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# KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

## III. KNOWLEDGE OF GOD: WHETHER GOD CAN BE KNOWN

- A. GOD'S INCOMPREHENSIBILITY
- B. SPECULATIVE VS. REVELATIONAL APPROACHES
- C. REVELATIONAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD
- D. HUMAN CAPACITY TO KNOW THE REVELATION OF GOD
- E. KNOWLEDGE ABOUT GOD VS. KNOWING GOD

We will pretend that we gone through the section of the Knowledge of God as in many ways it's a repeat of the section on revelation that we've already gone through, just from a different angle. We'll leave the outline in for future revisions and move through to the Trinity. We could spend a long time on the Trinity and even longer on attributes. In order to try and get through all the planned theology, this is probably a good section to skip.

## IV. TRINITY IN UNITY

This is one of the most important areas for Christian people to be clear on. I am just impressed more and more as I grow in my own theological understanding over the years how important the doctrine of the Trinity is.

There are several areas in the Trinity today being discussed. There is a tendency to talk about the Trinity primarily in terms of Trinitarian relationships with us. We are very relational, postmodernism-like relationships, community and that sort of thing, but there's a tendency not to talk about God in himself apart from creation and of course if you don't understand that, you really skew who God is in relation to creation. If all you think about who God is in relation to creation, you don't understand God correctly, a God who is self-existent, self-sufficient. Also, I believe that most Christian people just don't understand how pivotal, central, necessary the doctrine of the Trinity is to our theological understanding broadly and our experience as Christian people.

### A. SCRIPTURAL MONOTHEISM

The reason to start here is because this is where the church started. The early church in developing its doctrine of the Trinity inherited from Judaism what it never did dispute. One of the greatest marvels of theological development in the early centuries was that there was never any serious proposal put on the table; we thought there was one God, but in fact we've got two or three as the Holy Spirit became more understood as well as being divine. Christian theologians accepted what Jewish theologians and the Jewish faith had affirmed and that is there is one God. This was never challenged, never questioned. It was never seriously considered to be set aside. Why is this? Because the Bible in both Testaments is clear; there is one God, not many gods, one God.

These are some of the classic statements of this:

■ Dt 6:4 "Hear, O Israel! The Yahweh is our God, the Yahweh is one!

Here is this assertion of the unity of the God of Israel in the midst of a culture that recognized many gods, many different deities, but in fact there is one deity who is LORD of heaven and earth.

Gn 1:1 In the beginning God created

Created how much?

Gn 1:1 ... the heavens and the earth.

Everything. What is the significance of that? Genesis 1 is fundamentally a theological polemic against polytheism. It's not fundamentally a scientific statement of creation. It is fundamentally a theological polemic against polytheism. In polytheism, you hold that there are a number of gods who have regional jurisdiction, who are over certain portions, maybe geographical areas; one god in this land another god in this land. These gods then are regional despots, territorial despots but here you have the statement of Israel that says God created the heavens and the earth. That means there is one God over all. To create it is to own it, and to own it is to rule it. Genesis 1:1 is a statement against all the polytheistic religions surrounding Israel. There is one God over all.

One episode in Scripture where this understanding makes all the difference in how you read the story is the account of Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal. Elijah confronted them, and they had this challenge, this duel of deities; Baal verses Yahweh. Where did it take place? Mount Carmel. What is the significance of that? Mount Carmel is Baal's territory according to Baal worshipers. If the same confrontation had taken place in Jerusalem, they would have said, of course, Jerusalem is Yahweh's territory. Of course, he won the battle; of course he won the duel; of course he responded and Baal didn't. That is where Yahweh reigns, in Jerusalem. But it wasn't in Jerusalem; it was at Mount Carmel. The point was "Baal is not what you think he is. He is not god here either, Yahweh is God over all." It demonstrates that forcefully.

The Ten Commandments make this clear from the very beginning.

Dt 5:9 You shall not worship and serve no other than the Lord your God

Dt 5:11 You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain

Isaiah 45:5-7

Is 45:5 "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no God.

Is 45:5 ... I will gird you, though you have not known me;

Actually this is talking about Cyrus. I will gird you, Cyrus, though you don't even know me. You are going to be my instrument Cyrus. You don't have a clue that I am doing this, but I am.

Is 45:5 ... I will gird you, though you have not known me; Is 45:6 That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other.

Do you get the point? It is so clear that God wants to go on record saying, I alone am God. What he says after that we will come back to when we talk about divine sovereignty. In the context of laying out "I am God, no one else," he then goes on to say:

Is 45:7 The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these.

