

UNIT 3: GOD THE TRINITY

1. 'Heresy': Misunderstandings of the Doctrine of the Trinity

A number of common misunderstandings abound concerning the doctrine of the Trinity as it is expressed in orthodox Christian teaching. Two examples are modalism (also known as sabellianism, after a proponent of this view named Sabellius) and subordinationism.

Subordinationism is the view that the Son is subordinate to the Father, or that the Holy Spirit is subordinate to the Father and the Son. Within the early Church, while many accepted the divinity of Jesus Christ as the incarnation of the Son, the Son being co-equal with the Father, many denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. This is a subordinationist view.

Modalism is the view that the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit refer only to 'modes' of God's existence and are not essential to God in himself. Those who held this view were concerned to preserve the absolute unity of God by claiming that 'the Son' and 'the Holy Spirit' merely referred to two manifestations of the single Godhead.

An analogy will make this clear. I may have three roles: teacher, father and husband. These are three 'modes' or manifestations of my single being. None of them, however, is *essential* to me. I would still be me even if I were not a teacher, father or husband. In other words, these 'modes' or 'roles' are not essential to who I am in myself. This is how the modalists consider the names 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' in relation to God.

Orthodox teaching, however, does not consider these names as inessential modes. The names 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' refer to what God is essentially in *himself*.

One popular expression of modalism in the contemporary Church is the reference to God as 'Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer', roughly corresponding to 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. However, the doctrine of the Trinity is **NOT** claiming that the Father is the creator, the Son the redeemer and the Spirit the sanctifier. The work of God is not 'apportioned' in this way. Rather, all three persons of the Trinity are at work in every moment and event of creation, redemption and sanctification. While an orthodox Trinitarian such as Barth would not deny that God is 'creator, redeemer and sustainer', he or she would deny that calling God 'creator, redeemer and sustainer' says anything about God *in himself*. By contrast, the name 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' *does* express what God is eternally in himself. God would be Father, Son and Holy Spirit even if he had not created the universe and saved humanity from sin (as he might not have done, because God is not bound to the contingency of the universe).

If modalism is concerned to maintain the absolute and essential unity of the Godhead, its main concern will be with any doctrine of God which suggests that the name 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' refers to three, independent and self-

subsisting Gods. This view is known as tritheism. Some have suggested that the Cappadocian Fathers, whose formulation of Trinitarian doctrine came to be one of the most influential in the Church, hints at tritheism.

2. The Cappadocian Fathers

The Cappadocians, Basil of Caesarea (c.330 AD-379 AD) (sometimes known as Basil the Great), Gregory of Nazianzus (c.329 AD-c.390 AD) and Gregory of Nyssa (c.330 AD-c.395 AD) (the younger brother of Basil) were the chief influence which led to the defeat of the heresy known as Arianism (named after the chief proponent, Arius). Arianism (which is a sophisticated and varied theological standpoint) denied the divinity of Christ and, consequently, the incarnation and doctrine of the Trinity. Arianism was finally defeated at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.

The particular contribution of the Cappadocians to the formulation of the Trinitarian dogma comes in the area of language and the distinction between *hypostasis* (person) in *ousia* (substance or essence). According to the Cappadocians, God is three persons (*hypostaseis*) in one and the same substance (*homoousios*).

The Cappadocians explain this by reference to an analogy. Peter, James and John are three persons who share a common nature, namely 'humanity'. Does this hint at tritheism? On the face of it, yes. However, Gregory of Nyssa regards the reference to three human persons sharing their humanity as only an analogy. After all, God is his nature in a more essential and necessary fashion, as we discussed in the last unit.

How are the persons of the Trinity distinguished by the Cappadocians? By their 'procession': the Father eternally begets the Son and is himself not begotten, the Son is begotten of the Father, the Spirit proceeds or is breathed from the Father. Note that Western formulations of the Creed profess that the Holy Spirit 'proceeds from the Father AND THE SON'. This is known as the '*filioque* clause'. The denial by the Eastern Church that the Spirit proceeds from the Father AND the Son has been a distinguishing feature of their doctrine. However, a number of theologians, amongst them Aquinas, deny the genuine importance of this difference, while others, notably Barth, spend much time discussing the issue.

Please note that the language of 'begetting' and 'processing' is not in any way temporal and does not imply that the Father comes first, the Son second and the Spirit third. There was never a moment when the Son was not begotten or when the Spirit had not proceeded. Neither does this view imply in any way that the Father is 'more God' than the Son or the Spirit (such a view would be known as 'subordinationism' – subordinating one person of the Trinity to another). The Cappadocians are clear that all three are fully and wholly God. The point might best be described in this way: the Father is fully God, but is not the Son or the Spirit; the Son is fully God, but is not the Father or the Spirit; the Spirit is fully God, but is not the Father or the Son; God is fully Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is difficult to over-emphasise the importance of the Cappadocian contribution to Trinitarian doctrine and you should pay attention to their thought as you consider the topic of this unit.

3. St. Augustine of Hippo on the Trinity

In his great work *De Trinitate* ('On the Trinity'), St. Augustine refers to the *vestigia trinitatis*. These are 'vestiges of the Trinity' which abound in creation. Sometimes, the literature refers to Augustine's 'psychological analogies'. What are these '*vestigia trinitatis*' or 'psychological analogies'?

