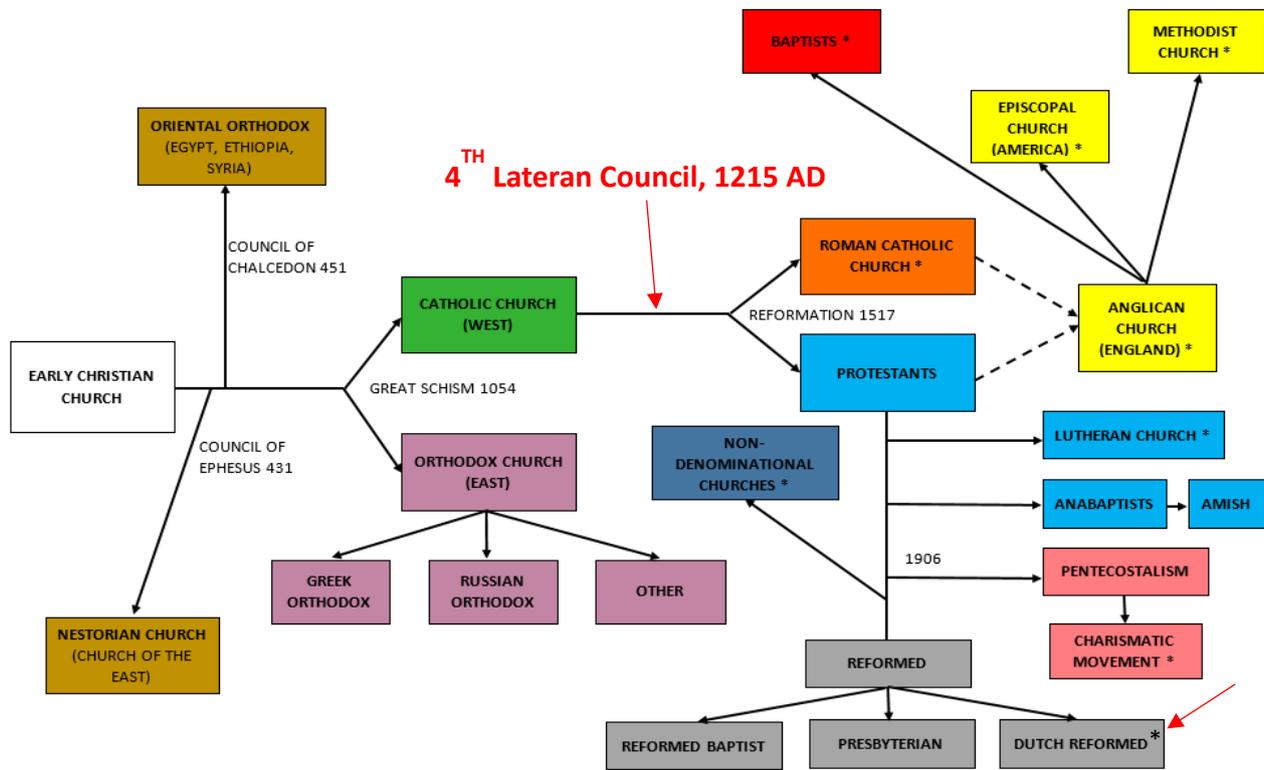


3. THE CHURCH TODAY – PART 2



WHAT SPLIT THE EASTERN AND WESTERN CHURCHES?

- Firstly, I must make a clarification: While I said in the previous lecture that one can only really begin to speak of the Roman Catholic Church after the Reformation, that might not have been the most insightful comment. After all, why did the Reformers feel they could not continue in the Catholic Church and had to break away?
- It would be better to say that many scholars agree that most of the core beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church had been put in place by 1215 AD, and that disagreements with these core doctrines led to the Reformation and then the Roman Catholic Church as we know it today.



- Last week we looked at what it means to be Protestant, and how important it is to know what you believe.
- This week we go back in time to look at the event that was the chief catalyst for the Great Schism (separation or split) between the Eastern and Western Churches in 1054.

