

How Jesus Changed Our Understanding of God

SCOTT HOEZEE

As Christians today, we often forget this, but our understanding of what we call the Old Testament changed quite a lot once it became clear that Jesus was the divine Son of God, and that he was one of three divine persons in the Holy Trinity of God. True, the words of the Old Testament did not change, but what we read into them and how we understand the background of the Old Testament did change. Once we knew more about the inner life of God, and once we understood that three persons within God carried out God's work, things changed. Today on *Groundwork*, we continue our series on Christology, or the theology of Christ. We have a special guest with us to help us ponder the meaning of Jesus as God's Son, and how that affects the whole Bible. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, today we are welcoming a guest for this program, the third in our series on Christology, and for the final program. Han-luen Kantzer Komline is a professor, an assistant professor of history and theology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. So, Han-luen, welcome.
Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Thank you so much. It is great to be here.

DAVE BAST

We are very excited to have you here because we are talking about Jesus as we seek to explore, really, the depths of scripture's teaching about his nature, his person, his identity; and it is all wrapped up in this part of theology that we call Christology. So, how would you, in a word or two, define Christology?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes; Christology is the study of Christ—the person and work of Jesus Christ; and it is interesting because we can think of a lot of *ologies*: biology, psychology, psychology being the study of the soul; biology the study of life; but Christology is interesting because according to the Christian understanding of who Christ is, is almost a little bit redundant because it is the *logos*, the rationality, of who Christ is, who is himself the *logos* or rationality of the entire universe, of all that exists.

DAVE BAST

He is called in John 1 the *logos*—the Word; so, it is the word about the Word...

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right.

DAVE BAST

That we are really exploring.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is, again, our third program. In the first two programs, Dave, we were mostly...and Han-luen...we were mostly in Colossians 1, and we looked at Jesus as sort of the firstborn over all creation, and we looked at Jesus as the head of the Church, and some of the really outrageous claims that Paul made in Colossians 1, very early in Church history already, as to who Christ was as the supreme one over all; and very early in the Church already, some very, very significant claims were being made about Jesus as divine; and so, we looked at that in the first two programs. In this program, we want to explore that a little bit more and talk a little bit in this first segment particularly about what it was that led the disciples, later turned apostles, to conclude that Jesus was divine, but also that there was a Trinity of persons, of whom Jesus, the Son of God, was one of three; and in just a second we are going to look at a passage that is one of those building blocks.

DAVE BAST

The more you dig into the Bible, the more you begin to realize that the view there of God is not quite simple; it is not monistic, to use maybe too fancy a word, but there is more complexity to God—to the being of God. So we have a passage like this, Jesus' words from John 14:

¹⁵If you love me you will keep my commandments. (That is straightforward.) ¹⁶And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate (which is capitalized in my version of the New Testament). ²⁶This is the Spirit of truth, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name. He will teach you everything.

So, here is Jesus, and he is talking about the Father and the Spirit, and he himself is still someone else. That is the kind of language we are getting at, isn't it, that seems to indicate there is more to God than just a simple being?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right; and even just within this passage we see that Jesus Christ's relationship with both the Father and the Advocate—the Holy Spirit—is something really difficult to describe because there is an element of distinction, because he is talking to them as separate persons, or talking about them, but there is also an element of intimate unity because he is able to say exactly what the Father will do when he makes this request of the Father, and the Spirit is able to teach exactly what Christ has taught, and in its wholeness and completeness, so we see both of those aspects, even in this short passage.

DAVE BAST

And clearly there is only one God. Nobody ever questioned that.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

