

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 16

The Trinity – Part Two

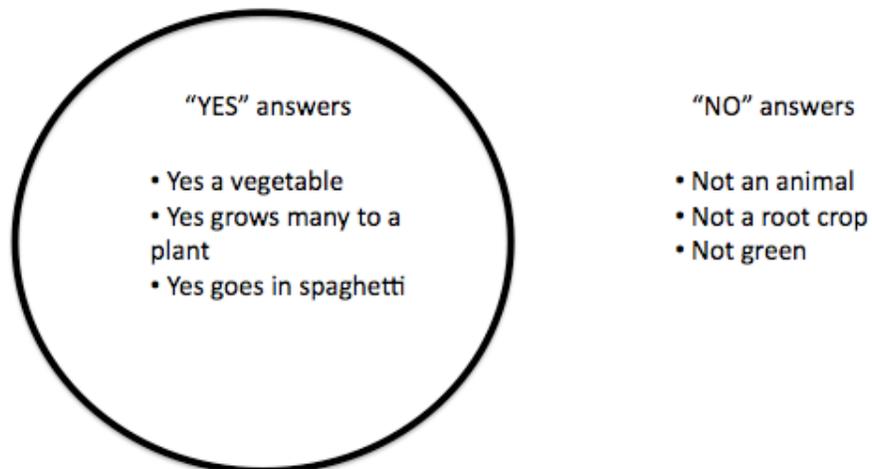
Have you ever played the game Twenty Questions? It was a favorite in the Lanier house while I was growing up on our long car trips. (I suspect Mom used that game as a ploy to stop my sister and me from fussing on drives from New York to Texas.)

We have five children. We have used the same ploy!

The game is simple to learn. As we play it, one person thinks of an animal, vegetable or mineral. Everyone else tries to guess what it is. In guessing, you have twenty questions you can ask, but each question must be a “yes” or “no” question. This means that you can ask, “Is it a vegetable?” because that can be answered “yes” or “no.” You cannot ask, “What kind of vegetable?” because that question requires something more than a “yes” or “no” answer.

One chief strategy is to ask questions where you learn from the answer whether it is “yes” or “no.” For example, if you have determined if the answer is a vegetable, you might want to ask if the vegetable grows above the ground. If the answer is “yes,” then you have narrowed the field of possible answers. Similarly, if the answer is “no,” then you have a good indication you are dealing with a root vegetable (potato, turnip, beet, carrot, *etc.*) You learn either way.

This diagram offers a simple way of understanding:



We can reasonably make our next guess, “Is it a tomato?”

What we are doing here is walking through a logical reasoning process that most anyone any age can do. The simple process shows that we can learn from positive answers and information, and we can also learn from negative answers and information. This process is true in theology as well as car games!

As we begin our second week studying the Trinity, we do so considering the ways we learn information about things from both positive information and statements as well as from negative ones.

THE PROBLEM

Last week, we began our study of the Trinity setting forth the issues that confound our minds as we seek to understand the true nature of God Almighty. As we mentioned last week, we do this with trepidation and awe, remembering that we are created humans trying to grasp the infinite Creator God. We should be mindful of the point made by Wolfhart Pannenberg that,

Any intelligent attempt to talk about God...must begin and end with confession of the inconceivable majesty of God which transcends all our concepts.¹

This must be in front of us as we pause to consider what we are really doing. Most of us would have a great deal of difficulty understanding quantum physics, yet that is merely $2 + 2$ compared to human fathoming of the substance and makeup of God.

Without a doubt, we would be hopeless in making any strong determinations at all, save the fact that God has chosen to reveal aspects of his nature to us. We have this revelation through scripture. We have this revelation in the life and being of Christ. For any who have seen Christ, have seen the Father (Jn 14:9).

Having stated the humility required in such a study, we previously walked through the scriptures, with particular focus on Paul’s writings, that made the point about the divinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We then explained from where our term the “Trinity” came. We considered what was originally meant when God was first termed “three persons” as opposed to what is meant by “person” today. We closed the class pushing again the question, How are the “Three” “One?”²

¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans 1991) Vol. 1 at 337.

