scriptural. Such was the diversity of opinion available in the first few centuries after the crucifixion.

One example of variations of the ancient Christians has come to us from the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is a huge topic, but suffice it to say for this discussion, the driving impulse to think about the Holy Spirit in our terms was not present in the Qumran texts. For example, there is nothing in the Qumran documents that in the slightest way resembles Pentecost in the early church. The “Qumran Spirit” is not a divine person. And there is no Qumran parallel to the Christian concept of the Trinity. While the stress on the Spirit in the Qumran is significant, it can’t be said that the New Testament derived its doctrine of the Spirit from Qumran. While there are several aspects of our current church which are not found in the Qumran, that doesn’t mean that the Qumran sect wasn’t a direct ancestor of the ultimate orthodox church, but that can’t be proven given current evidence.

As would be expected there was much early confusion and debate about the difficult concept of one God, the creator – but if Christ is God he must be the one. If he is a different God, then there are two – and so on. A group referred to as “proto-orthodox” came to consider the relationship of God the Father, and God the Son, as being more complicated than an exact identification. The theologians who began working on this problem are the ones who developed the traditional doctrines of the Trinity. Scripture passages dealing with Christ, his Father, and the Spirit were carefully examined, combined, amalgamated – all in order to make sense of what I believe the Roman Catholic Church considers the “Trinitarian Mystery”.

These early proto-orthodox Christian theologians developed models for understanding the Godhead which impressed later generations as moving in the right direction but still in much need of development. In the third century AD, the famous theologian Origen of Alexandria, (with a wealthy Christian named Ambrose as his benefactor) wrote massive commentaries on both the Old and New Testaments. His theology was biblically rooted from start to finish. Without belaboring his thought process, after having developed a complex theory of Jesus as “one with the Father”, he still relegated Jesus as subordinate to God. For this reason Origen, in later centuries, was condemned for this theory.

Some time later, the orthodox thinkers began thinking in trinitarian terms. (Actually, in the second century AD, Tertullian was the first Latin theologian to use the term Trinity, but the details were to be slowly worked out over several centuries.) There are some who believe that the concept of the Trinity was influenced by numerous Pagan traditions. The philosophers and theologians of the early centuries AD were familiar with the common culture of the day which was filled with pagan triune gods – and therefore it is considered reasonable by some to assume that these theologians could have examined and considered these Trinitarian concepts which seemed to fit their issue.

In any case, when the Roman Empire was deteriorating, Constantine came to power. He defeated Emperor Licinius and is believed to have ended the Christian persecutions. He wished to unify the Empire and some feel he chose Christianity to do so. But Christianity itself was far

from unified. A significant controversy at this time revolved around the “Arian” Christians who believed (among other things) that Christ was the Son of God and lesser than, or subordinate to, God the Father. In any case, this controversy greatly agitated the Emperor, and to advance his goal of Christian unity, Constantine convened the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. The result of this meeting, among other things, was an advancing of the Trinity “formula” for explaining, theologically, a significant basis of Christian beliefs. While it seems much debate and in-fighting surrounded this process, it is some consolation to remember the Creed developed at Nicea was the real choice of a great majority of the exceedingly devoted religious scholars present.

Soooo.....the proto-orthodox thinkers found themselves to be the “last ones standing” and were forced into the orthodox forms of Christianity of the fourth and fifth centuries. The Arian movement lives on today in the Unitarian Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and several others. Sadly, there are reports that there was violence and persecution surrounding events soon after the Council of Nicea.

These early developments gave us the current New Testament, books of the Old Testament that are considered canonical, the developed concept of the Trinity, our Creeds, our sacraments, and other Christian doctrines.

Move forward to the 1500s – Erasmus edited the text of the Greek New Testament, with some controversy present because of his decision to omit a common reference to the trinity – the battle goes on. A brief time later, William Tyndale relied on one of his texts to produce the first English printing of the New Testament.