Is 46:9 Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me,

We might even have a category in relation to God called God's Incomparability. He is not comparable, "no one like me." The Incomparability of God would be a good category to have in our minds in terms of how God seeks to identify himself. Over and over again he says, there is no one like me. He stands alone; he is one of a kind. It is also related to holiness because to be holy is to be different, to be set apart, one of a kind, unique.

Dt 4:35 To you it was shown that you might know that the Lord, he is God; there is no other besides him.

So we have this clear testimony in the Old Testament and Jews held it. It is a remarkable thing that both Old Testament Judaism and New Testament Christianity were both monotheistic, because in both cases polytheism surrounded them. One of the ways of accounting for the Bible that liberals like to propose is that they are cultural products. They come about as people reflect on their religious experience, and that is what the Bible is. It is an amazing thing that polytheistic cultures surround Israel, and she is uniquely monotheistic. Then you come to the New Testament. In Acts 17 Paul observes the city full of idols. They prided themselves in knowing about every god. They are polytheistic. Everywhere around them in the Greco-Roman world is polytheism, and Christians affirm there is one God. Something has to account for the tenacity of a people to hang on to this belief when all of the cultural pressure is there weighing in on them, and they won't budge. It doesn't sound to me as a likely outcome if this religion is a cultural byproduct. They have revelation from God that led them to believe this and affirm it despite the fact that there were these pressures put upon them.

The New Testament affirms there is one God. The data in the New Testament gets more complicated. There is no question about it; it gets more complicated. Not that there aren't some passages in the Old Testament that are complicated also, but you never saw a hint of something like the doctrine of the Trinity in the Old Testament. That is, Old Testament Israel, with Judaism coming up with it. It is not until Jesus comes that now there is good reason to start rethinking what we mean when we say there is one God. But we don't drop the affirmation that there is one God.

1 Cor 8:6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things

Jn 17:3 This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God,

1 Tm 2:5 For there is one God,

Ro 3:30 since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

Jas 2:19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

## B. SCRIPTURAL TRINITARIANISM

The New Testament is as clear as the Old Testament: there is one God, not many Gods. But the data is complicated because some of the very affirmations that state that there is one God leads you to wonder what this means exactly.

Think about two of the verses that I read to you that I purposely only gave you part of the verse. Think of the rest of the verse.

Jn 17:3 This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Think about this. This is eternal life. Who can give eternal life? Who is capable of giving eternal life to people? Answer: God. So, this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. What does that make it sound like in terms of the one God and Jesus Christ? Doesn't it sound as though they are parallel in some sense? It sounds like Christ is also the bestower of eternal life. Doesn't it sound as though you are talking about Jesus Christ in a way that is appropriate only to speak about God. Furthermore, you have done this in a sentence in which you have affirmed one God. "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ." How does this make sense: "only true God, and." Shouldn't you have a period at the end of "only true God"? Don't you stop when you say "only true God"? No, it doesn't stop. That is the point; it carries forward. So we are to think at one and the same time this: In some sense deity must be true of Jesus, and yet Jesus must be distinct from God in something. How do we do this?

1 Cor 8:6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through him.

Who can create? God. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. But according to the New Testament, who creates the heavens and the earth? Jesus.

Jn 1:3 All things came into being through him, and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being.

Col 1:16 For by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him.

Heb 1:3 And he is the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his nature, and upholds all things by the word of his power. When he had made purification of sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high,

1 Cor 8:6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through him.

Jesus creates. But only God can create. What do we do with a passage that says, "There is only one God the Father of whom all things," and, "one Lord Jesus Christ by whom are all things"? Somehow it must be the case that the one God is true of Jesus and yet Jesus is distinct from God the Father, one God the Father of whom are all things. Somehow there must be identity and distinction at one and the same time.

Think about another passage, "In the beginning was the Word" (Jn 1:1). What does that bring to mind? "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). John purposely uses the phrase "In the beginning" to cause our ears to hear Genesis 1. He wants us to make the link between Genesis 1 and what he is saying here.

Jn 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Jn 1:2 He was in the beginning with God. Jn 1:3 All things came into being through him...

You hear the creation here. What does God do in Genesis 1? Create. In John 1:3, he creates. So clearly this is meant to associate the eternal Word with the God who created the heavens and earth.

Jn 1:1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.

There is a distinction. He was "with" God. You have God and you have Word; "the Word was with God". In the next phrase he says, "and the Word was God". Identity. You have identity and distinction. How do you make sense of this, that there is both identity and distinction? God is one, but God is somehow two it appears. If the Word is God then you are talking about just the Word as God, so our monotheism is just a Christomonotheism. But remember the previous phrase, "the Word was with God." So it can't be a Christomonotheism. It is not true that the only deity is Jesus. The Word was with God. So, how do you put this together?

