e. Council of Nicaea

Today we want to continue our discussion of the Nicene Creed. As we begin today it would be useful to read it through one more time to refresh our memories before we proceed.

> We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible;

> And in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead.

> And in the Holy Spirit.

> But for those who say 'there was when he was not' and 'before being born he was not' and that 'he came into existence out of nothing' or who assert 'the Son of God is from a different hypostasis or substance, or is created, or is subject to alteration or change' – these the Catholic Church anathematizes.

Last week we went through a blizzard of terminology in discussing this creedal statement, and lest you go away confused, let me pare it down to just a couple of essential terms that I think you should add to your theological vocabulary on the basis of the Creed. The first would be the word *homoousias*. That comes from the Greek

words *homo* (meaning "the same" as in "homogenized" or "homosexual"), and then from the Greek word *ousia* which means "substance" or "essence." The Creed declares that the Father and the Son (and by implication the Holy Spirit) are the same substance. They are the same essence. That is to say the Son is fully divine. He's not some sort of subordinate deity or a created thing, however exalted. He is God. The Father and the Son have the same substance or essence.

The other word that would be helpful for you to know is *hypostasis*. A *hypostasis* is an individual. It means something that has properties – a property bearer. As I pointed out, in the original Nicene Creed the word *hypostasis* is taken to be synonymous with substance – *ousia* or essence. That's why the Creed has this anathema appended to it condemning anyone who says that the Son is of a different *hypostasis* or substance. This is the term that created so much controversy in the Eastern church because to the Greek-speaking Eastern theologians *hypostasis* wasn't synonymous with substance. A *hypostasis*, as I say, was an individual. So, for example, Paul and Cindy and Jim are different individuals, but they all share the same nature – humanity. They are individual instances or examples of the same substance. Their common substance is humanity, and they are individually different people. That's why over the course of the fourth century the church revised the Creed so that *hypostasis* and substance were no longer considered synonyms, and so the orthodox doctrine became that there are indeed three *hypostases* – three individuals – in one substance. There's one substance – God. One divine essence. Then there are three individuals – three *hypostases* – that share that divine essence: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Now the question is: if there are three *hypostases* all sharing the divine nature, what are these? The opinion unanimously on the part of orthodox theologians is that these are persons. Three persons. It's very frequently said today that we must not read this affirmation that they are persons anachronistically by importing into it the modern psychological concept of a person. While this caution may be in order, still I think that it needs to be seriously qualified. What is true is that the word *hypostasis* does not *mean* person. They're not synonymous words. *Hypostasis* is an individual – a property bearer. Nevertheless when you talk about a rational *hypostasis,* then this does come very close, indeed, to the modern concept of a person. For Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, the essence or nature of man is captured by the phrase "rational animal." That's what human nature is. Man is a rational animal. We have an animal body joined with a rational soul, and that differentiates us from mere animals. Animals have souls according to Aristotle, but they lack rationality. They have lower-order souls that don't have rationality. So it's this property of rationality that serves to distinguish human beings from other animals. So a rational *hypostasis* can only be a person. It is a person.

This was strongly emphasized by the Cappadocian church fathers – some of the most important of the post-Nicene church fathers. Cappadocia is in central Turkey today. (If you ever get a chance to visit Cappadocia by all means go. It is unworldly, this ancient region in central Turkey). Among the Cappadocian fathers were people like Gregory of Nyssa (335-95) and Gregory Nazianzus (329-90). And then there was Basil of Caesarea (331-79). These Cappadocian fathers were very emphatic about the personal nature

of these three *hypostases* in the Godhead. For example, Gregory of Nyssa illustrates the idea of three *hypostases* having one nature by pointing to Peter, James, and John. He says these are three *hypostases* all exemplifying the same human nature. I don't know how else you could take that than by saying that these are three persons who share the same human nature. Moreover, they ascribe to the three divine *hypostases* properties which are constitutive of a personhood such as mutual knowledge, mutual love, and mutual will. They emphasize that these three persons are always in concord, always in harmony, with one another, and so they cannot be separated or disagree with one another. Gregory Nazianzus boasts that, unlike the Modalists, we "worship the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, One Godhead; God the Father, God the Son and . . . God the Holy Spirit, One Nature in Three Personalities, intellectual, perfect, self-existent, numerically separate, but not separate in Godhead" (*Oration* 33.16).

