

Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ

Lesson 5: Very God of Very God

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law...”

Galatians 4:4

“Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” John 8:58

“Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”

Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” John 20:26–28

Introduction

As we are living in and reckoning with a very heavy situation, contemplating the nature of God and the majestic heights of all that is true about His Being is a welcome antidote to the stress and fear that the world, our flesh, and the devil are trying to impress upon us. The uncertainty and chaotic nature of global events seems intent on sapping our mental and emotional energy. We must be conscious of these forces and seek to guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. The LORD is faithful and He will guard us against the evil one by directing our hearts to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ (2 Thess. 3:3).

The world wants us to join them in getting caught up in speculation, divisiveness, and fear. It wants us to think that if we know enough then we'll be able to get back in control of world events. This clambering, frantic mindset is not befitting of the children of the gracious and all-powerful God and He gives us a great remedy. He reveals Himself to us and invites us to reflect on all that He is. This draws us out of ourselves. He draws us out of our current situation...whether it be plenty or hunger, abundance or need...and gives us contentment (Phil. 4:11). He pulls us out of our chronological snobbery which tempts us to put ourselves and this present moment at the climax of all time. God's revelation, and I think specifically revelation about the majestic mystery of His being and nature, draws us into eternity and unending depths of wonder. Our pastor gave us a great feast of this in his message on Sunday on the doctrine of God. We will now consider some of these things again with a particular emphasis on the deity of Christ and the unique aspects of the second Person of the Trinity, God the Son.

Over the next three lessons we'll dive deep into the nature of the incarnate historical person of Jesus Christ. We'll look at how scripture lays out the complex and mysterious nature of Jesus and how the church has strained to find appropriate, sufficient words and concepts to try to convey to the finite human mind the majesty of the eternal God. Concepts specific to the Son of God tie into our overall understanding of the Trinity because the relational dynamics of the Trinity help us to see the uniqueness of the persons of the Trinity while still holding to the unity of the essence of the Trinity. To look at the Son, we must also look at the entire trinitarian nature of God along with the unique aspects of the other Persons which comprise the Trinity. Seeing

the whole as well as the dynamics at play in the relationships between the Persons, we get a clearer sense of who the Son is uniquely. While Scripture gives us full and sufficient insight into these realities, we will also look at historical creeds and confessions to see how the Body of Christ has thought through these things over time.

It's a great comfort to step out of the demands and stresses of our current situation to reflect on and taste the true nature of reality which is upheld by the power of the word of the Son of God (Heb. 1:3). Setting our minds and hearts to the task of mining these depths requires steadfast attention and humility, which are two qualities not highly prioritized in modern culture. Screens, talking heads, status updates, and headlines scream at us and claim that they consist of what is ultimately true and good. If we're not careful, we can fall into a pattern of living that is always skimming across the surface and never pausing to consciously focus our attention on things above (John 8:23-24). As we gird up the loins of our minds to consider transcendent, eternal things, we come to see the frailty, wispieness, and fleeting nature of this life...and this is just what we need to properly order our thoughts and actions in this life.

The author Wendell Berry beautifully illuminates how bringing our minds to bear on subjects far beyond ourselves leads to a more rich, joyful existence. He says, "*The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.*" Ponder that for a while :)

A Complete Biblical Picture

As we begin this more detailed examination of the nature of Christ, the ESV Study Bible gives us a helpful summary of what must be "affirmed in order to attain a complete biblical picture of the person of Jesus Christ." These four points will be what occupies our thoughts over the course of the next three lessons.

1. Jesus Christ is fully and completely *divine*.
2. Jesus Christ is fully and completely *human*.
3. The divine and human natures of Christ are *distinct*.
4. The divine and human natures of Christ are completely *united* in one person.

In this lesson we'll now dig into what Scripture and the early church had to say about the divinity of Christ. Herman Bavinck summarizes this very well, so a lengthy quote is included below to get us started.

"Christ was God, and is God, and will forever remain God. He was not the Father, nor the Spirit, but the Son, the own, only-begotten, beloved Son of the Father. And it was not the Divine being, neither the Father nor the Spirit, but the person of the Son who became man in the fulness of time. And when He became man and as man went about on the earth, even when He agonized in Gethsemane and hung on the cross, He remained God's own Son in whom the Father was well pleased (had all His pleasure). It is true, of course, as the apostle says, that Christ, being in the form of God, did not think it robbery to be equal with God, yet made Himself of no reputation and emptied Himself (Phil. 2:6-7). But it is a mistake to take this to mean, as some do, that

*Christ, in His incarnation, in the state of humiliation, completely or partly divested Himself of His Divinity, laid aside His divine attributes, and thereupon in the state of exaltation gradually assumed them again. For how could this be, since God cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13), and as the Immutable One in Himself far transcends all becoming and change? **No, even when He became what He was not, He remained what He was, the Only-Begotten of the Father. But it is true that the apostle says that in this sense Christ made Himself of no reputation: being in the form of God, He assumed the form of a man and a servant. One can express it humanly and simply in this way: before His incarnation Christ was equal with the Father not alone in essence and attributes, but He had also the form of God. He looked like God, He was the brightness of His glory, and the expressed image of His person. Had anyone been able to see Him, he would immediately have recognized God. But this changed at His incarnation. Then He took on the form of a human being, the form of a servant. Whoever looked at Him could no longer recognize in Him the Only-Begotten Son of the Father, except by the eye of faith. He had laid aside His Divine form and brightness. He hid His Divine nature behind the form of a servant. On earth He was and He looked like one of us.**"* (The Wonderful Works of God, pgs 305-306)

This is a beautiful encapsulation of how the eternally pre-existent Son of God “became what He was not” while still remaining what He always was. Bavinck goes on in this section of his book to look more into how “He who remained what He was also became what He was not.” and ultimately dwells long on the unity of these two natures in one Person. This discussion on the humanity of Christ will be our topic for the next lesson and the unity of the natures in the singular person of Jesus will be what we look into two lessons from now.

While the scriptures do not contain a concise summary of the doctrine of the Trinity, there is a very clear theme that allows us to draw out this picture clearly and completely. Especially as we look at the life of Jesus in the gospels and the content of the epistles, we are able to see God revealing Himself as triune.

Three specific events in the life of Jesus display the trinitarian nature of God and begin to help us understand the unique roles of the Persons within the Trinity. The accounts of Jesus’ baptism captured almost identically in all three gospels (Matthew 3:16-17, Mark 1:9-11, and Luke 3:21-22) reference all three Persons of the Trinity. The upper room discourse of Christ in John 13-17 has so many trinitarian references and allusions that it’s impossible not to see it. This was Jesus’ last teaching to His disciples before His crucifixion and you get the sense He is laying out deep mysteries to the ones He loves in an effort to comfort them before a hard time. Lastly, the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20 shows that, right off the bat following His resurrection, Jesus’ followers worshipped Him, which would have not been fitting unless they believed the Son to be equal with the Father. Also, the Commission is given in the *name*, singular, not the *names*, plural, “of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

The epistles as well are filled with instances where we can see the Trinity clearly formulated. Again, in the way these references are structured, we are given language by which we can conceive of the dynamics of the Trinity.

These and many other portions of scripture have been the basis for the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. Over centuries, the church has used these biblical pictures to establish the accepted view of the nature of God. Many of these doctrinal positions had to be spelled out more clearly due to misapplication of the biblical record in expounding on the nature of God. Gerald Bray, in his book *The Person of Christ*, states,

“...the statement ‘Jesus Christ is God’ (or any statement linking such a subject and such a predicate) raises momentous questions. In the first four centuries after the apostles, these questions were raised in acute form and debated by a long series of theologians of outstanding ability. Their conclusions were encapsulated in a succession of credal statements, at once precise and pregnant, which serve as both boundary-markers and starting-points for Christological reflection today.”

We'll now look at some of the most prominent historical errors surrounding the nature of Christ followed by a quick overview of the creeds, counsels, and confessions that were organized to refute heresies. We should give thanks for the work of these “theologians of outstanding ability” in laying out “boundary-markers and starting points for Christological reflection” and for vigorously defending the truth from errors.

