

The Threefold Personhood of God

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[0 : 00] Welcome back. Today I'm continuing to answer questions from viewers and I thought today, as the issue has been on my mind for various reasons, I'd answer this particular question from Curious Cat.

You've challenged the idea that the persons of the Trinity are three distinct centres of consciousness, but reading the Gospels it seems fairly obvious to me that they are. How do you make sense of this?

As a background to this question, it may be helpful to think back to the debates in 2016 about the eternal subordination of the Son. These caused considerable controversy within certain evangelical circles over a period of a few months and they're still bubbling away beneath the surface in some quarters.

These debates were concerning the question of whether the Son eternally submits to the Father, whether the Father and his authority is enacted over the Son and expressed in his continual internal obedience to the Father.

Now, there were a number of issues with this particular debate, not least the politicisation that manifested itself within it. One of the problems that we have within evangelical circles is that so many of our debates are snared up within these politics that we have within our movements, between different parties and between different viewpoints that are not strictly theological, but use those theological debates as proxies for the real institutional and personal tensions that exist between them.

[1 : 36] So, unfortunately, this meant that, on occasions, the proper theological weight and issues that should be manifest within these debates and should be foregrounded were often just being used to serve other purposes.

Likewise, the fact that it was caught up within the gender debates did not help. Within the gender debates, everyone has strong opinions and often far stronger opinions and far stronger commitments than they have to the classical Trinitarian position.

One of the things that you could notice within the debates, for instance, if you are following them, is that many of the parties who strongly appeal to the classical doctrine of the Trinity, in other cases, when the doctrine does not play to their prejudices, they are all too happy to discard it and to reject it in favour of some novelty that is more amenable to their particular theological or political priors. So, it's important to be careful and wary of the way that these positions play out within these highly politicised debates, where they are being conscripted to serve other purposes, for the most part. And so, if we're going to think well about the doctrine of the Trinity, it's important to think about it as a doctrine in its own right, not just a doctrine that can serve us well within certain debates and controversies that exist for other purposes.

[3 : 01] So, within that debate, one of the things that was at stake was the question of whether the Father and the Son are distinct personalities.

Not just distinct persons, in a stipulated sense of that term, but distinct personalities. Personalities in the sense that we think of human persons as personalities.

That I'm a distinct personality, I'm a distinct person, in a way that is, means that I have a distinct principle of knowledge, of action, of willing, and these sorts of things, as a distinct centre of consciousness of my own, all these sorts of things, that mean that I am who I am, rather than someone else.

And so, that's how we understand human personality. The question is, how do we apply those sorts of notions to God? Is that what it means to be a divine person? Is that what that term means within that context?

And this manifested itself within that debate in the controversy about whether the Father has authority and the Son submits.

[4 : 15] And what is the problem there? One of the problems that people saw, including myself, within this debate, is that if the Father has authority and the Son just submits, that authority is not the proper authority of the one God, Father, Son, and Spirit, but that authority becomes the proper possession of the Father, and not of the Son.

And so this leads to a tension with classical theism, which, classical Trinitarianism, which would hold that the authority is common to Father, Son, and Spirit.

Now, this is difficult to understand in some ways, because within the Gospels we see, on numerous occasions, Christ talking about his submitting to the Father, or Christ talking about the command of his Father, and his keeping of that charge.

How are we to understand that? I think one of the ways that I found very helpful to think about is this way that's laid out by John Webster, who talks about the inseparable operations of God.

Indivisibility, he says, does not disqualify personal differentiation or restrict it simply to the internal operations, but it does indicate that economic differentiation is modal, not real, and it reinforces the importance of prepositional rather than substantive differentiation from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit.

[5 : 42] Modal differentiation does not deny personal agency, however. It simply specifies how the divine persons act. Owen, John Owen, notes that the several persons are undivided in their operations, acting all by the same will, the same wisdom, the same power.

Every person, therefore, is the author of every work of God, because each person is God, and the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations, and this ariseth from the unity of the person in the same essence.

And so when we're thinking about divine authority, for instance, it is important that we recognise that there is one divine authority. It's not three divine authorities.

But yet this one divine authority is enacted in a threefold manner. This one divine authority is from the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit.

How do we see this within the Gospels? I think one of the ways we see it is that the Father is the one from whom authority comes. The Father is the one who gives command.

[6 : 49] The Father is the one who sends. The Father is the one who gives a charge. The Father is the one who commits to the Son. The Father is the one who gives all authority and power to the Son.

But yet, what does it mean that this is through the Son? That all authority and power has been given to the Son, without reservation. The full authority of God is enacted through the Son.

That this is the way that God's authority is seen in the Son, and entirely through the Son, that this authority is enacted. So it's not as if the Father has the authority of purely in himself, and then he delegates a certain amount to the Son.

Rather, the entire divine authority is enacted through the Son. And so it's important to distinguish this from a position that sees divine authority as the proper possession of the Father, that is then delegated in part to the Son.