The ascription of personal properties to these three individuals in the Godhead is especially evident in the Cappadocian fathers' strong emphasis upon the full equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son. You notice in the Nicene Creed the Holy Spirit gets short shrift. All it says is "and in the Holy Spirit" - we believe in him, too. But the Cappadocian fathers emphasized that like the Son the Holy Spirit is a divine *hypostasis*. Basil, for example, says that the Holy Spirit is not only incorporeal, purely immaterial, and indivisible, but, "We are compelled to direct our thoughts on high and to think of an intelligent being boundless in power" (*On the Holy Spirit* 9.22). So the Holy Spirit is an intelligent being boundless in power. He quotes 1 Corinthians 2:11 where Paul says, "For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God." Basil compares the Holy Spirit to

the human spirit that is in each of us. He says in his sanctifying work the Holy Spirit makes people spiritual by bringing them into "fellowship with himself." So these Cappadocian fathers would have resisted fiercely any attempt to depersonalize the Holy Spirit and make him into some sort of impersonal divine force. I think it's evident that their intention was to affirm that there are really three persons in a rich psychological sense in the one God.

While Modalism affirmed the equal deity of the three persons at the expense of their distinctness, and Arianism affirmed their distinctness at the expense of their equal deity, orthodox Christianity maintained both the equal deity and the personal distinctness of the three persons. Moreover they did this without surrendering their commitment to monotheism. There exists only one God who is three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That completes the historical survey that I wanted to do with you of the doctrine of the Trinity. I think it does bear mentioning, at least, as we conclude this section that you can see how misleading it is when certain cultic groups like Jehovah's Witnesses or secular authors like Dan Brown say that at the Council of Nicaea 325 years after Christ the church voted to make Jesus divine and voted to adopt the doctrine of the Trinity. That is a gross misrepresentation. Right from the very beginning – from the *Logos* doctrine of the Greek apologists – Christ was regarded as divine. The modalists affirmed that he was divine. This wasn't some sort of late developing doctrine that the church suddenly voted on at Nicaea. What they were struggling to articulate is the relationship between these three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Right from the very beginning Christ was affirmed to be God. That's in the pages of the New Testament. The question was how

can he be God and not be the Father? How do you make sense of that? The doctrine of the Trinity was the church's attempt to make sense of that truth.

2. Coherence of the Doctrine

    a. The Problem

Is there, then, a philosophical problem of the Trinity? Jeff Brower and Michael Rea observe that there is nothing particularly philosophically problematic about what I've called the biblical doctrine of the Trinity.

> The central claim of the doctrine of the Trinity is that God exists in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This claim is not problematic because of any superficial incoherence or inconsistency with well-entrenched intuitions. Rather, it is problematic because of a tension that results from constraints imposed on its interpretation by other aspects of orthodox Christian theology. . . neatly summarized in . . . the so-called Athanasian creed.[1]

It is these accreted constraints that occasion philosophical problems for the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. So one finds that philosophical articles on the subject of the Trinity very typically begin with quotations from later conciliar formulations of the doctrine, particularly the apparently incoherent Athanasian creed.

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[1] Jeffrey E. Brower and Michael C. Rea, "Material Constitution and the Trinity," *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, ed. Thomas McCall and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 264.

The biblical doctrine of the Trinity, by contrast, becomes problematic only when statements such as the following:

     1. The Father is God.

     2. The Son is God.

     3. The Son is not the Father.

are construed as identity statements. But treating affirmations like (1-3) as identity statements requires a modern grasp of the logical relation of identity that the ancients in general and the NT writers in particular did not have. This fact illuminates Arthur Wainwright's provocative suggestion that most of the authors of the NT were not even aware of "a Trinitarian problem," much less interested in a solution to it.[2] That is to say, the mutual relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit just did not appear problematic to them. Wainwright thinks that Paul, the author of Hebrews, and John were aware of a problem, though John alone clearly conceived it and sought to provide a solution to it (presumably, in his doctrine of the immanent Logos).

This claim might seem at first implausible. What, after all, could be more obvious than that $a = a$, that everything is identical to itself? Doubtless, NT writers were intuitively aware, for example, that the Father is the Father and not the Son. But the identity relation is far more subtle and difficult than that, and a fairly sophisticated understanding of identity is necessary in order to discern a problem of the Trinity.

The relation of identity is today understood to be the strongest equivalence relation, holding between an object and itself and

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[2] Arthur W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962), p. 250.

nothing else, an irreducible relation characterized by reflexivity ($a = a$), symmetry (if $a = b$, then $b = a$), and transitivity (if $a = b$ and $b = c$, then $a = c$). As such, it expresses what has come to be known as Leibniz's Law of the Indiscernibility of Identicals, which may be simply stated as

> LL. An object x is identical with an object y only if every property of x is a property of y and vice versa.

In the ancient world, philosophers had scant understanding of the identity relation. A prescient Aristotle wrote briefly in his *Topics,*

> Again look and see if, supposing the one to be the same as something, the other also is the same as it; for if they be not the same as the same thing, clearly neither are they the same as one another. Moreover, examine them in the light of their accidents and the things of which they are accidents; for any accident belonging to the one must belong also to the other, and if the one belong to anything as an accident, so must the other also. If in any of these respects there is a discrepancy clearly they are not the same (*Topica* vii.1 (152ª30).

