§ 5. Doctrine of God: Trinity

Introduction

We've just finished a very long excursus on natural theology – looking at arguments for and against the existence of God. Before we begin our next section, let's step back and reconnoiter.

Our excursus on natural theology is a subsection of a larger unit that we've been covering on the Doctrine of God. The first subsection of the Doctrine of God that we looked at was the attributes of God, in which we discussed God's nature. Then we temporarily took this excursus on natural theology to look at arguments for God's existence and against it. Now we want to come to the second subsection of the Doctrine of God, and this is on the doctrine of the Trinity.

If I were to ask you here this morning, "How many of you think that God is a person?" probably a number of you would say, "Yes." Well, technically it is incorrect to say that God is a person. Rather, God is three persons. This is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. God is personal, yes, but he is not "a" person. This is what serves to distinguish Christianity from other monotheistic faiths like Judaism or Islam which also agree that there is one God who is personal, but they think there is only one person who is God. This also serves to distinguish Christianity from various Christian cults and sects like Jehovah's Witnesses. You will find inevitably that these sectarian groups get the doctrine of the Trinity wrong – it is almost like a thermometer that you can use to test these different groups to see whether or not they adhere to biblical Christianity.

Unfortunately, the average Christian has little understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. If he gets into a conversation with a

Jehovah's Witness who comes to his door, I'm afraid that the average Christian will be completely overwhelmed and unable to defend his Trinitarian faith. In fact, if you probe deeply, he probably turns out to be a heretic in the view of the Trinity that he actually espouses. So it is important, I think, that we discuss the doctrine of the Trinity to make sure we accurately understand it.

The doctrine of the Trinity is often obscured by Christians in mystery. Sometimes they will say that the doctrine of the Trinity is logically inconsistent or it is an affront to reason and something that can be held only by faith. It is a mystery. But I think this really does the doctrine a disservice. The fundamental doctrine of the Trinity is not even apparently logically contradictory. The doctrine of the Trinity is not the self-contradictory doctrine that three Gods are somehow one God, or that three persons are somehow one person. Rather, the doctrine states that there are three persons in the one God. Another way to put it: God is tri-personal.

Often Christians will offer inadequate analogies of the Trinity in order to explicate this doctrine. For example, we are sometimes told that the doctrine of the Trinity is like one man who is a son, a husband, and a father. Unfortunately, that is not an accurate analogy for the Trinity because in that case you have only one person who is simply playing three roles or has three relationships. Another analogy that is often used is that water can be liquid, steam, or ice. Yet it is all H_2O. This is perhaps a better analogy because at least here you have one substance – one essence (H_2O) – that could be in the form of a liquid or of steam or of ice. But again the analogy really fails because the water is only successively in those various states. It can be first liquid, and then

if it freezes, it turns to ice, or if you boil it, it turns to steam. But it is not simultaneous. It is a succession of states in the water.

I think it is better just to avoid these sorts of analogies. They are all, I think, going to be inadequate in the end. It is better to simply say that just as I am a being with one center of self-consciousness whom I call "I", God is a being who has three centers of self-consciousness, each of which can say "I". Each one has a first-person perspective: In the same way that I can say, *I am William Craig,* the persons of the Trinity can say respectively, *I am the Father. I am the Son. I am the Holy Spirit.* So God is a tri-personal being. He is a being with three centers of self-consciousness in contrast to human persons who are each one being with one center of self-consciousness.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a systematic summary of the data of Scripture. Therefore, it doesn't really matter that the word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible. The important thing is not the word, but rather the concept or the data that this word denominates. Any word could be used to denominate this doctrine so long as the scriptural data are respected and not twisted or bruised in any way. The significant thing is not the word "Trinity." The significant thing will be the concepts that the Trinity embodies, namely that God is a single tri-personal being.

With that, we have introduced the subject that we will be discussing over the next several weeks. I think at this point it would be a good time to simply bring today's lesson to a close. What we will talk about next time will be the scriptural data that undergird the doctrine of the Trinity. We will see that the

Scriptures teach both that there is one God and one God alone, but also that there are three distinct persons in the Godhead.