

BETHEL SEMINARY

CREDO PAPER: TRINITY, CANON, AND CREATION

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TS512 Systematic Theology I

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PART ONE: TRINITY

The Trinity is one of the most crucial and complex doctrines of the Christian Faith. Someone once said in reference to the trinity, “Try to explain it, and you’ll lose your mind; But try to deny it, and you’ll lose your soul” (Erickson 2013, 313). Our faith stands on a firm foundation and a building block on that foundation is the doctrine of the Trinity. However, the Bible never uses the word “Trinity,” which is Latin for *trinitas* meaning “threeness.” The Trinity is the idea that the God of the Christian faith is one God although exists as three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. So, if the Bible never mentions it, how did we develop and receive this Trinitarian theology of God? Well, much of what we know about the Trinity is a result of God’s revelation through Scripture. While the Bible never directly mentions “Trinity” it does point to it, sometimes indirectly, and many times directly (Boice 1986, 110).

To start, we must look at biblical evidence that points to the Trinity. There are three different types of evidence developed in the text of the Holy Scriptures. First, the evidence that the God of the Christian faith is monotheistic and clearly rejects polytheism, most noticeably in the Old Testament (Erickson 2013, 294). In the story of the Exodus, for example, God tells the Israelites that they should have no other God and worship Him only (Exod. 20:2-3). In the Shema of Deuteronomy 6 the Israelites are commanded to hold to a statement that declares that, “The Lord is One” (Deut. 6:4). Not only does the Old Testament reject a polytheistic God but the New Testament authors seem to have a theological belief in a Trinitarian view as well. Jesus

references that “God is one” several times (Matthew 23:9; John 5:44; 17:3). Not only does Jesus mention it but it seems that Paul, James, and Peter all endorse and affirm a monotheistic view of God (Rom. 3:30; 1 Cor. 8:4, Gal. 3:20; James 2:19; 4:12 1 Pet. 1:2). Based on these texts it can be concluded that the Old and New Testament have a consistency in their belief that the God of the Christian faith is monotheistic.

The second Trinitarian biblical evidence we will examine is how scripture declares God not only as “three,” but also as “one” (McGrath 1988, 121). In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus refers to God the Father as someone other than Himself (Matt. 6:26; Mk. 12:17; 24-27). Genesis, at the very least, alludes to a multi-person being when creating mankind in “our” image (Gen. 1:26). God alludes to the Trinity in the story of Babel, using the plural “us” in regards to whom will go down to intercede after confusing the language of the people (Gen 11:7). However, the most notable is at the baptism of Jesus when the Spirit descends on the Son (Jesus) and the Father’s voice from Heaven proclaims that He is certainly pleased with His Son (Matt. 3:17).

Third, there is scriptural evidence that this one, monotheistic God is represented in the embodiment of three persons. The book of First John mentions that there are, in fact, three persons of God but all three are “in agreement with each other” (1 John. 5:8). When writing the book of Acts, Luke deliberately mentions that Peter, when speaking at the Pentecost, believed that God was three in one (Acts 2: 32-33). To summarize, when regarding the Trinity, it can be said in three points: God is three persons, each person is fully God, there is one God (Grudem 1994, 231).

Based on the differing beliefs on the Trinitarian theology, nuanced ideas about the Trinity have been developed throughout the church's history. One of the most preeminent and heavily debated Trinitarian movements was Arius' defense of Arianism. Arianism was developed before the time of Constantine but championed by Arius, a popular presbyter in the city of Alexandria (Gonzalez 2010, 182). The theology of Arianism centered around the doctrine of the "logos" and the word "begotten" in the book of John (1:1). Essentially, Arius claimed that the word "begotten" proved that Jesus was a creature created by God the Father (184). On the other side of the controversy was Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, who believed in a Trinitarian God of three in one. Arius argued that Alexander's teachings were not strictly monotheistic, but Alexander, in return, accused Arius of denying the divinity of Jesus and threatening the atoning death of the Son (185). At the Council of Nicaea in 325, Eusebius, who was representing Arianism, was condemned for the heretical teachings and the Nicene Creed was developed to put a final nail in the coffin of the Arian controversy (188). The Nicene Creed uses language that makes three clear points which are still important for us today: Jesus was not created from the Father, God is in fact three in one, and the "three in one" are from the same substance.

The doctrine of the Trinity matters because without it, the sacrifice of Jesus is futile, there is no hope for unity in our world, and a relationship with God may not be possible. First, if Jesus is not God then His death does not have the power of atonement and we cannot trust Him to save us or provide salvation. Second, if God is not part of a Trinitarian fellowship—one that includes both perfect plurality and perfect unity—then how can unity within the diversity of the universe exist? Third, if Jesus is not divine then Christians who pray to Jesus are committing idolatry by worshipping a creature other than God (Grudem 1994, 246).