² This material is available for download in written or oral form at our class website: www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

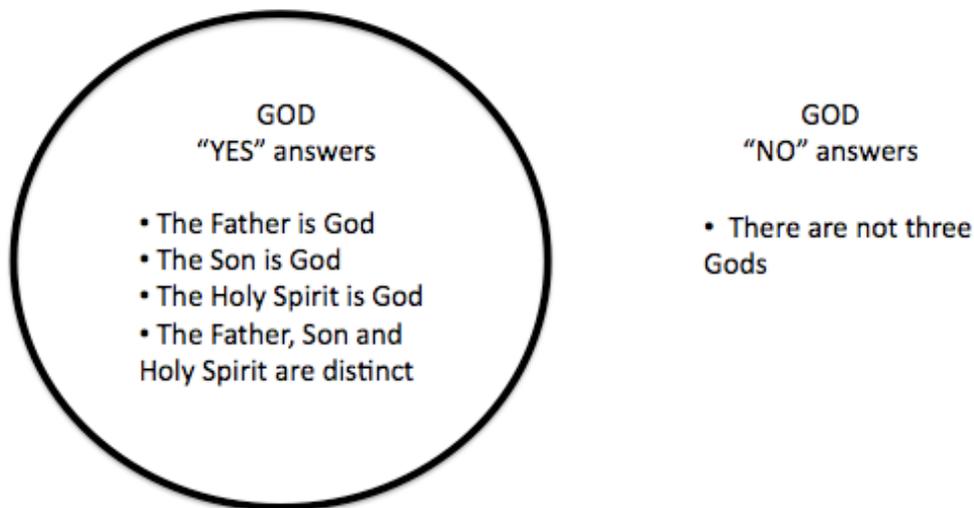
Our goal this week is to provide some measure of answer to this question. We will not solve a problem that has intrigued many of the greatest minds of Christianity over the centuries with a ten page lesson that answers all our questions. It certainly would be suspicious if we were able to do that in one class or even a decade of classes! We again emphasize that the true and full nature of God is not going to be understood by fallen humanity. At most, we can comprehend what aspects of God he has chosen to reveal to us.

Our goal this lesson is more than defining the Trinity and seeking to understand it. We hope in this class to add to our *way* of thinking about God. It is here we start.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE THEOLOGY³

Remember the game of twenty questions we discussed? That approach is useful as we consider the nature of God and the Trinity. We are able, through revelation and the scriptures, to determine a number of things that Trinity God is. Similarly, we are able to understand a number of things God is not. This is the approach we use this week. It helps us to look at the historical development of Trinity thought before returning to Paul for his teaching on the subject.

If we reuse our chart from earlier, then we can set it out in reference to God:



³ The terms "positive" theology and "negative" theology have had multiple uses over the centuries. Historically, many mystics have used "negative theology" to make the point that humanity cannot really know anything positive about God. They assert that he is so far beyond our reasoning and understanding that all we can really know is what he is not. This is an extreme of negative theology that denies the concurrent existence of positive theology. It is a fun area of study complete with great Greek labels of "apophatic" and kataphatic" approaches, but that is beyond this class!

We have already filled in the lessons of scripture from last week, noting that God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We have added that these three are distinct in some manner. Yet at the same time, we remember that there are not three Gods, there is only one.

We have set this model up for several reasons. First, it is sensible to remember that often what we know about God is not simply because we have positive information and answers. Much of what we know is often what we can negate as *not true*. In other words, we might know that God cannot be seen (he is “invisible”), yet that does not tell us exactly what he is made of. It simply tells us that he is not visible material in front of us.

Second, this model leaves us room for awe, wonder, and contemplation. Once we recognize the use of negative theology, we are left with some matters of God that are unknown in precision.

For example, in our game of Twenty Questions, if we know the question “Is the vegetable green?” gets an answer, “No,” then we can exclude such vegetables as cucumbers and broccoli. But we still do not know if the answer is carrot, tomato, potato, cauliflower, etc. Similarly when we know God is not “three Gods,” then we may not have an answer for how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are a unity, but we know they must be!

A third reason this model is particularly useful as we consider the Trinitarian aspect of God is that much of what orthodoxy has set out over the generations was a studied and reasoned reaction to what would ultimately be deemed heresy. This means that many things that helped define the Trinity are expressed recognitions of what *God is not*, not simply what God is. We are ultimately looking at two different issues (inside the circle and outside the circle). We are looking at both what God is and what God is not.

Most helpful in this analysis is the doctrine of the Trinity as it developed in the church in its first several hundred years in response to heresy. Let us consider briefly the usage and references to God in these early centuries.

