



The Life and Writings of St. Paul

Lesson 6

Lesson 6 Commentary

Paul's Theology of the Trinity

Lesson 7 Questions

Paul's Theology of Salvation

Introduction

In the last session, we finished Paul's life through the end of Acts and then speculated on how and when Paul died. In the process, we outlined a possible scenario for when he wrote his letters. Our focus now changes to broad theological issues and how Paul's writings may have contributed to the development of doctrine. The first one we will tackle is Paul's theology of the Trinity. While the concept of "the Trinity" seems so ingrained in our Catholic tradition, as well as all other Christian traditions, the word "trinity" is never used in the Bible. It was not until the 4th century AD that the doctrine was defined. Even then, it was challenged. So, before looking at words of Paul that may have helped shape the doctrine, let's review what Catholics believe according to the Catechism.

Catholic Beliefs Regarding the Trinity

We, like our Israelite predecessors, are monotheistic. That is, we believe that there is only one God. Israelites (and many Jews today) quoted the "Great Shema" at least three times daily. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD."¹ While the Israelites were monotheistic, there were also complicating factors. For instance, in Daniel, we read:

As the visions during the night continued, I saw coming with the clouds of heaven one like a son of man. When he reached the Ancient of Days and was presented before him, he received dominion, splendor, and kingship; all nations, peoples and

¹ Deut 6:4, RSVCE. All remaining Biblical citations are from the NABRE.

tongues will serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, his kingship, one that shall not be destroyed.²

This is not the only reference in the Old Testament to a “second person” who shares the reign of God. In Psalms we read, “The LORD says to my lord: “Sit at my right hand, while I make your enemies your footstool.””³ Daniel Boyarin, a leading theologian says, “the idea of a second God as viceroy to God the Father is one of the oldest of theological ideas in Israel.”⁴

We believe that there are three distinct persons in God - God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These are not three gods. They are three equal persons sharing in the one nature of God. They are of one substance (consubstantial). This belief is the “central mystery of the Christian life and faith. It is the mystery of God in himself.”⁵ It is a mystery in that we cannot know it by reason alone. God must reveal it to us. “To be sure, God has left traces of his Trinitarian being in his work of creation and in his Revelation throughout the Old Testament. But his inmost Being as Holy Trinity is a mystery that is inaccessible to reason alone or even to Israel’s faith before the Incarnation of God’s Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit.”⁶ Where might we find those hints in the Old Testament?

Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness.

Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.⁷

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oak of Mamre, as he sat in the entrance of his tent, while the day was growing hot. **Looking up, he saw three men** standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them; and bowing to the ground, ³ he said: “Sir, if it please you, do not go on past your servant.”⁸

In addition to these, in the Wisdom literature we see Wisdom as somewhat of a second figure with God.

We believe that they are distinct only in their relationship to one another. The Father is eternally the Father to the Son. The Son is eternally the Son of the Father. The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son. Think of it this way: for all eternity, the Father thinks of himself and his infinitely perfect self-understanding is the Son, the divine, eternal image of himself. The infinitely perfect love that is eternally shared between the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit.

² Dan 7:13–14.

³ Ps 110:1.

⁴ Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 44.

⁵ CCC 234.

⁶ CCC 237.

⁷ Gen 1:27, emphasis added.

⁸ Gen 18:1–3, emphasis added.

Jesus commanded his Apostles to baptize in the name (not names) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁹ This formula is the central way the Catholic Church decides whether to accept a person's baptism. If a person is not baptized in the name of the one God who is three distinct persons, then the baptism is invalid, One must be baptized to enter full communion with the Catholic Church. Most of the religions that call themselves Christian today follow this formula. The most notable exception is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons). "Mormon doctrine denies the Trinity, teaching that the Father, Son, and Spirit do not comprise one God. According to Mormonism, Jesus is a created being, the first spirit to be born of the Father and a celestial mother. Therefore, Jesus could not be the eternal God or part of an eternal Trinity. Mormons also teach that both the Father and the Son are *men* with bodies of flesh and bone; as two separate people, the Father and the Son cannot be considered "one.""¹⁰

What Did Paul Say?

To reiterate a previous point, Paul never uses the word "Trinity", nor does he make a clear statement that there was one God, who exists as three distinct Persons. It is by no means obvious that Paul specifically believed all the same things about God's being in himself that the Catholic Church confesses as outlined in the previous section.

As we stated in previous sessions, I do not believe that Paul lost his Jewish roots. Not only would this indicate that he was monotheistic, as we are today, but Paul is also explicit on this position.