That is the baseline assumption.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and these disciples who eventually would begin teaching this more robust view—more complex view, as you said, Dave, of God—these were people who were raised with a great fear of idolatry. They were raised with the *Shema*, you know: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one. That was hammered in. You were not supposed to worship anybody but the one God, Yahweh of Israel; and yet, eventually they concluded that worshipping Jesus was okay. It wasn't idolatrous.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and what do you say to people who argue that the word *trinity* doesn't appear in the Bible anywhere, and yet we want to use it. We are kind of drawn to this term. How do you respond to that?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes, I think it is important to acknowledge that the term trinity does not occur, but that doesn't mean that there isn't a basis for the concept in scripture; because we have, on the one hand, this principle that God is one God. That is completely clear, that Scott was just mentioning, but then we also have the Holy Spirit, the Father, and the Son all portrayed as doing things that only God can do, and characterized as God; which, put those two pieces together that there is one God, yet Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each of these persons is God, there you have the doctrine of the Trinity in a nutshell, if not in name.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the things that makes the doctrine of the Trinity kind of the radical thing that it is, is that we really do insist that these are different persons within God, and yet, together they are only one God; and one of the big implications of that is that when we ask who was born of the virgin Mary and laid in a manger in Bethlehem, in Trinitarian terms, we would say that was not the Father and that was not the Spirit, that was only the Son, who took on a human nature. That was his job, right? They kind of divvied up the work of salvation among the three of them and the Son said: I will be the one to be born a human, and the Spirit said: I will be the one to animate the Church, and the Father would superintend the whole thing...

DAVE BAST

And actually cause Mary to become pregnant, that was the Spirit's job, too, wasn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right. So, we sometimes...I mean, there is this thing called *modalism*, which is a technical term, but it is sort of a pop view of the Trinity, that it is just sort of like my being a husband, a son, and a pastor—three different roles, but just one person. We are more radical with that in the Trinity. We say there are three persons.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right; the threeness and the oneness go all the way down.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And the fact that Jesus was obviously a human being. I think we said earlier...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No one doubted that.

DAVE BAST

We said in an earlier program nobody ever came up to Jesus and poked him and said: Say, you are not real, are you? You are not a real person. You are not a real man; but at the same time, those who knew him best by the end of the Gospels fall down and worship him and proclaim him as God: Peter on the Day of Pentecost...So, how did that happen? Well, the key is the resurrection, isn't it? That sort of forced them to see Jesus in a new light.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

That is where it became entirely clear, and clear for everyone to see. I think there are also hints of it even before then with things that Jesus is doing and claiming to do that are really only things that God can do, like forgiving sins and judging the whole world. This is part of the reason that people—some people—reacted so

negatively to what he was saying, because they realized: Wow, if he is saying this, he is claiming to do...

DAVE BAST

To be equal with the Father, yes, right.
Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

That is right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is either true or it is blasphemy. Well, as we said in the intro to this program, knowing this about Jesus and knowing God is triune retrospectively changes how we read the Old Testament even; and so, in just a moment we will dig into scripture and see just how that goes. Stay tuned.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and today we are also joined by Dr. Han-luen Kantzer Komline, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are talking about Christology, the doctrine of Christ, and we just said, Scott and Han-luen, that understanding that Jesus is God, Jesus is the Son of God, and he always has been—God has always been this way—helps us to see new things when we go back to the Old Testament and read there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so we all know...I mean, most of us who are Christians certainly know the first verse of the Bible: In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light, and it was good, and so forth and so on; so, that is very familiar. Christians and Jews all agree on that, and so forth; but then in the New Testament you get John 1 saying also: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning and through him all things were made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. So now, John is going behind the scenes of Genesis 1, and identifying who was the active power of that creation, and saying it is the one we now know as Jesus.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

So, this is one of those places where we can really see that doctrine of the Trinity come into expression because clearly no mere human being could be present at the beginning of creation, involved actively in all of God's creative work, the agent of creation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right. As an African American preacher friend of mine says: The Son of God was before was was. He was with God from the beginning; and Dave, in this series we have also been looking at Colossians 1, which makes a similar claim.

DAVE BAST

Yes; that is the passage that has been kind of the core of this whole series. He is the image of the invisible God. He is the firstborn of the creation; but there...unpack that phrase for us: The firstborn of creation. Does that mean God created him, too?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Ah, a fateful phrase in Christian theology, yes. So of course, Arius seized upon this phrase to say...

DAVE BAST

And Arius was an early Christian teacher.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right, right; an early Christian teacher in Alexandria who had these Christological teachings that ultimately threw the Church into this tumult and this huge debate that led to the Council of Nicaea; and so he took this verse, referring to Christ as the firstborn of all creation, as indicating that Christ was, though a special creature, still a creature, and somehow subordinate to the Father eternally.