And in the 1500s, John Calvin wrote a controversial set of Christian doctrines. He seems to be a very devoted but intolerant individual who once agreed to meet with a deeply religious man named Michael Servetus, a physician from Spain. Remember that there is no direct doctrinal declaration in the New Testament which directly clearly stipulates our trinitarian concept. The physician was deeply interested in the scriptures, but he was unable to accept the Trinity. He was interrogated, became a fugitive, and John Calvin suggested that so vile a foe of the Bible and its faith be promptly beheaded. But others insisted the Spanish physician be put on trial to document his heretical views. Ultimately, he was burned at the stake at the end of the trial. *Uff Da!*

In summary, it appears to me that the introduction of the Trinity, and ultimately the current version of the New Testament, happened over a long time and in the midst of a flourishing Christian church, but which was plagued by confusing and sometimes even brutal competitions among the many theologies and factions of the day. It took a controversial, non-baptized, and theologically “flip-flopping” Roman Emperor, Constantine to bring together several factions of religious bishops/pastors and finally create some focus for the church. It seems to me that his motives for doing so are not understood (politics, family pressure, legacy building, etc.). I refer to Constantine as “flip-flopping” because, several years after this Council of Nicea at which the competing Arians were defeated with his endorsement, he eventually had his son educated as an Arian, and on his death bed he was baptized by an Arian clergyman (He was not unlike today’s politicians in their ability to quickly “change horses”).

As a footnote, it was one of the “winners” at this Council, Athanasius, who several years later is the first to list the current 27 books as the New Testament Canon. What happened to arrive at that list is not yet clear to me. From my reading so far, I don’t think that the first Council did much in this regard, and indeed probably didn’t intend to. Rather, the Council of Nicea was established to “iron out” the strong divisions existing regarding the theology of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – the Trinity, and what it represents. At that time in history, the canon of the New Testament was actually ratified only by widespread consensus rather than by official proclamation. By the beginning of the fifth century, most churches in the Christian world actually agreed on its basic content. There was no official, church wide pronouncement on the canonical New Testament until the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century – but by then the “official 27” were already “set” as scripture.

The Creeds



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The Apostles' Creed

About the Creed

The Apostles' Creed as we now have it dates from the eighth century. But in truth its roots are in the "Old Roman Creed," which was used in some parts of the ancient church as early as the third century. Before the Old Roman Creed, in turn, were variations rooted in the New Testament itself. While this creed does not come from the apostles (Jesus' followers sent to share the good news), its roots are apostolic (in keeping with the teaching of the New Testament apostles). The creed describes the faith into which we are baptized and therefore is used in the rites of Baptism and Affirmation of Baptism.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead.* On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

*or "he descended into hell," another translation of this text in widespread use.

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The Nicene Creed

About the Creed

The Nicene Creed was first adopted by church leaders in 325 at the First Council of Nicaea. Later that century, at the Council of Constantinople (381) some minor changes were made and it was again reaffirmed at the Council of Chalcedon (451). This ecumenical creed is the most widely accepted creed in the Christian faith and it is an essential part of the doctrine and liturgy of Lutheran churches. Historically it has been used at Holy Communion on Sundays and major feasts.

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son,* who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

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The Athanasian Creed

About the Creed

This creed is of uncertain origin. It was supposedly prepared in the time of Athanasius, the great theologian of the fourth century, but many scholars have theorized that it seems more likely that it dates from the fifth or sixth centuries because of its Western character. It communicates two essential points of Bible teaching: that God's Son and the Holy Spirit are of one being with the Father; and that Jesus Christ is true God and true man in one person. Traditionally it is considered the "Trinitarian Creed." In many congregations it is read aloud in corporate worship on Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost.

Athanasian Creed

Whoever wants to be saved should above all cling to the catholic faith.

Whoever does not guard it whole and inviolable will doubtless perish eternally.

Now this is the catholic faith: We worship one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the divine being.

For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Spirit is still another.

But the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, equal in glory, coeternal in majesty.

What the Father is, the Son is, and so is the Holy Spirit.

Uncreated is the Father; uncreated is the Son; uncreated is the Spirit.

The Father is infinite; the Son is infinite; the Holy Spirit is infinite.

Eternal is the Father; eternal is the Son; eternal is the Spirit: And yet there are not three eternal beings, but one who is eternal; as there are not three uncreated and unlimited beings, but one who is uncreated and unlimited.

Almighty is the Father; almighty is the Son; almighty is the Spirit: And yet there are not three almighty beings, but one who is almighty.

Thus the Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God: And yet there are not three gods, but one God.

Thus the Father is Lord; the Son is Lord; the Holy Spirit is Lord: And yet there are not three lords, but one Lord.

