Trinity Seminar Week 4

Lesson #6: The Early Church Recognizing Jesus as God

"Devotion to Jesus erupted suddenly and early, yet without abandoning the Jewish conviction that there is only one God."
Larry Hurtado

Some have claimed that belief in the deity of Jesus is a later claim developed centuries after the first-century church. Their contention is that this was not the conviction of the first Christians but a theological credal development in the councils much later. But there are solid sources that contend against this line of thinking.

A strong historical argument can be made that the first-century church recognized Jesus as fully divine. Richard Bauckham is a highly respected British biblical scholar and theologian known for his work on the New Testament, early Christianity, and the doctrine of God. He served as Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of St Andrews and is widely regarded as one of the leading evangelical scholars of his generation. Bauckham is especially known for arguing that the earliest Christians did not merely view Jesus as a divine-like figure or exalted creature, but included Him within the unique identity of the one God of Israel. This argument is developed most fully in his influential book *Jesus and the God of Israe*l. Rather than saying Christians gradually elevated Jesus to divine status over centuries, Bauckham contends that belief in Jesus' deity emerged very early, within the first generation of the church.

Furthermore, Dr. Larry Hurtado, one of the world's leading New Testament scholars and historians of early Christianity and former Professor Emeritus of New Testament Language, Literature, and Theology at the University of Edinburgh, in his book *How on Earth did Jesus become God, also* argued that the deity of Jesus was not a late theological invention that slowly developed over centuries, but something that emerged very early within the worship life of the first Christians. According to Hurtado, the earliest believers, who were overwhelmingly Jewish and deeply committed to monotheism, began including Jesus within the devotional practices that had traditionally been reserved for the God of Israel alone. Rather than beginning with abstract philosophical speculation, the early church's understanding of Christ's divine status was formed through lived religious devotion. Hurtado often described this as a "mutation" within Jewish monotheistic worship, because reverence for Jesus appeared alongside continued belief in one God rather than in competition with it.

One of Hurtado's central observations was that the earliest Christians worshiped Jesus in concrete and communal ways. They prayed in Jesus' name, invoked him in gatherings, sang hymns about him, confessed him publicly as "Lord," and celebrated baptism in his name. Passages such as Philippians 2:6–11, where every knee bows to Jesus, and 1 Corinthians 16:22, which preserves the early Aramaic prayer "Maranatha" ("Our Lord, come"), showed Hurtado that devotion to Jesus appeared extremely early—within the first decades after the resurrection. He argued that practices such as the Lord's Supper, healing in Jesus' name, prophetic worship centered on Christ, and doxologies directed toward him revealed that the church treated Jesus as sharing in

God's divine honor and authority long before creeds or councils articulated doctrines like the Trinity.

In his book *One God, One Lord,* Hurtado emphasized that these devotional patterns are historically significant because, within Second Temple Judaism, worship was the clearest marker of God's uniqueness. Jews might honor prophets, angels, or kings, but worship, prayer, and sacred invocation belonged to God alone. Therefore, the fact that the earliest disciples incorporated Jesus into their worship while still insisting there was only one God indicates that they believed Jesus somehow shared in the divine identity itself. They would not have used the word Trinity, of course, but their worship was acknowledging divinity in Jesus while it seems they were staying loyal to monotheism. This is a remarkable observation by Hurtado and knocks the legs out from under the argument that the divinity of Jesus was a later development. So it seems that from the beginning the Christian community saw Jesus as divine but also held to monotheism. What a glorious "mutation" that has massive implications in our understanding of God and His redemptive work.

These two scholars are not alone in making this argument. Respected scholars like Martin Henkel, N.T. Wright, C.K. Barrett, F.F. Bruce, and many others all make the argument that there is overwhelming evidence that not only the scriptures of the first century but also the Church of the first century were all acknowledging that Jesus was God without abandoning monotheism. Those that claim that it is only a later development in the church councils are not being historically nor intellectually honest. The truth is that the first generation of Christians to the current one all affirm the deity of Jesus Christ.

Lesson #6 Questions

44. How early did the church recognize Jesus as God?

45. What were some ways that the Church affirmed the deity of Jesus?

46. What is meant by a "mutation" in Judaism through Jesus Christ?

47. How is Jesus a crisis to Jewish monotheism?

48. How did the first-century Church deal with this problem?

In your own words, talk about how the early Church recognized and responded to Jesus as God.

Lesson #7 Trinity: A New Description for an Eternal Reality

"The doctrine of the Trinity arose because the church had to account for everything Scripture says about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit without surrendering biblical monotheism."
Robert Latham

"The Trinity is not the awkward appendix to Christian theology; it is the source, the center, and the goal of all Christian theology."
Karl Barth

A said before, the proclamation of Jesus as God caused a theological crisis that was to be processed for the next couple of centuries in the Church. The historic articulation of monotheism with tri-persons is called the Trinity. The *Trinity* is the Christian belief that God is one being who exists eternally as three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person is fully God, sharing the same divine nature, yet they are not three gods but one. This mystery describes how God is both unified and relational/social at the same time.

The Gospel of John played a crucial role in shaping how the early church articulated the deity of Christ and, eventually, the doctrine of the *Trinity*. As stated before, John opens with the profound claim that "the Word was with God, and the Word was God," holding together both distinction and unity within the Godhead. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus speaks of His unique relationship with the Father, being sent by Him, sharing His glory, and existing with Him before the world began. At the same time, Jesus promises the coming of the Spirit, described as another Helper who proceeds from the Father and is sent in Jesus' name. These themes provided the raw biblical material the early church needed to wrestle with the question: how can Father, Son, and Spirit all be fully divine, and yet God is one?

As theological reflection developed, especially in response to controversies about Christ's nature, John's Gospel became central in defending the full deity of the Son. Ancient Fathers like Athanasius of Alexandria appealed to John's language—particularly the eternal existence of the Word and His oneness with the Father—in order to argue against teachings that reduced Jesus to a created being. This debate came to a head at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), where the church affirmed that the Son is "of the same substance" (*homoousios*) with the Father. John's emphasis on both unity ("I and the Father are one") and distinction ("the Word was with God") helped shape the careful language the church used to avoid both denying Christ's deity and collapsing Him into the Father.

In the centuries that followed, theologians continued to draw on John to articulate a fully Trinitarian understanding of God. Historically speaking, the earliest known Christian writer to use the word "Trinity" was Theophilus of Antioch around A.D. 180. In his work *To Autolycus*, he used the Greek term τριάς (trias), referring to "God, His Word, and His

Wisdom." A few decades later, Tertullian (c. A.D. 200–215) became the first writer to use the Latin term Trinitas, from which our English word Trinity is derived. He also gave one of the earliest systematic explanations of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Gospel's presentation of the Father, Son, and Spirit in dynamic relationship, sending, indwelling, glorifying, helped the church move beyond simple formulas toward a richer theological vision. Thinkers like Augustine of Hippo used John's writings to explore the inner life of God and the unity of divine essence alongside the distinction of persons.

In this way, the Gospel of John did not by itself create the doctrine of the *Trinity*, but it provided some of the clearest and most influential scriptural foundations that enabled the early church to confess one God in three persons. Other scriptures informed the grammar of God in the triunity, but the gospel of John was essential in the process. And while the early creeds like the Apostles' Creed honored Jesus Christ highly, it was the Nicene Creed in AD 381 that made the definitive Church-wide confession on the deity of Christ. So we end this lesson with this creed.

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified. who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Lesson #7 Questions