

TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY – THE HISTORY [2]

A Christian understanding of God is unique, distinct, and unlike any other concept of God. It is different from the Jewish understanding of Jehovah, and unlike the Islamic understanding of Allah,

By definition, theology is simply “the study of God” whereby we arrive at “an understanding of God.” Theology, proper, is limited to the consideration of God Himself or as we could also put it, **“Who are you, God?”**

Theology, in general, includes all subjects pertaining to God – His historical actions, His objectives, His projected future actions, etc. The big question broadens and now becomes, **“Who are you God and just what do you do?”**

Sooner or later all persons must engage in some form of theological consideration. As we seek to explain reality, the world around us, and ourselves, man is forced to confront some understanding of God, even if it is a concept of God that he subsequently rejects and repudiates. Even the atheist has some concept of the God that he denies.

The development of some understanding of God is a necessary starting-point before we can make any sense of the creation in which we find ourselves. That is in itself can be a tall order for the Bible tells us in John 1:18,

“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”

How can you possibly describe a person or thing that no man has seen? The second part of the verse gives some hope, but at best, is referring to character qualities, rather than appearance. Other verses such as Romans 1:20,

For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen, being understood from what is made, so that men are without excuse.

His power and greatness are certainly made clear but tells us little about the actual appearance of God.

Our understanding of God is not a result of independent human reasoning, having set out to find God and figure Him out. Our knowledge of God comes only by means of, and must be derived out of, His own Self-revelation. We must allow God to determine our understanding of Himself, and that by His own Self-revelation.

Human understanding of God is further limited by the finite faculties that man has been created with. Isaiah 55:8-9,

‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’

Our knowledge of God cannot be exhaustive, for the finite is attempting to understand the Infinite who has revealed Himself. If we had an infinite and completely comprehensive understanding of God, we, too, would be God, having omniscience. God ever remains, somewhat of an inexplicable “mystery”, to the finite understanding of man.

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For man the starting point is appearance. The better they look the better they will be. God however, goes beyond the paint work, to see what really makes a person tick.

Truly, God does not see what man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD sees the heart." 1 Samuel 16:7 KJV

The outward appearance can be subject to temporary cosmetic change but only the heart can know lasting spiritual change.

In revealing himself, God is following this same pattern by placing more importance on his heart than his outward appearance. Today our understanding of the appearance of God has grown little from the understanding of the early church fathers, but true to his word, God has practised what he preached by revealing his heart to us through his good works. We are still left pondering on his appearance and whilst we know that God will ultimately achieve, his purposes to fulfil every promise made to us, we are still very much in the dark as to how and when he will do it..

All faith in God must be built on some form of infrastructure or safe anchor points, commonly referred to as presuppositions. When considering the person of God we can stand with certainty on only two premises as a format for our thinking. They are:

1 Who God is, only God is and.

2 God does what He does, because He is who He is.

That sounds very obscure, but whenever we go beyond these boundaries, our understanding is open to challenge. Even the doctrine of the trinity falls into this category. We accept, without reservation, that it appears to be best interpretation of the word and revelation of God without having precise proof of it.

Our first safe premise is: **“Who God is, only God is.”** Psalm 14:1,

The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is none who does good.

There is God’s own definition of a fool.

It follows, that as creator of everything, he can never have a superior nor an equal. We are encouraged to become more like him without having the capacity to be exactly like him. No matter how good we become, an enormous gap will continue to exist, between the creator and his creation.

Our second safe anchor is, **“God does what he does because He is who He is.”**

Why? Because he is the only one capable of doing so. All others’ regardless of position or ability are subject to restrictions and limitations of some description. Not so with God, he created it all, answers to know one and is perfectly free to do as he will. Matthew 19:26,

“With God all things are possible.”

This unlimited power leads us to ask, how will this power be used? Or put more bluntly, is God a “goodie” or a “baddy”. It is vital that we know. Lack of this essential knowledge has led many to believe that he is both, a hanging type judge in the Old Testament who turned into a God of love in the New. However, when one looks back from the New Testament it is

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revealed that he has been a God of love from the outset. His plans for the good of those he created have never changed.

In so many ways, we tried to see God through human eyes, only to receive a grossly distorted picture. Where the Bible says things like God is love, or is good, or is the way, the truth and the life etc. we were inclined to overlook that little word “is” and assumed that he could be that way whenever he chose to be. But God has set himself to be that way always, without change or inconsistency or any shade of variance. It is his unchangeable nature at the heart and core of his being. Not something he chooses to be at one time or another.

Standing on these premises let us resume our journey of the history of the church.

