

LEARNING FOR LIFE

FATHOMING THE TRINITY

(2) In history and theology

Introduction

The Challenges faced by the post-apostolic church

- a) How to relate new revealed truth (person and work of Christ, coming of Spirit, adoption of believers) to the monotheistic O.T. understanding of God?
- b) How can God be One if Christ and the Spirit are God?

A: The Early Church

1) Origen (born 185)

- Allegorical
- Greek philosophy - speculative
- Against Monarchianism
- Asserted 'threeness', but a graded trinity. Note the pendulum effect. But where is the Biblical perpendicular?

2) Arius (born 250)

- Divine hierarchy an impossibility
- Son is a created being. 'There was a time when he was not' (J.W's)
- Condemned at Council of Nicea, 325

3) Athanasius (born end of C3)

- 'The Incarnation of the Word' – salvation had to be by the creator and by the cross
- Arian Controversy (325-381) divided church.
- Full deity of Son v Inferiority to Father

- Council of Constantinople 381 agreed three beings (persons) are of one substance. Not 'homoiousios' (like) but 'homoousios' (same)
- Nicea statement. Constantinople Creed. Athanasian Creed (undated).

'The catholic faith is this : that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity, neither confounding the persons, nor dividing the substance ; for there is one person of the Father, another of the Son and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is all one; the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal'.

- Rejected adoptionist views (Jesus a deified man) but tendency to subordinationist views – so creed affirms 'In this Trinity none is before or after another: none is greater or less than another, but the whole three persons are co-eternal together and co-equal.

4) Augustine (born 354)

- 'On the Trinity' destroyed all ideas of subordination
- The Trinity as a whole
 - Subjects all things to himself (1 Cor. 15)
 - Indwells the believer
 - Sent the Son to save
 - Is the image of God in which we are made

B) The Reformation Church

1) Calvin (born 1509)

- Institutes, Book 1 chapter 13 – Augustinian
- Expository of Biblical texts (eg. 'persons' in Heb.1:3)
- Mainly directed against errors of his own time

2) Thirty-nine Articles (1571)

'There is but one living and true God. And in the unity of this Godhead there are three persons of one substance, power and eternity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.'

3) The Westminster Confession (1647) adds 'The Father is one, neither begotten nor proceeding : the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, the Holy Spirit eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son'.

C) Theological Reflection

1) Why bother?

2) God – centred theology

- Trinity as unifying central principle
- Alternative 'centres' will mislead e.g. Salvation (soteriology) cannot be the organising principle
- The sacred / secular divide

3) Man-centred cultural ethos

- Jesus dethroned
- Trinitarian foundation of salvation (2Cor. 5:19)
 - Author
 - Accomplishment
 - Application

4) Heresies and inadequate theologies

- Trinity deals with and answers the half-truths of
Polytheism
Pantheism
Deism
- Need to recover not only exegesis, but theological exposition.

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