The Trinity, the Creed, and the Heresies

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[0:00] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for gathering us. I give thanks to our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We pray to you, our God, in the name of Christ. We pray in the power of the Spirit.

We know, O Lord, that the Spirit even improves our prayers. We know that the intercession of Christ, who sits at the right hand of the Father, is active for us now. So we give thanks to you, our God, for hearing us and listening to us.
So as we think about who you are a little bit more through the doctrine of the Trinity, and then we come and plead before you for your work in our city. We pray, God, and ask that you would draw near to us, that we seek your face so, Lord, do gather with us.
We pray for your condescension into our midst, that the Holy Spirit would be with us now, and we ask for your help in Christ's name. Amen. All right, we're working our way through a course on the doctrine of the Trinity called Delighting in the Trinity.
And we have said the past couple of times, this is our third time to get to gather together, that delighting in our God, who is triune, one God in essence, three in person, is not just the icing on the cake of the Christian life, it is the main content of the Christian life, that we exist actually to delight in God, who is the triune God.
[1:17] And then last time we got together, we talked about the Bible and the Trinity. So some of the questions that come up around that are, does the Bible actually teach the Trinity? And there have been plenty of religious traditions that have said no to that, but we looked very carefully at how the Bible does teach the doctrine of the Trinity and the truth that God is one in essence, three in person, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We said that God is distinct in His persons, but undivided in His essence. And that's one of the really important parts of the language that we want to remember.
Another thing we've said both times coming up to today that you can never graduate from, that is so helpful to remember, is that we do theology as creatures.
And as creatures, we can never get our hands all the way around, which is the word comprehension in English, to get your hands all the way around the doctrine of the Trinity.
Of course we can't. If we could, we would be God. So only God knows God the way that God knows God. And we know God as creatures, and we use human words to speak about God.
[2:23] And so that means we speak truthfully, but relatively. We speak as creatures, and so God has given us permission to speak about Him. He's told us so much about Him, so we speak truthfully.

But one of the theologians I like to read says famously that mystery is the lifeblood of theology. And so mystery is the starting point, really, of talking about the Trinity.
All right, so tonight we're going to look at the next subject, which is the heresies surrounding the Trinity. Oh, there's my pen. And I'll, there we are.
So just a reminder, this is what you need to have the fundamental doctrine of the Trinity, that there is one God. We looked at Deuteronomy 6, 4, the Shema, 6, 1 to 4.
Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. Not many, not a pantheon, not polytheism, but one. And then the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are each fully God. And the Father, Son, and the Spirit are not the same as each other.
[3:21] So there's an undivided essence. Yet at the same time, there's distinction in the Godhead, and that's a distinction of the persons. So we say the persons of God are distinct, Father, Son, and Spirit, but undivided in essence.

And that's what you need to say to have the standard Christian doctrine of who our God is, the triune God. Now, one of the ways we've developed language around the doctrine of the Trinity is

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through responding to problems.
And we call those problems in Christian history heresies. And heresies have been very important, actually, in a way for clarifying what we believe and helping us understand more of what the Bible teaches.
And so sometimes what's happened throughout history is that we've received something and said, well, is that correct? And then we've had to go and look at the Bible and wrestle with it to come up and understand what the Bible actually teaches.
So the word heresy is a Greek word, comes from a Greek word. It's an English word, of course, that means to choose. And so the reason that they're called heresies is because the idea is that when people speak heresy, they are taking one accent of a truth, a half truth, a partial truth, and making it the whole thing.
[4:35] And then letting go of the rest, letting go of the nuances. And that's how you arrive often at heresy is by taking one thing that seems true, but forgetting everything else around it and then speaking that as if it is the truth.