Last time we traced church history, from the apostles to the apostolic fathers and the early church fathers that followed, up to the adoption of the Nicene Creed in AD 325.

The primary purpose of that convention was to determine the divinity of Jesus. Was he, or was he not, fully God? After along and careful study of all relevant scriptures, often leading to heated debate, the decision by 313 votes to 5, overwhelming affirmed that he was. Yet, many of the bishops who voted in the affirmative were far from happy with the document itself, because it was overly influenced by the authority and charisma of Constantine himself and secondly by the bias of Greek or Eastern church philosophy towards material aspects.

In all, an uneasy peace had been achieved leaving a climate in which Arian groups continued to spring up and continue to do so, even till this very day, although against the overwhelming evidence that Jesus is both fully God and fully man.

An ecumenical council was a conference of ecclesiastical dignitaries and theological experts convened to discuss and settle matters of Church doctrine and practice. The word "ecumenical" is derived from a Greek word which literally means "the inhabited world" a reference to the Roman Empire, that later was extended to apply to the world in general. From that, we see the similarity between the terms ecumenical and catholic which is widely understood as universal. The early church was universal, consistent with the oneness of the Trinity.

As we shall see the splits and schisms that were to follow are to be healed in the coming restoration of all things. Mathew 12:25,

“Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.”

As the church, the forerunner to the Kingdom of God, continues to crumble and to the human eye appears destined for extinction, the words of Matthew 16:18 give great hope and comfort,

“On this rock[Peter] I will build my church, and the gates of hades will not overcome it.”

What wonderful times lie ahead when all branches of the church are consistent in their teaching and current confusion has become a thing of the past.

In all here have been 21 official catholic church councils starting with Nicaea in 325 AD and ending with the discussion called by Pope John in 1962 in his attempt to heal the wounds, that for centuries, have divided the church. The first seven of these assemblies are remembered as ecumenical councils. Those to come were to be influenced by or to follow the

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Great Schism of 1054 AD when the Eastern Church centred in Constantinople broke away from Western Church centred in Rome. But more on that later.

In a stricter sense only the first two were truly ecumenical. Some of the other seven fell short of being universal though geographical restriction or by the views of those, otherwise eligible to attend. It is interesting to note that all early assemblies were initiated by the Roman Emperor of the time, rather than by the heads of the church. The church was seen as the only glue that could hold a crumbling empire together. Of necessity, a united empire was dependent upon a united church. So whenever a threat of division loomed in the church, a ecumenical council was called to address the problem.

Although the assemblies were called for earthly selfish reasons, the emperors unwittingly played right into the hands of God who welcomed the opportunity for basic spiritual awareness to spread to the far ends of the empire. State backing was to give the church great influence and power that has not since been equaled. However as power grew, so too did corruption.

So what were the issues discussed at these early councils? The issues that threatened to cause divisions within the church. Not surprisingly the question that Saul asked on the road to Damascus was at its heart and core. Acts 9:5,

“Who are you, Lord?”

Although well versed in scripture and the law, Saul appears not to have understood much, if anything, about Christ: yet he *‘breathed threats and murder’* against the unknown, through persecuting Christ’s followers. Little has changed, and even today, we find that those who know least about Christ are strongest in the condemnation of him.

“Who are you God and what are your purposes?” remains a much asked question.

Through the centuries men have set about unravelling the mystery through human intellect. All have been without success. And so it was in the early church, the thoughts and philosophies of the thinkers of the day were threatening division as the believers were forming into camps in support of differing philosophies. .

However, despite the extreme and eccentric views of some of the deepest thinkers, the truth as revealed by God prevailed. Last time we saw how Arius presented a convincing case against the divine nature of Jesus but God held the trump card of truth in the form of a young, little known, yet spirit filled, Athanasius who tore the theory of Arius to shreds as evidenced by the vote of 313 votes to 5.

Despite this overwhelming vote, many of the bishops were still, far from satisfied, with both the wording of the resultant creed and the undue influence of Emperor, Constantine whose real objective was self-interest. Despite its crushing loss, Arianism had not been laid to rest and continued to simmer only to be fanned into life again when Constantine completely changed sides a few short years later. Consequently, there was need to again put the issue to vote and again the truth prevailed. By this time, Athanasius had been elevated in rank and held in high esteem.

Overall, opposition to truth, as revealed by God was far from over. In succession the issues moved from the claims that Jesus was not fully God to the opposite view that he was never fully man. Again, the finding was that he was both fully God and fully man. The opposition were to take it a step further. By reasoning that if Jesus had a dual personality he must of

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necessity have two conflicting wills. Would not the will of God over-ride the will of the human Jesus?

