

# BASIC CHRISTIANITY

## Lecture Number 2

### GOD

#### INTRODUCTION

Revised 2/2/07

Which came first: the chicken or the egg? Either there have always been eggs which were laid by chickens which hatched from eggs laid by chickens ... etc. Or “sometime” there must have been something which was neither chicken nor egg.

Consider a row of dominoes. I push over the first one, and the entire row falls over. Why did the last one fall?.... Because the one next to it pushed it over.

No matter how long the row of dominoes is, the answer is always the same—“because the one next to it pushed it” —until we come to the very first domino. No single one of the domino-falls is self-explanatory. It did not cause itself. But, on the other hand, what did cause it does not completely account for the event; and so it is called an *insufficient* cause. It is an insufficient explanation.

An infinitely endless series of such insufficient causes would still be insufficient to cause itself, insufficient to account for itself.

The “Big Bang” theory of the astronomers says that once upon a time all matter/energy was concentrated in something as small, perhaps, as an egg. Then it exploded; and, as the energy began to fly off in all directions, it organized itself into atoms and molecules and suns and planets, etc., until we have the Universe as we know it.

Either it will keep expanding for ever,.... OR it will reach a point where the force of gravity will be greater than the explosive force—at which point it will begin to collapse upon itself until, once again, it is the size of an egg. Perhaps it has already done that an infinite number of times.

Anyway, the “Big Bang” theory cannot be disproved. But it is not, in any case, an account of the origin of the Universe, nor an explanation of it; it is only a description.

Apparently, the current opinion of cosmologists is that the “Big Bang” happened just once, and, based upon mathematical calculations, that the Universe will not collapse upon itself at some point.

But if the Universe has always been, and that’s the whole story, then that leaves us with a very serious difficulty: it makes all our values relative.

To illustrate: Imagine that a high-school senior comes to me in May and asks me to help him find a job. I ask him why he wants a job. He says he needs to make some money. I ask him what the money is for. He says: To go to college. I ask him why he wants to go to college. He says that he wants to go on to medical school. I ask him why he wants to go to medical school. He says he wants to be a doctor.

Well, I ask him why he wants to be a doctor, and he says that it's so that he can make money. So I lend him enough money to buy a power lawn mower. He develops a small business, with enough customers to keep him busy cutting their grass. And by the end of June he pays me back the loan.

By the middle of August, as he sweats in the afternoon sun, he begins to wonder just why he is doing it. But the vision of college keeps him going. Then he gets to college, and one night he is cramming for a chemistry exam. His roommate urges him to take a break and go out with him and a couple of good-looking girls he knows.

But what enables him to say no and keeps him at work is the vision of the next step—medical school. In medical school what keeps him working—and it is even harder there—is the vision of becoming a doctor.

He discovers that the medical profession is hard work. He is at the mercy of his patients, and especially the ones who just think they are sick.. He never really gets a chance to enjoy all the money he is making.

What keeps him going is the vision of ... But what if there is no vision?

If that boy, on that hot August afternoon, had suspected that there was no vision at the end, he would have quit before he ever got to college. And, as a matter of fact, many people have dropped out for that very reason.

If the doctor says that keeping people well is what keeps him going, then what are people for? And that is the \$64 question. And there is no answer,.....IF the natural Universe is all that there is.

Now, if that point of view is unsatisfactory, there is an alternative:

Behind or before the first domino of the Universe, the first egg/chicken, there is that which is *other* than domino, other than egg/chicken, a first cause which is not itself a part of the system, which transcends the system. My finger pushed over the first domino. My finger is not a domino. My finger transcends the system of dominoes.

## THE FIRST CAUSE

The first cause cannot be the result of some other cause, or else it would not be the first cause. And the first cause must always have existed, or else it would be the effect of whatever caused it to be. Therefore, the first cause must be *eternal*: that is, it exists *necessarily*. “Honey, it just is!”

If there ever had been just nothing, there would still be nothing—for there would be nothing to make the situation be otherwise. Out of nothing comes nothing. *Something* has to have been *always*. Either it is another chicken and another egg, etc., a series of insufficient causes and effects, or it is something which is *self-existent*, self-explanatory.

The first cause cannot be material. As we saw last time the nature of matter is change, process. And matter is part of the system of cause and effect. The first cause must be something like  $2 + 2 = 4$ ; it must be *spiritual*.

And the first cause does cause. Therefore, the first cause is *creative*.

The first cause did not have to cause anything at all. If it had to, then it would not be the first cause but would be subject to some prior cause.

The first cause, then, must be intelligent, having purpose(s), and free to choose to cause or not to cause. I was *relatively* free to choose to push over the first domino. But the first cause must be *absolutely* free to choose. To be able to choose is what we mean by being a person. The first cause, then, is *personal*.