Okay, so it's so important to say, just press pause there. We'll come to the Nicene Creed in a moment, why this matters. Why does it matter for a Christian in 2026 to know at least a little bit about the tradition of the heresies?
And it matters for a number of reasons. I'll just rattle off a few. One, because we want to know the truth. And arriving at who God is has come to us by way of thinking through some of these problems and arriving at the language that we're about to read in the Nicene Creed through the lens of these problems.
So we want to know God and the way he's revealed himself more and more and more deeply. And so one way to say that is we can't really delight as much as possible with affection for the God who is unless we know the God who is to the uttermost as much as we can.
And so if I turn to my wife and say, I love you so much, I delight in you so much. And then I say to my wife, I delight in your beautiful blue eyes and your long blonde hair.
[5:55] Then hopefully those of you in the room who know my wife will know that she has every right to say you don't know me because my wife doesn't have those attributes.

And in the same way, that's a small example of the magisterial reality that God invites us to know him. And the more that we talk about God, the more we want to say true things to the God who made us.
And that's actually one of the ways we grow in our affection for God. And then the most important, perhaps, and piece in addition to that is we've said every single time the gospel stands or falls at some point in speaking about the God who is and the way he's revealed himself in the right way.
So only the son can bring you to the father. Only the father can send the son to be adopted as a child of God is to have the spirit in your life. Well, there right there is what we call a triune work of God, the father, son, and spirit at work in your life.
And to get the gospel, you have to speak about the Trinity. And so we want to say that as best as we possibly can. So a little caveat on that is to say we're not saying tonight at all in any way that everybody needs a classroom level understanding of what's called the Trinitarian grammar.
[7:11] You know, all the precise words in their Greek and Latin form as they were originally given to make sure that you've got the doctrine right or you're speaking wrongly about God. That's not at all what we're saying. You are not saved by getting theological grammar correctly.

No, not at all. And so the smallest child in our church that trusts in Jesus is justified by faith in Christ Jesus. So we're not saying that for a half second. But I think what we are saying tonight is real faith desires to know the deep things of God and want to enter in more fully into the deep things of God.
So it does mean that eventually errors about God that seem small at first become quite big eventually. And it really does matter to say that no one who denies the father knows, sorry, denies the son, I should say, knows the father.
And so if we are arriving at a place and that's what the tradition of the heresies did, denying the divinity of the son, for example, it means that one does not know the father and has lost the very concept, the very reality of Christianity altogether.
And so let's take a few minutes to talk about this. And I just want to present to you three of the most important for their historical value heresies that have been spoken in church history and see how we responded to them in order to talk about God as best as we possibly can.

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[8:35] So we'll move through them in just a few minutes each, not hardly any time. And there's a world here underneath what we'll do in just a few minutes. But I want to first confess the Nicene Creed.

So in our church, we don't often do this. We do a catechism where everybody responds. But it has been very normal throughout church history, including in the Scottish Presbyterian tradition, to confess the creeds.
And so if there's nothing else tonight, maybe one of the invitations I could make to you is just to ask you, do you have a relationship with the creeds at all? Do you know them? Are you aware of them? The creeds are the foundational constitutional documents of the Christian faith.
Of course, sitting on the authority of the Bible alone, which is not constitutional because it can't be changed. But here we have one of the most important statements ever written on the Christian faith that the church has typically looked at and said, to confess this is to understand the sum total, really, of what the Christian believes.
And so let's confess it together, if you're okay with that. Typically, to confess the creed, we would ask, Christian, what do you believe? And then we would respond. So it comes across, I think, three slides.
[9:47] So you might have to bear with me right at the last little word there just to get to the next slide. But let's confess the creed together. So, Christian, what do you believe? We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.
Through him, all things were made. For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly human.
For our sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered death and was buried. On the third day, he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.
[10:53] We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy Catholic and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen. All right. So, well, thanks for doing that. And this is something that we hope to do here a little bit more often soon at St. C's, is confess the creeds a little bit more.
So, the first, and we'll just do these very briefly, is the heresy called Arianism, which was very important for clarifying what we just read there in the Nicene Creed and understanding what we think about Jesus, about the Son of God.
So, Arius comes up around the year 318, especially his teaching becomes very popular, I should say, around the year 318. And I won't tell all the stories, but invite you very much to go, even on Wikipedia or other great sources, much better sources than that, and read a little bit about the story of Arius.
[12:11] And the big thing to know is that Arius was going around saying things like, there was a time when the Son of God was not. Meaning, there was a time when the Son, who took on flesh in Jesus Christ, did not exist.

