

Diakonia Program – Northern Illinois Synod ELCA

Christian Doctrine

**Session 2, Segment A
The Trinity – The Doctrine of God**

- I. Opening Devotions
- II. The Problem of God
 - a. A Construct of the Mind?
 - I. “God is for the weak minded” – Gov. Jesse Ventura
 - II. “Freud called belief in God an infantile illusion that our needs will be met by an omnipotent parent.” (Migliore 65)
 - III. “Religion (God) is the opiate of the people” – Karl Marx
 - IV. The God of oppression, patriarchy, etc.
 - V. God and the presence of evil
- III. Attributes of God
 - “Failure to rethink and reform our ideas of God’s impassibility, immutability, and omnipotence in light of the gospel sets the Christian doctrine of God at odds with the proclamation of Christ crucified.” (Migliore 83)*
 - a. Ineffable
 - 1. Classic Greek/Medieval Thought = Beyond knowing
 - 2. Modern proposal = Holiness
 - b. Impassible
 - 1. Classic/Medieval = feeling no pain, beyond suffering, impassive – without passion
 - 2. Modern proposal = cannot be overcome by suffering
 - c. Immutable
 - 1. Classic/Medieval = Unchangeable; static
 - 2. Modern = Faithfulness, trustworthiness
 - d. Eternal
 - 1. Classic/Medieval = Timeless
 - 2. Modern proposal = Encompassing all time, our future, eternal from an “eschatological” perspective.
 - e. Omnipotence
 - 1. Classic/Medieval = Power to cause; power over
 - 2. Modern proposal = Power to save; power of love; self-limiting power.
 - f. God & Love - redefining the paradigm

“In order to be completely itself, love has to suffer. It suffers from whatever contradicts its own nature. But if God is love and nothing but love, can there be anything that contradicts his being, so that he suffers from it and has to endure it as part of his own self-sacrifice? What is this? It is evil. By suffering evil he transforms evil into good.” (Moltmann 33)

“A God who cannot suffer cannot love either. A God who cannot love is a dead God. The truth of the suffering God has been revealed to us...” (Moltmann 38)

g. God “from above”

Beginning with a doctrine of God, what God must or must not be, etc., leads to a method that forces us to fit Jesus, scriptural witness, etc., into our notions of God. It necessitates that we say more than we can actually say if we are people rooted in the witness of the scriptures, tradition and community.

Trinity “from above” leads to divine math that does not add up; Jesus “from above” gives us Father and Son estranged from one another. God “from above” is really no God at all.

“Too frequently Christian educators confuse students with misleading inanities such as this: the mystery of the Trinity is how God can be both one and three at the same time. Then they appeal to divine ineffability, claiming this mysterious mathematical trick belongs to the realm of divine incomprehensibility... God should not be blamed for confused theology... What is at stake is whether or not God can define the Godself by becoming human, whether the Beyond can be become intimate, whether the infinite can become finite, and whether all of creation can be taken up into the divine life. (Peters 99)

“The gospel attacks the God of timeless eternity; that God is unmasked as Satan, who at once destroys us with the guilt of what we have been, and deludes us with false security in what we are. The Father of Jesus replaces all that men have called ‘God;’ and just so takes that title to himself. The Father of Jesus makes that one unnecessary to whom we have fled; because Jesus’ triumph is the future we do not need to defend ourselves against the future. Just and only so the triumph can be called ‘God’” (Jenson, S&P, 111)

h. God “from below”

Our confession of God is limited by what is revealed in Christ and witnessed to in scripture and community. We say what we can say, and must be silent on what we cannot say.

“The one who defined his Godhead by the death and resurrection of a man is not transcendent by his distance, to be quested after; he is transcendent in that he is coming.” (Jenson, S&P, 111)

“By Luther’s drastic insight, we may not seek to rise above the temporal revelation of God, thinking to grasp God more truly, in his high majesty, because the true God’s majesty is precisely his hiddenness, his refusal to be grasped by any but himself... “Thus both as the hidden God and as the revealed God, the one God directs us away from himself as we might seek to grasp him ‘above’ his human life and cross and resurrection, toward himself as he defines himself for us in these events of our own time and history.” (Jenson, TI, 29)

”The doctrine of the Trinity is the always-inadequate attempt to interpret this witness in the most suitable images and concepts available to the church in a particular era... the starting point or root of Trinitarian faith is the good news of the love of God in Christ that continues to work in the world by the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is the church’s effort to give coherent expression to this mystery of God’s free grace announced in the gospel and experienced in Christian faith.” (Migliore 67)

i. Why it matters

- a. It matters because of what we proclaim. Think of some of the common ways we broadly talk about God in our culture that reflect assumptions about God that do not fit well with the God revealed “from below.” “All God’s plan;” “God never gives us more than we can handle;” God is all “power-full.”
- b. It matters because of the grounding. Scripture and tradition and community are the foundation – all else is speculative.