So we may say that unless the Universe caused itself to be and to continue being, then there is—behind it or before it a *transcendent first cause which is eternal, spiritual, creative and personal*, and that First Cause the Christian Church calls God.

## THE CREATED ORDER

Let us imagine that I have the power to expand a penny until its diameter is as great as that of the Earth. As it expands before our eyes, at first it is a huge sheet of copper; then as it expands further it becomes translucent; then it becomes transparent; and finally it disappears from our view altogether.

We can't see anything at this scale, because it is made up of atoms separated by great distances and moving at great speed. If I could catch one in my hand I wouldn't be able to see it. It is also almost entirely "empty" space in which electrons move rapidly at great distances around a nucleus.

And if I expand the atom until it is as big as the state of Texas and catch an electron in my hand, I won't be able to see anything. Because an electron is really only a theoretically measurable center of a field of energy which extends in all directions until it merges with the fields of other electrons.

Matter is energy organized in a pattern. It is a dynamic pattern — but still a pattern.

- Where does energy come from? The natural scientist says, "Honey, it just is."

The Christian goes a step further: Matter is an idea in the mind of God to which he has given the energy of his will.

Note: God was not just walking along one day and found a lump of matter, out of which he made the Universe. Rather, he "others" it -- or, to use the old Germanic word, he *utters* it. So the Book of Genesis tells of God creating the world by saying "Let there be light, dry land, etc."

The prologue of St. John's Gospel says "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ...and according to him was everything made that was made ... In him was life, and the life was the light of men."

Both natural scientists and Christians speak of light as the ultimate. For example: Science says, " $E$  equals  $MC^2$ "; that is the speed of light is the fastest speed that it is possible to attain.

The Bible says things like, "Let there be light"; "Light from Light, God from God"; "The light of men".

- What happens to a song when the singer stops singing?...It just isn't.

If God were to withdraw the energy of his will from the Universe, or from anything in it, it would disappear. But since God doesn't have a body—he is without “parts or passion” – he doesn't get tired of thinking. And he doesn't change his mind. So we keep on existing.

Nevertheless, it is well that we should remember that we hang by a thread over the abyss of nothingness!

- Since there is no such thing as a “where” which is not itself the creation of God, there is no place where God is not. Therefore, God is *omnipresent*.
- Because there is no ultimate source of power except God, he is *omnipotent*.
- Shakespeare himself does not appear in any of his plays, yet the plays themselves reveal the mind of a supreme poet and dramatist. So too the Universe is full of evidence of God; in fact, it is itself evidence of him. But it is the kind of evidence which always leaves us free to ignore or deny his existence: it does not compel us to believe.

In the last analysis, whether or not one believes in God is a matter of choice. It is only after that choice is made that one can really discover whether or not God does exist. God has chosen that we shall exist—and that is why we do. Then he invites us to return the favor. We are free to live as though he does, or as though he does not, exist. But of course our choice does not, in itself, change the fact of God's existence.

- The Universe is not a kind of clock that God “wound up” once upon a time, and left ticking down through the centuries. Creation happens every instant. In fact, “every instant” is part of what God creates.

## ETERNITY

How long is an hour?...60 minutes. How long is a minute?...60 seconds....How long is a second?

If I were to wave a magic wand and to cause absolutely all motion in the Universe to stop instantaneously, and then if I were to have it all return instantaneously to normal, there would be no way to tell how long it had been stopped – or, indeed, whether it had been stopped at all. For the things by which we measure time—clocks, the motion of the sun in the sky—would have been stopped and started too.

Maybe that is what happens all the time! The Universe may run for a second, then stop for a thousand years, then run for another second, and so on. If so, we could not know it. And it wouldn't matter. It makes no difference whether it does or not.

Time can only be understood in terms of motion, and therefore only in terms of space. And vice versa – space can only be understood in terms of time. They are relative to each other.

Eternity is not a long, long time. It is more “like” one vast, unending, simultaneous NOW.

Time and space are the creatures of God. So there never was a “time” when God was not.

In this life we come closest to experiencing what eternity is like in those rare moments when we are so engrossed in a great experience that we forget where we are and lose all sense of the passage of time. It may be that we are spending an evening in delightful conversation with close friends—and at 1:30 in the morning we say, “Good heavens! I didn’t realize it was so late.”

God is eternal. He is not “in” time and space. Time and space are “in” him.

## GOD’S LIMITATIONS

God has certain internal limits which are part of his nature. There are some things which even he cannot do. God cannot make a square circle. That is, he cannot do nonsense!