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PART TWO: CANON

The canon of Scripture is of the utmost importance in our faith. If we are to follow the commandments which the Bible claims, then we must have an assurance that the books that made it into the Bible (the canon) are, in fact, God's Word to His people. The canon is the list of books that belong in the Bible (Grudem 1994, 54). The Holy Scriptures are split into two testaments. The New Testament and the Old Testament. Each Testament has a different history of how they were developed and decided.

First, let's look at what Scripture and history say about the Old Testament and how we know of its legitimacy. Through Scripture, we can infer that some of the Old Testament was written on tablets (Is. 30:8; Hab 2:2). In fact, it was on a tablet that Moses received the Ten Commandments from the very finger of God (Ex. 32:16). This serves as the earliest written words of God and form the beginning of the biblical canon (Grudem 1994, 54). After the Ten Commandments, the canon started to grow as Moses added to it and requested that his new

words be “deposited beside the Ark of the Covenant” (Deut. 31:24-26). After the death of Moses, Joshua added to the canon along with people that held the office of prophet. According to Grudem, no more words were added to the Old Testament canon after the date of 435 BC (56).

There are additional non-canonical books to reconcile; namely, the Apocrypha, which are books in the Catholic canon. First, we must recognize that there is no Scriptural support in the New Testament for the Apocrypha. Not only did the authors of the New Testament endorse specific books of the Old Testament (Acts 13:33; Rom. 1:17; 2 Pet. 2:22) but Jesus endorses the Old Testament many times throughout His ministry (Matt. 4:4; Luke. 4:17-19; John 3:18). The New Testament never explicitly endorses the writings of the Apocrypha. Second, the earliest lists of the Old Testament and New Testament are from Melito, bishop of Sardis, written about 170 AD and do not list any of the Apocrypha books as part of the canon. Interestingly, Melito does leave out the book of Esther (Beckwith 2000, 28). Third, Josephus lists twenty-two books as the Old Testament scriptures in his treatise *Against Apion* (Bruce 1988, 33). While the common list of books from a Jewish perspective was twenty-four we can affirm that Josephus was likely appending Ruth to Judges and Lamentations to Jeremiah “in order to assimilate it to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet” (Beckwith 2000, 29). To conclude, not only do the New Testament authors and Jesus lapse in their affirmation of the Apocrypha, it seems that the Hebraic community, including their most famous historian, Josephus, does not attest to the Apocrypha as canon.

Next we will discuss the history and development of the New Testament canon. Many of the New Testament books were in circulation by the time Marcion had established the first attempt at a collection of New Testament books. However, Marcion had a heretical view of God

and separated anything that had to do with the Hebraic Old Testament from his canon. He believed the God of the Old Testament was different from the God of the Christians and anything that resembled the God of the Old Testament was eliminated in his list of books. Marcion's list consisted only of the letters of Paul and the Gospel of Luke. All other books were filled with Jewish views and were not on his list of authoritative Scripture's (Gonzalez 2010, 74). Soon, Marcion gathered quite the following and posed a real threat to the foundation of the Christian church. It was out of that threat that the early church decided to establish a canon for the New Testament (Bruce 1988, 144). The New Testament canon was developed and books were considered authoritative based on three mechanics. First, they have to have the mark of apostolic authorship. Jesus endorses the apostles in the writing of the New Testament. He promises His empowering Spirit (John 14:26) to teach them and to guide them into all truth (16:13-14) about current events and what was to come. In addition, Peter encourages his readers to remember "the commandments of the Lord through the apostles" (2 Peter 3:2) and Luke concludes that lying to the apostles is the same as lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3). It is clear that apostles and apostolic community that walked with Jesus or lived in the early church community were given authority to write the Word of God. Second, the books accepted into the canon had to be self-attesting and have the ability to bear witness to their own divine authorship (Grudem 1994, 63). Third, the books must be consistent with the rest of Scripture and recognized by a majority of churches and people as both edifying and inspired (Scorgie 2016). It was these three measurements that were used to develop what we have as our New Testament canon today.