The first church understood that God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit existed. We have no indication from scripture that Paul (or anyone else) ever probed whether the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were distinct persons. “Persons” was not necessarily a present concept for Paul and the people of Biblical times in the sense that we use it today. Similarly, the question of how the three could be one was not one that Paul or scripture seems to answer as a directly posed question. That is not to say that scripture does not give us material to arrive at answers. We simply wish to point out that neither Paul nor the other New Testament writers directly set out the questions for answer. In fact, it is in the scriptures that we get enough information to actually raise the question!

Because scripture does not use words like “person” or “nature” or “substance” or even “Trinity” in reference to God, one of the first issues for the church was trying to find the right terminology to answer the questions raised by the Trinitarian issues. These terminology issues caused a number of heresies to arise as people heard teachings and understood the import and meanings of the used words in a different sense than the original theologian meant.

As P. J. Hamell noted:

There were heretics...who denied Christian truths; but there were well-meaning bishops, priests, and people who unconsciously furthered heresy because they were genuinely confused about words.⁴

We face many similar problems today. We struggle to understand how God is three distinct “persons” yet one “nature” or “substance.” Could we call God three “entities”? How about “three beings”? In some sense, yes we can. Yet in another sense both of those labels could be used in a way that orthodoxy declares heretical!

On top of the difficulties in finding words to convey truths of God that were not words available in Scripture, the church had to confront many ideas about God and the Trinity that were shown by the church and scripture to be outside the circle (to use our earlier demonstration). This was the church defining heresy on this issue.

Although the heresies took many names and many forms, we can fairly subdivide them into three groupings that a number of scholars use: (1) Monarchianism, (2) Subordinationism, and (3) Tritheism.

1. Monarchianism

One set of heresies found in the Church’s early centuries bears the term “monarchianism.” Our English heritage might make us think that any word starting with “monarch” must refer to either a king or a butterfly. Here, it refers to a Greek root (*monos*) which means “alone” or “one.” In its fuller form, the Greek word *monarchia* means to be “sovereign” or a “single ruler.” It is in this sense a king is a monarch because he is the *one* ruler.

These Monarchian heresies were based on the idea that there is only one God; therefore, there could be no other person or being equal in power and glory to the Father. This heresy took multiple forms. At its roots, this was the same concern that caused the Jews to label Christianity as the heresy for giving divine status to Jesus. In response to this, Justin Martyr⁵ (c.100 AD – 165) wrote some of the

⁴ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2d Ed. (Thomson Gale 2003) Vol.14 at 203.

⁵ For more on Justin Martyr, see lesson # 13 in Church History on the class website.

early reasoned responses on how Jesus could be as divine as the Father without denying God the Father's status. In his work, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, Justin wrote his reasoning on how belief in the Son as God did not destroy the monotheism of the Jews and Old Testament.

After discussing the many incidents in the Old Testament where the one God demonstrated distinctions,⁶ Justin pointed out that Jesus proceeding from the Father did not mean that either Christ or the Father was lessened in any way. The example Justin used was that of fire. One fire catching onto a second log does not diminish either the first fire or the second. Both were the essence of a single flame with the second still maintaining some level of distinction.⁷

Under the part of our diagram assessing what "God is NOT," Justin would add that the Father was not lessened when the Son became incarnate. Nor was the Son lessened having left the Father. Of course this does not offer an explanation of how Christ was "begotten." It merely lets one know that in the process Christ and the Father were still fully God.

Another route taken by Monarchians that claimed to be Christians involved removing the distinct personality of the Son. This approach⁸ merged the Father and Son into one entity. The Father, some taught, was God in heaven, but this Father God then descended to earth becoming the divine Christ. The church fought against this heretical doctrine clarifying that God the Father and the Son were not the same entity. In this sense, we could place in the negative area of our diagram, "GOD the Son and God the Father are not just different manifestations of the same singular being."

It was fighting against this type of Monarchian belief that brought Tertullian to write the works we discussed last week where he devised the Latin terms for Trinity (*trinitas*) and Persons (*persona*) in describing God.

2. Subordinationism

Fighting Monarchianism helped the church understand the biblical teaching that God was truly three different divine persons, but another heresy soon came up.

⁶ Justin used many of the scriptures from the Old Testament we cited in last week's lesson including the angels that appeared to Abraham destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, the burning bush speaking to Moses, etc. See *Dialogue* at chapters 56 – 60.

