

The Doctrine of the Trinity: Its History and Meaning

The doctrine of the Triune God has a rather odd position in the life of the Church today. Every official Church teaching affirms its absolute centrality for faith, and virtually every other doctrine of Christian faith depends upon it for its meaning. But what exactly it itself means seems obscure to many people, and most simply set it more or less reverently aside in order to turn to theological topics that seem more concrete and practically significant. Then there is the fact that, for reasons that are largely forgotten, the Doctrine of the Trinity became the occasion for the schism of the Eastern and Western branches of Christendom, a breach that the Episcopal Church has been making an effort to overcome by deciding to change back to the original, eastern version of the Nicene Creed in the next revision of the Book of Common Prayer.

I will try in these lectures to clarify the reasons for all of these developments by going back to the original processes of thought that gave rise to the formulation of the doctrine in the early centuries of the Church, then discussing the reasons for the break up of the Church in subsequent centuries and the efforts of recent theologians to recover the original meaning of the doctrine and rediscover its true centrality.

The lectures will be presented in four series

1. Biblical background (Jan. 14 - Feb. 4, 2007)
2. The formulation of the doctrine in the 4th & 5th centuries (Sept. 9-30, 2007)
3. West vs. East
4. The meaning of the doctrine today

Part 1: Biblical background

Symbols: Son of God, Spirit

Context

Words and symbols have their meanings in a context.

Context = both accompanying text and surrounding culture

Example:

Entrée -- in France vs. in US.

Framework of interpretation

They also have their meanings within a framework of interpretation

Supernatural theism vs. panentheism

Example:

Son of God in Bible vs. Son of God in Milton's Paradise Regained.

Son of God in Biblical context

Israel as “son” of God

Exod. 4

[21] And the LORD said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, ...

[22] ... thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn:

[23] And I say unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me: and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn.

King as “son” of God

2Sam.7

[1] And it came to pass, when the king sat in his house, and the LORD had given him rest round about from all his enemies;

[2] That the king said unto Nathan the prophet, See now, I dwell in an house of cedar, but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains.

[3] And Nathan said to the king, Go, do all that is in thine heart; for the LORD is with thee.

[4] And it came to pass that night, that the word of the LORD came unto Nathan, saying,

[5] Go and tell my servant David, Thus saith the LORD, Shalt thou build me an house for me to dwell in?

[6] Whereas I have not dwelt in any house since the time that I brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt, even to this day, but have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle.

[7] In all the places wherein I have walked with all the children of Israel spake I a word with any of the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to feed my people Israel, saying, Why build ye not me an house of cedar?

...

[12] And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom.

[13] He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever.

[14] I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men:

[15] But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee.

[16] And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever.

Pyramid Texts

Atum:

This is my son, my first born ...

This is my beloved with whom I have been satisfied...

This is my beloved, my son; I have given the horizons to him...

The Messianic theme

Egypt — Prophecies of Neferrohu (ca. 2000 BC)

"Then it is that a king will come, belonging to the South, Ameni the triumphant his name. He is the son of a woman of the land of Nubia; he is one born in upper Egypt... Rejoice ye people of his time! The son of a man will make his name for ever and ever. They who are inclined toward evil and who plot rebellion have subdued their speech for fear of him. The Asiatics will fall to his sword, and the Libyans will fall to his flame. The rebels belong to his wrath, and the teacherous of heart to the awe of him." (ANET 443)

Isaiah 7

[10] Moreover the LORD spake again unto Ahaz, saying,

[11] Ask thee a sign of the LORD thy God; ask it either in the depth, or in the height above.

[12] But Ahaz said, I will not ask, neither will I tempt the LORD.

[13] And he said, Hear ye now, O house of David; Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also?

[14] Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

[15] Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good.

[16] For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings.

[17] The LORD shall bring upon thee, and upon thy people, and upon thy father's house, days that have not come, from the day that Ephraim departed from Judah; even the king of Assyria.

[18] And it shall come to pass in that day, that the LORD shall hiss for the fly that is in the uttermost part of the rivers of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria.

[19] And they shall come, and shall rest all of them in the desolate valleys, and in the holes of the rocks, and upon all thorns, and upon all bushes.

Isa. 42

[1] Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles.

[2] He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street.

[3] A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth.

[4] He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.

[5] Thus saith God the LORD, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that spread forth the earth, and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein:

[6] I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles;

[7] To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.

Jesus as “son” of God

Combines imagery both of Israel and of divinely anointed king

Mark 1

[11] And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

Matt. 1

[18] Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

[19] Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.

[20] But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

[21] And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

[22] Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,

[23] Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

Luke 2

[1] And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. ...

[3] And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

[4] And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

[5] To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

[6] And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

[7] And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

The birth of Augustus (as described by Suetonius)

Augustus was born of the union of his human mother and the god of an Egyptian temple in which she spent the night during a trip to Egypt 9 months before his birth. According to the story, her serving women saw a serpent (the form of the god) crawl out from between her legs in the morning and then she washed herself after the manner of women after intercourse.

One symbolic difference is that in the case of Augustus, the god simply “took” Augustus’s mother; in Matt., the angel comes to ask Mary’s free acceptance of the calling to be Christ’s mother.

Augustus also bore the title “*divi filius*” or “son of a god” and was called *primogenitus dei* by the Tiburtine Sybil (in the story about the origin of the *ara coelis*). The point of the story in Matthew and Luke seems to be that Jesus surpasses Augustus as the true firstborn son of God.

Augustus, in the Greek speaking East, was called *basileus*, which can be translated as either king or emperor. Herod in the gospel is also called *basileus*. The “kingdom of God” is called the *basileia tou theou*, and the magi come asking in Matt. 2: “Where is the child who is born to be king (*basileus*) of the Jews.

In the light of all this, I think the parallel with Augustus is part of the larger pattern of trying to show how the term *basileus* (and messiah) can apply more properly to Jesus, and in a new and deeper sense, than to those who ordinarily bear that title in the Hellenistic milieu.

Jesus anointed with “spirit”

Acts.10

Peter (to Cornelius):

[36] The word which God sent unto the children of Israel ...

[38] How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him.

[39] And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree:

[40] Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly...

Luke 3

[16] John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.

Luke 4

[14] And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about.

[15] And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all.

[16] And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read.

[17] And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written,

[18] The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,

[19] To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

[20] And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him.

[21] And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.

Son of God in Paul

Rom.1

[1] Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God,

[2] (Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures,)

[3] Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh;

[4] And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead:

Rom.8

[11] But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.

[12] Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh.

[13] For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

[14] For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

[15] For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

[16] The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:

[17] And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

[18] For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

[19] For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.

...

[28] And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

[29] For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

Gal.4

[1] Now I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all;

[2] But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father.

[3] Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world:

[4] But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,

[5] To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.
[6] And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.
[7] Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

1Cor.12

[11] But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.
[12] For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.
[13] For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.
[14] For the body is not one member, but many.
[27] Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular [individually].

John.1

[1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
[2] The same was in the beginning with God.
[3] All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.
[4] In him was life; and the life was the light of men.
[5] And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.
...
[9] That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.
[10] He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.
[11] He came unto his own, and his own received him not.
[12] But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:
[13] Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.
[14] And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.
...
[18] No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

John.15

[26] But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me:
[27] And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning.