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Matthew 28:18-20; Galatians 4:4-7
June 27, 2021

A Journey into the Country of Grace **Week 4: Trinity 101 – God in his Castle**

Scripture Readings:

Matthew 28:18–20 (NRSV) ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Galatians 4:4–7 (NRSV) ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶ And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Prayer

On God Talk: the pros and cons of metaphors

God is not an idea, although everyone has ideas about God: G-O-D

John Calvin said that the fallen human mind is like “a perpetual factory of idols” (Inst. 1.11.8), meaning that we are constantly distorting the nature of God in our minds, making him out to be less than who he is, making him devilish. This tendency is the source of all spiritual coldness. We run from a god we have fabricated, and are blind to the God who is.

Describe God. Name some of his attributes to yourself. (where do you get these ideas from?)

Last week we talked about what we called “the Jesus filter.” We observed that:

Nothing can be said accurately about G-O-D that does not pass through the Jesus-Father relationship filter first.

Jesus was sent by the Father to us to act as our translator. Like my translator in Albania, Jesus interprets the things of God to us and the things of us to God.

He is not just a picture of a bottle of wine, he is the wine that we get to drink that shares its joy.

I know I'm not supposed to say this, because it goes against all rules about public speaking, but what I'm about to say next may be the only thing you need to hear out of this entire message:

If you ever find yourself running from God, avoiding God, keeping yourself at a safe distance, the reason you are doing that is because you are believing some kind of lie about God.

Westminster Faith trinitarian deficit disorder

A comparison of the Nicene Creed to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms

The Nicene Creed, also called the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed, is a statement of the orthodox faith of the early Christian church in opposition to certain heresies, especially Arianism. These heresies, which disturbed the church during the fourth century, concerned the doctrine of the trinity and of the person of Christ.

The Nicene Creed

1.1 *We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is,
seen and unseen....*

The Westminster "standard": In 1643, the English Parliament called upon "learned, godly and judicious Divines" to meet at Westminster Abbey in order to provide advice on issues of worship, doctrine, government and discipline of the Church of England. Their meetings, over a period of five years, produced the confession of faith, as well as a Larger Catechism and a Shorter Catechism. For more than three hundred years, various churches around the world have adopted the confession and the catechisms as their standards of doctrine, subordinate to the Bible.

Notice the first thing the Nicene Creed says about God: God is the Father. And God's almightiness (sovereignty) and creatorship are placed in the context of the Fatherhood. God does not *become* Father; he *is* our Father. God was Father before he was creator.

In Calvinism, as expressed in the **Westminster Confession and catechisms**, God's Fatherhood and the trinitarian relations are not essential to God's nature. God's nature is comprised entirely of philosophical commitments to an abstract G-O-D.

Compare the Westminster Standards say to the Nicene Creed. Are we formed more by logical deductions about what God must be, or is our description framed inside the co-inhering relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Is it run through the filter of Jesus, or based on some other alien grid?

WCF – 2nd section, “Of God, and of the Holy Trinity”

- before even mentioning the Trinity, it offers more than 250 words about who or what God is.

The Catechisms pose a strange question: “*What is God?*” Even the question sets us down a distorted road to understanding the character of God.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism:

- **7.004 Q. 4. What is God?** A. God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

The Westminster Larger Catechism:

- **7.117 Q. 7. What is God?** A. God is a Spirit, in and of himself infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection; all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty; knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.

Picture in your mind the God described by the Westminster Catechisms. There is no picture...

Psalm 21:6 (NRSV) You bestow on him blessings forever; you make him glad with the joy of your **presence**.

The word “presence” in Hebrew is actually the word “face.” We’ve taken the face off of God.

Psalm 21:6 (The Message) You pile blessings on him; you make him glad when you **smile**.

That’s a picture!

Psalm 89:15 (ESV) Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O LORD, in the light of your **face** (most translate as ‘presence’)

We have erased the face of God in many ways. When we lose the Trinity, we lose the face of God. And when we lose the face of God, we lose the relationship, we lose the dynamic...we lose God.