DAVE BAST

It strikes me that believing in the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the hallmark of all orthodox Christians, is kind of like riding a bicycle. It is easy to wobble and fall off on either side, and you can see why so many people are drawn to the idea that, well, Jesus was great, Jesus was huge, Jesus was higher than the angels, but he is still different from God. God still created him, because that preserves the oneness of God, and so that is tempting to hold that; but the Church has said no to that, right?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right, right; and the tricky thing about it is, is that that whole view—Arius's view that Jesus Christ was a creature, although a special creature—stemmed from an attempt—a pious attempt, really—to protect the transcendence of God, saying: You know, hey, it is unworthy of the dignity and honor of God to say that God could be a human being. I mean, that is impious.

DAVE BAST

Oh, yes, yes, yes. They didn't like that idea of getting involved in the messiness of human life; so yes, Jesus is a special man.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the Church has... all along we have fallen one way or the other. We have gone so far in the oneness of God direction that it is hard to affirm the three persons, or you go so far in the three-person direction that the oneness becomes threatened. It is a balancing act, like riding a bike or walking on a balance beam or a tightrope. You can fall one way or the other. The orthodox trick, as it were, is to keep it all straight; and in this case, what the doctrine of the Trinity implies is that whenever you read the word God in the Old Testament, for us now as Christians going back and reading the text, that is not the simple, one-person, you know, an old man with a long beard; it is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit every time; we just didn't know; and of course, our Jewish brothers and sisters still deny this when they read the Old Testament. So, Jews and Christians read the same thing in Genesis and Joshua and Psalm 19, but Christians, behind the scenes, picture Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all along; and the New Testament teaches us that the Son, who became Jesus later, had some very special roles to fulfill, and creation was the big one.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and what about the term *Lord*? When we read that in the Old Testament do we read new meaning into it also because of what we believe from the New Testament?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

That is interesting, because when you first brought that up my mind went to the application of that term in the New Testament to Jesus, and what that was saying about his divine identity.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; Paul says famously in the Philippians passage: God bestowed on him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. So, I take

that to mean that the name above every name is the name Lord, and yet, that is God's personal name in the Old Testament. So, how do we spin that one?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes, right; I think Philippians 2 is one of the passages where the divinity of Christ comes across most clearly. I mean, beginning with he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but he was in very nature or form, *morphe*, God. So, I think that is a key text certainly for thinking through who Christ is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And certainly in terms of Jesus' own awareness of this, the Gospel of John comes to mind. We read from John 14 earlier in this program, but the Gospel of John comes to mind. All of the I AM sayings in John, because near as we can tell, Yahweh, the name that God revealed to Moses first at the burning bush, means I AM, right? The great I AM; and so whenever Jesus said I AM in John he was linking himself to who Israel always regarded as Yahweh; that he was somehow God. It was a very radical claim.

DAVE BAST

So, the New Testament proclaims the full deity of Jesus. You mentioned Arius a little bit ago, this massively important Christian teacher who denied that, and we want to consider how that played out in Church history in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

And I am Han-luen Kantzer Komline.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the three of us are in a third program of a four-part series here on *Groundwork* on Christology; and Dave, just a moment ago you were mentioning, and we had talked a little bit about, the historical figure of Arius, and he was opposed by another 4th Century figure called Athanasius, and they had opposing views on who Jesus was, and it all kind of came to a head finally, after persecution of the Church ended, they were able to come out above ground a little bit from the persecuted time. They found out they had some disagreements and the Emperor Constantine thought these disagreements needed to be adjudicated; and so he called a council in the year 325 in the city of Nicaea. We have a creed—the Nicene Creed—that came out of that; but Han-luen, maybe talk a little bit about what was at stake at Nicaea. Who was Arius; who was Athanasius?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes; so, it really all started with this charismatic preacher in Alexandria. He was supposed to have been a very handsome guy who was drawing a large following, and he was...

DAVE BAST

Kind of a televangelist type?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes; he was teaching...