1. DIFFERENCES REGARDING THE TRINITY

The differences in language and cultural background began to work itself out in theology very early, especially in how the Eastern Church and the Western Church tried to make sense of the Trinity:

- There is ONE God in THREE distinct Persons. The challenge then is to determine what makes the persons distinct from each other? They are clearly distinct, yet there is a sameness that makes them indivisibly ONE. You cannot say one is stronger, holier, 'more' eternal, more omniscient (all-knowing) or omnipresent (present everywhere at the same time) than the others, because they all share the attributes of being equally God. All three Persons are equally worthy of worship and adoration.
- Using Biblical language, the distinctions came down to how each Person *has* their Personhood: In order to truly be Father, the Father must have a Son. But the Father has eternally been Father,

therefore His Son must have existed eternally as well. The Bible speaks of the Son being begotten of the Father:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” John 3:16 MEV.

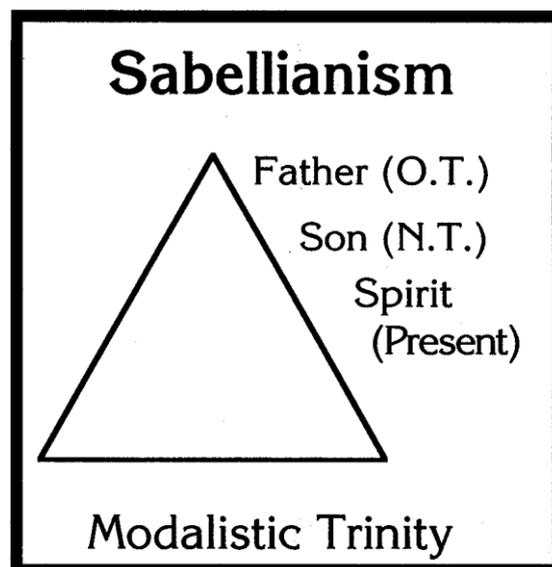
- To *beget* is to have a child, one with the same nature as you. Humans can only beget humans. Since the Father eternally begets the Son, then the Son shares the Father’s nature and is also God. Because He is the *only* begotten Son, He is unique in His Sonship. So that is what sets their Persons apart.
- But if Jesus is the only *begotten* of the Father, what about the Spirit? The Bible says that the Holy Spirit *proceeds* from the Father:

“But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me.” John 15:26 MEV.

- Again, if the Holy Spirit is God, then He is eternal, and this is an eternal procession. Also, He is clearly a Person, not some impersonal or spiritual force floating around!

WESTERN UNDERSTANDING

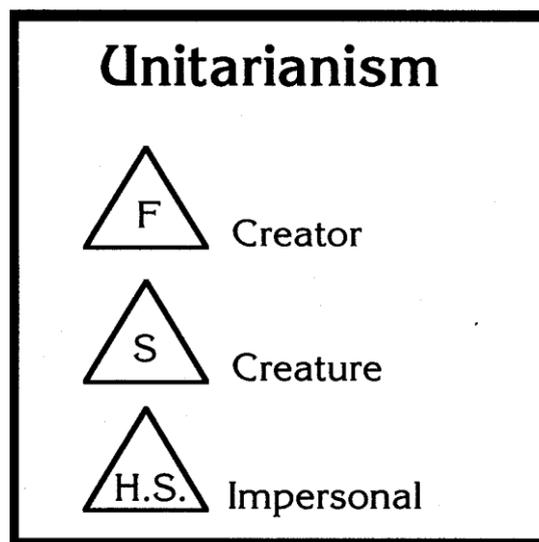
- The Western Church tended to start with the fact that there is only ONE God, and then argued for how one God could be THREE distinct persons.
- *Personhood* was a term that came from Roman Law and provided an explanation for both the unity and distinctions between the three Persons.
- *BONUS*: Because Western theology stressed the oneness of God a heresy called Modalism (or *Sabellianism*) sprang up in the Western Church, when a bishop by the name of Sabellius began to teach that God was really only ONE Person who manifested (or revealed) Himself in three different *modes* or roles over the course of time: Father (Old Testament), Son (Gospels), Holy Spirit (New Testament onwards).



