

Sermon Series – Church History

Week 2 – The Doctrine of God

Preached June 17, 2018 by Reverend Joylynn Graham

There is this story about a couple named Jeannie and Jack who would always go to church together, but one day Jeannie took ill and Jack went on his own. On his return Jeannie asks, “Was it a good service Jack?” “Oh, marvelous, Jeanie, marvelous!” says Jack. “And was the minister’s sermon good, Jack?” “Oh, marvelous, Jeanie, marvelous!” “And what was the minister talking about, Jack?” she asked. “Good heavens, woman,” said Jack, “far be it from me to understand what the holy man says!”

Does anyone ever walk out of here feeling like Jack? You know, like you really enjoyed the service and the sermon, but if pressed, you couldn’t actually explain to someone what it was about? It’s okay if you do, sometimes I feel that way – even when I’m the one who preached the sermon!

Actually it’s a pretty good thing when you can recognize and acknowledge that you don’t understand this “God Stuff” all that well. No one really understands it.

Yet we have all these doctrines that attempt to contain and explain God, and they have a tremendous influence on how we experience both religion and God.

Christian doctrine began taking shape immediately after the death of Jesus, and it is deeply embedded in our Christian teachings.

But it’s complicated – for a lot of reasons – starting with the fact that the first Christians, like Jesus, were Jews. And as Jews, they already had a bible. The Hebrew Bible.

The first Christian Bible was the Hebrew Bible and when these Jews who followed Jesus began to claim that certain prophecies from the Hebrew Bible pointed to Jesus – that became a problem.

Jewish leaders didn’t see it that way – and ultimately, these Christian Jews were banished from their religion.

Of course more writings were created to offer insights into the life and teachings of Jesus, but Christianity is deeply rooted in Hebrew scripture, in a very complicated way...and nowhere is it more complicated than in the doctrine of God.

But you can't have a conversation about doctrine without having a conversation about culture.

Because doctrine, in many ways, is a response to culture.

During the time of Jesus the world was becoming more Hellenized. The Greeks were the leaders in philosophical thought. Everyone knew that – even the Romans. And long before Christianity began to emerge, the Greeks had developed a philosophy of the “logos” as a way of explaining the rationality of the world.

Logos stood over the gods as the permanent and unshakable power shaping all of reality. It was the reality behind all reality. It was the rationality beyond all rationality. It was the knowledge behind all knowledge.

So along comes this guy named Philo. Philo was a Jew who lived in Alexandria and he wanted to build a bridge between the two cultures of Greek and Hebrew by developing a philosophical justification for Judaism in terms of Greek philosophy.

So he adopted the Greek philosophy of “Logos” and he tried to relate it to Judaism by claiming that the Logos was the creative principle through which God acted in the world.

It never really took off for Philo, but by the second century, the need for credibility was urgent for Christians who were seen as atheists, and as such, were subject to execution.

So they picked up where Philo left off and began promoting the Prologue of John with the Greek Logos as a way of attaching the Christian faith to the dominant culture of the times.

Now no one can say for sure if the author of John's Gospel was intentionally using Logos in the same way as Philo, but the Greek influence is pretty clear beginning

with the first sentence of the prologue where God is introduced as “The Word” which in Greek translates as Logos.

It was a really good fit, but, there were a lot of wrinkles in the theology...

The Logos had to meet certain criteria which were:

1. That the Being must exist in and of itself
2. That the Being is immutable, unmoving and therefore omnipresent
3. That the Being is the supreme idea of all ideas and therefore omniscient
4. And that nothing can limit its power thereby making it omnipotent...

The problem was, the Bible portrayed an active, sovereign, and loving God.

And these differences created a tension that became known as the Scandal of particularity.

So theologians had to figure out a way hold it all together, and the solution was an arbitrator between the immutable God and this mutable world.

That arbitrator of course was Jesus.

Through Jesus, God was able to actively relate to the world in a way that would otherwise have been impossible for an immutable Supreme Being. And not only that, God was also the same Word who was now incarnate in Jesus.

And the story was even further enhanced by tagging on the lore of the Hebrew prophets, which created a solid link between the faith of Israel and the faith of the church.

Not everyone agreed on this strategy and there was a lot of pushback, but in the end, cultural pressure won out. And as a result, much of what we take for granted as part of the doctrine of God, comes from the Greek philosophical tradition and not from the bible.

Soon the doctrine of the logos became normalized. And the story held up nicely – for a while – because Christians were still plagued by religious persecutions and there just wasn’t a whole lot of time for theological debate.

But ultimately it worked. And in 313 not only did Constantine put an end to religious persecutions, but almost overnight Christianity became the official religion of the empire.

And that opened a whole new can of worms because now that Christians were no longer being persecuted, there was time to reflect on all of the contradictions that were present in the doctrine of God.

Debates were public and political, and things finally came to a head in a heated dispute between the bishop of Alexandria and a scholar named Arius.

Arius challenged the divinity of Christ, and in an effort to resolve the debate, Constantine called the Council of Nicaea in 325 which became known as the First Ecumenical Council.