IV. Roots of the Doctrine

“In Jurgen Moltmann’s summary of the New Testament witness, the story of the gospel is ‘the great love story of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a divine love story in which we are all involved together with heaven and earth.’” (Migliore 68)

a. Expression of God in New Testament

^{NRS} 2 Corinthians 13:13: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you

“The key to the Trinitarian doctrine is the Father-Son relationship. In Christian theology, God is symbolized as a divine Father primarily because Christ is symbolized as the divine Son. Not the other way around.” (Peters, 100)

“If talk of the triune God is not to be wild speculation, it will always find its basis and its limit in the biblical narrative of the love of God that comes to the world through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and in actual Christian experience of this love (Rom. 5:5). (Migliore 69)

“Jesus sought to pass this intimate relationship with God on to his followers via the medium of prayer. Jesus teaches the disciples the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2-4; Matt 6:9-13)... The third person of

the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is significant here. The Holy Spirit empowers Christians to pray like Jesus and effects (sic) the same intimate communion with their lives.” (Peters, 101)

b. Classical Doctrine

- I. The efforts to articulate a doctrine of God rooted in the Trinity with it's, at times, confusing talk of essence and persons intend to “describe the reality of the living God in conformity with the gospel story.” (Migliore 71)
- II. The articulation defends against: (all “from above”)
 - a. Adoptionism
 - b. Subordinationism
 - c. Modalism
 - d. Tritheism

V. Elements of a Doctrine of the Trinity

- a. The Trinity shows us a God eternally living in relationship of love. It is the pattern for life.
- b. God's relationality is deep and abiding beyond human experience – *perchoresis* – mutual indwelling – encircling – dance of the divine. Friendship and human family, community and mutual, committed love are intimations of this dance.
- c. God is essentially self-giving love, and strong through vulnerability.
- d. God is capable of both subjective and objective immanence and ultimate transcendence.
- e. God is expressed in the narrative (story) of the Trinity in history.

“It is simply a mistake to say, or even to feel in one's heart, that the Father is the rigid lawgiver who is angry with one while gentle Jesus, meek and mild, understands and forgives. Attributing to one person what one cannot imagine attributing to another, or setting the persons up in opposition to one another should immediately raise a red flag.” (Van Harn, 11)

“God is not a simple monad existing somewhere in eternal isolation who occasionally turns on a celestial television news show to observe what is happening on earth. Rather, God's involvement in the course of world affairs is so intimate that the character of divinity itself is shaped by it. The Trinitarian understanding of God is that God's self-investment in the incarnation redefines divinity to include humanity, the humanity of the historical Jesus. God's full self-investment in the Holy Spirit binds believers to Christ. So that in faith, they are one with Christ, and hence, one with God... The identity of God does not come predetermined in some timeless eternity that lies beyond and divorced from everything else; rather the identity of God is shaped by the economy of the divine-human relationship taking place within time and history.” (Peters, 113)

- f. The Trinitarian Formulation – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is the name of God, and supplies us the gospel story in “shorthand.”

“Father, Son, and Holy Spirit became the church’s name for its God because it packs into one phrase the content and logic of this God’s identifying descriptions.” (Jenson, Triune Identity, 21)

VI. Break

Session 2, Segment B Creation

I. A Non-Trinitarian God as Creator

a. Types of approaches

- i. Theism – God is transcendent creator of the world, totally other, non-relational.
- ii. Deism – God is an absentee landlord, divine clockmaker.
- iii. Pantheism – The creation is a mode of God’s being; creation is in some way God.
- iv. Panentheism – Creation and God are mutually dependent

b. Dangerous Constructs

- i. Creation as object for humanity – man as “measure” and humans as consumers
- ii. Power as domination instead of love
- iii. Creation as object instead of relationship – denial of interconnectedness
- iv. Creator as vending machine – limitless resource

II. A Trinitarian Creator and Creation

a. Creation - On-going and Future

“... depicts God as constantly engaged in drawing the world out of nonbeing and into existence with the aim of consummating this creative work in the future. God’s present work in and for the world anticipates the final work.” (Peters, 132)

- b. Creation & Redemption - Parts of the whole; God is revealed to us in Christ first; there we find the revelation of the creator God.