False views of the Trinity (House 1992:50)

EASTERN UNDERSTANDING

- The Eastern Church tended to start with the fact that there are THREE persons and argued for how there can be only ONE God.
- Greek philosophy was concerned about finding and identifying the *source* of every substance. For placing things into hierarchies of importance. Philosophers were constantly trying to find out what exactly made something what it was. For example, there was a popular theory that everything material (physical) consisted of one of the four elements: earth, air, fire or water, or a combination of those four. Someone then said that there must be another element that is even more basic than these four, and so they began to search for the *quintessence*, the one element that would bring the four together.
- Theologians began to apply this same thinking to God: What is the *source* of God, what is it that ultimately makes God, *God*? They looked at the Biblical language and found that the Son is begotten of the Father, while the Spirit proceeds from the Father. God the Father is then ultimately the source of the Trinity, because without Him there could be no Son or Spirit. In effect they created a hierarchy in the Trinity, with the Father being the most important person.
- Because we use the phrase “*The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit*”, that could easily become a hierarchy in our minds if we don’t guard against it! All three Persons are equally God and of equal value and importance.
- **BONUS:** Because Eastern theology stressed the *Threeness* of the Persons and essentially elevated the Father above the Son and Spirit, the heresy of Arianism took root in the East. Arius taught that only the Father was eternal, Jesus was created by Him. Therefore, only the Father can be said to be truly God (UNITarianism [one] vs. TRINItarianism [three])



False views of the Trinity (House 1992:50)

ARE THERE EXAMPLES WITH WHICH WE CAN EXPLAIN THE TRINITY?

No, they all fall short, and most of them descend into heresy:

1. God is like water – Water can be a solid (ice), liquid (water) or gas (steam). Three in one.
 - a. This is an example of *Modalism*, not Trinitarianism: Water can exist in any of those states but not all three at the same time. The three Persons of the Trinity are always present, and they are distinct.
2. God is like an egg – You have the shell, the yolk and the egg-white. Three in one.
 - a. This is an example of *Tri-theism* (three separate gods), not Trinitarianism: If you crack open the egg you can easily separate the shell, yolk and egg-white and use them in

different applications. They can exist on their own. The Trinity is indivisible, you cannot separate the three persons.

3. God is like a lightbulb – The Father is the bulb, the Son is the light given off by the bulb, and the Spirit is the electricity that powers the bulb. Three in one.
 - a. This is an example of *Unitarianism*: The Father is the most important, without Him there would be no Son (the light), and the Spirit is just an impersonal force (electricity).

In short, the Trinity, while clearly established in Scripture, is a concept that is almost impossible for human minds to grasp. There is nothing else like it, it is wholly unique. We should therefore stick as closely as possible to Biblical language and avoid trying to explain the unexplainable with feeble human examples!

THE CONTROVERSY

- In order to definitively deal with heresies regarding the Trinity, especially Arianism, a Council was called at Nicaea in 325 AD. There Arianism was condemned as heresy and a creed was drawn up to promote the true Christian teaching. Because the focus of the Council was on Jesus and His relationship to the Father, the creed only said this about the Holy Spirit: “*We believe in the Holy Spirit*”. Like in what is called today the *Apostles’ Creed*.
- Theologians (especially the *Cappadocian Fathers*) began to develop the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, the Nicene Creed was expanded, and now said the following about the Holy Spirit:

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.*

- The Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople were *ecumenical* councils, meaning that there were representatives from both the Eastern and Western Churches present. The resulting creed was viewed as the official teaching of the Universal (Catholic) Church.
- It thus came as a surprise to bishops and theologians from the East when over time they began to hear Western bishops and theologians add words to the creed when it came to the Holy Spirit:

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father **and the Son**.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.*

- This addition is known as the *filioque* (Latin for *and the Son*) controversy, and by the 800’s AD it was universally accepted and taught in the Western Church. Why did it come about?
- As you can see, the Western Church agreed that the Spirit proceeded from the Father, but as they began to study Scripture, they came to the conclusion that the relationship between the Son and the Spirit is not as straightforward as originally thought:
 - Firstly, it helps draw further distinction between the Son and the Spirit. After all, if one is eternally begotten by, and the other eternally proceeding from, the Father, what really makes the Son and Spirit different from each other? But it also has good Biblical support.
 - “*But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you.*” John 14:26 MEV. Why send the Spirit in the Name of the Son, and not the Name of the Father?