⁷ *Dialogue* at chapter 61.

⁸ Also called "Sabellianism" or "Patripassianism."

The heresy of Subordinationism taught that Christ was lesser to some degree than the Father. A principle heretic of this persuasion was Arius (c.250 – 336).⁹

Arius taught that the Word (Christ) was created by God the Father out of nothingness. Thus, Christ was not God's son by nature, but was son by adoption. Christ was seen as subordinate to the Father, not equal. Ultimately, this view was also extended to the Holy Spirit by a bishop of Constantinople named Macedonius (died 364). Macedonius taught that the Son created the Holy Spirit setting up the subordination chain as the Spirit great, the Son greater, and the Father greatest.

Arius and the subordination heresies were confronted at the Council of Nicaea (325) and again at the Council of Constantinople (381). At Nicaea, the Church declared Arius and his followers heretics, in essence adding to our "GOD is not:" column that God is not a subordinate chain involving either the Son or the Holy Spirit. In a positive fashion, the council set out the orthodox creed including this language:

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance [*ek tes ousias*] of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of the same substance with the Father [*homoousion to patri*], through whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth; who for us men and our salvation descended, was incarnate, and was made man, suffered and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven and cometh to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost. Those who say: There was a time when He was not, and He was not before He was begotten; and that He was made out of nothing (*ex ouk onton*); or who maintain that He is of another hypostasis or another substance [than the Father], or that the Son of God is created, or mutable, or subject to change, [them] the Catholic Church anathematizes.

This is an amalgam of both positive and negative theology setting out that Christ was "begotten" (positive) "not made" (negative). It sets bounds on orthodoxy. Any who claim there was a time where there was no Christ, or that Christ was not in existence prior to being begotten, or that Christ is another substance than the Father, or that Christ is changeable, is branded a heretic and removed from fellowship of the Church. These bounds set up ideas of the Trinity that are outside the circle of who God is. These are statements of what the Trinity is not. Importantly, however, they do not presume to answer all the questions of how God is in positive terms.

⁹ For more of the history on these issues see Church History lesson #19 on the class website.

The Council of Constantinople re-affirmed the teachings on Christ and added an emphasis on the Lordship of the Holy Spirit as well.¹⁰

3. Tritheism

The Tritheists get their name from the Greek *treis* meaning “three” and *theos* meaning “God.” Tritheism fails to believe or understand the difference between God as three persons while still one substance. For the Tritheists there are three essences or natures to God. The net effect of this idea is that there are three Gods. The Tritheists did not choose to put it this way. Instead, they might say that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each of the “species” God. Thus, as much as Matthew, Mark, and Luke were all “men,” the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all “God.”

This heresy has taken a number of different forms, including the more recent (last several centuries) idea that the Biblical terms of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are really three divine attributes of “power,” “wisdom,” and “goodness.”

A third form of this heresy asserts that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three different beings that are so similar in purpose and will that they should be considered “one” in a symbolic way like a husband and wife are termed “one” in scripture.

Over the centuries the Church and orthodoxy has also placed this teaching into the column of what is NOT God. God is not a species that has three different beings in it. God is not a combination of power, wisdom and goodness. There are not three Gods who are simply united in purpose.

PAUL’S WRITINGS

A little over 100 years after Paul, a Christian writer named Athenagoras of Athens (a late contemporary of Justin Martyr) also used a great deal of negative theology as he sought to explain that the Christian believed in one God. Athenagoras wrote that Christians:

Hold God to be one, *unbegotten*, eternal, *invisible*, *suffering nothing*, *comprehended by none*, *circumscribed by none*, apprehended by mind and reasoning alone, girt about with light and beauty and spirit and power, *indescribable*, creator of all things by his Word...The Father and Son are one. The Son being in the Father and the Father in the Son by the powerful union of the Spirit.

¹⁰ See lessons 23 and 24 in Church History available on the class website.

We note in italics the words and phrases used by Athenagoras to instruct in what God is by noting what he is not. This is the approach we now turn to Paul for consideration. Did Paul ever try to describe God by listing what God is not? Would Paul think this a fair way to approach our knowledge of God?

Absolutely!

