

4 – The Community of the Godhead: ***Trinity***

Relational Leadership Training

Developing Disciple Making Leaders

Session Four

Introduction

Before we can think biblically about what it means to be an “elder” in a church, we need to make sure we are thinking correctly about the Bible itself and what it tells us about God himself.

Misunderstandings about and inaccurate views of God significantly impact both our personal faith in God and our functioning in a true mature community.

Pre-Session Assignment:

Step 1 – Read the article “Why We Must Think Rightly About God” by A.W Tozer (at the end of this session). As you read:

- A. Place the letter “N” in the margin near information that is “New” to you.
- B. Underline what strikes you as very significant.
- C. Circle terms or ideas you might need to have clarified.
- D. Write down any questions you might have in your Learning Journal for this session.

Step 2 – Take some time to think about the following aspects of the article you read for this session. Write your thoughts in your Learning Journal and be ready to discuss these during the group instruction time.

- A. Summarize Tozer’s main point in your own words.
- B. What comes into your mind when you think about God?
- C. Do you think that your church’s actual practices together (worship, programs, meetings, outreach, etc) demonstrate what your church says it believes in your church’s doctrinal statement? If so, why? If not, why not?
- D. What might be some consequences for your church if it gets wrong the answer to the question ‘What is God like?’

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With Others – *During Group Instruction*

Step 1 (In Triads) – Pray together, asking God to graciously provide His direction, protection, and presence during the group instruction time.

Step 2 (In Triads) – Share experiences, outcomes, and “Aha Moments” from the personal application activities from the last session.

Step 3 (With the Whole Group) – Have someone from each triad summarize to the whole group:

- A. a few outcomes and experiences from the personal application activities from the last session.
- B. Do you have any questions or concerns that came out of the triad sharing time?

Step 4 (In Triads) – Read the article “The Trinity – One God in Three Persons” out loud together. After reading the section, answer the following questions:

- A. Why is it important that we understand that God exists in “perfect community”?
- B. When you think of God, how do you think of Him most often, as transcendent or immanent?
- C. What might be the implications to you and your church if you view God:
 - i. only as Transcendent?
 - ii. only as Immanent?

Step 5 (With the Whole Group) – Using 2 Timothy 3:16 as a framework, analyze and interact with the articles of this session. Use the questions below as guidelines. Record your answers in your Learning Journal.

- A. Teaching (*What is true.*) – What are the key biblical truths of this session?
- B. Reproof (*What is not true.*) – What is something false or inaccurate that you personally have believed related to the topic of this session?
- C. Correction (*What not to do.*) – In relation to this session, what is something in your life that needs to change?
- D. Training in righteousness (*What to do.*) – What are some things you need to learn to do (or not do) in order to live in a way that reflects the truth of this session?

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Post Session Follow Up:

Step 1 – Then thoughtfully and honestly answer the following three questions. Record your answers in your Learning Journal.

- A. What does the truth of this session look like in my life now?
- B. What could the truth of this session look like in my life:
 - i. one month from now?
 - ii. one year from now?

Step 2 – Make a call to get to know someone.

- A. Call one person (different from the previous assignment) you don't know very well who is a part of your training group for the purpose of getting to know him. Ask two questions:
 - i. How are you doing?
 - ii. How can I pray for you?
- B. Tell them how they can pray for you.
- C. Pray for them over the phone.

Step 3 (With Your Spouse) – Discuss with your Spouse:

- the main ideas of this session.
- your answers to the integration questions and the assignment.

Summarize the main points of your discussion in your Learning Journal.

Step 4 – Prayerfully think about what you have learned with regard to the truths of this session, your experience during the assignment, and your conversation with your spouse. Use the questions below to guide your reflection. You do not necessarily have to write out answers to all of the questions but take the time to prayerfully think about each one and then write down some thoughts pertaining to one or two of them. Be ready to share your thoughts and insights during the next group instruction time.

- A. Do you need to repent of any disobedience? If so, what?
- B. Do you need to acknowledge any unbelief? If so, what?
- C. What biblical truth do you need to trust to be true for you?
- D. What promises of God can you trust in and expect Him to keep?
- E. What signs of growth do you perceive in your life?
- F. What can you give thanks to God for?

Step 5 – Record any “Aha Moments” from this session (i.e. insights gained that are important for you to remember). Record these in your Learning Journal.

Why We Must Think Rightly About God¹

By A.W. Tozer

O, Lord God Almighty, not the God of the philosophers and the wise but the God of the prophets and apostles; and better than all, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, may I express Thee unblamed?

They that know Thee not may call upon Thee as other than Thou art, and so worship not Thee but a creature of their own fancy; therefore, enlighten our minds that we may know Thee as Thou art, so that we may perfectly love Thee and worthily praise Thee. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God.

For this reason, the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech. She can never escape the self-disclosure of her witness concerning God.

Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, "What comes into your mind when you think about God?" we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. Were we able to know exactly what our most influential religious leaders think of God today, we might be able with some precision to foretell where the Church will stand tomorrow.

Without doubt, the mightiest thought the mind can entertain is the thought of God, and the weightiest word in any language is its word for God. Thought and speech are God's gifts to creatures made in His image; these are intimately associated with Him and impossible apart from Him. It is highly significant that the first word was the Word: "And the Word was with God, and the Word was God." We may speak because God spoke. In Him word and idea are indivisible.

That our idea of God corresponds as nearly as possible to the true being of God is of immense importance to us. Compared with our actual thoughts about Him, our creedal statements are of little consequence. Our real idea of God may lie buried under the rubbish of conventional religious notions and may require an intelligent and vigorous search before it is finally unearthed and exposed for what it is. Only after an ordeal of painful self-probing are we likely to discover what we actually believe about God.

A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to the temple; where it is inadequate or

¹ Chapter 1 of *The Knowledge of the Holy* by A.W. Tozer, (<http://www.full-proof.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Tozer-Knowledge-Of-The-Holy-b.pdf>)

out of plumb the whole structure must sooner or later collapse. I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.

It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity.

All the problems of heaven and earth, though they were to confront us together and at once, would be nothing compared with the overwhelming problem of God: That He is; what He is like; and what we as moral beings must do about Him.

The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems, for he sees at once that these have to do with matters which at the most cannot concern him for very long; but even if the multiple burdens of time may be lifted from him, the one mighty single burden of eternity begins to press down upon him with a weight more crushing than all the woes of the world piled one upon another. That mighty burden is his obligation to God. It includes an instant and lifelong duty to love God with every power of mind and soul, to obey Him perfectly, and to worship Him acceptably. And when the man's laboring conscience tells him that he has done none of these things, but has from childhood been guilty of foul revolt against the Majesty in the heavens, the inner pressure of self-accusation may become too heavy to bear.

The gospel can lift this destroying burden from the mind, give beauty for ashes, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. But unless the weight of the burden is felt the gospel can mean nothing to the man; and until he sees a vision of God high and lifted up, there will be no woe and no burden. Low views of God destroy the gospel for all who hold them.

Among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at bottom a libel on His character. The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than He is - in itself a monstrous sin - and substitutes for the true God one made after its own likeness. Always this God will conform to the image of the one who created it and will be base or pure, cruel or kind, according to the moral state of the mind from which it emerges.

A god begotten in the shadows of a fallen heart will quite naturally be no true likeness of the true God.

"Thou thoughtest," said the Lord to the wicked man in the psalm, "that I was altogether such as one as thyself." Surely this must be a serious affront to the Most High God before whom cherubim and seraphim continually do cry, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth."

Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration, and that civilized peoples are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. It begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place.

"When they knew God," wrote Paul, "they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened."

Then followed the worship of idols fashioned after the likeness of men and birds and beasts and creeping things. But this series of degrading acts began in the mind. Wrong ideas about God are not only the fountain from which the polluted waters of idolatry flow; they are

themselves idolatrous. The idolater simply imagines things about God and acts as if they were true.

Perverted notions about God soon rot the religion in which they appear. The long career of Israel demonstrates this clearly enough, and the history of the Church confirms it. So necessary to the Church is a lofty concept of God that when that concept in any measure declines, the Church with her worship and her moral standards declines along with it. The first step down for any church is taken when it surrenders its high opinion of God.

Before the Christian Church goes into eclipse anywhere there must first be a corrupting of her simple basic theology. She simply gets a wrong answer to the question, "What is God like?" and goes on from there. Though she may continue to cling to a sound nominal creed, her practical working creed has become false. The masses of her adherents come to believe that God is different from what He actually is; and that is heresy of the most insidious and deadly kind.

The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him - and of her. In all her prayers and labors this should have first place. We do the greatest service to the next generation of Christians by passing on to them undimmed and undiminished that noble concept of God which we received from our Hebrew and Christian fathers of generations past. This will prove of greater value to them than anything that art or science can devise.

O, God of Bethel, by whose hand
 Thy people still are fed;
 Who through this weary pilgrimage
 Hast all our fathers led!
 Our vows, our prayers we now present
 Before Thy throne of grace: God of our fathers! be the God Of their
 succeeding race.

Philip Doddridge

The Trinity – One God in Three Persons

In order to understand and apply the right-side up message of the gospel, we must begin with a right-side up understanding of God himself.

The Trinity Defined

Bruce Ware, in his book *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit*, provides the following definition of the Trinity:

“The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that God’s whole and undivided essence belongs equally, eternally, simultaneously, and fully to each of the three distinct Persons of the Godhead.

“Now think about what this is claiming. It affirms that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each possesses the divine nature *equally*, so as to avoid Arianism {i.e. Jesus is created}; *eternally*, so as to avoid thinking of God’s nature as created; *simultaneously*, so as to avoid modalism {i.e. one God existing in three modes or forms}; and *fully*, so as to avoid any tri-partite understanding of the trinity (e.g. like a pie divided into three equal pieces). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not each one-third God, but each is fully God, equally God, and this is true eternally and simultaneously.

“In *essence*, then, each member of the Godhead is identical; but in *person* each is distinct.” [Pages 41 and 42, *emphasis* Ware’s, content in brackets { } added for clarity.]

To summarize, the Trinity is one God, existing in three persons with each person fully God. To deny or modify any of these three aspects of the Trinity is to deny the orthodox doctrine and the revelation of Scripture.

Sometimes, as a means to emphasize the three and one nature of the Trinity, it is referred to as “Tri-unity.”

The Trinitarian Godhead in Community

Let’s come back to the story of God, the meta-narrative, and take some time to think about the God of the story. In the Bible he has described himself as a triune God.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).

- *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one* (Deuteronomy 6:4).
- Although one in essence, our God has revealed himself in three “persons.” “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Mathew 28:19).

When we read, “In the beginning God,” the word for God here is *Elohim* — referring to the idea of plurality of majesty. So God in the beginning was referred to as a majestic God.

So, before there was anything else, there was God, who is described as a plurality of majesty. We understand who the plurality was: God the Father, God the Son, God the

Holy Spirit. When we refer to God in this plurality, we refer to him as a “Trinity.” Therefore, we believe in what is theologically known as a “Trinitarian Godhead.”

Trinity is really a perfect community. It is the community of the Godhead. God is in right relationship with himself. But this reference to “himself” is not one, but three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we talk about God before anything else was, we are talking about a majestic community.

We could say it another way: before anything else was, there was perfect relationship. So, before anything else was, there was God who was in perfect and majestic relationship and community.

Here is a very important point. “Relationships” and “community” are part of who God is. They are true about God himself. Therefore, human relationships and community are aspects of being created in the image of God. Also, relationships and community existed before God created anything. This means that relationships and community are part of living in the right-side up world. This means the Bible and the gospel message have something significant to say about restoring relationships and community from upside down to right-side up.

God Is Transcendent and Immanent

The Bible tells us God is both transcendent and immanent. He is the God who is “*one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*” (Ephesians 4:6).

Transcendent

- God “transcends” the created universe in that he is distinct and separate from his creation. He is not a part of creation and creation is not a part of God. God made everything, whether material or spiritual. God rules over everything that has been made, whether material or spiritual.
- *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together* (Colossians 1:16-17).
- *He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure* (Psalm 147:4-5).
- *Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?* (Exodus 15:11).
- *All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made* (John 1:3).

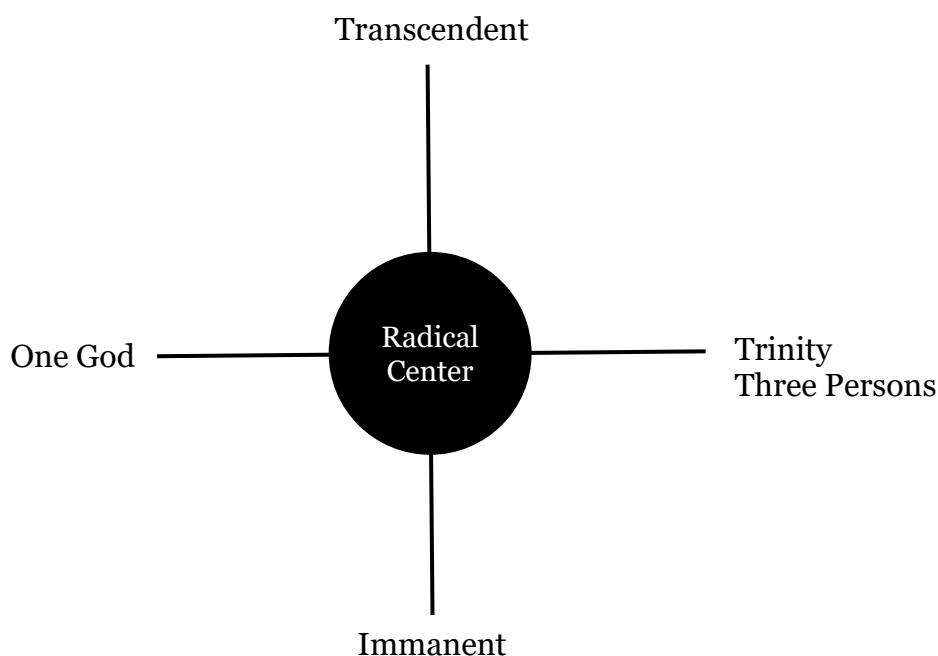
Immanent

Although God transcends the created universe, he is not removed from it or disengaged from influencing it. God is close to creation and directly involved in the largest to the smallest detail.

- *In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind* (Job 12:10).
- *...he upholds the universe by the word of his power* (Hebrews 1:3).
- *...even the hairs of your head are all numbered* (Luke 12:7).
- *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord* (Proverbs 16:33).

The Godhead as a Model of Eldering

Throughout this Relational Elders Training, we will be referring to what we call “The Framework for Eldering.” This will be developed in a future session. However, to provide a foundation for that framework, we need to understand some things about the Trinitarian Godhead upon which the framework for eldering has been developed. The diagram below depicts the “tension” that exists between various aspects of what is true about God.



The Tension of One God in Three Persons

Scripture teaches there is One God who exists in three persons (see “The Trinity Defined” earlier in this training unit). This reality is depicted in the above diagram by

the horizontal line, with “One God” at one pole and “Trinity – Three Persons” at the other pole. Although one God in three persons appears to be contradictory, Scripture tells us that both are true about God. So, we can say God exists in the revealed “tension” as both one and three.

The Tension of the Transcendence and Immanence of God

Scripture teaches God is both transcendent and immanent (see “God Is Transcendent and Immanent” earlier in this training unit). This reality is depicted in the above diagram by the vertical line, with “Transcendent” at one pole and “Immanent” at the other pole. Although God being both transcendent and immanent appears to be contradictory, Scripture tells us both are true about God. So, we can say God exists in the revealed “tension” as both transcendent and immanent.

The “Radical Center”

God’s revelation and interaction with humanity exists in what can be called ‘The Radical Center.’ It is a perfect point of balance between the truths of the horizontal and vertical lines. To drift to any pole is to lose touch with the reality of God as he has revealed himself to us in the Bible. Ultimately, such drift leads to imbalance and falsehoods about God and will impact our understanding of the right-side up message.

Keeping these “tensions” in mind about God will assist us in understanding both who God is in himself and how He wants us to live in light of who he is.

The Attributes of the Godhead

The attributes of God are descriptions of various aspects of his character. Each attribute is equally true for each person of the Trinity. A common way to classify the attributes of God is to group them into those that are “incommunicable” and those that are “communicable.”

Incommunicable Attributes

Incommunicable attributes are those aspects that are unique to God himself and not shared with his creation. For example, God is eternal (past and future) but we are not eternal. The following are examples of attributes that are considered incommunicable:

- Self-existence
- Immutability (God never changes)
- Omnipresence (present everywhere all the time)
- Infinity
- Perfection
- Eternity
- Immensity
- Unity

Communicable Attributes

Communicable attributes are those aspects that his creation may also have in some capacity. For example, God is love and we get to be loving. The following are examples of attributes that are considered communicable:

- Spirituality
- Knowledge
- Wisdom
- Goodness
- Love
- Holiness
- Righteousness

So when we describe God, there are some attributes that are unique to God and some we need to become like. God is holy, and he says to us “*Be holy for I am holy*” (Leviticus 11:44; 1 Peter 1:16). God is perfectly righteous, and he tells us we should live righteously. Some attributes we should strive to emulate (Ephesians 5:1). We should more and more conform to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29). In theological terms, this is called “sanctification.”