So, Arius said that Jesus, the Son of God, is a creature, not divine. And he said that the Holy Spirit was also a great creature, not divine.
And so, this is what led to the Council of Nicaea that we just confessed. In 325, the all-star character at the Council of Nicaea was this man called Athanasius.
And he was eventually exiled from Alexandria and Egypt five separate times because after the Council of Nicaea, the Arian thought that Jesus, the Son, is just a creature, not divine, actually sort of dominated parts of what we would now call Europe and North Africa.
And eventually, the truth came back up to the forefront. And it was reaffirmed later in Constantinople in the year 381, and a little bit more was added to that creed that we just read.

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[13:22] So, we just read what's called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. And that's to put the creed that was written in 325 together with the creed in 381 to produce one big text that we just read.

Now, Arius liked to go to places like Proverbs 8.22 famously, where we read that the Lord God, the Creator, possessed me at the beginning of His work.
And Arius read the me there as the Son of God, like many in the Christian church have done. But he read it to mean that the Creator created the Son and then used the Son to help with the rest of creation.
So, Arius read that to say such a thing as the Son was the Father's first great creature. And then if you go to Colossians 1.15-16, Chris preached on that very recently here.
He read a text like this in the same way. And you can see how he would get confused about this and assert something that's not ultimately true. But he said, the Son is the image of the invisible God.
[14:25] And then he read this word, the firstborn of all creation. Meaning that He was the first to be birthed as a creature of all the other creatures. And Chris, very helpfully, a few weeks back said that the word firstborn there does not mean the firstborn as a creature, but instead the first in ranking or hierarchy, Jesus Christ the human amongst all the other humans.

Right? And we could go on and on about all that that means. I won't do it tonight. But Arius read those texts. Now, what happens, remember, in often the heresies, is that a person picks a few passages and really emphasizes them and then loses the whole, loses the bigger picture.
And that's exactly what happened in Arius' case. So just very quickly, the theologians that gathered at Nicaea responded very directly to Arius.
And just look at these highlighted lines, and I'll only rattle off a thought or two on them. But they said that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. So we could all say that we're begotten from our mothers.
You're born from your mother, begotten. But when they added that word eternally, they're qualifying Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God, as something completely different from an ordinary human.
[15:43] Know that He is actually also the divine person, the Son of God, who's eternally begotten. So there the word begotten doesn't mean birthed. It's a way of describing a relation between the Father and the Son that is beyond human imagination.

That's what they were doing with that language. It comes, of course, from John chapter 1, John chapter 3. For God so loved the world, He sent His only begotten Son. So they're picking up on that language. Then they said Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God from God.
So that's really just saying, no, He's not a creature. He is God. He's God from God. He's light from light. That's an analogy with the Son, that the rays of the Son that come from the Son are also born or of the Son, S-U-N.
I mean, they're true God from true God. So you can see how much they're reiterating, anti-Arius, that the Son of God was never created. He is divine. And so they say that, very famously there, begotten, not made, never made.
The Son was never made. And then later on, in years after 325, they went back and made sure they said the same thing about the Holy Spirit, that the Holy Spirit was also never made.
[16:50] So they said, the Lord, the giver of life, the Holy Spirit. So you see how they call the Holy Spirit there, the Lord, meaning they're saying that He is Yahweh, the Holy Spirit, the Son, Yahweh, the one God, and that the Spirit with the Father and the Son are to be worshiped.