In the previous unit, we saw the way in which effects resemble their causes, and therefore the way in which creation resembles God. Augustine holds a similar view and claims that vestiges of the Trinity can be found in creation, particularly in the human person and intellect. Please note, in pointing out these analogies Augustine is NOT engaged in natural theology. In other words, he is not making some observations concerning the human mind and working up to demonstrate that God is Trinity. Rather, he understands the doctrine of the Trinity to be revealed, and he uses this doctrine to understand the human person and intellect. In other words, Augustine is working theologically from **God to humanity**, and not from humanity to God.

McGrath offers a very unfavourable reading of Augustine's *vestigia trinitatis*. What follows offers a brief and imperfect explanation of Augustine's view. Have you ever caught yourself talking to yourself? We all certainly think about and consider ourselves. In other words, we are self-conscious. In order to talk to ourselves or consider ourselves, it is almost as if we have to 'step outside ourselves', or project another of ourselves to which we then talk. Now Augustine (and indeed this is articulated more explicitly by Aquinas eight hundred years later) claims that this 'self-expression' or 'self-consciousness' which involves us 'projecting another self' is a faint image or 'vestige' of the self-projection of God as the Son is begotten of the Father. However, God's 'self-projection' – the Son from the Father – is so complete and perfect that that which 'emanates' or is begotten of God is just as much God as that from which it emanated or was begotten. My self-projections are not perfect – I only produce faint, imperfect and flawed views of myself. God does not. God knows himself most perfectly by the emanation of the Son and Spirit from the Father.

Augustine points to many other *vestigia*, most notably grounding the structure of thought within the Godhead. So mind, knowledge and love, as well as memory, understanding and will, are triadic vestiges of God the Trinity. Importantly, Augustine is engaged in authentic theological reflection: the doctrine of the Trinity is used to understand the structure of human self-consciousness and thought. It is no accident that we are self-conscious or that we think as we do: these are vestiges or 'participations' in reality or being itself, namely God.

4. Karl Barth on the Trinity

The set reading for this unit is one of the most important statements of the doctrine of the Trinity in recent systematic theology. It comes from the work of Karl Barth.

For Barth, revelation and the doctrine of the Trinity are utterly intertwined. Whereas Schleiermacher had ended his systematic theology entitled *The Christian Faith* with the Trinity as perhaps the last word of the theologian concerning God, Barth begins with the Trinity. The Trinity is the very form of dogmatic theology, according to Barth.

We noted in the last unit that Barth begins his theology from the fact that God's Word has been addressed to humanity and that the Word of God had been heard. God has spoken and revealed himself. Barth asks, 'what must be true of God if God has spoken and revealed himself?' For Barth, God is sovereignly free and in no sense does he rely on humanity for his revelation. The whole is accomplished by God alone. So God is the one who is revealed, he is the revealer, and he is what Barth refers to as 'revealedness', that is, the one who *teaches* that the revealer reveals the revealed. For Barth, the Father is revealed, the Son reveals the Father, and the Spirit teaches us that the Son reveals the Father. So the Trinity is the very form of God's self-revelation. In terms of theological jargon, we can say that the Son is the ontological and the Spirit the noetic possibility of God's self-revelation. In other words, God the Son is the being of God which makes possible God's self-revelation, while the Spirit teaches and makes known to us God's self-revelation.

5. The Text: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, ch.2, paragraphs 8 and 9

This is a lengthy passage which you will need to read in conjunction with some secondary literature. The portions in small typeface often contain details and are not integral to understanding Barth's main argument.

Paragraph 8 merges together the theme of the last unit with the theme of this unit. Paragraph 9 deals more particularly with the doctrine of the Trinity.

Further Reading

On Barth

Bromiley, G. (1979), *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), ch.2, especially pp.15-17

Iain Taylor, 'In Defence of Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Trinity' in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5(1), 2003, pp.33-46.

Torrance, A., 'The Trinity' in Webster, J. (2000) (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.72-91

Hartwell, H. (1964), *The Theology of Karl Barth: an Introduction* (London: Duckworth)

Dennis Jowers, 'The reproach of modalism: a difficulty for Karl

Barth's doctrine of the trinity' in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56(2): 231–246 (2003). **This work is available through ATHENS at 'Cambridge Journals Online'.**

Webster, J. (2000), *Karl Barth* (London: Continuum), ch.3, especially pp.57-64

Williams, R. (1979), 'Barth on the Triune God' in Sykes, S. (ed.), *Karl Barth: studies of his theological method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp.147-193

Williams, R. (2000), *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell), ch.9 (originally published in *Modern Theology* 2(3), 1986, pp.197-212)

Ward, G., 'The Revelation of the Holy Other as Wholly Other: Between Barth's Theology of the Word and Levinas's Philosophy of Saying' in *Modern Theology* 9(2), 1993

Augustine

Augustine of Hippo (trans. Hill, E.) (1991), *The Trinity* (New York: New City Press), especially bks. 1, 9, 10 & 11

Stump, E. and Kretzmann, N. (eds) (2001), *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), ch.7

The Cappadocians

Meredith, A. (1999), *Gregory of Nyssa* (London: Routledge), ch.2

*Meredith, A. (1995), *The Cappadocians* (London: Geoffrey Chapman)

*Kelly, J. N. D. (1993), *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A&C Black), ch.10

Coakley, S. (2002), *Powers and Submissions: spirituality, philosophy and gender* (Oxford: Blackwell), ch.7.