Consider Paul's doxology at the end of 1 Timothy. Paul writes of God:

Who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. (1 Tim 6:15-16)

Paul uses both positive statements about God as the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings, but he also notes the things we know that God is not. God does not dwell in approachable light. God has not been seen, nor can any see him. This echoes Paul's comments earlier in this letter where he notes that God can neither be seen ("invisible") nor can he ever end ("immortal") (1 Tim. 1:17).

Consider in this way Paul's comments about Jesus to the Ephesians. Paul tells them that God's power cannot be measured (a negative description) and that this is the power that raised Christ "from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:19-21).

Do we see the negatives? What is the limit to God's power? One cannot be set. His power is immeasurable. Similarly Paul does not give us the exact location of Christ and the Father in the heavenly places, but Paul tells us that Christ is far above all authorities, powers and dominions. Christ will not be subordinate to anyone in position, in stature or in name.

Later in the letter (3:8), Paul writes of the "unsearchable riches" of Christ. Again, Paul is stating that he is not able to define all the riches we have, but he is able to say that they exceed the searchings of our minds that might limit them.

Paul knew well that his understanding of the positive things of God, as well as his limitations in understanding the full implications of the negative things he knew, both alike came from the Spirit of God. Paul told the Corinthians that he knew these things because of revelation, not observation!

These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God...And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

So, where does this leave us as we consider Paul's teachings on God, the teachings that laid groundwork for the church's understanding of the Trinity? We first return to Pannenberg's caution of keeping awe over "God's inconceivable majesty" (a negative statement). We then recognize that scripture teaches us certain truths of God and the Trinity that the church has established as orthodoxy. Yet, God through his Spirit has not seen fit to give us all the answers, or a full positive understanding of his nature as the Triune God. Ultimately, there is mystery that we can theorize over, but not state definitely. We struggle to come up with human analogies that fall short as we try to understand the nature that makes the three persons one.

There are things we can say, and things we can deny, but there is also a great deal of mystery. We should never make dogma of areas left open to no definitive answer. Similarly, our faith should never be threatened by our failure to fully grasp the nature of the eternal, infinite God. In fact, we suggest that were we able to fully grasp the Lord, were we able to put him into our minds, into our words, into our boxes, we surely should tremble. For either we have reduced God to something we humans can handle or God is not truly God!

With humility, we offer again our diagram. No doubt it could be filled out in a multitude of ways beyond what we have done. We could write of God as "love," "light;" we could put down that there is "no darkness" in him. He is "truth," "all seeing," and "all knowing." He is "immanent" and yet "transcendent." He operates in space and time, yet he is beyond space and time.

As we focus on the Trinity, our diagram could be filled in with the following teachings:



GOD
"NO" answers

- There are not three independent beings that are of a common species we call "God"
- God is one being in three forms depending on location (i.e. not the Father when in heaven, Jesus when on earth, and the Spirit working in the Church)
- Jesus is not lesser than or inferior to God, nor is the Holy Spirit
- God is not understood except by revelation, we cannot see him or approach him in his dwelling
- Neither the Father, Son or Holy Spirit were ever created from nothing.

What more might you add?

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."* (Jn. 1:18).

Should we ever despair in our inability to fully understand God? Of course not! God has chosen to reveal himself, not only through the words and lessons of scripture, but also through the Word made flesh. We see Jesus and we learn of God. The compassion of Christ is the compassion of God. The purity of Christ is the purity of God. The call of Christ is the call of God. God has made himself known! Christ said it plainly, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Mt. 11:27).

2. *"Making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ"* (Eph. 1:9).

Think over God's incredible plan for us. He gave us Christ for our sins, his blood for ours, his righteousness, ours. Yet while doing so, God revealed a mystery of his to us – the mystery of Christ "as a plan for the fullness of

time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” This is God revealing God in an effort to bring back to God the creation lost in sin. May we humbly bow and joyfully return to our Creator. May we leave room for the mysteries of God! We can then join in Paul’s praise:

3. *“He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.”* (1 Tim. 6:15-16).

We may not know all there is to know about God, but there are things we know are certainly true, and things we know are certainly untrue. God can be known in ways that teach us who he is and in ways that teach who he is not. Either way, through the Spirit, God is at work to open our eyes, clean out our ears, and soften our hearts. His purpose has never been to make us mega-smart on all things God. His purpose has always been to make us holy as he brings us into our eternal home in his presence. At this we marvel and proclaim, “Come quickly Lord Jesus.”