

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Theology Proper: God, Session 3, Historical Soundings on the Trinity, Biblical and 2nd Century Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Peterson, Theology Proper: God, Session 3, Historical Soundings on the Trinity, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This theological lecture by Dr. Robert A. Peterson initiates a historical exploration of the doctrine of the Trinity, commencing with its biblical foundations and extending into the second century. Peterson highlights how the early church gradually understood the triune nature of God through Scripture and in response to emerging heresies. The session examines New Testament passages exhibiting a triadic pattern and analyzes the early church fathers' struggle to reconcile monotheism with the worship of Jesus Christ. Figures like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus are discussed, illustrating the developing understanding of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the context of their historical and philosophical landscapes. The lecture concludes by noting the "economic Trinitarianism" prevalent in this period, emphasizing God's self-revelation in creation and redemption while acknowledging the eternal distinctions within the Godhead.

**2. 23 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Peterson, Theology Proper: God, Session 3 – Double click
icon to play in Windows media player or go to the
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link
there (Theology → Theology, Peterson → Theology Proper:
God).**



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3. Briefing Document: Peterson, Theology Proper: God, Session 3, Historical Soundings on the Trinity

Briefing Document: Historical Soundings on the Trinity - Biblical and Second Century

Introduction:

This briefing document summarizes the main themes and important ideas presented in Dr. Robert A. Peterson's lecture on the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity, focusing on biblical foundations and the contributions of second-century Christian thinkers. The lecture emphasizes the gradual understanding of the Trinity within the church, shaped by Scripture and in response to early heresies.

Main Themes and Important Ideas:

1. Biblical Basis for the Trinity (Implicit and Triadic Patterns):

- The lecture highlights that while the Bible doesn't present a systematized doctrine of the Trinity, it lays the groundwork for it. "The Bible teaches but does not systematize the doctrine of the Trinity."
- Both the Old and New Testaments consistently affirm the oneness of God (Deuteronomy 4:35, 6:4; 1 Timothy 2:5; James 2:19). "Although the tree of the doctrine of the Trinity grows in the New Testament, its roots are in the Old Testament."
- A significant development in the New Testament is the emergence of a "threefold, or triadic, understanding of God." This pattern is evidenced in several passages where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are mentioned together, indicating a common understanding in the early church. "So, it was common in the early church: a pattern of triads, or triads, or threes."
- Seven New Testament passages from six different writers are cited as examples of this triadic pattern:
- **Matthew 28:19:** Baptism in the name (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- **Galatians 4:4-6:** God sent his Son, and God sent the Spirit of his Son.
- **Hebrews 9:14:** Christ offered himself through the eternal Spirit to God (the Father).

- **1 Peter 1:1-2:** Chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, and sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ.
- **1 John 4:13-14:** The Father has given us of his Spirit, and the Father has sent the Son as the world's Savior.
- **Jude 20-21:** Building yourselves up in your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- **Revelation 1:4-5:** Grace and peace from the one who is, was, and is to come (Father), from the seven Spirits before his throne (Holy Spirit), and from Jesus Christ.

2. The Challenge of Reconciling Divine Unity with the Worship of Christ:

- Early Christians, even before fully understanding the Trinity, worshiped Jesus Christ. "The early Christians worshiped him before they understood the doctrine of the Trinity. Worshiping Christ as Lord implied his deity."
- This practice presented a theological challenge: how to reconcile the worship of Christ with the established Jewish belief in the oneness of God. "How could they worship Jesus while simultaneously holding to their settled belief in God's unity?"

3. The Role of Heresies in the Development of Trinitarian Doctrine:

- False teachings about the person of Christ ironically played a role in prompting the church to develop a more precise understanding of the Trinity. "This task was complicated, and ironically, it was helped along its way by false teachings concerning the person of Christ, to which the church responded to those false teachings."
- The history of the Trinity's doctrine is intertwined with the history of Christology and was often controversial.

