

Argument for the Truth of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Today we bring our study of the doctrine of the Trinity to a close. You'll remember I have defended a model of the Trinity according to which we think of God as an infinite, unembodied soul, but a very special sort of soul, namely, a soul so richly endowed that God has three sets of rational faculties, each sufficient for personhood, so that God is a tri-personal being. I explained last time that this doctrine or model does not feature, but neither does it preclude, relations of derivation between the three members of the Trinity. We can think of them as simply three co-equal members of the triune God, or we can add derivation relations if we want to. It seems to me that this is a positive feature the model.

Today I'd like to wrap up by offering a plausibility argument for the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity belongs to revealed theology, not natural theology. That is to say, you will not be able to prove that God is a tri-personal being through the resources of human reason alone. You might be able to prove that God exists, but you wouldn't know that God is a Trinity. Rather, this is a matter of divine revelation, and one accepts this doctrine based upon God's self-revelation in Scripture as a tri-personal being: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Still, we can ask if there are any arguments that would support the plausibility of this doctrine.

I want to close our discussion of the Trinity with a plausibility argument that has been defended by a number of contemporary Christian philosophers for God's being a plurality of persons. The argument goes like this. By definition God is the greatest conceivable being. That's St. Anselm's insight in the ontological

argument. If you could conceive of anything greater than God, then that would be God. So by definition God is the greatest conceivable being. Now as the greatest conceivable being, God must be morally perfect. The greatest conceivable being must be morally perfect because to be morally perfect is a great-making property. Love is a moral perfection, and therefore a most perfect being (a greatest conceivable being) must be a loving being. It is better for a person to be loving than to be unloving. So as a morally perfect person God must be essentially loving – a perfectly loving being.

When you think about the nature of love, it belongs to the very nature of love to give oneself away to another. Love reaches out to another person rather than centering wholly in oneself. If you love, you are giving yourself away to another. Since God is perfectly loving by his very nature (this belongs to the essence of God), that means that God must be giving himself in love to another. But who is that other? It cannot be any created person because creation is a result of God's free will, not a result of his nature. It belongs to the very nature of God to be loving, but it doesn't belong to the very nature of God to be creating. So we can imagine a possible world in which God freely chooses to refrain from creating anything at all. There are no creatures at all in such a world, and God remains solitary and alone. And yet God would still need to be loving in such a world because love belongs to his very nature as the most perfect being. So created persons, though they are loved by God, cannot be the explanation for whom God essentially loves.

Moreover, we know from modern science that created persons have not always existed. The universe has been around for some 14 billion years, and human beings have only appeared relatively

recently on the scene. Therefore even though God loves created persons, they are not eternal. They have not always existed. But God is eternally loving. He didn't just begin to be loving some time ago when human beings came into existence. So, again, created persons cannot sufficiently explain or account for God's being a perfectly loving being.

It therefore follows that the other to whom God's love is necessarily directed must be internal to God himself. In other words, God is not a single isolated individual person as unitarian forms of theism like Islam hold. Rather God must be a plurality of persons as the Christian doctrine of the Trinity affirms. On a unitarian view of God like Islam, God is a person who does not give himself away essentially in love for another. He is focused essentially only on himself, and therefore he cannot be the most perfect being, the greatest conceivable being. But on the Christian view, God is a triad of persons in eternal, self-giving, love relationships. Because God is essentially loving, the doctrine of the Trinity is more plausible than any unitarian concept of God.

Now the obvious reply to this argument is to say that being perfectly loving requires no more than the disposition to love another, should another person be about. A sailor marooned on a desert island, for example, may be said to be a loving person due to his disposition to love and should not be characterized as less loving because he happens to be alone. But the case of God is crucially different, it seems. For God, as a maximally great being, is not dependent upon contingent circumstances to express His love. He can create persons to love if needs be. In His case His essential disposition to give Himself away in love to another

cannot remain unactualized. A God who has the power to create persons to whom He can give Himself in love but who refuses to do and is content to remain alone cannot be said to be perfectly loving, even dispositionally. But if God includes within Himself a plurality of persons, then there is no need to create persons in order for His loving disposition to be expressed.

I think this is a very good argument for thinking that God is a plurality of persons. It doesn't prove that God is three persons, but it does show that there must be a plurality of persons in God to whom God's love is necessarily directed. Therefore it serves to show the plausibility, at least, I think, of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Application of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Let me go on to say a word about the application of the doctrine of the Trinity to our lives. There are three points that I wanted to share.

1. *The doctrine of the Trinity helps us to order our prayer lives correctly.* When the disciples came to Jesus and said to him, *Teach us to pray*, how did Jesus teach them to pray? He taught them to pray to the Father. "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." Our prayers are to be directed to the Father. Jesus also said, *Whatever you ask in my name I will do it for you.* So we are to come to the Father in the person and the authority of the Son. It is because we are in Christ that we dare to approach the throne of the holy God, sinful creatures though we are, to make our requests. Then we do it in the power of the Holy Spirit. Remember Paul says

in Romans 8, *We don't know how to pray as we ought but the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness with groans too deep to be uttered, and he who knows the mind of the Spirit then knows what requests we make of him and what we need.* The Spirit intercedes for us according to God's will. So while one might on occasion pray to the Lord Jesus or invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit, the normal model for our prayer life ought to be prayer directed to the Father in the authority and name of the Son and with the power of the Holy Spirit.

2. *The Trinity provides a healthy model of the family and the marriage relationship.* Remember we saw that in the ontological Trinity all three of the persons are co-equal. They are all omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, eternal, and so forth. They are all partakers of the divine nature and so completely equal. And yet in the economic Trinity these persons take on different roles in the plan of salvation. The Father sends the Son into the world. The Son takes a human nature to himself and dies on the cross as substitutionary punishment for our sins. The Holy Spirit then works in the place of the Son to establish the church until the Son returns to Earth. So there is a subordination (or a submission) of the persons in the economic Trinity. The Son submits to the Father and his will. The Holy Spirit submits to the Son and stands in his place and continues his ministry. So even though all three of the persons are co-equal there is a kind of submission of one person to another within the economic Trinity.

In the same way, in the marriage relationship the husband and the wife are co-equal before God – both made in the image of God. In Galatians 3:28 Paul says, “In Christ there is neither male nor

female, slave nor free, but you are all one in Christ Jesus.” So before God’s throne the husband and the wife are co-equal. Similarly the children are equal with the parents insofar as they are in Christ and before God. They are all equal. But in the family unit, for the sake of the functioning of the family, God says that the wife should submit to her husband’s leadership and that the children should submit to their parents and do as they are commanded by their parents. Contrary to what feminists assert, this does not in any way imply inferiority of the wife or of the children. This is a purely functional submission for the sake of order in the family and doesn’t imply the inferiority of the wife or the inferiority of the children, who are all co-equal before God.

3. Finally, I wanted to share with you an email I got from a student who listens to the Defenders class and wanted me to share something of the impact that the doctrine of the Trinity had on his own personal spiritual life. So I want to read this testimonial that was sent in by Diego. He said,

As you wrap up the doctrine of the Trinity in Defenders class I was hoping that at the end of your lecture you would share with the class how much of a difference this doctrine can make in a believer’s spiritual life as it did for me by illuminating some of the other attributes of God that we have already discussed.

For me, the Trinity illuminated how, as you have said, creation like salvation is an act of God’s grace. I think that you express this concept well in your article “Divine

Timelessness and Personhood”¹ even though you were talking about God’s relationship to time. Still this paragraph just struck me. [Here he quotes a paragraph from that article]

Consider the love relationship between the members of the Trinity! Since intra-Trinitarian relations are not based on physical influence chains or rooted in any material substrata, but are, as it were, purely telepathic, the response of the Son to the Father’s love entails neither change nor temporal separation. Just as we speak metaphorically of two lovers who sit, not speaking a word, gazing into each other’s eyes as “lost in that timeless moment,” so we may speak literally of the timeless mutual love of the Father, Son, and Spirit for one another. . . . Within the fullness of the Godhead itself, the persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit enjoy the inter-personal relations afforded by the Trinity which God is. As a Trinity, God is eternally complete, with no need of fellowship with finite persons. It is a marvel of God’s grace and love that He would freely create finite persons and invite them to share in the love and joy of the inner Trinitarian life of God.

What a gift! What a life! When I first read that it was like a switch went off in my head and my heart. I understood what God’s love really meant. How absolutely holy and sacred the Trinity is. His aseity took on a whole new level for me because if he has a life like that why would he need anything

¹ See <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/divine-timelessness-and-personhood> (accessed September 30, 2016).

else? I was so grateful for God's power and eternity because that meant he could create creatures like me to enjoy that relationship forever. And his omniscience implied that he would know how to providentially order the world so that I would come to know him. The phrase "How Great Is Our God" finally made sense to me as did the incarnation and the atonement. To think that Christ would suffer the agonies of hell on the cross for my benefit so that I could enter into that relationship free from the sin that separated me from it, it brings tears to my eyes. Wow! What a God he is. This is more than I could ever expect even from the paradigm of goodness. So if you have time, please tell the folks in the class what a difference this doctrine can make in their lives. It sure has made a difference in mine.

Respectfully,

Diego

I thought that was a wonderful testimony to the practical implications in the spiritual life of this doctrine of the Trinity.