

Lead 360 - Christian Theology

Session II, Part I: The Christian Belief in the Trinity

I. Introduction

1. Popular media interest: *Da Vinci Code*; *The Shack*
2. Theological interest: more books written by theologians on the Trinity in the 20th century than all the centuries since early Christianity.
3. Trinity belief is THE distinguishing feature of Christianity.
4. Important aspects to understand about the Trinity:
 - "Trinity" not a biblical word but the belief is;
 - "Trinity is taught implicitly in Scripture and explicitly in Christian experience.
5. Need to avoid overstatement and understatement.

II. Christian Consensus on the Biblical Teaching

1. Early formulations in patristic (first five centuries) Christianity
 - "God in 3 persons" (Tertullian, 2nd century)
 - Monotheism a given: God is ONE.
 - Theological expressions of deity of the three
2. Early *mis*understandings of Trinity
 - Modalism (Sabellius): not 3 persons but 3 "faces" of God
 - Subordination - no equal deity; God the Father superior
 - Arianism: the most dangerous - Jesus a divine "creature" but not deity.
 - Unitarians & Jehovah's Witnesses are examples of this heresy.
3. Heart of trinitarian understanding
 - Start with God's unity (oneness) Monotheism
 - Three biblical "building blocks":
 - God's Oneness
 - God's incarnation in Jesus the Christ
 - Revelation of Holy Spirit as Person at Pentecost
 - If no Trinity, then we have no Saviour. If Jesus is not God, who saves us?

III. Making Sense of the Trinity

1. Cappadocian fathers (Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus & Basil of Caesarea) most helpful God is one essence but three trinitarian interrelated persons who share same deity.
2. Early Christian theologians used Greek ideas and concepts which help but sometimes confuse. Better to see this as a belief rooted in God's triune self-revelation. Mysterious YES. Believable YES. We cannot "explain" it but we experience the Trinity in the worship of the triune God.

IV. How Important Is It?

"The doctrine of the Trinity is the necessary theological framework for understanding the story of Jesus as the story of God; or put otherwise, it is the exposition of the O.T. affirmation 'God is One' and the N.T. confession 'Jesus is Lord' neither of which can be understood apart from the person of the Holy Spirit" (Timothy George).