

THURSDAY MORNING GROUP

NONE GREATER

2. The Simplicity of God

This week we are going to look at the doctrine of *the simplicity* of God. This is not about how easy or difficult it is for us to understand God. It is a doctrine that seeks to state clearly the fact that God is not composed of parts, and why that fact is important.

“Danger! Danger, Will Robinson!”¹

One of the dangers of talking about the “attributes” of God is that we may start to think of God as a composite of various “parts” –love, holiness, omnipotence, etc... It might be we think of God having all the “parts” in an equal division. Or, and this seems more likely to me, we may believe that some attributes are more important, and form a bigger slice of the “God” pie than other parts. Perhaps even we might see the various “parts” as being in conflict with each other, rather like factions in our political process, each trying to have supremacy over the others.

Another danger of talking about the “attributes” of God is that we may put some distance or distinction between God and His attributes. There is God – and then there are the “attributes” He has. God does not have attributes – rather it is probably better to say that God *is* His attributes. So God does not *have* love; He *is* love. If we start to think of the attributes as possessions of God, then the attributes have a self-existence apart from God. We define the attributes in some way (derived from our experience) apart from God, and then apply this to God.

Question: Is something good because God calls it so, or does God call something good because it is so?

Augustine taught that the reason that the nature of the Triune God is called *simple* is because it cannot lose any attribute it possesses, and because there is no difference between what it *is* and what it *has*. He contrasts this with a cup and the liquid it contains – there is division between what the cup is and what it has. Take the liquid away and the cup is still a cup. With the Triune God it is an entirely different matter. If it were possible to separate the being from the attributes of God, and then to replace those attributes with others, we would not have the same God. God’s attributes are not external (or *accidental* in the old theological language) to God’s essence, as though they add a quality to Him that He might possibly exist without. None of God’s attributes can be added to or subtracted from Him. God *is* His attributes, and there is an absolute, indivisible unity between His essence and His attributes. As Augustine says, “God has no properties but is pure essence... They neither differ from his essence nor do they differ materially from each other.” When, then, we think about the attributes of God it would be useful to think of them all prefixed with the word *wholly*. God is wholly love, wholly holy, wholly good, wholly wise....

Knowing The One Indivisible God

The positive side of the negative statement (that God is without parts) is the affirmation that *God is identical with all that He is in and of Himself*. This can be hard for us to wrap our minds around. It does sound like it is saying that to affirm simplicity is to affirm that all God’s attributes are the same, and we can’t distinguish between any of them. But rather like the light of the sunbeam striking a stained glass window and then being seen in various colours by the viewer on the other side, the undivided essence of God shines in various ways as it is revealed to humanity. The differentiations of the essence of God into attributes is really the way God presents Himself to us in a way that is comprehensible to us. To really understand God’s essence all at once would take an infinity in us. But that is what we do not have. And so, in His kindness, God reveals Himself in various aspects.

¹ My favourite quote from Robot, in the 1960’s TV series, *Lost In Space*.

Another analogy of this (as imperfect as all analogies are!) is our experience of other human beings. We encounter them as single beings, and yet we cannot comprehend them; they are mysteries. We might describe them to others by the various aspects of them that we have encountered – but we know that in doing so we have not really captured them. We hope that in our description of aspects that something of the totality of the person comes through. So it is with God – what is simple unity in Him is presented to the human knower under the form of creaturely multiplicity.

Theologian Herman Bavinck illustrated this this way: “Just as a child cannot picture the worth of a coin of great value but only gains some sense of it when it is counted out in a number of smaller coins, so we too cannot possibly form a picture of the infinite fullness of God’s essence unless it is displayed to us now in one relationship, then in another, and now from one angle, then from another.” As the one, undivided essence of God is displayed in a variety of ways, it comes to us through human words and mighty acts through which we get a reliable-but-partial understanding of that one, undivided essence – a knowledge that is adequate for our being the faithful people of God.

The One Symphony Whose Composer Is Without Composition

God being simple stands right alongside the truths of God being uncreated and independent. He has no need to be “put together” and He has no dependence on another to constitute Him of His parts. He simply *is*. The simplicity of God also stands alongside the truth of His immutability (unchangeability) as we will see next time. Enough to say that if God is “composed” of parts, then this would mean He is divisible. And if divisible then that would mean He is deconstruct-able, or even destructible. The simplicity of God also stands alongside His eternity. If He were composite, then those parts would necessarily precede God. Aquinas said it, “Everything composite is subsequent to its components and dependent on them.”

What do we make of the doctrine of simplicity if God is Triune? Are we saying God has “parts” when we say He is Triune – Father, Son and Holy Spirit? And do we not distinguish between them? Does the Trinity rule out simplicity, or simplicity rule out the Trinity? The basic Islamic criticism of Christianity is that the doctrine of the Trinity is actually tri-theism, denying the truth of there being one God.

Actually, the doctrine of simplicity has been the *solution* of the question about how the Trinity of God is not tri-theism. Firstly, the doctrine of the Trinity is not about “parts” of the Godhead but about Persons. The divinity is not portioned out between the three (1/3 each) nor could you “add up” the persons to make the totality of the essence of God. Each person of the Godhead shares wholly in the totality of the essence of Godhead, and each Person wholly shares every attribute. There never has been and there is no possibility where the existence of One has been separate from the existence of the Others. (Hence, e.g., the language in the Creed of “the eternally begotten Son.”) Each Person of the Godhead being *fully, wholly* God, not *partially* God, means that God remains undivided in His essence. As one theologian, Francis Turretin, summarised it: “Simplicity in respect to essence, but Trinity in respect to persons.”

This means that all the works of God belong to the Triune God as a whole. We cannot apportion particular aspects of God’s work to particular persons of the Godhead. (e.g. the modern substitute for “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” of “Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier” is inadequate at best, for it implies (at the least) that these works each belong to one Person of the Godhead. No – all that they do, they do so inseparably from one another. To think otherwise may end up with us thinking of the Persons of the Godhead being at loggerheads with one another. While One may take a specific part in the works, the Three are all working together in that work. There is no division of the works of God – the Three work inseparably in all their works. The “appropriations” of particular parts of the works by One or Another reflects the distinctions between the Person, but not a division of the essence of God. There is only one will in the Godhead. And this is a doctrine of very great comfort!