- [Y]et for us **there is one God, the Father**, from whom all things are and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are and through whom we exist.¹¹
- I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; **one God and Father of all**, who is over all and through all and in all.¹²

⁹ Matt 28:19.

¹⁰ Got Questions Ministries, *Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2002–2013).

¹¹ 1 Cor 8:6, emphasis added.

¹² Eph 4:1–6, emphasis added.

- For **there is one God**. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as ransom for all.¹³

Paul also sees Jesus as the son of God, the Father.

- God is faithful, and by him you were called to fellowship with **his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord**.¹⁴
- For **the Son of God, Jesus Christ**, who was proclaimed to you by us, Silvanus and Timothy and me, was not “yes” and “no,” but “yes” has been in him.¹⁵
- But when the fullness of time had come, **God sent his Son**, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption.¹⁶

In addition, Paul sees God, the Father, as the one that raised Jesus, the Son, from the dead.

- Paul, an apostle not from human beings nor through a human being but through **Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead**, and all the brothers who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins that he might rescue us from the present evil age in accord with the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever.¹⁷
- [I]t was also for us, to whom it will be credited, who believe in **the one [God, the Father] who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead**, who was handed over for our transgressions and was raised for our justification.¹⁸
- If the Spirit of **the one [God] who raised Jesus from the dead** dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit that dwells in you.¹⁹

We previously cited this verse. “[Y]et for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things are and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are and through whom we exist.”²⁰ Many scholars have suggested that this verse is Paul’s re-imagining of the Great Shema, mentioned above, which incorporates Jesus into the formula. Note that Paul uses

¹³ 1 Tim 2:5–6, emphasis added.

¹⁴ 1 Cor 1:9, emphasis added.

¹⁵ 2 Cor 1:19, emphasis added.

¹⁶ Ga 4:4–5, emphasis added.

¹⁷ Gal 1:1–5, emphasis added.

¹⁸ Rom 4:24–25, emphasis added.

¹⁹ Rom 8:11, emphasis added.

²⁰ 1 Cor 8:6, emphasis added.

the word “Lord” for Jesus Christ. The Greek word translated at Lord is *Kyrios*. In the Old Testament, God’s gave his name to Moses at the burning bush as YHWH, which the Hebrew people felt that you could never utter. As a result, the word was always translated at “Lord,” *Kyrios* in the Septuagint. Was Paul trying to say that Jesus was the God of Israel?

Paul says something interesting in what is called the Christ Hymn:

Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, **God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name**, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.²¹

What was the “name that is above every name?” “The name in question must be . . .the reverential substitute for the divine name YHWH, that is, *Kyrios*.”²²

In addition, it appears that Paul is saying that Jesus is both in the form of God and equal to God. Note the similarities between the above passage and that of Isaiah when the God of Israel is speaking. “By myself I swear, uttering my just decree, a word that will not return: **To me every knee shall bend; by me every tongue shall swear.**”²³ So, yes, Paul is connecting Jesus Christ and the one God of Israel in a bold and clear way.

We have spent some time looking at the relationship of the Father and Son. What about the Holy Spirit? Paul spends less time talking about the Holy Spirit than he does talking about the relationship between the Father and the Son, but does not ignore the issue, as we can see from the third bullet, above. Just as Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father AND the Son, Paul talks about the Spirit of God and the Spirit of the Lord or Spirit of Christ.

- Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the **Spirit of the Lord** is, there is freedom.²⁴
- But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption. As proof that you are children, **God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts**, crying out, “Abba,

²¹ Phil 2:5–11, emphasis added.

²² Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters*, (Grand Rapids; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 93.

²³ Isa 45:23, emphasis added.

²⁴ 2 Cor 3:17, emphasis added.

Father!” So, you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.²⁵

- But you are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the spirit, if only the **Spirit of God** dwells in you. Whoever does not have the **Spirit of Christ** does not belong to him.²⁶
- For the **Spirit** scrutinizes everything, even the depths of God. Among human beings, who knows what pertains to a person except the spirit of the person that is within? Similarly, no one knows what pertains to God except **the Spirit of God**. We have not received the spirit of the world but the **Spirit that is from God**, so that we may understand the things freely given us by God.²⁷

Lastly, Paul appears to state certain things using a trinitarian formula, like the way that Christ commanded the Apostles in the Great Commission of Matthew 28.