As Christian truth compels us to acknowledge each distinct person as God and Lord, so catholic religion forbids us to say that there are three gods or lords.

The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten; the Son was neither made nor created, but was alone begotten of the Father; the Spirit was neither made nor created, but is proceeding from the Father and the Son.

Thus there is one Father, not three fathers; one Son, not three sons; one Holy Spirit, not three spirits.

And in this Trinity, no one is before or after, greater or less than the other; but all three persons are in themselves, coeternal and coequal; and so we must worship the Trinity in unity and the one God in three persons.

Whoever wants to be saved should think thus about the Trinity.

It is necessary for eternal salvation that one also faithfully believe that our Lord Jesus Christ became flesh.

For this is the true faith that we believe and confess: That our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and man.

He is God, begotten before all worlds from the being of the Father, and he is man, born in the world from the being of his mother – existing fully as God, and fully as man with a rational soul and a human body; equal to the Father in divinity, subordinate to the Father in humanity.

Although he is God and man, he is not divided, but is one Christ.

He is united because God has taken humanity into himself; he does not transform deity into humanity.

He is completely one in the unity of his person, without confusing his natures.

For as the rational soul and body are one person, so the one Christ is God and man.

He suffered death for our salvation. He descended into hell and rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

At his coming all people shall rise bodily to give an account of their own deeds.

Those who have done good will enter eternal life, those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.

This is the catholic faith.

One cannot be saved without believing this firmly and faithfully.

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What Does Martin Luther Say?

In Luther's Large Catechism, he discusses The Third Article to the Apostles Creed which is repeated here:

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Christian church (*the term "catholic" is not used in Luther's catechism*), the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen

Some of Marty's comments:

He gives this article a title of "Sanctification". This phrase expresses and represents the PERSON of the Holy Spirit and also His job, namely, to make us holy (whatever that is).

The Third Article isn't just a "catch-all" of everything else we believe in, as has sometimes been suggested. Rather, in its entirety it describes the Holy Spirit and VERY succinctly describes the job of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit accomplishes His work of sanctification through the various means which are named in this article - specifically, the community of the saints (Christian church), the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the live everlasting. In other words the Holy Spirit makes us holy through placing/offering us a place in the Christian church, forgiving our sins, Jesus' resurrection – all resulting in eternal life.

This means he first leads us into His holy congregation, placing us into the arms of the church, where He preaches to us and brings us to Christ. We receive this information through the preaching of the Gospel. The redemptive work has thereby taken place and is finished, for Christ has purchased and won salvation for us through his suffering.

Thus to sanctify or make holy is to bring us to Christ our Lord to receive these treasures, which we could never have obtained by ourselves. The Holy spirit "arranges" things so that they cannot injure us because we are within the Christian community in which there is complete forgiveness of sins.

God has given us His Son and His Holy Spirit in order to bring us to Himself through them. This is Grace through faith which we couldn't accomplish on our own. (*Is this statement really consistent with the concept of "one God, separate but equal persons, all the same single God"?*)

The Father gives us all created things (the Creator); the Son gives us redemption through his death and resurrection; and the Holy Spirit gives us all His sanctifying gifts.

Quotes from Pastor Holm's Sermon – June 3, 2007

Title: The Marrow of the Mystery / Trinity Sunday

The name for God's personal, revealing imaginative voice is the Trinity

It is always the same God but the person – the “face” or voice by which we receive God's revelation is a surprise and a mystery.

The Trinity is not something thought up by theologians to deal with advanced mysteries – remote from daily work – no it is the work of Christians like us, teaching each other how to read Bibles attentively, personally!

In the Trinity we are faced with the reality we are not in control. We are not able to serve people on their terms – but only on the terms of who God is in Himself.

God is more than we can comprehend. A God that can be understood is NO God.

The Trinity keeps us in touch with the immense largeness of God; the immediate personal nature of God.

We worship, meditate, and pray – in the name of the Trinity – which keeps our lives both large and personal when the devil is using every strategy to make you and me small and mean.

Our baptismal naming, in the name of the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit summons us to a world of the Trinity – where all is attention and adoration, sacrifice and hospitality, obedience and love.

The only way we can approach God is through worship: “Holy, Holy, Holy.”