And so that was one of the big contentions, is that you're not supposed to worship a creature. That is not allowed in the Old Testament very clearly. But in the Gospels, we see the Son and the Spirit. We see the Spirit and the Son in the epistles being worshiped.
And so that was so significant for these early theologians that were trying to understand who our God is. And so they came up with this language in the light of that. All right, the second one of three is, very quickly, is this guy named Sebelius.
And there's been so many versions of what he taught throughout the centuries. I mean, thousands upon thousands of versions, really. But they all track back to Sebelius, and there's this thing called modalism.
Modalism effectively said that there is only one God, and that one God is one person, not three persons.

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[17:59] And so there's the Father. He's God, period, full stop. But in history, the Father shows up as something different.

So the claim there you see in that little box is that there's only one God, but he wears three masks. He's like a stage actor in the Greco-Roman world that comes out on stage putting on different masks.
And the mask is to be the Father or to be the Son or to be the Spirit. But there's no distinction in person between the Father, Son, or Spirit. These are masks. They're just appearances.
They're not real. And so Tertullian was one of the famous guys that responded to this. And Tertullian started using the word Trinity really for the first time in a substantial way.
And it's from this early theologian called Tertullian where we get the term Trinity. And he started using it in response to this claim that Sibelius was making.
[18:56] This is a quote from Tertullian, by the way, there in the middle. He was saying, Sibelius put to flight the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, and crucified the Father. Now, the reason Tertullian said that is because Sibelius and others taught that it was the Father who was crucified on the cross.

And the cost of that is enormous. So let me just give you, between the first two heresies that we've looked at there, a couple of the consequences that if we say things like that.
In the case of Arius, if we say that the Son and the Spirit were created, here's why that matters so much. A number of things, but I'll just give you one. Athanasius said, Only God can save you from your sins.
Very true. The Bible teaches that. And a creature cannot ultimately bring us to God. And so Athanasius was so clear that when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, went to the cross, he went to the cross as both truly human and truly God.
And if he wasn't truly God, his sacrifice as a human was not big enough, powerful enough, representative enough to actually cover the sins of the whole world. You know, a human could die for a human and maybe cover over that one other human.
[20:12] But only the one who is both God and human could represent you as a human, but also have the power to cover the sins of the whole world. That's what Athanasius said.

So he said, If the Son is not God, then you don't have the gospel. You lose the power of forgiveness and the power of the gospel. And the Jehovah's Witnesses continue to teach the Arian doctrine that we looked at just a moment ago, that the Son was created and that the Spirit was created.
And that loses the gospel. In the case of modalism, there's also a massive consequence to the gospel. And that's ultimately a number of things. But one is to say that God died at the cross.
The Father, the one God, died at the cross. Yes. And the Bible teaches something so different than that, that the Son, who is Jesus Christ, died at the cross.
And that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit raised Jesus Christ, the human, back to life again on the third day. But this is saying that somehow the Father came and died at the cross.
[21:14] And there's a sense in which you lose even the possibility of resurrection when you start to say things like this. And there's a million other consequences that come with this claim.

But this is one of the most substantial heresies that have come to us in the early church. All right. So you can see right here, just very quickly, Sibelius was saying things like, well, doesn't Jesus say I and the Father are one?
It's just the same person. Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. But we know when we read those texts in the light of the whole Bible that that's doing something very different. And what it's doing that's so different is Jesus here is talking about the unity of God in his essence, not breaking down all the distinctions of person.
He's saying I and the Father, two persons are one, the one God. And so he's talking about the unity he has with the Father as the one God. But of course, maintaining here that he and the Father are two different persons.
And so contra Sibelius, contra modalism, and it's incredibly important to see how clear I think that the New Testament is on this. And so, again, the same things hold against modalism, that he is the son is eternally begotten of the Father, that they're distinct persons.
[22:26] They're not the same person. And then they added some lines that the son is seated at the right hand of the Father. You see why they added that? Because they're saying that is two distinct persons in the triune Godhead.