“The gospel begins with the story of Jesus told with its significance -- that in the historical person of Jesus, the eternal God who is the creator of all things has acted in the course of temporal events to bring salvation to what has been created. Salvation for humans consists in the forgiveness of sins and the final redemption for the dead. This resurrection coincides with the advent of the new creation. For God to fulfill this promise, God must have the power to bring new creation to pass. If God has this transformatory

power, then God must have had the power to bring creation into existence in the first place.” (Peters, 133)

c. Creator of All Things

“Thus to affirm creation ex nihilo is to affirm that God is creator, that humans are creatures, and that it is possible for God to keep the divine promise to transform humankind and the rest of creation into something new.” (Peters 138)

“I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil. All this he does out of his pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on my part. For all of this I am bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey him. This is most certainly true.” (Luther’s Small Catechism, First Article of the Creed)

- i. To reject that God creates out of nothing strips God of the power to redeem.
- ii. To reject that God continues to create (creationism) robs God of the power to creatively engage creation. God is “locked in”

d. Dependence on God

“In confessing that God is creator and that we are creatures, we acknowledge that we are finite, contingent, radically dependent beings... You and I are not necessary... We are finite. The resources of our community and nation are finite. The resources of our world are finite. Like the grass that withers and dies (Isa. 40:6), all creatures and the earth itself live on the edge of nonbeing.” (Migliore 102)

“The God on whom we are radically dependent is the God who wills us to be free and calls us to responsibility.” (Migliore 102)

III. Creation and Science

- a. Credible theology needs take seriously scientific knowledge
- b. The central question is: Can creation be BOTH “out of nothing” and “ongoing?”
- c. Four Concepts
 - i. Big Bang - A far distant precipitating event that is still unfolding.
 - ii. Entropy - When the big bang fizzles -- Creation of time -- beginning and end.
 - iii. Evolution - Creation “on the way”
 - iv. Ecology - The parts are interconnected, interdependent

- d. "Proleptic" Creation sees all events in light of the future - including our scientific understanding. The pull toward God's integrated future.
 - i. This avoids "archonic" reductionism -- the notion that all is determined in the beginning; clock wound up and set in motion.
 - ii. This also avoids "atomic reductionism" which says "parts is parts." Everything is understood in terms of its smallest part.
 - iii. The "master act" -- Lemon Meringue Pie -- p. 145-146

Session 2, Segment C **Sin & Evil**

I. The "Problem" of Sin & Evil

- a. The space between the first two person of the Trinity....
- b. The recognition that there is something wrong.....
- c. Why does God allow Evil? Suffering?
 - i. Remember that we have said creation is both "out of nothing" AND "on-going." This changes the dynamics of the question.
 - ii. Divine providence in general may be seen to "allow" for the eruption of sin and evil in a creation that is "on-its-way" but that will be resolved in God's future.
 - iii. The notion of human freedom and its relationship to a God of love must serve the discussion more than discussions of God's imagined attributes.
 - iv. The cross and resurrection are still primary symbols for answering these questions to any degree.

II. Humanity and Sin

- a. The image of God - "...I will view the image of God as the call forward, as the divine draw toward future reality. We are becoming." (Peters, 147)
- b. The fall into sin - "Sin and its fruit - evil - retard this becoming. We sin by trying to fixate ourselves in present reality, thereby diverting or blocking God's call forward toward the new creation. Evil is unbecoming." (Peters, 147)
- c. Both soil and spirit - of the dirt, but spirit breathed.
 - i. We are part of something larger; forged to be communal (like the Trinity)
 - ii. Spirit (or soul) cannot be equated with individual being; it is something born of and yearning for something else; something beyond. "Spirit is present to us, but it is not our to keep." (Peters, 150)

iii. The Word and its creative power - "...we are not imprisoned by the soil. We cannot be confined to our physical makeup... (The Word) frees us to enter into profound relationships and to be open to what transcends us." (Peters, 151)

iv. We are finite - and we know it! (Or should)