## 1. SCRIPTURAL AFFIRMATIONS OF THE TRIUNE GOD

The early church struggled, and they began noticing a number of affirmations of the Triune God in Scripture that they had to account for. These are a couple of the most notable:

'Mt 28:19 The Great Commission passage that Jesus gives to his disciples.'

Mt 28:18 ... All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Mt 28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name ***in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,***

The word for "name" is singular ("onoma"), meaning a name. That is an amazing thing. Not in the "names" plural but in the "name", (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Matt 28:20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you;

Here you have this incredible statement in which Jesus is speaking flagrant blasphemy by putting himself and the Holy Spirit in the same name of the Father, who nobody disputes is God. Jesus doesn't dispute the Father as God; nobody disputes that the Father as God. That is settled. It is utter blasphemy if it is not true that Son and Spirit are deity and yet one name. There you have it again, identity one name, "onoma". There is distinction and identity between the Father, Son, and Spirit all the way through.

By the way, these passages are sometimes called "Triadic statements." This is a better term than what I sometimes hear them as being referred to as "Trinitarian." These are "Triadic" passages because they have all three represented clearly in a context of deity; there is no question about that. "Trinitarian," in my judgment, would imply that the actual doctrine of the Trinity is presented in this passage. I don't think any passage presents the doctrine of the Trinity; if it did we wouldn't have had four centuries working on this crazy thing, working it out. They would have opened up their Bibles and read it, and said, okay that is it. But triadic passages don't explain it; that is what makes it so difficult.

### **'2 Corinthians 13:14'**

This is the last verse in the book. It is a benediction.

2 Co 13:14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

So now, "may God be with you" comes in the form of Father, Son, Holy Spirit. This is the benediction saying, "God be with you." Incredible statement. If Jesus and the Holy Spirit aren't viewed as God, then this is all together inappropriate.

### **'Matthew 3:13-17'**

Another Trinitarian passages that has been noted is the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:13-17. You have the voice from heaven from the Father, the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove, and Jesus being baptized in the water; all three are present. That isn't as clear of an indication of the deity of the three as the previous two examples. Both the Great Commission and the benediction to Second Corinthians are contexts in which deity is being affirmed, and that is clear. But the baptism is an important passage where you see the three.

### **'Ephesians '**

Here, Paul is clearly thinking in Trinitarian ways. In fact, in Ephesians you find this quite a bit. Even in the first chapter: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ"(Eph 1:3). The emphasis is on the Father, but then follow it through in Ephesians 1:3-14, and repeatedly it says, "in Christ." It ends with saying we have been given the Spirit as a pledge of our inheritance, the guarantee for us. So clearly you have Father, Son and Spirit in Ephesians 1.

Eph 4:4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;  
Eph 4:5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, Eph 4:6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

Here you have this statement as our identity as God's people. Who are we? We are one in Spirit, Son and Father. But one. Here you have again this sense of one, of identity. But Spirit, Son, Father in order in verses 4, 5, and 6, you have distinction. He is not using different names for the same thing when he says Spirit, Son, Father. Yet in another sense he is referring to one reality for identity and distinction.

**'Deity of Christ'**

After Jesus had ascended and gone back to the Father, the early church really struggled with questions like this. A lot of attention began to be focused on passages which indicated the deity of either Christ or the Holy Spirit. They weren't in that order. Most of the attention for the second, third and first part of the fourth century was on the deity of the Son, and once the Council of Nicea occurred in 325, then the great emphasis was placed on the deity of the Holy Spirit. The church began looking at these discrete statements and passages regarding the Son and then the Spirit. For example, in *John 8:58* Jesus said, "before Abraham was, I am." This is just an astonishing thing. Is Jesus merely meaning by this that before Abraham existed, he existed, which was how many years earlier roughly? Round figures 2,000 B.C. So here is Jesus saying before Abraham existed 2,000 years ago, I was already born. If that is what he was saying, the Pharisees would have laughed. But they took it seriously. They picked up stones to stone him for blasphemy. They understood what he meant, namely before Abraham was I AM ("ego eimi"). He identified himself with Yahweh of the Old Testament. I am the eternal God; that is what he was saying. A similar thing happened in *John 10:30* when he says, "I and the Father are one," and they take up stones to stone him. One in purpose, one in goal, one in desire is not blasphemy. One in nature, one in essence is.

**'Deity of the Holy Spirit'**

Likewise, with the deity of the Holy Spirit, eventually they came to these passages as well.

In Acts 5 where Peter says to Ananias who has lied to him, "You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:4). In his previous statement, he says, "Why have you lied to the Holy Spirit?" (Acts 5:3). He equates lying to the Holy Spirit with lying to God.

In 1 Corinthians 3:16 we are referred to as the temple of the Holy Spirit. What is the temple in the Old Testament? It is the residence of God where his shekinah glory is manifest. Here it is the Spirit who is identified as God residing within us.

Also, in 2 Corinthians 3:16-18 the Holy Spirit is referred to as the Lord.

**2. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY****A. CHRISTOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

The Doctrine of the Trinity arose out of the early church's grappling with the nature of Jesus Christ. This is what gave rise to it. Who is Jesus? This was the dominate question of the late first, second and third century, until the Council of Nicea. Actually, that question dropped once we decided at the Council of Nicea that Jesus is one with the Father, one nature with the Father. The question continues, what about his human nature and divine nature? So, it is really not until Chalcedon in 451 that there is, as it were, a clear and holistic understanding of Christ in relation to the Father, the Spirit and his human and divine nature. This was the burning issue theologically for the early church.

There was never was a proposal on the table, taken seriously to go the direction of two Gods. We have misunderstood it before; we thought there was one God, but now we see there is the Father, and there is the Son. There are two Gods. This never happened. Instead the church took the harder course. The Doctrine of the Trinity is tough. It is really a difficult doctrine. The fact that it has been upheld, defended, and reaffirmed generation after

generation through the history of the church is a testimony to the fact that the Bible makes it so clear that there is something like one God, but as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### *B. MONARCHIAN HERESIES*

It is interesting because the early proposals to understand Jesus were driven by their desire to maintain monotheism. They feared that affirming the deity of Christ as equal to the Father would compromise it and there is no way you could avoid compromising or destroying monotheism. So there arose what are called Monarchian Heresies. The reign of the one God was incontestable, supreme, and inviolable must be maintained. Therefore we have to do something else with Jesus. We revere him, we honor him, we look to him as our hope, but we have to do something else with Jesus so that we can maintain the rulership of the one God distinct from Jesus. Two of these in particular that developed were prominent in the early church.

#### **1) Dynamistic Monarchianism / Subordinationism - Arius**

The main proponent of this view was Arius. Arius died in 336. He was active in teaching and advocating for his view in the late third and early fourth centuries. Arius proposed that there is one God who is ruler of all and he has created a supreme being, not God, but one who is very much like God. One who is his Son, the Word, who became flesh, Jesus of Nazareth. Arius believed that Jesus was the first created being. That he was the agent God used to create the heavens and the earth. That he had great power, and dominion. He believed that Jesus, that is, the Word who became flesh, was the one who died for our sins. He held all of these things, but he did so holding that Jesus was a created being. Greatly exalted but nonetheless created. He had this notion of dynamism, that the power of God worked in Jesus mightily. It is not that Jesus was omnipotent, but rather he had God's power at work in him. It is called Subordinationism because in nature Christ is subordinate to the nature of the Father. The Father is eternal; the Son is not. The Father is infinite; the Son is not. In that sense he is subordinate to the Father.

#### **2) Modalistic Monarchianism / Modalism - Sabellius**

The main proponent of this view was Sabellius. The Sabellian view, on the surface, seemed to have a lot of merit because it tried to take account of identity and distinction. The Modalist view proposes that there is one God, and the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. What Sabellius meant by it is there is one God who manifest himself first as Father, second as Son and third as Spirit. If you look at redemptive history we have modes of the divine essence manifest at various points in history. God is Father in the Old Testament period, and then when the incarnation takes place the one God becomes the God/man in Christ. Then Christ ascends back to heaven, and then you have the Holy Spirit coming, so that is the mode of God coming in the Holy Spirit.

The first view I talked about, the Subordinationist or the Arian view took a church council at Nicea to refute. It didn't take a council with the Sabellian view. All it took was normal Christian people reading their Bible who concluded that it was very innovative and very creative, but it just can't be. It didn't require a church council to refute it. It was refuted by the Christian community. What would they have looked at of the Sabellian view to realize it just can't be? Jesus at the right hand of the Father. There is the New Testament teaching. Jesus Himself said that he was going to go back to the Father; he prays to the Father. What do you do with the Baptism? You have a voice from heaven and the Holy Spirit as a dove; at least this is the way it is recorded for us in Scripture; then Christ is there. Christ intercedes for us to the Father. He's at the right hand of the Father. So you have Father, Son and Holy Spirit now. Early Christians rejected Modalism over time; it was just shown to be unacceptable as a view.

The desire for both of these is to maintain monotheism.