- The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the holy Spirit be with all of you.²⁸
- There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone.²⁹
- In him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will,¹² so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ.¹³ In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised holy Spirit,¹⁴ which is the first installment of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s possession, to the praise of his glory.³⁰

In summary, it appears that Paul touches on virtually every one of the basic beliefs we have in the Trinity today but does not come straight out and say it, likely because there was simply no developed and clearly defined vocabulary for articulating this doctrine at the time. He believes in one God, but multiple “persons” (maybe) that are equal. He distinguishes between the three “persons,” but seems also to maintain his monotheism roots.

²⁵ Gal 4:4–7, emphasis added.

²⁶ Rom 8:9, emphasis added.

²⁷ 1 Cor 2:10–12, emphasis added.

²⁸ 2 Cor 13:13.

²⁹ 1 Cor 12:4–6.

³⁰ Eph 1:11–14.

What Happened Next?

Well, it was not pretty and for four centuries arguments abound. Many heresies related to the Trinity arose, primarily related to the divinity of Jesus.

The first heresy to discuss is Arianism, named after Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria in the late third and early fourth centuries. The Arians believed that the Son was the first and greatest creation of God, the Father, but he was a creature and not equivalent to God. The Arian argument is not difficult to articulate, though the implications are immense. If Jesus was another of God's creatures, then He was not God. He was something lower than God. He may have been a great mediator, even a great prophet. He may be superior to man and all other creatures, but he would certainly be subordinate to God as all of God's creatures are subordinate to God. Jesus may have been the first of God's creations and made from nothing, but He would not have been there for all eternity. Arians would argue that Jesus was *homoiousios* (of similar substance) as opposed to *homoousios* (consubstantial). "The historian Gibbon was amused by the thought that Christianity almost floundered on the controversy between *homoousios* and *homoiousios*, the fate of humankind hanging on a single iota."³¹ There are still pockets of Arianism around today (Jehovah Witnesses).

The second great heresy facing the Trinitarian doctrine was Sabellianism, commonly called Modalism. This heresy was named after Sabellius, a priest from Libya in the third century, which "denied any real distinction of Persons in God"³² Effectively, the "Modalist" agreed with the Catholic faith that there was one God but denied the existence of the three Persons. The Sabellians "taught a Trinity, not of persons, but of manifestations or offices."³³ In other words, God would decide which form He would take based on the situation. However, the appearance of the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit was not a person, but a manifestation of the one God. "According to Sabellians, the term *Father* referred to this one divine person when His incomprehensible greatness and sovereignty were in view. *Son* referred to His revelation to men and His becoming incarnate. *Holy Spirit* referred to His operating immediately upon the creature in the works of creation, providence, or grace."³⁴

There were several councils that were called to address these heresies and others. By the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, the Trinitarian Doctrine was established as we know it today.

³¹ Robert Payne, "A Hammer Struck at Heresy," *Christian History Magazine* 51: *Heresy in the Early Church*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1996).

³² Addis and Arnold, *A Catholic Dictionary*, 730.

³³ John Thein, *Ecclesiastical Dictionary: Containing, in Concise Form, Information upon Ecclesiastical, Biblical, Archaeological, and Historical Subjects* (New York; Cincinnati; Chicago: Benziger Brothers, 1900), 616.

³⁴ Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 393.

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 7

Paul's Theology of Salvation

Day 1 – Scan the lecture notes. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 2 – Read CCC 2017 – 2029.

Summarize in a few sentences what you think the Church is teaching in this section.

Day 3 – Read CCC 1425 – 1426, 1021 – 1022, 1038 – 1041

Summarize in a few sentences what you think the Church is teaching in these sections.

Day 4 – Read Colossians 3:9-11, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Colossians 2:11-12, Galatians 3:27-29, Ephesians 4:1-6.

Reflecting on what you read in the Catechism, above, how do you think Paul's words fit into the faith of the Church?

Day 5 – Read Romans 3:21-26 and Romans 5:15-16.

In Romans 3:22, most versions of the Bible have the words, "faith in Jesus Christ." The Greek word translated as "in Jesus Christ" is *Xristou*, which can also be translated as "of Jesus Christ." If the words were changed to "faithfulness of Jesus Christ, how that change the meaning of that verse.

Reflecting on what you read in the Catechism, above, how do you think Paul's words fit into the faith of the Church?

Day 6 – Read Romans 8:14-17, Romans 12:6-8, Romans 2:5-8 and 2 Corinthians 5:10.

Reflecting on what you read in the Catechism, above, how do you think Paul's words fit into the faith of the Church?