4. The Emphasis on Monotheism in the Early Church:

- The earliest church fathers strongly affirmed the oneness of God, rooted in their Jewish heritage. "The classical creeds of Christendom opened with a declaration of belief in one God, maker of heaven and earth. The monotheistic idea, grounded in the religion of Israel, loomed large in the minds of the earliest fathers."

- This emphasis on unity served as a clear distinction between Christianity and paganism. The Shepherd of Hermas is quoted stating the first commandment is, "to believe that God is one who created and established all things, bringing them into existence out of non-existence."
- Early writers like Clement of Alexandria and Barnabas also emphasized God as the Father, creator, and Lord Almighty.

5. The Contributions and Limitations of the Apologists (e.g., Justin Martyr):

- The Apologists, early defenders of the faith, grappled with articulating the Christian understanding of God in a Hellenistic context.
- Justin Martyr, a key Apologist, affirmed God's oneness, transcendence, and creative role, often using language influenced by Platonizing Stoicism. He believed Greek thinkers had access to truth.
- Justin attempted to coordinate the Father, Son (Logos), and Holy Spirit, sometimes referencing baptismal and Eucharistic formulas. This countered accusations of atheism against Christians who refused to worship Roman gods.
- While recognizing the distinct existence of the Logos and the prophetic Spirit (Holy Spirit), the Apologists' understanding of the Spirit's status and role was often "extremely vague" compared to their understanding of the Logos. "Yet, the apologists, as compared with their thought about the Logos, appear to have been extremely vague as to the exact status and role of the spirit."
- Justin did not assign the Holy Spirit a role in the incarnation, viewing the "divine spirit and power of the Most High" in Luke 1:35 as the pre-incarnate Logos.
- Despite these limitations, the "liniments of a Trinitarian doctrine are clearly discernible already in the apologists." They used the analogy of a man putting forth his thought and spirit to understand the plurality within the Godhead while maintaining essential unity.

6. The Theological Advancement of Irenaeus:

- Irenaeus is considered the "first true Christian theologian," making significant advancements in understanding the Trinity, particularly in response to Gnostic heresies.

- His primary task was to refute the Gnostic idea of a hierarchy of eons and a separation between an unknowable supreme God and the creator (Demiurge). He strongly affirmed that "the one they call the demiurge is God."
- Irenaeus emphasized the unity of the Testaments and that the creator is the redeemer, highlighting Christ's role in both creation and redemption (Colossians 1).
- He taught that God exercises his creative activity through his "word" (Son) and his "wisdom or Spirit," believing in creation *ex nihilo*. "He taught that God exercises his creative activity through his word and his wisdom or Spirit..."
- Irenaeus viewed the Son and the Spirit as the "hands of God," the vehicles of his self-revelation in the "economy" (God's actions in creation and redemption). "According to the economy of our redemption, there are both father and Son."
- He had a firmer grasp of the "economical Trinity" (God revealed in his works) and gave a fuller recognition to the Holy Spirit within the triadic scheme than the Apologists. "His word and his wisdom, his Son and his Spirit are always by him."
- While affirming the eternal relationship between the Word and the Father, Irenaeus does not explicitly teach the doctrine of "eternal generation" (a later development).
- He identified the Spirit with divine wisdom, drawing on scriptural basis (Proverbs 8). The Word and Spirit collaborated in creation.
- Irenaeus emphasized that the Word reveals the Father, drawing on Johannine theology.
- His understanding of the Godhead is described as the most complete and explicitly Trinitarian before Tertullian, though it still employed the imagery of a single personage (the Father) with his mind (Word) and wisdom (Spirit), rather than three co-equal persons (a later, Western emphasis). This is labeled "economic trinitarianism."
- Peterson concludes that while focusing on the economy, Irenaeus did recognize the "mysterious three in oneness of the inner life of the Godhead," with real distinctions present eternally, even if fully manifested in the economy.

Conclusion:

Dr. Peterson's lecture provides a valuable overview of the early church's journey in understanding the Trinity. It highlights the biblical seeds of the doctrine, the initial challenges of reconciling monotheism with the divinity of Christ, and the crucial role of both defending against heresies and engaging with philosophical thought in shaping early Christian theology. The lecture underscores the significant contributions of second-century figures like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, while also acknowledging the gradual and complex nature of this theological development. It sets the stage for understanding the further refinements of Trinitarian doctrine in the third century.

4. Study Guide: Peterson, Theology Proper: God, Session 3, Historical Soundings on the Trinity

Study Guide: Historical Soundings on the Trinity (Biblical and Second Century)

Key Concepts and Themes:

- **Biblical Basis for the Trinity:** Understanding how the Old and New Testaments lay the groundwork for the doctrine of the Trinity, even without a systematic presentation.
- **Triadic Patterns in the New Testament:** Recognizing the significance of the frequent appearance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together in various passages and the early church's interpretation of these patterns.
- **Early Church's Monotheism:** The unwavering commitment of early Christians to the belief in one God, inherited from Judaism, and the challenge of reconciling this with the worship of Jesus Christ.
- **Influence of False Teachings:** Understanding how heresies, particularly those concerning the person of Christ and the Gnostic cosmology, prompted the church to develop a more precise understanding of the Trinity.
- **The Role of the Apologists:** Examining the contributions and limitations of early Christian apologists like Justin Martyr in articulating the relationship between the Father, Son (Logos), and Spirit within a monotheistic framework, noting their engagement with contemporary philosophy.
- **Irenaeus's Contribution:** Recognizing Irenaeus as the first true Christian theologian and his significant advancements in understanding the Trinity, particularly in refuting Gnosticism and emphasizing the interconnectedness of creation and redemption.
- **Economic Trinitarianism:** Understanding the concept of the "economic Trinity" as emphasized by Irenaeus and other early thinkers, focusing on God's self-revelation through the Son and Spirit in creation and redemption, while acknowledging the belief in an "immanent" Trinity.
- **Distinction Between Early and Later Formulations:** Recognizing that the doctrine of the Trinity developed over time and that it is inappropriate to judge early Christian writers based on the more precise theological language of later ecumenical councils like Nicaea and Chalcedon.

Quiz:

1. According to the lecture, what is a key point about the Bible's teaching on the Trinity?
2. Provide an example of a triadic pattern mentioned in the lecture and briefly explain its significance for the early church.
3. What was the primary theological challenge faced by early Christians in relation to their inherited monotheism and their new faith in Jesus Christ?
4. How did false teachings contribute to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the early church?
5. Describe a key characteristic of Justin Martyr's theological approach to the Trinity, mentioning a notable influence on his thought.
6. What was Irenaeus's primary theological concern, and how did it differ from that of the earlier apologists?
7. Explain Irenaeus's concept of the "hands of God." What did this imagery represent?
8. What is "economic Trinitarianism" as discussed in the lecture, and why is this term used to describe the thinking of Irenaeus and his predecessors?
9. Why is it considered "unwise and even unfair" to judge early Christian writers on the Trinity by later theological formulations?
10. Briefly describe a difference in emphasis between the "economic" and the "immanent" Trinity as presented in the lecture.

Answer Key:

1. The Bible teaches the doctrine of the Trinity but does not present it in a fully systematized form. The early church took time to understand and articulate this doctrine based on the message of Scripture while addressing errors.
2. Matthew 28:19, the Great Commission, is an example of a triadic pattern, instructing believers to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This pattern was common in the early church and played a role in their developing understanding of the Trinity.