Finally, the legitimacy of the canon of Scripture carries a great weight in our faith. As previously mentioned, if we are to follow the commandments and teachings of the Bible we must

have an assurance that they are, undoubtedly, the very words of God. It is through the development of the canon that a follower of Christ can have a great assurance of the complexity and yet incredible unity that the biblical message carries. The Bible was written over a period of fifteen hundred years and has over forty authors, yet one central theme of redemption and God's love for his people runs throughout the book. It is tough to look at the complexity of the canonical development and not attest the Bible to God—no other religious work uses overarching themes that unify various authors over such a large span of time. Without the canon of Scripture, we may not know which written works to read or trust, and it is because of the hard work of the early church leaders that we have a strong assurance that the biblical Scriptures are God-approved. However, we cannot conclude without addressing the topic of further revelation or, in other words, whether or not the canon is closed. When reflecting on the three measurements that the early church used, we can conclude that it certainly is possible for the discovery of a book that meets the measurements, however, it seems quite impossible (Scorgie 2016).

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PART THREE: CREATION

There are many theories regarding creation which have emerged throughout the history of Christianity. For example, there is the “flood theory” which claims that God used the great flood as a vehicle to create the world, and Noah’s Ark to populate it. The “Gap Theory” attests that, though the earth was created billions of years ago, there was a catastrophe that left the earth formless and void until God initiated the creation only a few thousand years ago (Erickson 2013, 351). In sum, there is a wide variety of creation beliefs for a Christian to consider; however, it appears that the text in the book of Genesis is not a manual for scientific proof, but has a rather different agenda. The doctrine of Creation can be more fully understood when focusing on three distinct aspects of the book of Genesis: 1) Genesis was written as a polemic, 2) its themes specifically point towards a theology of Sabbath and the value of humanity and 3) it conveys the intrinsic goodness of creation.

When set along the backdrop of its historic age, it is important to understand Genesis’ context as a polemical text or strong rhetoric intended to support a specific position. The way that the God of Genesis creates is completely different from the gods that were being worshipped in Old Testament times. God created not from a struggle, as it is often the case in Near Eastern mythology, but by His “Word” (Dyrness 1979, 65). He created all things by His Word, even the sun, moon, and stars which other religions believed ought to be worshipped. It appears that when the author of Genesis calls the sun and moon “lights” he is doing so to push up against the

religions of that time and show that they do not have gods worthy of worship (Wenham 1994, 59). In fact, there is only one God to be worshipped. The God of Genesis required no magic to create; His word was sufficient by itself (Dyrness 65). It is only because God “said” that anything exists. It is by His “calling” or “speaking” that creation comes about. God’s Word was the very beginning, and it is by his Word that all things begin (John 1:1-3).

The specific genre of Genesis must also be taken into consideration, especially in light of its polemical attributes. Genesis seems to fall into the genre of inspired truth in poetic form (Scorgie 2016)—in other words, God-inspired truth in the form of poetry. M.J. Lagrange took the poetical nature of Genesis into account when he developed the first literary interpretation of the creation account. The literary interpretation attributes the six-day creation as an artistic arrangement not to be taken literally but to be interpreted thematically. We will now explore how the literary account lends itself to a Sabbath theology and promotes the value of man (Blocher 1984, 50).

The creation story first explores the theology of the Sabbath by opening Genesis chapter two with the Sabbath. While the original biblical authors did not choose the chapter divisions, it is clear that our early Christian fathers saw a purpose for a split at this specific verse. This division is a clear indication of our need to start the week, and even our days, resting in God—the second chapter starts with rest because we, as God’s image, are to start with rest. “We do not work towards our Sabbath, we work out of it” (Dogterom 2013). The first thing we do each day is rest in God. The first thing we do each week is rest in God. It is only out of that rest and subsequent fullness that we are able to work effectively. The Sabbath was important to God and it ought to be important to us. Jesus tells us that, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for

the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). The Sabbath is at the very heart of God and it ought to be in our hearts as well and it seems that one of the main themes in the creation account is this idea of Sabbath rest.

Lastly, the creation story provokes the reader to realize the value of humanity. (Grudem 1994, 262). We know that humanity is valuable to God because He does not use the term “very good” until describing His human creation (Gen. 1:26). He gives them the authority of ruling over the fish in the sea and naming the animals of the ground (Gen. 1:28; 2:19), giving them precedence and favor over all other created things. Humanity is the apex to the first chapter in the creation story—the only beings created in the very image of God (Gen. 1:26); not to be worshipped as gods but to give glory and praise to *their* God (Blocher 1984, 83). In sum, the creation story has deep meaning within its text, and while it was not intended to be scientifically flawless, there is much truth to learn from this poetic text. The true purpose of the creation story is to reveal humanity’s purpose, namely, to honor the Sabbath, to glorify God, and to understand how valuable we are in His eyes.

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