"We are in between, embodying both soil and spirit. We are creatures but with a degree of divine presence. Although mortal we dream of immortality. Although we are finite and limited our desires and imaginations soar to the infinite and the boundless. We live at the inbetween, at the point of tension between soil and spirit. This is human reality. To deny it makes us ripe for tragedy." (Peters, 151)

v. New Adam -- the call of the future; to be what we are called to be. *"Our restlessness is a sign that we are not now what we will yet be."* (Peters, 152)

d. The Image of God

i. Intellectual reality

ii. Moral reality

iii. Relationality

iv. Creativity

v. What embraces all? Integrating power of the future. *"Who we are is determined by who we will be."* (157)

vi. Divinization, *Theosis*, Sanctification - Union with Christ

"Through divinization humanity as the imago Dei becomes fulfilled in us."

I. Finnish School of Luther Studies

II. Trinitarian implications -- becoming part of the Trinitarian dance...

III. Sin produces Evil (163)

a. Anxiety - *"Anxiety is a prelude to sin. In itself, anxiety is not a sin; but it stands before us like a fruit on the tree of knowledge, tempting us toward aggression."* (163)

b. Unfaith - *"If anxiety is the fertile soil, then the root of sin is unfaith - that is, untrust. By this I mean a lack of trust in God when we are confronted by our anxiety."* (164)

c. Pride - *"By pride (Augustine) means the self-exaltation that results from centering our attention upon ourselves when pursuing satisfaction of temporary or ephemeral desires rather than the long-range purposes of God. It refuses to allow God to be God."* (Peters, 166)

i. Individual pride = narcissism

ii. Group pride - pick an "-ism" racism, sexism, nationalism, etc.

- d. Concupiscence - "... sensual desire leading to lust, greed, envy, avarice, covetousness. Concupiscence consists primarily in the attempt to become solely soil... expressed most saliently in the consumer mentality. Concupiscence is perverted love." (Peters, 167-8)
- e. Self-Justification - Jesus addressed the sin of self-justification shown in the religious ethos of his day as much as any other sin. "None of us wants our pride or concupiscence advertised or our public image tarnished. We wish to be considered innocent, righteous, good, just. If things go wrong, it must be somebody else's fault." (Peters, 170)
 - i. Sometimes we think of this as legalism - which can be a second layer of self-justification - it pints whitewash on the evil result.
 - ii. Scapegoating always results - the act of selecting victims to blame for the crisis at hand. WE draw the line between good and evil and take matters into our own hands - the crucifixion of Jesus.
- f. Self-Loathing - An alternative to self-justification is self loathing or hatred. This is missing from Peters' analysis, I think. This leads to the stages below, but directed toward the self.
- g. Cruelty - "We treat our scapegoats cruelly. All the hatred we have toward ourselves and hidden from ourselves comes to expression in acts of cruelty, which I will here define as the inflicting of physical or emotional pain on another person in order to cause anguish or fear." (Peters, 172)
 - i. Passive Cruelty - lack of care and concern - Lazarus at the gate
 - ii. Active Cruelty - inflicting pain under the guise of discipline or security etc.
 - iii. Torture is active cruelty crossing the boundary to blasphemy.
- h. Blasphemy - "The use of sacred symbols to incite prejudice... identification of one's on tribal o nationalistic interests with the providence of God... seek supranatural power for engaging in vengeful or criminal enterprises... When cruelty is inflicted in behalf of God's name or in profaning God's name, it is blasphemy." (Peters. 173-5)

IV. Sin is "Original"

- a. Our tendency to sin is not simply individual lack of character or moral lapses -- it is part of the fabric of humanity.
- b. In some ways it is the price of our freedom; God's love determines God's use of power.
- c. It is not a hopeless cause, however -- we are called into becoming

V. God, Suffering, & Evil

- a. The questions: Why does God allow evil? Why doesn't God do something about evil? etc. are in some sense rooted in our sin -- our demand for the future in the present.
- b. What if we view the biblical narrative as precisely the answer to what God is doing about evil?

- c. Suffering is often because of evil of others, inflicted by a broken world; often it is self-inflicted; may times it is a result of the process of becoming we reject .
- d. God has shown us in the cross and resurrection an answer to suffering and evil -- God is with us in the midst of the pain; God is active in redemption of suffering and overcoming evil.
- e. The Trinity is an answer.....

Session 2 Bibliography

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