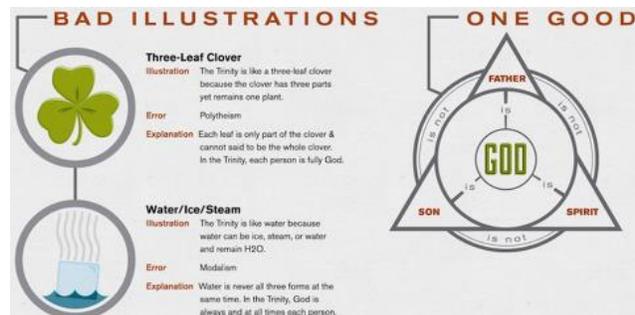
In many of our traditions, we have a Trinity Deficit Disorder. We have TDD. TDD has gotten into the water of much of our Reformed Tradition because of these catechisms. They have erased the face of God and put other things up front. And what they have put up front are philosophical assumptions about what G-O-D must be like, which is really a rationalistic Enlightenment starting point.

The “problem” of the Trinity....

Why is the Trinity considered a problem? (see if they can guess these)

1. Not “biblical”: The Bible does not speak of it directly (the word is not found in the Bible)
2. Unique: There is nothing else like it (it is unique) and therefore we have nothing to fully compare it to (therefore, all analogies break down)
3. Confictual: There are many ways to “get it wrong” (three in one and one in three? Lots of possible heresies and bad analogies along the way: modalism, polytheism, etc)

- a. Arianism (Subordinationism)
– “There was a time when the Son was not” (Arius’ main argument was “this makes better sense to our rational mind.”)



4. Complicated: It is a mystery. (But mystery does not mean *unknowable*. Mystery means “infinitely knowable”.) The Trinity is not a math problem to be solved, but a relationship to be enjoyed. (this perspective changes the goal from solving a riddle so that we can be “right”, to entering the mystery so that we can participate more fully) It is hard to get our minds around all this stuff about the Trinity - a being who *is* relationship.
 - God is like a national park, not a padlocked door. We can’t take him all in, *but we can know him*. When I say “I have been to Glacier National Park”, what does that mean? Have I really been there if I have not been there in every season, walked every trail, explored every peak, and sat down for a table-side chat with every bear? Well, yes and no. Yes, I have been there and experienced, but there is so much more. But the more I would discover by returning again and again will be consistent with the small bit I already have experienced.

Trinity Deficit Disorder

Rather than explore the country of grace, the modern mind prefers to sit back and criticize the maps.

The modern gross misunderstanding of the Trinity as a useless or purely academic doctrine:

- Thomas Jefferson once derided what he called the “incomprehensible jargon of Trinitarian arithmetic.”
- The philosopher Immanuel Kant flatly declared, “The doctrine of the Trinity provides nothing, absolutely nothing, of practical value.”

Sadly, many churches confirm this negative and irrelevant assessment:

- When we lived in Scotland, the church we were attending had a guest preacher on Trinity Sunday (which is next week). The preacher began his sermon like this: “Today is Trinity Sunday. Don’t worry, we aren’t going to talk about the Trinity. That’s a very mysterious subject.”

Growing up with a problematized Trinity

When I reflect back on the church I grew up in, I’m not sure things were that much better. Don’t get me wrong. It was a solid and wonderful church with good preaching. Every week we sang hymns that reminded us of the Trinity, and the Trinity was certainly something we were taught. The church was even named “Trinity Presbyterian Church.” In practice, our Presbyterian version of the Trinity was more like the Father, Son, and Holy Bible. I don’t remember any teaching about the Holy Spirit. We didn’t know what to do with the Spirit so we never talked about it.

If I were to summarize what I understood about the Trinity after 10 years of weekly attending that church (and summer camp), I think there were two or three concepts that stuck:

1. The Trinity was like a tag-team: the Father got things started with creation, then because of sin the Son came to die on the cross, and then the Spirit came to help us along until we would get to heaven.

One of the classic ways many people think of the Trinity is according to their general functions:

- Father is Creator
- Son is Redeemer
- Spirit is Sanctifier

Sound familiar? *What is the problem with this scheme?* (It presents the actions of the 3 persons in chronological/linear fashion when the truth is all the acts of the Trinity are *co-activities*.)

2. The Trinity was a problem to be solved: it was the proof that theology was incomprehensible stuff that just had to be taken by faith. But it was the 80's when Christian apologetics was in its hey-day and so the focus was on proving the legitimacy of the faith. I read books like Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, not so that I could experience more of God, but so that I could prove the logic and rationality of what Christians believed to a skeptical scientific culture. Faith and Reason were in constant tension with Faith always trying to prove its legitimacy. In this environment, the Trinity was simply another problem to be solved and defended. Those who were serious about their faith learned how to 'defend' it by showing it was logical. It was never spoken of as a mystery to be explored and a reality to enter into. It was more of an idea "out there", not a real living communion in whom I quite literally live and move and have my being.
3. Satisfaction with analogical "proofs": Within this framework, Trinitarian teaching was often done through the use of analogies that would help make sense of how 3in1 and 1in3 is possible.
 - Egg, water, clover
 - But all of these analogies are problematic on various levels. (We won't go into why right now, but regardless of their theological accuracy, none of them help us enter or experience the Trinity any better. They are (poor) attempts at understanding, but not at all useful for living.)

All analogies break down eventually, but some are more helpful than others:

The Trinity means that; strictly speaking, God is not alone. Within the being of God there is relationship – three persons united in mutual love and communion without loss of personal distinctness.

Non-relational analogies will be problematic and very limited in their usefulness. The best analogies are personal, relational, and dynamic. Best involve sound (Officium).

Chris' participation drawing: trying to show dynamic relationship that is both eternal and related to creation.

Why does it matter? Because the gospel is not the gospel without the Father, Son, and Spirit. So if we misconstrue the relations of the Trinity, we end up changing what we believe the gospel to be! That's pretty serious!

This is what I believed for the first 20 years of my Christian life. The picture of the me-God relation this concept of the Trinity gave me was that God was on one side of the table and I was on the other. God made his move, and now it was up to me to make mine, and thankfully I would have a little help from "the force". In Jesus God gave me a clean slate of forgiveness, but I was mostly on my own to live a holy and faithful life.

God as Ruler vs. God as Father

What is your vision of God? How do you describe him? Most people will start with something like “Creator” or “Ruler” and by that they mean that he is the one in charge, the king.

But this starting point creates all kinds of toxic problems:

First of all, if God’s very identity is to be The Creator, The Ruler, then he needs a creation to rule *in order to be who he is*. For all his cosmic power, then, this God turns out to be pitifully weak: he *needs* us.

And a God who needs us to be who he is turns out to be the Devil. In the aftermath of WW2, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote the following:

- “Perhaps you recall how, when Hitler used to speak about God, he called Him “the Almighty”. But it is not “the Almighty” who is God; we cannot understand from the standpoint of a supreme concept of power, who God is. And the man who calls “the Almighty” God misses God in the most terrible way. For “the Almighty” is bad, as “power in itself” is bad. The “Almighty” means Chaos, Evil, the Devil. We could not better describe and define the Devil than by trying to think this idea of a self-based, free, sovereign ability.” (Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 48)
- Barth did not doubt the fact that God is indeed almighty, but he wanted to make very clear that mere might is not who God is.

How do we define God? What do we think of when we think of God?

If I define God as “the Ruler”, then I am in the position of rule-keeper and dutiful servant.

- “If God’s very identity is to be The Ruler, what kind of salvation can he offer me? If God is The Ruler and the problem is that I have broken the rules, then the only salvation he can offer is to forgive me and treat me as if I had kept the rules.
- But if that is how God is, then my relationship with him can be little better than my relationship with any traffic cop. If I were caught speeding and so breaking the rules, I would be punished. And if a cop failed to spot me or if I managed to shake him after an exciting car chase, I would be relieved. But in neither case would I love him. And even if, like God, he chose to let me off the hook for my law-breaking, I still would not love him. I might feel grateful, and that gratitude might be deep, but that is not at all the same thing as love.
- And so it is with the divine policeman: if salvation simply means him letting me off and counting me as a law-abiding citizen, then gratitude (not love) is all I have. In other words, I can never really love the God who is essentially just The Ruler. And that, ironically, means I can never keep the greatest command: to love the Lord my God.” (Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 20)

Starting points matter.

Yes, God is Lord, and Ruler, and All powerful, but that is not the place we start with him.

Is God most fundamentally “Ruler” or is he “Father”? These two very different ontological starting points situate the God-human relationship in very different spaces. If the identity of God is primarily Ruler, when he needs a creation to rule in order to be who he is.

If God is ruler, my job is to be the rule-keeper and dutiful servant.

- If God is Ruler, our job is to imitate the life of God
 - o We are the “rule-keepers”
 - o Subjective moral formation
 - o God does his part, we do ours
 - o We are in the position of performer, striving for acceptance and approval
 - o Relationships become functional; weakness is disdained
 - o We serve and obey out of gratitude

This was me. I understood Jesus’ death in transactional terms because God had some kind of need for the scales of justice to be balanced and his honor to be met. While the Bible spoke a lot about love, I didn’t really hear it as love. I heard it as rules and power. And my response to God’s grace was gratitude – at least as much authentic gratitude as I could muster. But it was not love. My heart was not warmed.

Disassociated faith: loss of positive emotions

I used to struggle with the idea of ‘loving God’. I believed in loving God, but I wasn’t feeling it. It felt abstract to me.

I was encouraged to discover C.S. Lewis felt the same way. He writes, “Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings.” (Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s To Be Said,” 37.)

While love can be faked, it cannot be manufactured.

If we start from the place of being beloved children, adopted into a family, as secure as the biological children and cannot be taken away, then things are very different. (Ex. Of Kaili adoption – what she thinks is true will have more impact than what is actually true. If she thinks that her adoption is a really a contract and not a covenant, she will live as if it is a contract.)

God as “Father”

The early church wrestled with this same question of “Who is God?” They eventually came down on the side of believing that “Father” is not God’s nickname.

The breakthrough came in the 4th century when Athanasius asked a new question which really clarified things: he asked “What was God doing before creation?” He argued that, before God was creator, he was Father, for he loved the Son before he was born.

The apostle John starts with Jesus face to face with the Father – “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God...” The relationship between the Father and the Son is the center of the NT.

In other words, the Trinity is not some inessential add-on to God, like an optional software that can be loaded onto the computer after it leaves the factory. Rather, Trinity tells us about the heart of God. There is a fellowship at the heart of God. It is this life and love that we were made for and it has come to us in Jesus Christ.

John Calvin wrote that if we try to think about God without thinking about the Father, Son, and Spirit, then “only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God.” (Ins. 1.13.2) God is G-O-D.

Calvin affirmed the cruciality of the Fatherhood of God and the Trinity when he said “Salvation is...calling God ‘Father’.” Eternal life is knowing the Father and the Son together (John 17:3 - Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.)

To be honest, I never doubted God was Father, Son, Spirit while I also viewed God as Ruler, but the trinity stuff made little difference to my heart. I viewed the Trinity as a problem to be solved, a mystery to be navigated, a balance to keep between all the possible heresies, a truth to preserve. God still was primarily ruler and salvation still was primarily transactional.

Trinity tells us about the *heart* of God (immanent); it also reveals *how* God works with us (economic). *There is a fellowship at the heart of God.* It is this life and love that we were made for and it has come to us in Jesus Christ.

John 17:24-26 also states that the Father loved the Son before the creation of the world and that the reason the Father sends the Son is so that the Father’s love for him might be in others also. Simply put, Jesus came to share the Father’s love, AND he also came to share with us his love for the Father – to echo the Father’s love back to him, to image him, to be his child.

Looking at and along and Baby Brains

Meditation in a Toolshed (C.S. Lewis, 1945; reprinted in *God in the Dock*)

C.S. Lewis describes an experience he had while he was standing in a dark toolshed...

“I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it.

Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.

As soon as you have grasped this simple distinction, it raises a question. You get one experience of a thing when you look along it and another when you look at it. Which is the “true” or “valid” experience? Which tells you most about the thing?

Lewis then observes that our cultural bias is toward looking *at* things. He points out that we have privileged external, objective, and abstract knowledge over and above knowledge gained by experiencing a thing. And then he concludes...

One must look both along and at everything.”

Because we gain one form of knowledge of a thing by observing it from the outside, and we gain another form of knowledge of a thing by entering into it and knowing it from the inside. We must look at a reality, and we must dwell in or participate in the reality. To know a thing requires both types of knowledge.

I distinctly remember one day in class raising my hand and asking my teacher **Eugene Peterson** a question about the relevance for our lives of some of the more obscure parts of theology. I’ll never forget his answer. He said, “Every part of our theology is experienceable.”

And while he didn’t draw on Lewis’ image of the toolshed, I think he had that in mind. Nothing that is actually true in the Christian life is simply abstract or impersonal. All knowledge is either about God or about things in relation to God. All of it can be prayed. All of it can be an occasion for fellowship.

I wonder...is your own experience of the Christian life more of a “looking at” or a “looking along”?

Both are important.

Baby Brains: How do babies learn to talk?

- Brain science has known for a long time that neighboring neurons fire together when they are working on a common task, and over time firing becomes wiring.
- Now neurobiologists are learning that this firing and wiring also takes place in communication *between* brains. Some of the same patterns required to encode the message are also used to decode it. The more closely we tune into each other, the more similar our brain activity becomes.
- When this concept was applied to babies, things got really interesting. Babies were presented with 3 different videos of a woman singing a nursery rhyme, but the woman's body language differed from one condition to the next:
 - o In one condition, the woman faced the camera head-on, and looked directly at the viewer.
 - o In another condition, the woman's head was turned to the side, but her eyes continued to peer directly at the viewer.
 - o In the third condition, her head was pointed to the side and her gaze was indirect.
- In each of the conditions where the woman made eye contact, the babies' brain activity mirrored that of the woman. But when the woman's gaze was averted, the brain waves didn't match.
 - o The babies watched the woman just as much whether she made eye contact or looked away. So the mirroring wasn't merely the result of paying attention. Shared gaze appeared to be a crucial cue -- a signal that helped them tune in and synchronize brain waves.
- Then they did a live interaction face-to-face. In this case, not only did the babies track the woman's brain waves, the woman sometimes mirrored the babies' brain waves. And once again, the crucial cue was direct gaze. Adult and baby had to make eye contact for the brain waves to match up.
 - o So both adults and babies use direct gaze as a cue for synchronizing brain activity, and this direct gaze is probably important for babies to learn.



What happens to us when we look along the Trinity? *Glory*

- Entering in, as Jesus did, Joy
- 2 Cor 4:6 – the Spirit lights up our hearts and we see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in Jesus (babies and syncing through eye contact)

What is joy? Joy is the feeling you have when someone's eyes light up when they are happy to see you.

Jesus lived in a place of joy because he always saw the Father's happiness when he looked at him. The Spirit can make that happen in our hearts too.

- **Why did Moses glow?** Was it like he got burned and not 'caught' some of the radiance? Like being near a fire and still being warm after? OR was it some personal or emotional happening inside him?

The glory of God is this love-relation happening. And we are invited to experience that glory because God wants to give us himself. The Giver is the Gift. In giving us himself means he gives us his face.

The invitation for each of us is to not wipe the face off of God. To let his face look at us and to turn our face toward him. To make eye-contact with God who has moved into our neighborhood in order to make eye contact with us.

Questions for personal reflection:

- God what is my greatest need right now? What are you bringing up?
- God, what do you want me to know about that?