Historical errors

It seems as though, at the heart of most of these errors and heresies, is a desire to more fully explain and rationalize the mystery of the incarnation beyond what Scripture presents. The human tendency when confronted with reality that breaks pre-existing concepts is to re-fashion that reality to better align with pre-existing presuppositions. This is a grievous error. It subjects God to the judgment of fallen humans rather than embracing the otherness of God to draw us out of our own misconceptions. We should want our patterns of thought and impressions to be blown away when we are given true truths about God. When this happens, we cannot help but praise and magnify God over and above ourselves

Here is a quick list and summary of the most prominent historical errors from the first four centuries AD surrounding the nature of Christ.

Ebionism

This was a very early sect of radical Jews who accepted that Jesus may have been the messiah in some senses, but they denied the deity of Christ. They are described as *“emphasizing the oneness of God and the humanity of Jesus as the biological son of Mary and Joseph, who, by virtue of his righteousness, was chosen by God to be the messianic ‘prophet like Moses’ when he was anointed with the Holy Spirit at his baptism.”*

(Wikipedia) This sect was relatively small and does not appear to have caused major rifts in the early church,

but there are records of early church fathers refuting their claims. They could have potentially been described as ‘Judaizers’ because they promoted a strict adherence to the Mosaic law.

Arianism

Arius denied the self-existence and eternity of the Son and he denied the equality of the Son with God. Arius lived from 256 - 336 AD. Arius dismissed the truth that the Son is begotten of the Father. He stated that, *“If the Father begat the Son, then he who was begotten had a beginning in existence, and from this it follows there was a time when the Son was not.”* This makes the Son a creature, which has grave implications for many aspects of Christology.

Athanasius of Alexandria was Arius’ primary opponent in this effort to refine and clarify the church’s view of the Trinity. Athanasius formulated a ‘*homoousian*’ (same in essence, substance, or being) view, which we’ll look at in more detail below. The Council of Nicea in 325 was a response to Arianism and ultimately accepted ‘*homoousian*’ as the correct view of the Trinity.

Sabellianism/patripassianism/modalism

Sabellius was a third century theologian and priest. He taught that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were only different modes or aspects of the one undifferentiated God. This heresy falls under the broader term, ‘monarchianism’, which denies any real distinctions in the godhead and is grouped with many variations of this teaching which are all categorized as ‘modalism’. The great repository of irrefutable theological wisdom, Wikipedia, (I kid), states, *“Modalism is the belief that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are three different modes or aspects of one monadic God, as perceived by the believer, rather than three distinct persons within the Godhead – that there are no real or substantial differences between the three, such that there is no substantial identity for the Spirit or the Son.”*

Pastor Tom gave an example in his sermon on Sunday of how it is very easy to slip into modalistic thinking when trying to explain the Trinity by use of analogies. It is important to ensure our thinking does not fall into this trap. Understanding and rightly applying the ideas of ‘essence’ and ‘persons’ as it relates to the Trinity are helpful as we ponder this mystery.

This is not an exhaustive list but these teachings, especially Arianism and modalism via Sabellius, were refuted in the early church by use of counsels and rigorous study of the scriptures. Although these heresies or variations of them continue to arise in the church, it is so helpful to be aware of the solid foundation on which we can stand to make sure our own thinking and confession is in line with biblical revelation and established, centuries-old orthodoxy.

Credal Summaries

We’ve looked at how events in history and forms established in the life of Israel paved the way for the Messiah and initiated the paradigms which enabled people to consider what the Messiah would be like. We saw the

necessity of holding to the truth that Christ existed prior to His incarnation. We have meditated on the glorious reality of the plan of salvation and how Christ came in the fullness of time to accomplish redemption.

As we now look at the life of Jesus and the reaction of people during and after His life, death, and resurrection, we see clearly that no man ever before had done the things Jesus did, spoke the way He spoke, or imaged God so completely, as humanity was meant to, in His sinlessness, love, and obedience. He displayed Divine power over creation (Mark 4:39-41). He had insight into the thoughts of others and the future which could only be explained as omniscience (Mark 2:8, John 18:4). He proclaimed forgiveness of sins as only God could have (Mark 2:5-12, Mt. 9:1-8). He made promises, such as life past death (John 2:18-22, John 11:25-27) and the sending of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7-11), that only an Eternal One could make.