In the 19th century novel *Trilby* there is a hypnotist named Svengali who, by power of hypnotism, turned a young woman into a world-famous opera singer. In spite of this success he was unhappy and lonely. No one loved him. So he hypnotized the girl, Trilby, and told her to make love to him.

But, at the last moment, just as she was about to embrace him, he cried, “Stop! This is Svengali making love to Svengali!”

God cannot make a moral creature without freedom to sin. If I *had* to tell the truth, it would not be me doing it, but God. The reason that God does not stop me from lying is that he wants *me* to tell the truth.

The presence of sin in the natural Universe is itself evidence of God’s greatness. He is able to create moral, free, beings.

Furthermore, it is evidence of his total security. God is not threatened by sin and evil. Jesus demonstrated that on the cross.

## THE DIVINE SOCIETY

Up to this point what we have said is the sort of thing which human beings could have thought up on their own. But the next step we are going to take is not one which it is possible to discover without help from outside of the natural order.

Because the Christian Church is convinced that Jesus was absolutely to be trusted and that he spoke with the authority of God himself, it takes seriously the things he says.

And Jesus says, “I and my Father are one ... Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” [John 10:30, 14:9]. Here he identifies himself with the Father, the God of creation.

He also says such things as: “I came down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” [John 6:38]. Here he distinguishes himself from the Father.

In the same paradoxical language he speaks of the Holy Spirit whom he is going to send.

So the Church began its history firmly committed to the dogma that there is only one God – referred to in the Old Testament as “Jehovah” or, more correctly, Yahweh—and yet there are three. But the one-ness does not destroy the three-ness, nor does the three-ness destroy the one-ness.

The Jews were scandalized at such a notion, and the Greeks and Romans laughed at it. But the Church, as it battled its way through a series of heresies, resisted the temptation to explain away the apparent contradiction. She was determined to hold on to both horns of the dilemma and to give it a ride.

And so all new members were initiated into the Church by being bathed three times—once each in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit—the Holy Trinity.

So because of *revelation*—that which has been revealed to us—Christians are committed to the dogma that God is SOCIAL, a society.

## THE HOLY TRINITY

The Council of Chalcedon in the year 451 settled the final and authoritative form of this dogma, as we have it in the Nicene Creed.

The Creed of Nicaea said, in the original Greek, that in God there are three *hypostases* but one *ousia* – or, to use the Latin forms with which we are more familiar in English, three *persons* and one *substance*.

The dogma of the Holy Trinity is the statement of a mystery, in fact, *the mystery!* Remember that in a mystery there are two terms which seem contradictory but which are both true. How can God be both three and one?

There are a number of analogies to help us think about what the doctrine of the Holy Trinity means. No one analogy is adequate. Each analogy can only go so far. It has to be balanced by others—the way one term of a mystery is balanced by the other.

In the Catholic Church of the west, the following analogies are commonly used to express the mystery of the Holy Trinity:

- God can be conceived of as pure and eternal mind. And He has one thought which contains all that he has ever known or ever will know. His thought, in fact, is equal to—or identical with—him; the only difference is that between thinker and thought.

Since the Thought is everything the Thinker is, the Thought is conscious and thinks. What does he think?....He thinks the Thinker.

Their life is the act of thinking, the Thinker thinking the Thought and the Thought thinking the Thinker.

The Thinker is God the Father; the Thought is God the Son; the Thinking back and forth is God the Holy Spirit.

- Likewise, the Holy Trinity can also be conceived of as the Lover, loving the Beloved, and vice versa; and the love which passes between them is the Holy Spirit.
- Another western analogy is to speak of God the Father as the Divine Intellect, God the Son as the Divine Will, and God the Holy Spirit as the Divine Affection.

In the eastern, or Orthodox, Church, the following analogies are used:

- God the Father is Truth; God the Son is the Image of Truth; and God the Spirit manifests the Truth.
- God the Father is Beautiful; God the Son is the Image of Beauty; God the Holy Spirit manifests the Image of Beauty.
- God the Father is the Thought; God the Son is the Word; God the Spirit is the Expression.

The eastern Orthodox criticize us Catholics of the west for having added certain words to the creed which speak of the Holy Spirit proceeding not only from the Father, but also from the Son: “who proceedeth from the Father *and the Son*”. Those words, “and the Son”, are called in Latin the “*filioque* clause”.

They point out that in St. John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of Truth, who *proceeds from the Father*, he will bear witness to me;...” [John 15:26]

It would be more accurate to say that *eternally* the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son, and *in time* the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son.

This is a complicated technical theological question. But the Orthodox are certainly right in saying that the western Church had no authority to add the filioque clause to the creed. And at the very least it demonstrates how important it is to use more than one analogy in thinking about the Holy Trinity.