- Even though John 15:26 says that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, Jesus said that *He* would send the Spirit.
- In Luke 3:16, John the Baptist says that “*He (Jesus) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit...*”
- In John 16:14 Jesus says that “*He (The Spirit) will glorify Me, for He will receive from Me and will declare it to you.*” If the Spirit proceeded from the Father alone, why is He receiving from Jesus?
- Probably most convincingly, in Romans 8:9 the Spirit is called the Spirit of *God*, and the Spirit of *Christ*: “*You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. Now if any man does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him*”.
- Interestingly enough, the Western theologians also referenced Revelation 22:1 “*Then he showed me a pure river of the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb (The Son)*”, where they took the river of life to be the Holy Spirit (based on John 4:10-14 and John 7:37-39, also Revelation 21:6). They saw in these verses the picture of the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Throne of God the Father and God the Son.

THE FALLOUT

- For the record, as far as we are capable of understanding the Trinity, I think that the Western theologians got it right. I do believe that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. I would not call anyone a heretic for believing otherwise or for saying they don’t know.
- This did however cause major problems in the Church:
 - The Western Church did not go about it in the right way. They should have called an ecumenical council in order to debate what they believe Scripture taught with their Eastern brethren, not snuck the term in there without any consultation.
 - The Eastern Church was extremely offended, because by altering the wording of the Nicene Creed the Western Church was departing from the Catholic teaching regarding the Holy Spirit.
 - Because of their commitment to the view that God the Father is the source of the Trinity, the Eastern Church thought that the West was robbing the Father of glory that belonged to Him alone and sharing it with the Son.
 - They also questioned how the Western Church could dare to try and ‘peek behind the divine curtain’ as it were and say they so definitively understand the Trinity (as we will see next week, to the Eastern Church God’s essence is really unknowable).
- The act of adding the *filioque* clause to the Nicene Creed is undoubtably the greatest event that shaped the split in 1054. Both the Eastern and Western Churches began to view one another with increasing suspicion, to interpret each other’s’ words in the least charitable sense, and each trying their best to influence and reform the other.
- For all the talk of unity and reconciliation, it is going to take one of the major branches of Christianity (or two, if you take the Western Church as both Protestants & Roman Catholics) to admit that they have been fundamentally wrong about the Trinity for the last 1000 years. That is going to take an awful amount of humility!
- Of course, there are liberals who say, “Well who cares about the filioque, let’s just get along”. But it is not so simple for true and faithful Orthodox, Protestants and Roman Catholics. They would want to know you agree with them theologically.
- As we will see next week, both the Orthodox and Roman Catholics claim to be the custodians of the true teachings of the Apostles, which has been carried down through the ages. To admit that your teaching has been wrong is to admit that the other side were the true *Apostolic* Church.

2. ICONS & STATUES

- Christians had begun to use art very early on. We have wall paintings from about 250 AD (more than 1500 years ago!) that have survived.
- The early Church borrowed a lot of its practices from Judaism and their Synagogues. Apart from the Temple items that God instructed the Jews to make, they refrained from making images based on the Second Commandment.