And yet He also had very human experiences. We won't dig into these now, but it was obviously confusing for people to reconcile these observations. How could a mere man make the claims and perform the deeds He did? How could a divine manifestation of the Eternal God be limited so much as to express hunger, thirst and weariness (Luke 4:2, John 4:6-7, John 19:28) and limits to his knowledge (Matthew 24:36)?

These are some of the questions that scripture presents and then moves to help us resolve. The point of the gospels, the epistles, and Revelation is to capture what happened in and what the implications are for God manifesting Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ. Yet, the historical accounts, letters, and record of visions are not succinct, well-organized doctrinal statements. As we've seen, the language employed to try to capture the whole truth and the startling realities revealed in Christ sometimes feel awkward, redundant or uneducated. It feels as though we're presented with information and the beginnings of interpretation, but it is by no means systematic and much room is left for pondering and working over the revelation in our hearts and minds. This is not to say that the scriptures are unclear or that they do not contain everything needed for life and faith in the objective reality of who God is and what He's done. It's just interesting to reflect on how God chose to record these truths. It seems as though He wanted to make it so clear that our hearts and minds would be captivated and changed forever when we beheld these truths while also leaving enough hiddenness and mystery to keep humanity pondering and pursuing its depths for ages.

This delicate balance of inquiry and humility is what the great creeds and confessions of the church accomplish. While they do employ some analysis and unique terminology to help us gain greater clarity on these realities, they do not go so far as to stomp out the ineffableness which is inherent in eternal truths. In our flesh, we want clear, relatable, and understandable propositions, but these ancient statements capture truth in a way that resists this urge and retains grandeur.

Herman Bavinck captures this idea when he says,

“All those expressions and statements which are employed in the confession of the church and in the language of theology are not designed to explain the mystery which in this matter

confronts it, but rather to maintain it pure and unviolated over against those who would weaken or deny it. The incarnation of the Word is not a problem which we must solve, or can solve, but a wonderful fact, rather, which we gratefully confess in such a way as God Himself presents it to us in His Word." (The Wonderful Works of God, pg. 304)

Apostles' Creed

The Apostles' Creed is the earliest, broadly-accepted orthodox creed from the early church. It has a beautiful trinitarian structure which captured the Trinity's essence and roles with relatively simple language and order. There are many theories about the origin of the creed, but it does not appear to have been written in response to any specific heresy, but seems to be an attempt to capture the core elements of biblical Christianity. For that reason, it does not have a lot of specifics about the nature of Christ.

Wikipedia has the following tidbit for us, *"Because of the early origin of its original form, it does not address some Christological issues defined in the Nicene and other Christian creeds. It thus says nothing explicitly about the divinity of either Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Nor does it address many other theological questions which became objects of dispute centuries later."* Nevertheless, it provides a great basis from which to move into more detailed explanations of the dynamics at play in the Trinity.

The Apostles Creed reads:

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

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

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic (the true Christian church of all times and all places) church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen."*

Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed, written and adopted in 325, reads:

“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 and 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 Spirit, 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 in one holy Christian 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.”

As you can see, it follows the same trinitarian structure as the Apostles Creed, but adds more language related to the Person of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Related to the Son of God, the creed adds the following seven majestic petitions:

*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.*

Regarding the Person of the Holy Spirit, the Creed adds:

*who proceeds from the Father and the Son;
who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified;*

Chalcedonian Creed

This creed was adopted at the Fourth Ecumenical Council which was held at Chalcedon, located in what is now Turkey, in 451. As with Nicea, it was a response to heretical views that were being spread concerning the nature of Christ. It established the orthodox view that Christ has two natures which are unified in one person. As you can see, this creed carries forward much of the language laid out in the Nicene Creed.

We'll not dig too much into the Chalcedonian Creed at this point, but it stands as a crucial milestone in the development of orthodox Christology. It is especially helpful in considering the unity of the two natures (human and divine) within Christ, which is known as the hypostatic union.

“We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood;

truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.”