At this gathering there were a lot of issues on the table, but it was the Arius' claims that led the discussion. The bishop believed the Logos to be eternal, but Arius, insisted that Jesus was not God, nor divine, but a creature.

This didn't set very well at all. Many of the people present had been tortured because of their worship of Christ, and now here was this "student" suggesting that they had suffered in the service of a mere creature.

They were outraged, and they wanted to make it permanently clear that this was not the faith of the church. So they created The Creed of Nicaea, which declared that the Son is 'God from God, light from light, true God from true God.' And furthermore, the Son is of the same substance as God.

This became the seal of the Council of Nicaea.

Debates continued to rage long after the first council, but what I really want you to take note of is the influence of culture on church doctrine for a couple of reasons.

The first reason relates to a question posed in response to my survey. The question reads as follows:

"Jesus said that no one would enter the kingdom of Heaven without going through him. As an old Catholic, I was taught by the nuns that the only sure way to Heaven was through Catholicism and that we were blessed to be born into a Catholic family. Nuns wouldn't lie to a kid would they? This same topic came up while speaking with a Christian missionary. I was told "if a non-Christian heard about Christ and did not convert to Christianity, they could not enter the Heavenly Kingdom. However, if they had never heard of Christ, their entry totally

depended on their righteousness toward their fellow humankind. Can you shed some light on what Jesus said? It all sounds a bit unchristian to me!”

This is a great question; and it is one that we have all had to wrestle with because we have all been told the same thing – except maybe for the Catholic part.

And this is where church history really comes in handy.

The bible verse referenced in the question, comes from the Fourth Gospel. And what is the very first thing the Fourth Gospel introduces? The Word – or – Logos who is later quoted as saying that “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

The Fourth Gospel wasn’t written until the year 90 – or even later – possibly into the second century, and it was during this time that theologians were attempting to merge the Platonic immutable God with the active and involved Hebrew God.

So in that context, if Jesus is the arbitrator between the immutable God and this mutable world then it makes sense that no one can know God, except through him.

It makes sense, but the truth is, the author of the Fourth Gospel did not know Jesus. And no one can say whether or not these words were actually spoken by Jesus...

Scripture is a human product, and much of it was written as a response to human pain and suffering. That’s what it about – suffering humans appealing to a merciful and just creator.

And for Christians, Jesus IS that creator – enfleshed. But all we have of him is a few words spoken a long time ago by people who didn’t know him.

I am not in any way trying to discount Scripture. My point is, we can’t just take a tiny slice of it and use it to support a modern day agenda, and then expect that God is going to be pleased with us.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others who may not have heard it. But we have to be willing to recognize and correct the shortcomings of our own motivations too.

And this brings me to my second reason for talking about the influence of culture on our doctrines.

Despite being persecuted for their own beliefs, once Christianity became the official religion of the empire, Christians became convinced that they knew all the best ways to speak about God. The church no longer felt the need to critique the culture in which it lived – It was THE dominant culture. It was Rome.

There are a lot of awful, awful things that came out of that, but probably the worst example took place in Germany during the twentieth century.

Germany had been a center of Christian learning since the thirteenth century when Albert the Great taught Thomas Aquinas at the University of Cologne. It was the center of the Reformation, and right after the reformation, its universities were bulging with Protestant theologians, all training to serve and to promote Protestantism throughout the world.

All these scholars and all this thinking led to all sorts of systems and doctrines and it was a wild and wonderful time, however, what no one was noticing was that all of these doctrines and systems began to assume that the best way to understand Christianity was from the perspective of the new Germany.

Germany was also the leader in science and technology; it was the nation of the future, and therefore, God's chosen instrument to bring this future about, and everyone was convinced that Christianity, as interpreted and practiced in Germany, was the highest possible form of Christianity and a beacon for the church worldwide.

So when all that was challenged in the first WW, Germans were ripe for the plucking by a man, a party, and a philosophy that proclaimed German superiority over all other nations and all other races.

And when that man and that party came to power, it was difficult for the church to resist them because over the last century, it had become so tightly entwined with the national culture.

It's impossible to separate faith from culture, but when our faith becomes so bound up in our culture that we can't speak against it or even recommend some

improvements, then we have made an idol out of our culture. And that's what happened in Germany.

So when I hear a representative of our government using Biblical text to justify ripping families apart and imprisoning children, I am reminded of Germany, and I am reminded of other decades and other atrocities committed in the same manner – all of them justified through the use of scripture – yet very few Christians spoke out.

We cannot separate our faith from our culture, so when our culture does evil in the name of our faith, we are obliged to speak out.

When they draw out our sacred texts and point them at us – that's a line – a clear and present line that they have crossed into Christian territory, and we are absolutely obliged to speak out.

We know that is not the way of Christ, or even the way of someone with good moral values, and we are obliged to speak out...

Because we know better. We know there is nothing in scripture to justify the mistreatment of other human beings. We know that Jesus was a champion of the poor, the exploited, the abused, and the weary, and we know that he said whatever we do to the least of these, we do to him.

We know better, not because some doctrine said so, but because we know that we are all of us, God's beloved creation, and the best way we have of experiencing God's love is through each other.

We know better; and we are obliged to speak out.

May it be with you all according to God's word...Amen