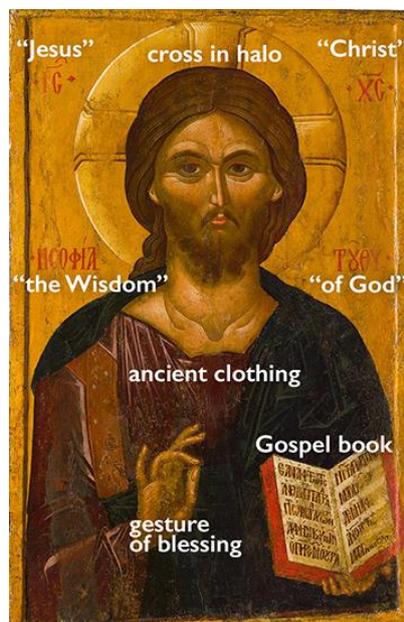


You shall not make for yourself any graven idol, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water below the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them; Ex 20:4-5a MEV

- They also wanted to distinguish themselves from pagan idolatry that was rampant in the Roman Empire: People made a living selling statues of the gods that they had cast or carved.
- However, as time went by, these practices began to slip back into the Church, especially after Christianity became the State religion of Rome (381 AD) and people began to depict Jesus, Mary, the Apostles etc. in statue form. These were not intended for worship, and therefore did not violate the 2nd Commandment they argued.

THE EASTERN CHURCH

- The Eastern Church offered serious resistance to the use of statues, preferring to use *icons* (from the Greek for 'image'). These are 2-D mosaics or paintings that depict Jesus or some other holy figure from Christianity (such as Mary) and is used to aid in worship and personal devotion.
- Orthodoxy teaches that the first icon was painted by Luke himself, of baby Jesus and Mary.



Christ Pantokrator (the Almighty) from the late 1400's

- Icons are filled with religious symbolism and truth that help focus the mind of the believer upon God's truth, often called 'windows to heaven'. The idea is that looking at the icon while praying helps focus your prayer.
- They depict people as they are now, in their heavenly glory (which is why they have halos around their heads). Thus, icons focus on spiritual truths. They are painted in a 'distorted' way on purpose, to show that we on earth do not see spiritual things perfectly as we one day will.
- Eastern Orthodox Christians *do not* worship icons. Even though they bow before and kiss icons, light candles and lamps, and burn incense before them, they would say that they venerate them, but that worship is meant to pass *through* this 'window' to Jesus Christ.
- They would argue today that it is like having a photo on your wall: You know that the person is not in the photo, but it represents them, they are with you in a way, and it is meant to stir certain emotions in you.
- Icons celebrate the fact that Jesus became a man (*incarnation*): Before God took human form in Christ, we had no idea what He looked like and so to try and make an image of Him would be blasphemy. Once God became incarnate, depiction was now possible.
- Many welcomed the use of pictures because no-one had access to the Bible and most people were illiterate. Thus, icons served as a teaching method.