Terms

Let's look at some of the key terms used in the above creeds to shape the understanding of God's nature.

Homoousion ('same in essence' or 'consubstantial') and *Ousia* ('essence' or 'substance')

Gerald Bray states that,

“The single most important statement was the declaration of the Council of Nicea (325) that Christ, as the Son of God, was homoousios (consubstantial) with the Father. This patristic term is embodied in all the great Protestant creeds.” (The Person of Christ, pg. 121)

Athanasius formulated the term with the explanation that the Father and Son are co-eternal, co-equal, and con-substantial. There were objections to using this term because it was very close to the monarchianism promoted by Sabellius, which claimed there were no distinctions. However, Athanasius and the Nicene Council used the term to affirm the oneness of the divine 'essence' or 'substance' while still maintaining the distinctions by using the term '*hypostases*' (persons) as we'll see below.

Again, Gerald Bray states,

“There can be no doubt that Athanasius and his colleagues were correct in their perception that Arianism threatened Christianity at its very heart. If Christ were a creature, no matter how exalted, or even a kind of inferior deity (god, but less than the Absolute God) worship of him would be entirely illegitimate. This is why the term homoousios ('the same in essence')...was so important. It safeguarded not merely a theological dogma but the very core of piety and worship of the church.” (The Person of Christ, pg. 123)

Hypostases (persons)

The key way that theologians avoid overly diluting the distinctions within the Trinity (*monarchianism*) in using the term '*homoousios*' in speaking about the nature of God is by quickly moving into references to the three '*hypostases*' within the One essence. This is where our human-conceived models of Trinity and our concepts

of how existence works begin to fail us in grasping the full measure of the Three-in-One. The language about persons in the Trinity must be thought of as relational terms, not as terms of origin. As we think about distinctions with the one substance (subsistences), relational terms are used to capture the unique roles and “personalities” of the Persons of the Trinity.

Begotten

The term ‘begotten’, used in the Nicene Creed in contrast to ‘made’, is focused on the relational aspects of the Father and the Son. The key thing to get in our minds about this term is that it does not refer to origins. We are prone to associate our experience with what we expect from God, and this is one area where it fails us miserably. We, as non-eternal creatures, have a hard time fathoming the idea of an offspring that does not have a starting point in time.

Gerlad Bray comments on this phenomenon and the importance of the term ‘begotten’ using quotes by three titans of the early church; Athanasius, John of Damascus, and Augustine...good company, indeed!

“There is a clear distinction between being begotten and being made. What is begotten is a Son, what is made is a creature. The latter position was precisely what the Arians argued for: Christ was a creature, made out of nothing. Over against this the Nicene theologians argued that to be made would be fatal to his sonship; that all made things were in fact made by him; and that he was God’s offspring, not his creature. ‘He is not a creature or a work,’ wrote Athanasius, ‘but an offspring proper to the Father’s essence’. The definitive position was laid down by John of Damascus:

‘For generation means that the begetter produces out of his essence offspring similar in essence. But creation and making mean that the creator and maker produces from that which is external, and not out of his own essence, a creature of an absolutely dissimilar nature.’

The underlying truth here is that the properties begotten and unbegotten belong not to the essence [ousia] but to the persons [hypostases]. The divine essence of the Son is one with that of the Father. Generateness defined his relationship, not his nature, as Augustine pointed out:

‘But because the Father is not called the Father except in that he has a Son, and the Son is not called Son except in that he has a Father, these things are not said according to substance; because each of them is not so called in relation to himself, but the terms are used reciprocally and in relation to each other.’” (The Person of Christ, pgs 134-135)

As we try to conceive of this in our minds, it’s easy to go to the human father-son relationship we’ve been given as a type of this eternal relationship. This can be helpful, but we must not error in putting the human type of

relationship over and above the archetype it was intended to point to. The limitations and faults within the human model of father-son relations under the curse should not constrain our thinking about the Divine Father and Son. Gerald Bray summarizes it well,

“Divine fatherhood is complete and perfect because it is eternal; and because here alone is there perfect consubstantiality, absolute equality, and perfect correspondence. The fullness of the Father and the image of the Father exist in the divine Son in a way that is impossible in the human relationship; just as the bond between them surpasses in love, intimacy, and interaction anything that men can attain to.” (The Person of Christ, pg 135

So, now we understand the begotten-ness of the Son, but there are three Persons in the Trinity. Is the Spirit also begotten? Nope. That would dissolve the uniqueness of the Spirit from the Son. We don't have time to do a deep dive into the term 'proceeding' and how that is distinct from 'begotten'...that's a topic for another study, but we should note one thing about the Nicene Creed that has caused controversy and even is at the root of a major schism in the church.