Here Aristotle not only grasps the relation of identity as a reflexive, symmetric, and transitive relation, but, incredibly, anticipates Leibniz's Law of the Indiscernibility of Identicals. The historians of logic William and Martha Kneale observe, however, that these isolated comments of Aristotle went largely unnoticed, his insights being rediscovered only centuries later, and so it is "not surprising that he does not generally get any credit for them."[3]

If ancient philosophers were largely ignorant of the relation of identity, how much more the missionary-pastors who authored the

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[3] William and Martha Kneale, *The Development of Logic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 42.

NT! For example, while they believed that the Son is God, they would have balked at the assertion that God is the Son, which suggests that we misinterpret them if we construe their initial belief as an identity statement. Similarly, the same author who affirms that the Father is "the only true God" (Jn 17.3) also affirms that Jesus Christ "is the true God and eternal life" (I Jn 5.20), which again suggests that we misconstrue these affirmations if we interpret them as statements of identity. Or again, the fact that the NT authors affirm that the Father is God and that Jesus Christ is God does not lead them to infer that the Father is Jesus Christ, in accordance with the transitivity of identity, showing once more that it is an anachronistic hermeneutical error to import a modern grasp of the identity relation into these authors' statements.

As if this were not enough, add to the mix the ambiguity of the word "is" in ordinary language, whether Greek or English. Philosophers have distinguished multiple meanings of the word, including not only the "is" of identity ("Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens"), but also the "is" of predication ("Jones is the tallest man in North Dakota"), and the "is" of constitution ("The statue is the block of marble").

This inherent ambiguity of ordinary language can make it very difficult to discern just when an author, especially one utterly unacquainted with the modern relation of identity, intends to make an identity statement. Philip Bricker rightly warns, "Surface grammar often misrepresents the underlying logic: one must beware inferring logical from grammatical form."[4] That this is the case for NT authors is obvious when we find that even after the

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[4] *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2d ed., ed. Donald M. Borchert, *s.v.* "Identity," by Philip Bricker 1996. He cautions in particular that "We should not confuse identity with the relation of co-designation, the relation that holds between singular terms whenever those terms designate the same object." This fallacy is committed by those who assume too readily that every NT use of the proper name "God" is intended to assert an identity statement between God and the Father.

problem of the Trinity has been philosophically explained in terms of the identity relation and the Indiscernibility of Identicals, some contemporary Christians still fail to see any problem at all.[5]

Now obviously the NT authors might have wondered why there are not three Gods. But God's unicity was already given by Jewish monotheism, which was presupposed. In order to find it problematic that the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit one would haveto have a modern understanding of the identity relation, which NT authors did not have. Given NT authors' lack of a modern grasp of the identity relation, we must beware of overreading them. It is hardly surprising that they did not find their own trinitarian statements about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit problematic.

When one says that the Father is God, one is not making an identity statement. When one says the Son is God, one is not making an identity statement. Rather this "is" is an "is" of predication, not of identity. For example, if I say "Elizabeth is Queen" I'm not saying that Elizabeth is identical to the Queen. I am saying she holds the office or the role or the title of being Queen. But it would be possible for there to be co-regents. Sometimes that happens. There's more than one king or more than

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[5] See, for example, the series of muddled responses by Christopher Date to Dale Tuggy's challenge on p. 90 of their debate (Dale Tuggy and Christopher M. Date, *Is Jesus Human and not Divine?: A Debate*, Essential Christian Debates [Apollo, Penn.: Areopagus Books, 2020]). In response to Tuggy's objection, "Being the same god requires being numerically the same thing. But that requires that 'they' never differ in any way. . . . we all know that the Father and Son have differed" (p. 25), Date replies, "I answer that they are the same God. . . I can (and do) therefore affirm that the Father and Son are numerically the same *being* but differ as *persons*" (p. 90), oblivious to the problem confronting him. Needless to say, Date is not appealing to numerical sameness without identity.

one queen. So when we say "Elizabeth is Queen" we're not making an identity statement; we're making a predication. You're predicating *being Queen* of Elizabeth. You're making a statement like this: "Elizabeth is regal." You're saying she is the Queen in that sense. Not an identity statement but you're assigning a predicate.

So when we say the Father is God, we're saying the Father is divine. When we say the Son is God, we're saying the Son is divine. You're making a predication of the Father and the Son. You're predicating full divinity of the Father and the Son. You're not making an identity statement. Otherwise you would get three gods.

When we say the Father is God, the Son is God, those are not identity statements, rather they are predications. They are predicating properties of the Father and the Son, namely the property of being fully divine.

All right. That brings us to the end of our time. What we will do next time is try to address the question: how can there be three persons that all are divine – three divine persons – and yet there not be three gods? How can you have three persons who is each divine and yet not have three gods? That's what we'll talk about next Sunday.