Rather, Father, Son, and Spirit share the one divine authority, and it's enacted from the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit. All the divine authority is enacted in the Spirit.

[8 : 01] Thinking about this then, I think this helps us to understand just how close the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit actually is, and how Christ can reveal the Father in the powerful way that he does.

Because we do not have three distinct centres of knowledge, wisdom, of will and action, but rather we have inseparable knowledge, authority, action, willing, wisdom, and all these things are seen through the Son.

Through the Son who is sent by the Father and who acts in the Spirit. And so what we see is the one divine God in Jesus Christ. Now this is important when we're thinking about what does it mean when we talk about personhood within the Trinity.

Because personhood within the Trinity is not like human personhood. It's not that we have three personalities within the Trinity. Rather we have three divine persons who each enact or instantiate the one divine nature in a distinct way.

And that inaction or this instantiation of the one divine nature is necessary. It's not as if it's accidental that you have this one divine nature and it just so happens that it's Father, Son, and Spirit.

[9 : 26] Rather it's necessary. This is how God subsists, Father, Son, and Spirit. Not just as one divine nature that accidentally under certain historical or other conditions happen to be this way.

So when we're thinking about the doctrine of God, this doctrine leads us to an unsettling of some of the ways that we would think about personhood as applied to human beings.

Because that way of thinking about personhood does not apply properly to God. So we do not have three divine personalities that just have a very close relationship who are dancing around with each other and seem so closely bound and inseparably bound together in their communion that we speak about them as one God.

That is a certain form of tritheism. It's an attenuated form of tritheism perhaps, but it is still a tritheistic position. Whereas Christians we hold to monotheism.

And monotheism in part means that we do not believe in three personalities and God. We believe in three persons.

[10 : 37] But those three persons are each expressions, each instantiations of the personal qualities of the divine nature. Personal in more of the sense that we would think about them.

Of knowledge, of will, of wisdom, of agency and authority. That all of these things are one in God.

They are inseparable. Not just inseparable as three different sets of these qualities that are inseparably joined together and fused in relationship, but they are inseparable in a deeper way.

They are inseparable in the fact that they are truly one. And they are instantiated in these three forms. Now, when we think about Christ's work, this matters.

Because it means that Christ, when he acts, truly reveals the Father. When he acts, he is acting from the Father and in the Spirit. He is the one through whom the Father acts and does everything that he does.

He is the one in whom, the one whom the Spirit, the Spirit is placed upon without measure.

[11 : 49] And in these sorts of ways, we can see that God is not just a matter of the Father delegating certain things to the Son, and the Son doing those things as he's given the Spirit.

There's a far closer relationship than that. Far, far closer. We are dealing with one God who reveals himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, who is Father, Son, and Spirit.

And that relationship is such that the Father's personhood is a manifestation, is an instantiation of the same divine nature as the Son's is.

The same divine knowledge, the same divine action, the same divine will. And so when God acts, he's not acting in a sort of matter of delegation or a matter of division of labour, but he's acting as a single principle of action that is modally or prepositionally differentiated, but not really separated into these different parts.

And so when we see Christ, we are truly seeing the Father. We are seeing the one true God. We are seeing not just this distinct personality, and there's this other personality somewhere hidden from sight, the Father, but rather the Father is the one who sends the Son, and in the Son we encounter the one true God.

[13 : 24] We encounter the one true God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. And this really helps us to understand how when Christ acts, he's acting with authority, with the divine authority.

He's not just acting under the divine authority as some emissary or some representative or some delegate of this authority, this authority that is proper to the Father. Rather, he is the authoritative God come to save us.

He is the one who has come into our situation and who acts with authority into our world. And when we encounter him, we are encountering the knowledge, we are encountering the love, we are encountering the authority, we are encountering the will, and we are encountering the wisdom of God.

All of these things that are inseparably operative, and that are seen in the threefold instantiation of Father, Son, and Spirit, but yet cannot be detached from each other.

So when we see Christ, we cannot detach Christ from the Father who sent him. We cannot detach Christ from the Spirit who is placed upon him.

[14 : 40] He is called Christ because he is the anointed of the Spirit. And in all of these ways, it is important to hold these things together, because if we allow them to fall apart, our understanding of

Christ's mission is weakened.

No longer does Christ seem to have the same authority that he actually does. Rather, he seems to be some emissary or delegate or someone who is sent, but who does not truly have this authority of himself.

But yet, when we hold to classical Trinitarianism, I believe it helps us to read the biblical narrative better. Now, this involves understanding that personhood, as relates to the divine persons, does not function in the same way as human personhood functions when we think about human persons. It helps us to understand the text, but it also takes effort. This isn't an easy thing to get our heads around. The Trinity is a mystery. It's a deep doctrine.

It's a doctrine that is one that exceeds our capacities of comprehension. But yet, it helps us, even in its mystery, to understand certain things better.

[15:52] It helps us to understand who Christ is. It helps us to understand who God is. It helps us to understand just how powerful God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ actually is.

It helps us to understand how Christ is the one who acts with divine authority. How Christ is the one who acts with the divine will. And it also helps us to understand things like the statements of love concerning God.

That Augustine, for instance, talked about God as lover, beloved and love. Now, what he was trying to explain in part is that God is love.

Now, this is a different sort of statement from saying that God is three personalities who love each other very much. That is not what the doctrine of the Trinity is, nor is that what Augustine was trying to explain.

Augustine, rather, was explaining the fact that this is this one reality of love. That God is love in his personal being as Father, Son and Spirit.

[16:57] He is love. And this one love, this indivisible love, is expressed in a threefold manner.

As Father, Son and Spirit. As beloved, lover and love. And this inseparable triad is something that is expressive of the fact that we are talking about, when we talk about God, we are saying that God is love.

Not God is loving, or that God has three loving persons within his life. And these persons all love each other very much as distinct personalities.

But rather that God is one inseparable reality of love. That God is one God who is love. And that's a very deep and difficult statement to get our heads around.

It does not deny the distinction between the persons. But it denies the way that we're trying to attach them into separate personalities.

[18:07] And so in some ways, it might be, rather than talking about three centres of consciousness, we can talk about perhaps a threefold consciousness. That this consciousness is undivided.

It's singular. That there is one principle of agency. There is one principle of will. There is one principle of knowledge. But yet, it's threefold.

Because when we're talking about God, we cannot help but talk about Father, Son and Spirit. As we see the oneness, we see the threeness. And as we see the threeness of God, we also see the oneness.

And this statement of the Trinity, I find, in classical theism, is profoundly challenging. It's intellectually challenging.

But it's challenging for our view of who God is within Scripture. It's challenging for our view of Christ. It gives us a profound view of who Christ is.

[19:04] We realise that Christ is not just the second fiddle within the Trinity, or something like that. The second personality behind the primary personality of the Father.

But rather, in Christ, we see God himself. The one true God. The one indivisible God. We see that God in Jesus Christ.

And this statement of monotheism is something that Christians should stand for. It's difficult to understand. It's something that plays against many of the streams within 20th century and even 21st century theology.

But we need to hold this ground. We need to push this position. Because it matters. It matters because it helps us to read Scripture as well. It helps us to understand who Christ is, what the nature of his mission is.

And it helps us to understand the oneness of God. That this monotheistic position that is maintained within the Old Testament is maintained into the New as well.

[20 : 07] It's not seen to be in tension with the doctrine of the Trinity. But the doctrine of the Trinity is a richer manifestation of that. That in God's inseparable being, in God's inseparable authority, his will, his agency, and his knowledge, that there are three divine personhood.

There's three divine persons. That all things occur from the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit. And these distinctions of person are not just modes in the sense that or masks that God appears to wear, but they are real and necessary instantiations.

That they are not just accidental or historical, but they are true to who God is in himself. And that is a deep mystery. It's a wonderful mystery. And it's one of the reasons why the Church has repeatedly returned to this doctrine of the Trinity as a cause to praise God.

It's a cause, it's a means by which we can understand the biblical narrative and its deeper structure. It's architectonics, as it were. So when we're reading the doctrine, when we're reading the New Testament, one of the things that can help us to read the New Testament is the creed that presents us with a Trinitarian form of God's action, of God as Creator, Redeemer, as God as the one who sanctifies us.

And Father, Son, and Spirit and their distinct actions within each one of those aspects that God creates by his powerful word in his Spirit.

[21 : 51] That God is the one who redeems us through his Son and in his Spirit. And that God is the one who sanctifies us in his Spirit through his Son. These things are absolutely crucial for us to hold if we're to understand the grammar of the biblical narrative, if we're to understand the grammar of salvation.

And so returning to this doctrine is something that we should continually do. It's a wellspring of Christian wisdom. It's a wellspring of biblical wisdom. And it's a wellspring of Christian spirituality. It's one of the reasons why, if you look in the great hymns of the church, so many of them have the doctrine of the Trinity at their heart. Because the doctrine of the Trinity is a great mystery. But as a great mystery, it's not just this deep problem that we leave over there and we think, well, that's a hard problem.

We'll just leave it over there. But rather, it's a mystery that we will never fathom. But yet, every time we return to it, we'll find new riches to draw upon. We'll find new understanding.

We'll find new grace. And so the doctrine of the Trinity is not something we should reject. It's not something that, in its classical form. It's something that we should return to.

[23 : 04] We should seek to understand better. We should seek to understand the threefoldness of God, but also his unity. We should be deep Christian monotheists, people who care about that position and who maintain that position against its adversaries.

We need to do this with grace. It's a difficult position to understand within our day and age, where so many things have been pushed against it. And so many people have lacked teaching on the subject.

But it's a wonderful doctrine to return to. And we should do so. We should maintain this monotheism in a Trinitarian manner and our Trinitarianism within a monotheistic manner.

Thank you very much. I'll return tomorrow, hopefully, with another question. We should take the decision.

take the decision