Interestingly, the original Nicene Creed did not have any additional language about the Spirit because it was primarily focused on the Son's relation to the Father. But groups arose who began to think the same thing about the Spirit as the Arians taught about the Son so a later creed (the Nicaeno-Constantinople Creed) in 381 added the following language: *“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.”* The version of the creed used in the Western church includes the phrase 'and the Son' (*filioque*), while the version of the creed used in the Eastern church only has 'who proceeds from the Father'. Again, this could be a whole other lesson unto itself, but it is related to our look into Christology so it's important to be aware of this ancient schism.

As Reformed Christians in the stream of the Western church, we should be encouraged that the view of the Spirit proceeding from both the Father and the Son seems to most closely align with the scriptural record. Gerald Bray summarizes,

“There is no doubt that in the economical Trinity the Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father. He is the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9) in the same sense as he is the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 8:11). Likewise, he is the Spirit of the Son (Gal. 4:6) and the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19). In accordance with this, the Son, equally with the Father, can be said to send the Paraclete (John 15:25, 16:17), to baptise in the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11), and to pour out the Spirit of promise (Acts 2:33). This point need not be laboured.”

Perichoresis

The final term that we will investigate is an original term that was employed by the church in the effort to plumb the mysterious reality that each of the individual Person is identical with the overall essence of the One God, yet these Persons are not identical with each other. The English translation of this term is “co-inherence”. This was an effort to give a name to the synthesis of the ideas that the essence is unified while at the same time the Persons are distinct. Bray helps us understand why a new term is necessary, *“What the idea of perichoresis really attempts is to explain a special kind and intensity of inter-personal unity to which there is no analogy in human experience.”* (pg. 141)

The term tries to capture some of the mystery in Jesus’ language in John 17:20-26. *Perichoresis* in the human experience appears to be most available to us in marriage as described at the end of Ephesians 5, but as mentioned above, there is no perfect analogy. The concept has also been described as a cosmic dance where all Persons are moving in perfect unison as part of something bigger than any of them individually. Marriage (and particularly the act of consummating that covenant...wink, wink) and dancing, can all be transcendent experiences...divine gifts and possibly glimpses into the experience of the Trinity. At the end of the day, maybe it’s best to just pause, ponder the summary below and ask God to grace us with glimpses of this truth while acknowledging that we will not know it in full until we are taken up in glory.

“In the divine existence, there are neither physical nor mental barriers to complete co-inherence. The mutual understanding is complete; the experience of love is complete; the sharing of common purposes is complete; the co-operative involvement in creation and redemption is complete.” (The Person of Christ, pg. 141)

Having been helped along by the early church fathers to see the importance of using accurate and precise language, we conclude this consideration of terms with two quotes to help us piece it all together. First, Gregory of Nazianzen says it concisely,

“Now these names are common to the Godhead but the proper name of the unoriginate is Father, and that of the unoriginately begotten is Son, and that of the unbegottenly proceeding is the Holy Ghost.”

John of Damascus says the same thing with a little more detail,

“For the Father is without cause and unborn; for he is derived from nothing, but derives from himself his being, nor does he derive a single quality from another...But the Son is derived from the Father after the manner of generation, and the Holy Spirit likewise is derived from the Father, yet not after the manner of generation, but after that of procession...For in these hypostatic or personal properties alone do the three holy subsistences differ from each other, being indivisibly divided not by essence but by the distinguishing marks of their proper and peculiar substance.”

