

BEHOLDING THE WONDER OF THE TRINITY

Bruce A. Ware, Professor of Christian Theology, Southern Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

Session One:

GOD IN THREE PERSONS: HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

I. Introduction

I invite you to join me on a journey to *know better the God whom you already know*, and in particular, to see afresh something more of the glory and wonder of the One God who is none other than Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To illustrate, consider afresh the God whom you know from Ephesians 1:1-14.

II. Historical and Biblical Overview: Why did Christians come to Believe the Trinity?

A. OT Affirmation of One God

Genesis 1:1 – In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Deuteronomy 4:35 – To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him.

Deuteronomy 6:4 – Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!

1 Kings 8:59-60 – ⁵⁹ [Solomon's address after temple build] And may these words of mine, with which I have made supplication before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, that He may maintain the cause of His servant and the cause of His people Israel, as each day requires, ⁶⁰ so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no one else.

Isaiah 45:5-6 – ⁵I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. ⁶ I will gird you, though you have not known Me; That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other

Isaiah 46:9 – Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me.

B. NT Affirmation of One God

John 17:3 – This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God

1 Corinthians 8:6 – yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him

1 Timothy 2:5 – For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

Romans 3:30 – since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

James 2:19 – You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

III. Biblical Teaching: Scriptural Trinitarianism

- A. Father is God – clearly this is the case, and never questioned, as asserted in 1 Cor 8:6 that we just read. Who did Jesus honor, to whom did Jesus pray, whose will did Jesus obey, if not God, his Father?
- B. Jesus is God – here it gets very interesting. For even some of the very passages affirming that there is one God raised questions in the minds of the early Christians about Jesus in particular and his relationship to this one God.

John 17:3 – This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent — (distinction and identity)

1 Corinthians 8:6 – yet for us there is *but* one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we *exist* through Him — (distinction and identity)

John 1:1; John 8:58; Mark 2:5-11 (forgives sin); Heb 1:2 (Creator), 3a (exact representation of his nature), 3b (upholds the universe by the word of his power), 6 (Let all God’s angels worship him), 8 (Of the Son he says, Thy throne O God is forever and ever), and 10-12 (quotes Ps 102:25-27, where God is eternal and immutable).

- C. Holy Spirit is God – Acts 5:3-4 (lied to the HS . . . not lied to man but to God); 1 Cor 2:10-11 (HS knows the thoughts of God); 1 Cor 3:16 (you are a temple of God, the Spirit dwells in you); Heb 9:14 (eternal Spirit)
- D. Triadic Passages – Matt 28:19-20 (baptize in the name of F, S, HS); 2 Cor 13:14 (grace of the LJC, love of God, fellowship of the HS)

IV. Historical Overview

- A. Council of Nicea (AD 325)—Affirmed Christ is fully God
 - 1. Sabellius—modalistic Monarchianism, or Modalism, or Sabellianism, **rejected**
 - 2. Arius—dynamistic Monarchianism, or Subordinationism of essence, or Arianism, **rejected**
 - 3. Athanasius—won the day, and **affirmed** that Christ was *homoousios* with the Father
- B. Council of Constantinople (AD 381)—Affirmed Christ is Fully Man; Holy Spirit is Fully God
 - 1. Apollanarius—docetic view, that Christ was fully God but *not* fully human, **rejected**
 - 2. Arius’s followers—the “pneumatomachians” (“Spirit fighters”) view, that the Spirit is just the presence of God, an impersonal force, **rejected**
 - 3. Cappadocian Fathers (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus)—**affirmed** the Spirit is, with the Father and Son, fully God

C. Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431)—Affirmed Christ is One Person

1. Nestorianism—Christ was fully God and fully man by being two full persons joined together, **rejected**
2. **Affirmed** that Christ was fully God in nature, and fully man in nature, and so one person with two natures—hypostatic union, i.e., the union of two natures (*ousia*) in one person (*hypostasis*)

D. Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451)—Affirmed Christ has Two Complete Natures in One Person

1. Eutychianism—that Christ’s two nature co-mingled within him, producing a sort of humanized deity and divinized humanity, **rejected**
2. **Affirmed** that Christ was fully God and fully man in one person, his two natures being *conjoined* indissolubly forever together but not *confused*.

E. Definition of the Trinity (Augustinian in nature):

God’s whole and undivided essence belongs equally, eternally, simultaneously, and fully to each of the three Persons of the Godhead, so that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each is fully God while each is his own personal expression, in role and activity, of the one eternal and undivided divine essence.

V. Conclusion, and Prelude for Following Sessions

The Christian faith affirms, then, that there is one and only one God, eternally existing while fully and simultaneously expressed in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each member of the Godhead is equally God, each is eternally God, and each is fully God—not three gods but three Persons of the one Godhead. Each Person is equal in essence as each possesses fully the identically same and eternal divine nature, yet each is also an eternal and distinct personal expression of that one undivided divine nature.

Because of this, what *distinguishes* each Person of the Godhead from each other is not and cannot be *the divine nature* of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. This—the one and undivided divine nature—is possessed equally, eternally, simultaneously, and fully by each of the three Persons of the Godhead. Therefore, what distinguishes each Person of the Godhead from the other Persons are the *relationships* that each has with each of the other Persons, and the particular *roles* each Person carries out in relation to the other Persons. In light of both the *equality of essence yet differentiation of relationship and role* that that exist among the Persons of the Godhead, we realize that our task is to seek to discern just how those relationships and roles are expressed within the Trinity of Persons.

And this we will do, focusing our attention on the distinctive role of the Father among the Trinitarian Persons along with the Son’s role in relation to the Father (**Session 2**), the Son’s role in the incarnation particularly in relation to the Spirit (**Session 3**), the Spirit’s role with the Son following the Son’s resurrection, ascension and exaltation (**Session 4**), and finally some of the practical relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity expanded on, in application to our lives, homes, churches, and ministries (**Session 5**). In so doing, may we see more clearly something more of the greatness and glory of the God whom we know. And may we see that the One God is *One* only as He also is *Three*: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And in this, may the triune God receive the honor, praise, and glory due to his name alone.