DAVE BAST

And this was Arius you are talking about?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

This is Arius, and he was teaching that there was a time when the Son of God was not; really making a point of drawing a distinction between Jesus Christ, who was a very special human being, in fact the greatest creature ever made, and God, who is absolutely transcendent.

DAVE BAST

So, he would have said that in the beginning there was just God. There wasn't the Word, there was only God at that point.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And then when God decided to start creating other beings, he started with Jesus and made him first.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or the Son of God who became Jesus, right.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, Athanasius opposed him and we will give away the end of the story: He won; but what did Athanasius say in opposition to Arius?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Athanasius really identified two very huge problems with what Arius was teaching. One was a problem with worship. If Arius was right, the Christian practice of singing praise to Jesus—worshipping Jesus—praying to Jesus—all of this had to be rethought; and in fact, it ought to be rejected.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, absolutely.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It would be idolatry!

DAVE BAST

And that goes back to the New Testament. They started doing that right off the bat; and you think of the scene at the very end of the book of Revelation where an angel appears to John and falls down and the angel says to him: Don't worship me, worship God. That is just a basic principle: Worship God. So, there is going to be a problem with all of Christian worship. That is going to have to go. What is the second problem?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Well, the second major problem is with salvation, because if Jesus Christ is just a creature, and in that sense, more like us on our side of the God/creation divide rather than on the divine side, then why should we trust him to help get us out of the fix that we are in, because he is really just like one of us in every way.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; so, salvation by a merely human being is kind of like trying to grab your own coat collar and pick yourself up off the ground. That doesn't work. We need somebody from outside to lift us out of the problem—the hole—that sin has dug for us, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Athanasius taught one thing, Arius taught another; it kind of became all the rage. It really was quite well known among Christians and across the Roman Empire in the 4th Century. So the best scholars of the Church came together in Nicaea in the year 325 AD, and they hammered this out, and at the end of the day Arius lost, as I said, and Athanasius won; and the key was to affirm that Jesus was the same as God; was of one being. Many of us know the Nicene Creed well. We maybe don't have it memorized like the Apostles' Creed, but we recite it often, and we kind of glide right over a line that was the result of a huge amount of blood, sweat and tears in Nicaea. Here is how that part of the Creed goes: And we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; (and now this line) of the same essence as the Father.

We as Christians should never recite that line in the Creed without taking an internal pause to say thankfully the Church got that right because that was the kicker, right?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

That's right; and this is where Arius just...he finally stopped wriggling around people's arguments and just said: I cannot affirm that. Jesus Christ is similar to the Father in substance, but not...

DAVE BAST

Not identical, yes. You just reminded me of an evangelical preacher I heard once who was trying to pin down a colleague, and this guy also was very slippery about what he believed about Jesus, and finally this man said to him: Do you worship Jesus? And the fellow replied: No, of course not. I worship God. That is where it comes to a head, as you were saying earlier, do we have the right, do we have the duty, really, to worship Jesus?

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is interesting you mentioned the Greek term, *homoousios*. That was Athanasius's term and that won the day; but Arius's term was one vowel different: *homoiousios*; one vowel different; and a lot of people look at that to this day and say: Oh, for goodness' sake. They roll their eyes and say: One letter, one vowel, same-similar, who cares? But, Han-luen, as you said, if we don't get this right, our worship of Jesus is idolatry and our hope for salvation may be a fantasy. This is pretty important.

Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

This ended up being debated for decades even after Nicaea, and due to the work of the Cappadocians and Athanasius, it was reaffirmed at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

DAVE BAST

And really, these views of Jesus are still around today, aren't they? I mean, this is still a contemporary issue.
Han-luen Kantzer

KOMLINE

Yes; Arianism is alive and well today; and the funny thing is, there are a few people who will claim Arianism, although that is more unusual. In most cases, people aren't really aware of the implications of what their views are of who Christ is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But as we said, we can be thankful; and whenever we recite the Nicene Creed should take a little internal pause on that line: of the same essence as the Father; because that is when the Church got it right. They either got it right or they got it wrong. If they got it wrong, we have been off the rails for two thousand years; but thanks be to God, we believe they actually did get it right.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and today we have been joined by Han-luen Kantzer Komline. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture; so visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what you would like us to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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