Implications & Application

Jenny and I have a term that we use when one of us gets caught on an issue that causes us fear, anxiety, or anger. When something dangerous or unknown occupies our mind and we feel mentally and emotionally trapped. It's how we describe what happens when we're feeling stuck and unable to concentrate on the tasks before us because we're preoccupied with mentally playing out possible scenarios of how a particular issue might (or might not) resolve. We call this 'spinning'. For example, "I need to talk to you about whether or not we're going to _____ because I've been spinning on it all day." Can you relate to this?

I share this because, as was alluded to at the beginning of this lesson, I feel that filling our minds with contemplation of the nature of God is the opposite of spinning. It is grounding. It is mighty ballast which keeps our ships upright in the storms of life we face.

I believe that we can ease the anxiety of our times by asking God, by His Spirit, to train us in how to make thoughts about Himself our default mode. The fear, distraction, and paralyzing effects of 'spinning' can be tempered and ultimately destroyed by directing that mental, spiritual, and emotional energy towards the grandeur of our eternal, triune God. The beauty of this gift that God gives us in the revelation of Himself is that it can never be exhausted.

Another aspect to consider applying in your own life and in the work you are doing to care for others is to reflect on the fact that the incarnation of the Son of God is referred to as "the fullness of time." God is revealed fully. We have beheld Him in Christ. Victory is sure. There is nothing to fear.

Lastly, as Pastor Tom admonished us to remember in his sermon last Sunday, we are invited by God to not just ponder these majestic truths, but to enter into them ourselves and enjoy the reality of the love of God. Tom stated,

"God's three-ness means that love is eternal. Relationship, give and take, grace and thankfulness, and love are at the heart of all reality. They are eternal. At the bottom of everything is not strife or struggle, not competition or raw power, not mere rules or impersonal forces. It is the God who is love - joyful, delighted, eternal, self-giving love. A love so full between Persons [hypostates] that it expresses or constitutes a complete and perfect ontological oneness [homoousios]. This amazing love that has always burned within the heart of the Triune God is now summoning you to join in, to taste of eternal love, to partake of the divine nature."

As these truths sink into the core of our being and as the Spirit draws us into the fellowship of the Father and the Son, we come to see that we have no need to fear and we can live in the freedom for which Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1).

Prayer (*The Trinity* from Valley of Vision, contributed by Claudia White)

Three in One, One in Three, God of my salvation,
Heavenly Father, blessed Son, eternal Spirit,
I adore thee as one Being, one Essence,
One God in three distinct Persons,
For bringing sinners to thy knowledge and to thy kingdom.
O Father, thou hast loved me and sent Jesus to redeem me;
O Jesus, thou hast loved me and assumed my nature,
Shed thine own blood to wash away my sins,
Wrought righteousness to cover my unworthiness;
O Holy Spirit, thou hast loved me and entered my heart,
Implanted there eternal life,
Revealed to me the glories of Jesus.
Three persons and one God, I bless and praise thee,
For love so unmerited, so unspeakable, so wondrous,
So mighty to save the lost and raise them to glory.
O Father, I thank thee that in the fullness of grace
Thou hast given me to Jesus,
To be his sheep, jewel, portion;
O Jesus, I thank thee that in the fullness of grace
Thou hast accepted, espoused, bound me;
O Holy Spirit, I thank thee that in the fullness of grace
Thou hast exhibited Jesus as my salvation,
Implanted faith within me,
Subdued my stubborn heart,
Made me one with him forever.
O Father, thou art enthroned to hear my prayers,
O Jesus, thy hand is outstretched to take my petitions,
O Holy Spirit, thou art willing to help my infirmities,
To show me my need, to supply words, to pray within me,
To strengthen me that I faint not in supplication.
O Triune God, which commandeth the universe,
Thou hast commanded me to ask for those things
That concern thy kingdom and my soul.
Let me live and pray as one baptized into the threefold Name.

Song of the Week

Immortal, Invisible God Only-Wise: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzP58aCxGD4>

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.*

*Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;
Thy justice, like mountains, high soaring above
Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.*

*Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;
Of all Thy rich graces this grace, Lord, impart
Take the veil from our faces, the vile from our heart.*

*All laud we would render; O help us to see
'Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee,
And so let Thy glory, almighty, impart,
Through Christ in His story, Thy Christ to the heart.*