

THE TRIUNE GOD

Knowing God

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INTRODUCTION

- The Westminster Shorter Catechism states, “That the chief aim of man is to know God and enjoy him forever.”
- But who is the God of the Bible?

FIVE ACTS OF GOD

- God creates—then man's subsequent fall (Gen 1-3)
- God calls Abraham—Israel as a blessing to the nations (Gen 12)
- God incarnated—Jesus Christ (Matt 1:1)
- God pours out the Holy Spirit—the birth of the church (Acts 2)
- God the returning King—restoration and recreation (Rev 20-22)

KEY ISSUES ON THE TRINITY

- Is unique among world religions
- It is implied, not explicitly taught in Scripture
- It requires the deity of Christ, which is largely denied
- It is the first doctrine to be thoroughly formulated in the context of Christological controversies (Nicaea, 325)
- It uses Greek metaphysical language—one essence (*ousia*)—to explain biblical ideas

NICENE CREED, 325

- “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things, both visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God begotten of the Father, and only-begotten—that is from the essence (*homoousios*) of the Father—God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, being of one essence (*homoousios*) with the Father; by whom all things were made, both things in heaven and things on earth; who for us and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, was made man, suffered, and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven, cometh to judge quick and dead; And in the Holy Spirit.”

THE ONENESS OF GOD

- Ex 20:2-3: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me”
- Deut 6:4-9: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!”
- 1 Cor 8:4-6: “Yet for us there is but one God”
- Jas 2:19: “You believe that God is one”

TRINITY IS SUGGESTED IN THE OT

- Gen 1:1—“God (*elohim*, plural) created (singular) the heavens and the earth”
- Gen 11:7—“Come, let us go down and there confuse their language”
- Gen 16:7, 10, 13—The Angel of YHWH finds Hagar. It was Hagar’s testimony that she had seen God

TRINITY IS SUGGESTED IN THE OT

- Gen 18:3ff—Three men appear to Abram by Oaks of Mamre—the Lord and two angels
- Ex 3—The Angel of YHWH appears in a burning bush to Moses. Notice the interchange of “Angel of YHWH,” “Lord,” and “God” in vv. 2, 4

THE DEITY OF THE SON

- Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος (Jn 1:1)
- John uses *logos* to convey unity and plurality (1:1)
- The term relates to *dabar* (Gen 1:3ff) or “word”
- The LXX translates *dabar* as *sophia* (“wisdom”)
- The Greeks used *sophia* or *logos* to refer to intermediaries of gods that create material things
- John’s use of *logos* was meant to subvert pagan thought (1:1-3)

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- John often uses similar Greek verbs to show contrast of themes—γίνωμαι (to become) and εἶμι (to be)
- In Jn 8:24, 57-58: Jesus says “Before Abraham was (γίνωμαι), I am (εἶμι)
- In Jn 1:1, John uses εἶμι each time

THE DEITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

- Mk 3:29—“But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”
- Jn 3:8—“The wind blows, where it wishes”
- Jn 16:7-11—“And he, when he comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (v. 8)
- Acts 5:3-4—“You have not lied to men but to God”
- 1 Cor 12:11—“God and Spirit are one”

GOD AS THREE-IN-ONE

- “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt 3:16-17)
- “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19)

GOD AS THREE-IN-ONE

- “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13:14)
- “who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance” (1 Pt 1:2)