And so it went on. The answer to one issue often led to the next. Once the truth of the nature of Jesus was established, the focus turned to the existence of the Holy Spirit. Did he exist prior to creation or was he a created being? If so, he could not be the equal of the Father and Jesus. A thorough examination of the scriptures led to the acceptance that the Holy Spirit did in fact exist prior to the creation.

Little by little the understanding of “Who are you Lord” was revealed and adopted by the church. Although some of these early council findings have, from time to time, been challenged none have ever been overturned. Many centuries later our understanding, although somewhat refined, is basically the same as that of those faithful early church fathers who met at Chalcedon in 451 AD

Over the centuries, the philosophies and theories of men have come and gone in their droves. One by one, they have been tried, tested and abandoned for what they are, the mere thoughts of man. In the meantime thanks to the Holy Spirit, who came to lead us into all truth and wisdom, our God knowledge is slowly but surely growing for those with the interest and patience to listen.

Just as Jesus came to reveal the thoughts and ways of the Father, the Holy Spirit came to reveal Jesus. From time to time, fresh insight is given to faithful servants charged with the responsibility to pass it on to the rest of the flock. However, before passing it on, the teacher needs to diligently test all new revelation against the written word. Provided that it is harmony with the book, new revelation should be embraced as being from God and passed on to others called to listen. Otherwise, it should be recognised for what it is, and discarded as heresy. There is still so much more to know about God and his ways, but in due season all will be revealed. So let us wait in patience for the truth and resist the urge to engage in wild speculation.

We live in a world where the wisdom of the past is constantly being abandoned in favour of the new, so why have the findings of the early ecumenical councils stood the test of time? The answer is probably found in Philippians 1:9-11, Addressing the entire church together with all overseers and deacons Paul said, **And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness [a reference to the Holy Spirit] that come through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God**

Here Paul is setting up what we now know as a “think tank”, where all the best brains are assembled, to discuss and consider in minute detail, a current issue of major importance. Even in our secular world such gatherings have produced outstanding results. Add the guidance of the Holy Spirit and even better outcomes will follow.

The vibrancy and enthusiasm of that early church ensured that the right questions were the first to be considered. Firstly, **Who are you, Lord?** And secondly, **What are you doing, Lord?** Of necessity, the questions must always be asked in that order. If the person is not worthy, the second question becomes superfluous.

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By the time of the Council of Chalcedon in 459 AD the first had been answered as fully as the church needed to know, “**Who God is only God is**” and left a thirst for the answer to the second, “**God does what he does, because He is who he is**” Since that time, little has been added to the first answer but in regard to the second there have been continuing revelations to magnify the greatness of God.

With the major theology issues being addressed by the early councils, the impact of subsequent councils diminished, as the topics for discussion became more secular with the focus more on survival rather than to build the church that God desires. For that reason as we proceed down through the ages, we will restrict our focus to events that have turned back an increasingly decadent church towards the truths that they once practised.

The Medieval Age

The formative age of the early church fathers gave way to what is known as the middle or medieval age. This era began about 476 AD and continued until 1500 AD. Historians break the Middle Ages down into three separate periods, early middle age, high middle age and late middle age but it will be precise enough for us to consider it as a single age.

Seen in retrospect, the decline of the Roman empire occurred over a period of centuries culminating on September 4th 476 AD when Romulus Augustus, the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire was deposed by a Germanic chieftain, but the influence of the church that it fostered, was to continue.

However, the halcyon days of the early church, when it sought to do the will of God were over as it increasingly became more involved with politics, wars, corruption and scandal. The highest offices in the church were being bought and sold and the practice of selling indulgences, or special favours, became common place.

In the meantime its religion moved from the worship of God to the worship of man by such decisions to venerate the mother of Christ in a very special non Biblical way and to claim that the authority of the pope to be infallible. In life, Mary was the very essence of humility and obedience and would be shocked if aware of her current status.

Unfortunately the church had forgotten the lesson of the Old Testament, that as the chosen people move away from their God, they bring trouble and misery upon themselves. Trouble was brewing within the East and West divisions of the church and finally came to the boil in 1054 AD when each decided to split and go their separate ways.

The Great Schism, which lead to the formation of the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches, can be attributed to several factors which festered over a considerable period of time rather than to any single event. For long, there had been cultural and language barriers and differing views on where the seat of power should be. In addition there was a simmering theological issue on the procession of the Holy Spirit. Was he sent by the Father, or by the Father and the Son? On such issues, neither side was prepared to give ground, so the final split had been merely a matter of time.