THE WESTERN CHURCH

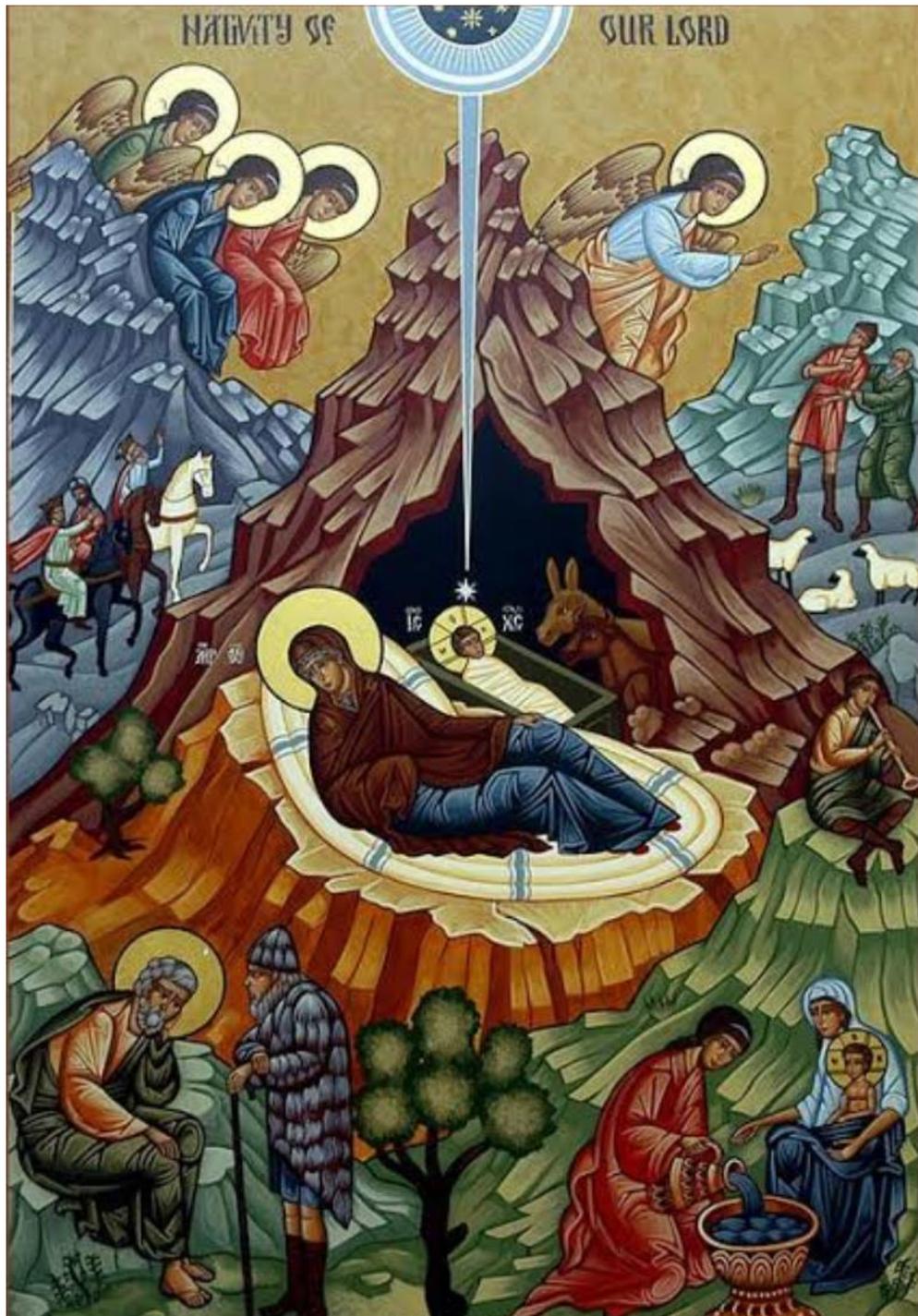


Mary, mother of Jesus, holding his body after the crucifixion

- Roman Catholics have no issues with the use of statues in their devotion and worship. They also do not worship the statues themselves, and they would make the same sorts of arguments as the Eastern Church to justify it, but there are clearly some differences:
 - Statues are 3-D, and therefore depict the full human form. The Eastern Church wanted to avoid the 'sensuality' that this could depict.
 - Statues are of Jesus, Mary or other holy Christians as they were on earth, thus more bound to the physical than the spiritual.
 - Many parts of the Eastern Empire were being conquered by the new Muslim Empire that emerged in the 630's and Muslims did not take kindly to religious statues of any kind. The East wanted therefore to shed the image of Christians making 'idols' but got no help from the Western Church in that regard.

PROTESTANT CONCERNS

- During the Reformation, Protestants removed all icons and statues from their churches and discouraged their use by Christians.
- This was because especially John Calvin had a good understanding of the human heart: Our hearts are walking *idol-factories*, and therefore even those with the best intentions cannot help but be drawn to the worship of either icons or statues whether explicitly or implicitly.
- God has given humans great creativity and many gifted artists, yet that doesn't mean that we are free to use those gifts without boundaries.
- But most importantly, we don't *need* to know what Jesus looked like. We have the Bible. If we look at what Scripture teaches about Him, we learn who He really is, what He is like and we get to know Him in a way that a picture, a photo or even a video could never communicate.



REFERENCE

House HW 1992. *Charts of Christian Theology & Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan