

Lesson 5: 2LCF Chapter 2: Of God and of the Holy Trinity

Paragraph 3

*"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."*

2 Corinthians 13:14

Chapter two and paragraph three of the Second London Baptist Confession of faith deals with one of the most oft-attacked doctrines of Scripture: the doctrine of the Trinity and the relationship between the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. When one surveys the annals of church history, what we find are a whole host of heretical movements that have emerged to deny the deity of Christ and/or the divine personhood of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian resource website, monergism.com, provides a helpful list of anti-trinitarian heresies that have appeared over the centuries.⁴⁷ We will briefly survey some of these heresies below:

Modalism (i.e. Sabellianism, Noetianism and Patripassianism)

Modalism teaches that the three persons of the Trinity are not distinct persons, but are revealed in different "modes." Adherents believe that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not distinct personalities, but different modes of God's self-revelation. A typical modalist approach is to regard God as the Father in creation, the Son in redemption, and the Spirit in sanctification. In other words, God exists as Father, Son and Spirit in different eras, but never as triune. Stemming from Modalism, Patripassianism believed that the Father suffered as the Son.

Modern day modalists can still be found among the "Oneness Pentecostalism" movement. This movement is alive and well and has influenced the doctrine of many local charismatic churches.

Tritheism

Tritheism confesses the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three independent divine beings; three separate gods who share the 'same substance'. This is a common mistake because of misunderstandings of the use of the term 'persons' in defining the Trinity.

Trinitarian Christians are often accused of this heresy by Muslims and Jews; however, this accusation is without warrant. Some positions held by Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists may be described as tritheistic. For example, some SDA groups that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not one in their essence, but are three separate beings with their own unique essences.

Arianism

Arianism teaches that the preexistent Christ was the first and greatest of God's creatures but denied his fully divine status. The Arian controversy was of major importance in the development of Christology during the fourth century and was addressed definitely in the Nicene Creed.

Arianism continues to be taught by Jehovah Witnesses and some Unitarian groups.

Docetism

Docetism teaches that Jesus Christ is a purely divine being who only had the "appearance" of being human. Regarding his suffering, some versions taught that Jesus' divinity abandoned or left him

⁴⁷ This list and unedited descriptions of these heresies can be found at: <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/Trinitarian%20Heresies.html>.

upon the cross while others claimed that he only appeared to suffer (much like he only appeared to be human).

The heresy of Docetism is closely related to Gnosticism.

Ebionitism

Ebionitism teaches that Jesus was endowed with particular charismatic gifts which distinguished him from other humans. Nevertheless, he is a purely human figure.

Some modern charismatics espouse views that are dangerously close to this heresy. This is seen in the way that many charismatic leaders speak about the “Kenotic Theory” (arising from a misinterpretation of Philippians 2:7).

Macedonianism

This is a fourth-century heresy that taught that the Holy Spirit is a created being.

Adoptionism

Adoptionism teaches that Jesus was born totally human and only later was “adopted”—either at his baptism or at his resurrection—by God in a special (i.e. divine) way. This movement is closely related to the first-century Ebionite movement listed above.

Partialism

This heresy teaches that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit together are components of the one God. This led them to believe that each of the persons of the Trinity is only part God, only becoming fully God when they come together.

In the face of these errors, the framers of the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith provide the following biblical defence of the doctrine of the Trinity:

Paragraph 3.

In this divine and infinite Being there are three subsistences, the Father, the Word or Son, and Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence, yet the essence undivided: the Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son; all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being, but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations; which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on Him.

Exposition

This paragraph of the confession follows in the footsteps of some of the most important historic creeds of the church. Rather than identifying with churches in various restorationist movements, that often cast aside historic creeds on their quest to restore a New Testament church, the confession identifies with the doctrines of Scripture articulated by saints throughout the ages—both in the early church and in the Reformation.

One can hear echoes of the Nicene Creed in paragraph 3 of the Confession:

*We believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.*

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
begotten from the Father before all ages,
God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made;
of the same essence as the Father...*

*And we believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life.
He proceeds from the Father and the Son...*

As we arrive at the first sentence of the paragraph, we find the doctrine of the Trinity succinctly summarized. Waldron notes that, like the ancient creeds and confessions, the 2LCF “fences” the doctrine, but does not seek to fully explain it. This is because the incomprehensibility of God necessitates that remain content not seeking to explain “holy mysteries which transcend human reason and contradict fleshly wisdom.”⁴⁸

“In this divine and infinite Being there are three subsistences, the Father, the Word or Son, and Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence, yet the essence undivided...”

In this paragraph find the three persons of the Trinity referred to as “three subsistences.” The use of this term refers to “The property by which an entity is capable of existing *per se*, in itself, or in its own right.”⁴⁹

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit exist in and of themselves and possess the whole of divine essence, so that it might be said that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are truly God.

Several Scriptural Proofs for the Trinity

Matthew 3:16-17

Matthew 28:18-20

Psalm 110:1/Matthew 22:41-46

John 1:1-18

2 Corinthians 13:14

1 Peter 1:1-2

Colossians 2:9

Hebrews 1:8

1 John 5:20

Acts 5:3-4

⁴⁸ Sam Waldron, “Chapter Two: Of God and of the Holy Trinity,” in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 75.

⁴⁹ Dolf te Velde, ed., *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae/ Synopsis of a Purer Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1:613.

Titus 2:13
2 Peter 1:1

“... the Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son; all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being, but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations...”

This portion teaches a form of subordination, but we must carefully define this subordination.

Exploring three types of subordination:

- 1) Economic Subordination: The subordination of the Son to the Father to accomplish redemption.
- 2) Hypostatic Subordination: This speaks to the “relationship of derivation” among the persons of the Trinity. This subordination reflects the fact that the Son is begotten of the Father, and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.
- 3) Essential Subordination: The Son and Holy Spirit are subordinate to the Father in their essence. This can rightly be called “subordinationism”

Orthodox Christian doctrine can heartily affirm the first two forms of subordination, but must reject the third.

Waldron makes several biblical arguments for this form of subordination in the Trinity.⁵⁰ We will explore only a few below:

- 1) The economy of redemption is that of creation (John 1:1-3; Hebrews 1:2; I Corinthians 8:6). Surely it is strange that both in the economy of creation and the economy of redemption the same order is maintained, if this economic subordination does not reflect a certain hypostatic subordination in the Trinity itself.
- 2) The Bible teaches explicitly that the Son is begotten, or, at least, derived (John 1:14, 18). The translation of the key word is, however, disputed. Some translate it in the traditional way 'only begotten', while others prefer the translation, 'unique.' To some extent this problem of translation is related to a disputed etymology. Some derive the word from the verb which means 'to beget' and others from the verb which means 'to become.' Either possible etymology contains the idea of (eternal) derivation.
- 3) The argument that the term 'Son' means nothing but equality simply does not carry conviction. That it does denote equality we do not, of course, deny. However, to say that it denotes only this appears to fly in the face of everything we know not only about the word 'father' but also the word 'son.'
- 4) Without eternal generation and eternal procession and the doctrine of hypostatic subordination it is impossible to distinguish the different persons of the Trinity. There are no revealed personal relations or properties. Even terminology like the First, Second, or Third Person of the Trinity becomes illegitimate. We are left with three colourless, unvarying, indistinguishable persons in the Trinity. This result smells of the barrenness of human philosophy, not the richness of biblical revelation.
- 5) Finally, the suppression of a real eternal fatherhood and a real eternal sonship lessens the glory of redemptive love. Is not the glory of the Father giving his Son for our redemption lessened if we limit the idea of sonship in this sentence to mere equality? The result is that one neutered divine person gives another colourless divine person. On this idea, where is the glory of the

⁵⁰ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 68.

Father's sacrifice? Where is the glory of the Son's filial obedience? The tendency to doubt eternal generation and eternal procession diminishes the glory of the gospel.

Waldron summarizes:

"The historic doctrine of the church and its creeds is that as to their essence, the Son and Spirit are equal in power and glory to the Father, but as to their persons, they are eternally generated and eternally proceeded from the Father. Thus, as to their essence, they are self-existent, while as to their persons, they are internally derived from the father."⁵¹

But, we should carefully heed Edward Leigh's words:

"The mystery of the Son's generation is so profound, that it is difficult and dangerous to wade further in it, then we have clear ground from Scripture: that the Son was of the Father begotten from eternity, and is one with him, and of equal power and dignity, seems clear from Prov. 8, 23, 26. John 1. 3. & 10. and 17. 5. Phil. 2. 6..."⁵²

"...which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on Him."

An Explanation of the Assembly of Divines Shorter Catechism:

Infinite, Eternal, Unchangeable, in thy Being, in thy Wisdom, Power, Holiness, Justice, Goodness and Truth. Although we are not fit to come into thy glorious Presence, being both unlike thee, dark and foolish, impotent and unclean, guilty and corrupt, thou art graciously pleased to command us to draw nigh unto thee, and to seek thy Face, in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, our Advocate, in whom thou art well pleased. For thine infinite Mercies, and for thy Goodness sake, be nigh unto us by thy Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ. According to the multitude of thy tender Mercies, be merciful unto us, and blot out all our Iniquities.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Muller, PRRD, 3:379; Leigh, A System of Body of Divinity, 141.