3. The primary theological challenge was how to maintain their deeply held belief in the oneness of God (monotheism, inherited from Judaism) while simultaneously worshiping Jesus Christ as Lord, which implied his deity.
4. False teachings, particularly heresies concerning the person of Christ (like Gnosticism), acted as a catalyst, prompting the church to respond with careful theological reflection and articulate a clearer understanding of the Trinity in defense of the true faith.
5. Justin Martyr's theological approach was influenced by Platonizing Stoicism, and he attempted to find connections between Greek philosophy and Christian thought, even suggesting that Greek thinkers borrowed concepts related to the divine from Moses.
6. Irenaeus's primary theological concern was to rebut the Gnostic theory of a hierarchy of eons and the separation between an unknowable supreme God and the creator (demiurge). This differed from the apologists, whose main task was defending Christianity against paganism.
7. Irenaeus famously referred to the Son (Word/Logos) and the Holy Spirit (Wisdom) as the "hands of God." This imagery was intended to illustrate the active role of the Son and Spirit in God's creative and redemptive work while emphasizing their inseparable unity with the Father.
8. "Economic Trinitarianism" describes the early church's focus on the Trinity as revealed through God's actions in creation ("economy"), providence, and redemption, particularly through the Son and the Spirit. This approach highlights God's self-disclosure in history rather than solely focusing on his inner being in eternity.
9. It is unfair because early writers were working with the biblical witness and responding to the specific challenges of their time, often without the benefit of later theological refinements and vocabulary developed in response to subsequent controversies.
10. The "economic" Trinity emphasizes how God reveals himself and acts in the created world and in redemptive history through the Son and the Spirit, while the "immanent" Trinity refers to the mysterious three-in-oneness of God's inner being from all eternity, prior to creation.

Essay Format Questions:

1. Analyze the significance of the New Testament's triadic patterns in the development of early Christian understanding of God. Discuss specific examples and their impact.
2. Compare and contrast the approaches of the apologists (using Justin Martyr as a primary example) and Irenaeus in articulating the relationship between the Father, Son (Logos), and Holy Spirit. What were their main concerns and what progress did Irenaeus make?
3. Discuss the role of heresy in the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity during the second century. How did specific false teachings prompt the church to refine its understanding of God?
4. Explain the concept of "economic Trinitarianism" as it pertains to the theological contributions of figures like Irenaeus. What are its strengths and potential limitations in describing the Trinity?
5. Evaluate the claim that the roots of the doctrine of the Trinity are found in the Old Testament, even though the doctrine itself was more fully developed in the New Testament and the early church. Provide specific examples from both testaments to support your argument.

Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Trinity:** The Christian doctrine that God is one being in three co-equal, co-eternal persons: Father, Son (Jesus Christ), and Holy Spirit.
- **Monotheism:** The belief in one God. This was a foundational principle inherited by early Christians from Judaism.
- **Triadic Pattern:** The recurring appearance of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together in New Testament passages, suggesting a threefold understanding of God.
- **Apologists:** Early Christian writers (2nd and 3rd centuries) who defended Christianity against pagan criticisms and explained its beliefs to the wider culture.
- **Logos:** A Greek term meaning "word," "reason," or "divine utterance." In early Christian theology, it often referred to the pre-existent Son of God through whom God created the world.

- **Gnosticism:** A diverse set of religious and philosophical beliefs that emphasized secret knowledge (gnosis) as the key to salvation. Gnostics often held dualistic views and a complex cosmology with intermediaries between a supreme God and the material world.
- **Demiurge:** In Gnostic cosmology, a subordinate deity or being responsible for creating the physical universe, often seen as distinct from and inferior to the true, transcendent God.
- **Heresy:** A belief or doctrine that contradicts the orthodox teachings of the church.
- **Orthodoxy:** Correct or sound doctrine, adhering to the accepted beliefs of the Christian faith.
- **Economic Trinity:** The understanding of the Trinity based on God's actions (economy) in creation, redemption, and the ongoing governance of the world, particularly through the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- **Imminent Trinity:** The understanding of the Trinity as it exists eternally within God's own being, prior to and independent of creation.
- **Eternal Generation:** A later theological concept describing the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son, where the Son is eternally begotten of the Father.
- **Catechetical:** Relating to the instruction of new converts in the basic doctrines of the Christian faith.
- **Doxology:** An expression of praise or glory to God.

5. FAQs on Peterson, Theology Proper: God, Session 3, Historical Soundings on the Trinity, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions on the Early Development of the Doctrine of the Trinity

1. According to the provided text, why did it take the early church several centuries to fully articulate the doctrine of the Trinity? The doctrine of the Trinity was not explicitly systematized in the Bible, although its foundations were laid in both the Old and New Testaments through the consistent affirmation of one God and the emerging triadic understanding involving the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church's understanding developed gradually as it reflected on Scripture and responded to various false teachings and heresies concerning the nature of God and the person of Christ. This process of theological refinement, involving debate and clarification, naturally took time for the church to "crystallize" the doctrine.