Overall, the medieval age could be best described, culturally and spiritually, as an age of stagnation, but things were about to change. In the words of Banjo Paterson there was about to be *movement at the station*.

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The Renaissance

The late Middle Age beginning with the 14th century coincided with a secular period remembered as the renaissance. The word itself can be defined as re-birth or to be born again. Looking back, it can be seen as the spring of civilisation emerging from the dreary winter of the Middle Ages.

Through it, practically every aspect of civilisation had an awakening. The arts took on fresh life. Great life altering inventions, like the printing press, were to emerge and explorers were about to cross new boundaries. Like all change, some of it was to be good and some not so good.

The church and its religion were not to be spared. Suddenly there was an awareness that all was not well with the church and what it stood for. Earlier events within Europe such as the Black Death, had eroded people's faith in the Catholic Church and the Papacy that governed it. This, as well as other factors like the mid 15th century invention of the printing press, contributed to the creation of Protestantism.

The Reformation

The Protestant Reformation was the 16th-century schism within Western Christianity initiated by Martin Luther, John Calvin and other early Protestants. It was sparked by the posting of Luther's ninety five theses on a church door at Wittenberg in 1517. The efforts of the self-described "reformers", who objected to, or protested against the doctrines, rituals, and ecclesiastical structure of the Roman Catholic Church led to the creation of new national Protestant churches.

An inspired Luther went back to the very roots of Christianity, to the faith once delivered and practised by the apostolic church in an attempt to right the wrongs of a decadent church. He also added to the store of theological knowledge through the framing of his five solas.

The Five solas are five Latin phrases that emerged during the Protestant Reformation and summarize the Reformer's basic theological beliefs. The Latin word *sola* means "alone" or "only" in English. So we refer to them as,

By scripture alone

By faith alone A point that: Luther stressed to be of paramount importance

By grace alone

Through Christ alone and

Glory to God alone

After the Reformation, an assortment of Protestant churches rose in contrast with Rome, allowing Christians a large number of choices which continue to proliferate to this day. In essence, all main stream orthodox churches frame their Statement on Beliefs around the findings of those early ecumenical councils. In short, they profess the doctrine of the Trinity even if they neglect to preach or practice it. This point is the hallmark that distinguishes an orthodox church from a cult.

Time is getting short so we will conclude by making a brief stopover at the Age of Enlightenment, before a short visit to the life and times of Karl Barth, to connect the reformation with the modern era

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The Age of Enlightenment.

'The Enlightenment' has been given many differing definitions but it was, at its broadest, a philosophical movement of the eighteenth century which stressed human reasoning over blind faith or obedience and was thus in contrast with much of the religious and political order of the day, while also encouraging 'scientific' thinking.

The Enlightenment is often cited as the start of the modern era, kick started by the renaissance. It spurred growth with Newton's scientific discoveries and gathered pace through the industrial revolutions that followed shortly after. With it, the source of knowledge and the solution of all the world's problems, shifted from religion to science.

At first it was thought the two were diametrically opposed and that science would emerge as the clear winner. But that was not to be the case. Whilst, it did provide many answers, science fell short of being the complete package. For example, as the giant telescopes looked further into outer space, they revealed an infinitely greater universe but were at a loss to explain, the 'whys' and 'wherefores' of it all

Maybe, that religion was not yet dead. As the scientists discovered a much larger universe that they could not explain, a much larger God, than they had ever imagined, was being revealed to those believing in creation. Previously, they had been running from a seemingly much better equipped and more powerful enemy, now they were encouraged to stand and fight. Further thinking developed, that the two could even complement each other, under the hand of the one who created all things,.

Although science held the superior numbers the battle was far from won. Without doubt the Enlightenment put a damper on the encouragement offered by the awakening of the reformation but important ground work had been well laid.

During the period dominated by Hitler, Karl Barth, considered by many to be the most significant theologian of the 20th century emerged to take over from where Luther, Calvin, Knox and co had left off. He in turn, was followed by many others, including the Torrance brothers and the gifted theologians that have been featured in the You're Included series of interviews. Together they have contributed much to our current understanding.

It has become clear to them that the reformation approach, whilst on the right track, was far too formal, rigid and religious to the one, that God desired. God has in mind that believers worship and praise their God from the base of a strong, friendly, family type relationship that invites them to actively participate in his awesome plans for the restoration of all things.

It has been a long, slow pilgrimage, with many twist and turns along the way, but the end looms into sight. Once we reach that end, it will be the time for all the people who have ever existed to be, shown his ways.