## CREATION

“All things were created according to the Word [Greek: *logos*] and without him was not anything made that was made” [John 1:3].

There was once a mind, a thinker, a lawyer named Erle Stanley Gardner, who took part of his thought and gave it an existence separate from himself: He wrote a series of detective stories about a lawyer named Perry Mason.

In each story Perry solved the mystery in the courtroom, got his client off— who was always a pretty young woman—and he also proved that someone else sitting in the courtroom was actually the murderer.

We can imagine Erle Stanley Gardner autographing a copy of one of his books. As he does so, he recalls in an instant the whole plot, the setting of the story, and the many characters. They are



instantly present to him. But within the book itself there are time and place, and characters and events moving through them. The book is a world in itself.

God created the Universe according to his thought, his Word (*Logos*). He thought it; then he *othered* it—he uttered it.

Now imagine the Perry Mason story which Erle Stanley Gardner never wrote—though he could have done so. In this case, Perry is completely stumped. So he visits another lawyer to get his help. The other lawyer who tells him just how to solve the case is named Erle Stanley Gardner.

You see what has happened? The author has written himself into the story. *Who* Erle Stanley Gardner is, is the *author*. *What he is*, is both *character and author*.

God thought the world into existence. And then, in the fullness of time, something like this happened—he thought himself a sperm which fertilized an ovum in the womb of a virgin named Mary.

And thus he began to live a human life within history, within his creation. His name in history is “The Salvation of God”—which is what the name *Jesus* means.

Who Jesus is, is God. What Jesus is, is God and Man.

## THE PURPOSE OF CREATION

Have you ever had an experience like this? You go to the movies to see what turns out to be a really great movie. Afterwards, as you leave the theater, the crowd for the next showing is coming in. And as they pass, you grin at perfect strangers and say, “Wow! You’re really gonna like it!”

What is happening? The good experience, the movie which is now part of you, is giving itself away.

It is the nature of that which is good to give itself away. Everything that God has created is good. So it tries to give itself away. Every body tries to give itself away to every other body, “in proportion to the product of their masses and in inverse proportion to the square of the distance between them”—which, you might say, is Newton’s Law from a Christian point of view!

Imagine the Joneses at home alone one evening. The doorbell rings. Standing there is a couple who had moved away from the area ten years before. The Joneses are thrilled to see them. Before long they remember others in town who were also friends of theirs. They call them up and invite them over. And the next thing you know there is a great party going on.

Throughout eternity God is knowing, loving, and enjoying himself.

God, the Holy Trinity, is having a party. *He* is (or) *They* are a party.

God is goodness himself. It is in his nature to give himself away.

God has made the whole human race in order that he might invite them to his party. That is why Jesus often described the life of heaven in terms of banquets and feasts and dinner parties.

God said, “Let us make Man in our own image,”—that is, “persons who, like us, can choose and can freely accept or reject our invitation.”

Man was created to *know* God, to *love* God, and to *enjoy* God for ever in eternity.

## THE ANSWER IN THE BACK OF THE BOOK

Now we have the answer to the \$64,000 Question, “What are people for?”

The purpose of Man—your purpose and mine—is to go to God’s party! The end of Man is to know God, to love God, and to enjoy God forever in eternity.

In coming to know God, who is the source of all things, Man will thereby know all things of God’s creation. [I Cor. 13:12]

In coming to love God, Man’s moral nature will be made perfect in the process, and he will thereby love all of God’s creatures.

In enjoying God, Man will also enjoy all of creation.

The creatures of God all tend to realize, to actualize, the fulfillment of their natures. Acorns tend to become oak trees.

And, from early childhood, human beings tend to ask questions: “Why, Daddy? Why, huh, why?”—and every answer we get simply poses a new question. And we are not meant ever to stop asking questions till we have come *all the way* to the only really adequate answer there is – till we know God as completely as we are able.

Only God can satisfy our hunger to know and to be known. [I Corinthians 13:12] \*

Only God can satisfy our hunger to love and to be loved.

Only God can satisfy our hunger to enjoy and to be enjoyed. Just think of it: to be enjoyed by God!

To fail to achieve this purpose is to be a complete failure. The Church calls it damnation and hell. To succeed in this is to be a complete success. The Church calls that salvation and heaven.

## CHOICES TO BE MADE

Do you believe the universe is all there is [“Honey, it just is.”]?

Or do you believe in God who causes it to be?

Do you want to accept his invitation to love him, to know him, and to enjoy him forever in eternity?

\*I Corinthians 13:12: (St. Paul:) “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”