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The son is seated at the right hand of the Father. They're not just the same thing. It's not modalism. And then there was a modalist teacher after Sibelius that was going around saying, when the new heavens and the new earth come, the Father will reveal to everyone that there was never a son and a spirit.
It was only just the Father. And so they added this line later to the creed, the kingdom of Jesus will have no end. And that's why they added it because they're saying, no, the Son of God will not just be wrapped back up into the Father and it be revealed as if he's just the Father, never the Son. His kingdom will have no end. And then you can see that some of the same claims are being made there about the Holy Spirit. Okay, lastly, to sum everything up in a helpful way that you could remember it would be this, that the main ways people have gotten the Trinity wrong is to either overemphasize oneness and lose threeness or overemphasize threeness and lose oneness. Right? So in modalism, you emphasize the oneness to the point where you lose the threeness. Right? And here on the flip side, you've got the opposite problem, tritheism, where you so emphasize threeness that you lose oneness.
[23:56] And so famously, one of the teachers in the early church that ended up being condemned for teaching tritheism asked the question, if Peter, James, and John are three men, why are not the Father, Son, and the Spirit three gods?

Now, the mistake here that's so important to know as we draw things to a close tonight is that it is fundamental to the Christian doctrine of God from the time of the early church that when we talk about our God, the one God, Father, Son, and Spirit, that the one God has one mind, one will, one consciousness.
And the way that you arrive at tritheism is to start to think that when we talk about persons in the Godhead, we mean the same thing as persons in this room.
And that's the big mistake that it makes. When we say person in theology, we are not saying the same thing as when I talk about human persons in the room tonight or anywhere else.
It's categorically different. It's totally other. So our God, Father, Son, and Spirit, is the one God who has one mind, will, and consciousness. And so any time you deny that and start to think of God as being like three humans that are all just gathered around a table chatting, you lend and move towards tritheism.
[25:21] And that's exactly what's happened in these heresies. And of course, I've just listed there Joseph Smith, because Mormonism teaches tritheism and really polytheism, because more gods can be added to the Godhead.

But from the very beginning in Mormonism, the Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct gods, not the one God. And so it commits this great heresy of tritheism.
So they're working on passages like John 17, that they may all be one, Christ's prayer before he goes to the cross, just as you, the Father in me, and I in you, that they may be one even as we are one.
I should say, sorry, this is being presented to show the unity of God contra tritheism here in this passage. Okay, so I just said that. One mind, one will, one being. All right, so the Creed answers this very simply when it says we believe in one God, not three gods.
We believe in one Lord, not three Lords. Jesus Christ is of one being with the Father. So the Creed goes out of its way to talk about unity and triunity as much as it can without sacrificing one to the other.
[26:26] All right, well, I thought it might be kind of fun to end on just a reflection on the trouble with analogies. So the trouble with analogies is that as soon as you start using them, you fall into trouble pretty quickly.

And so I'm not coming tonight to say don't ever use analogies, but it's just important to be really aware of their limits. But these are three of, you know, three that sometimes get used.
Water, ice, and steam. That God is like H2O. He's sometimes water, sometimes ice, sometimes steam. But as soon as you can start to say it, it becomes modalism very quickly.
He's sometimes the Father, sometimes the Son, sometimes the Spirit transforming between each of them. But that's very clearly modalism, not a very helpful analogy. The clover, the three-leaf clover, the egg, three parts of an egg.
So partialism tends to split God up in a way that lends itself towards tritheism. So it's not that analogies are always bad. No, not at all.

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[27:30] There's some helpful things that can be said in that territory. But we have to be very careful. It's just important to remember Isaiah 40, 18, to whom then will you liken God? All right.

So lastly, before we come to a time of prayer, I want to take just a few minutes to ask if there's any...

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