2. What is meant by the "triadic pattern" found in the New Testament, and why was it significant for the early church's understanding of God? The "triadic pattern" refers to the recurring instances in the New Testament where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are mentioned together in a significant relationship, often in the context of salvation, baptism, and spiritual life. Examples include Matthew 28:19, Galatians 4:4-6, 1 Peter 1:1-2, and Revelation 1:4-5. This pattern was significant because it suggested a threeness within the Godhead, which the early Christians had to reconcile with their foundational belief in the oneness of God inherited from Judaism. It served as a crucial biblical basis for the later development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

3. How did the early Christians reconcile their worship of Jesus Christ with their belief in one God? The early Christians, even before fully developing the doctrine of the Trinity, worshiped Jesus Christ as Lord. This act of worship implied their belief in his deity. The challenge for them was to understand how Jesus could be worshiped as God while maintaining the core tenet of monotheism. This reconciliation was a complex process, spurred in part by the need to respond to false teachings about Christ's person and ultimately leading to the formulation of the Trinity as one God eternally existing as three persons.

4. What role did the early apologists play in the development of Trinitarian thought, and what were some of the limitations of their contributions? The early apologists, such as Justin Martyr, were defenders of the Christian faith who engaged with contemporary philosophy, particularly Greek thought, to articulate Christian beliefs. They recognized a plurality within the Godhead, often using analogies like a man and his thought and spirit. They identified the Son with the Logos (Word) as seen in Scripture. However, their understanding of the Holy Spirit was often less developed, primarily seeing the Spirit as the inspiration of the prophets. They were also sometimes influenced by philosophical ideas that later proved to be inconsistent with a more refined Trinitarian understanding, and they did not achieve a fully coherent threefold pattern.

5. How did Irenaeus, considered the first true Christian theologian of the period, advance the understanding of the Trinity compared to the apologists? Irenaeus made significant advancements by more firmly grasping the "economy" of God – his self-revelation in creation and redemption – and by giving a much fuller recognition to the role of the Holy Spirit within a triadic scheme. Unlike some apologists, he deliberately avoided philosophical jargon and emphasized the unity of God as creator and redeemer. He described the Son (Word) and the Spirit (Wisdom) as God's "two hands" in creation, highlighting their inseparable unity with the Father. While he affirmed the eternal relationship between the Word and the Father, he did not explicitly teach the doctrine of eternal generation.

6. What is the distinction between the "imminent Trinity" and the "economic Trinity" as discussed in relation to Irenaeus's thought? The "imminent Trinity" refers to God in his intrinsic being, eternally existing as Father, Word (Son), and Wisdom (Spirit). The "economic Trinity" refers to how God manifests himself and acts in the created world and in redemptive history as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Irenaeus approached God from both these perspectives, recognizing that the distinctions seen in God's actions in the world reflect real, though not fully comprehended, distinctions within his eternal being.

7. What was Irenaeus's primary theological concern when discussing the oneness of God in light of the emerging understanding of the Trinity? Irenaeus's primary concern was to uphold the fundamental tenet of monotheism against various heresies, particularly Gnosticism, which proposed a hierarchy of divine beings and a separation between the supreme God and the creator. He strongly affirmed that the God of the Old Testament, the creator, is the same as the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the redeemer. His understanding of the Trinity was always framed within this commitment to the singular, unique God.

8. According to the text, why is it considered "unwise and even unfair" to judge earlier Christian writers like Tertullian by the later, more technically precise formulations of the doctrines of Nicaea and Chalcedon? It is unfair to judge earlier writers by later formulations because theological understanding and vocabulary developed over time, often in response to specific controversies and the need for greater precision. Early theologians were working with the biblical texts and philosophical concepts available to them and were laying the groundwork for later developments. They may not have had the same level of technical vocabulary or the benefit of subsequent theological reflection and debate. Therefore, their contributions should be understood within their own historical and intellectual context.