FORMULATION OF DOCTRINE

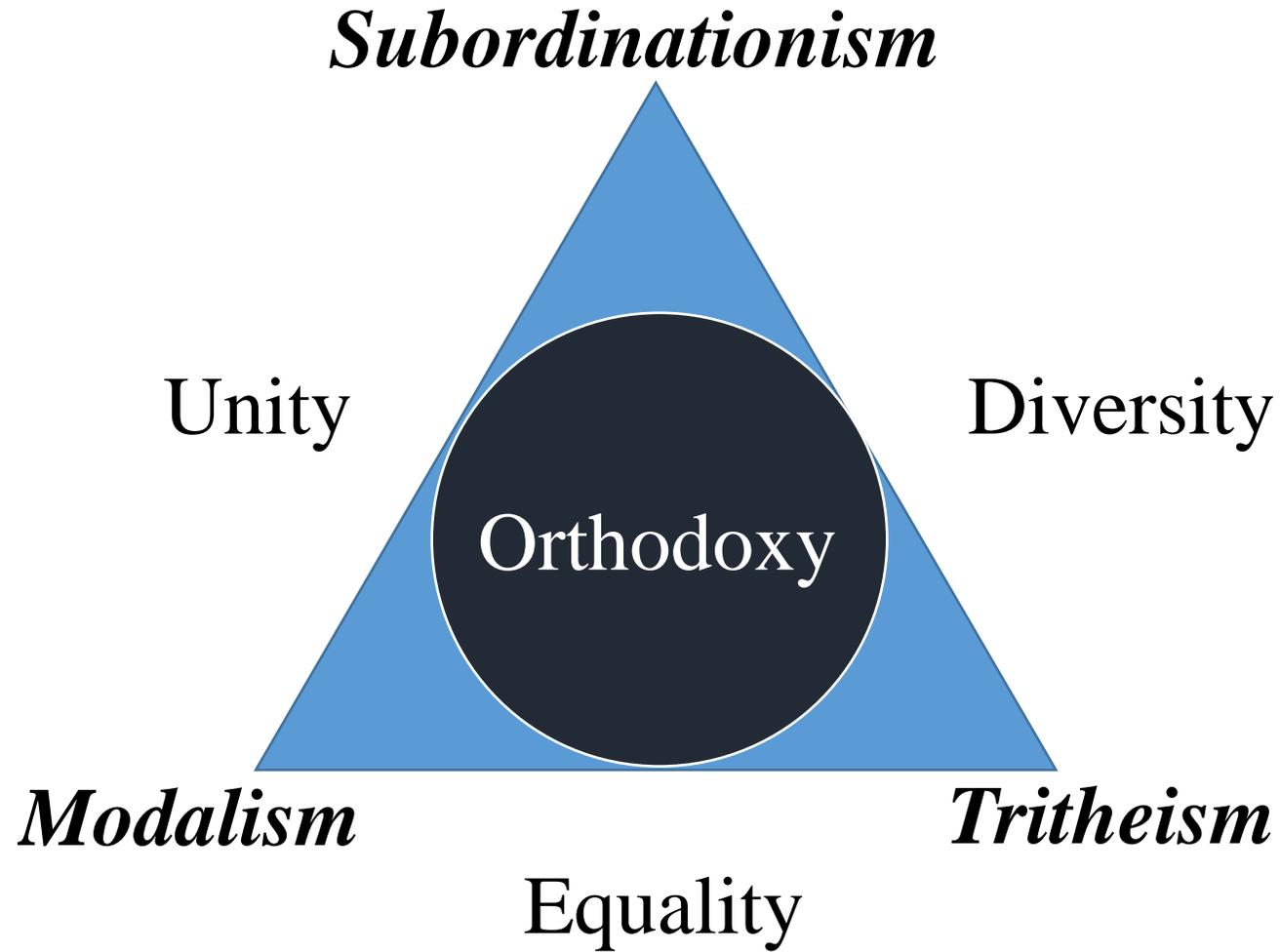
- The doctrine of the Trinity is based on inductive and deductive reasoning from the biblical text
- We have to deduce from the Bible that God is both “one” and “three.” How is this possible?
- The Church Fathers appealed to technical language to explain that God is one in “essence” (*ousia*) and three in “persons” (*hypostasis*)
- This was not meant to do away with mystery but to avoid the charge of Unitarianism or Tritheism

THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT

- The theological concept consists of three ideas: unity, diversity, and equality.
- The early church rejected the following heresies:
 - (1) Subordinationism/Arianism (unity at the expense of equality);
 - (2) Modalism/Sabellianism (unity at the expense of diversity);
 - (3) Tritheism/polytheism (plurality without singularity)

Trinitarianism

(errors avoided)



SEARCHING FOR ANALOGIES

- Liquid, ice, and vapor
- Lover, the Beloved, and the Spirit of Love
- “The conception of ‘perichoresis’ is especially helpful. This is the teaching that the life of each of the persons flows through each of the others, so each sustains each of the others and each has direct access to the consciousness of the others. Thus, the human organism serves as a good illustration of the Triune God” (Erickson 312)

GOD IN CHINESE CONTEXTS

- Tien 天 (Heaven) in Confucianism refers to an impersonal ethical ultimate
- Shang-di 上帝 (Lord on high or heavenly God) is used to translate YHWY. Why not use Shen 神 (to identify God)?
- In Taoism the way 道 is the “supreme ultimate,” characterized by the harmony of opposites *yin* and *yang*
- When the Trinity is adapted to Taoism, the Trinity can be seen as a “becoming” or “change” or “relationality”
- *Yang* is Father and *Yin* is Spirit and Son is unity of the two

ENOCH WAN ON SINO-CHRISTOLOGY

- Jesus in Chinese Christology 天人合一的道
- “guan-xi 關係” relationship in Chinese culture
- “the en-qing-zhen-zhu 恩情真主” (grace-passion-true-Lord)
- “zhong-bao 中保”(middle-guarantor)
- “jiu-zhu 救主” (savior-lord)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why do you suppose that the Trinity, though a theological construction, is unique among world religions?
- In what ways is the doctrine of the Trinity crucial for Christian faith and witness?
- How would you talk about this doctrine with non-believers in a way that is understandable and consistent with scriptural teaching?