

GOD IN THREE PERSONS, BLESSED TRINITY

Selected Scripture
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St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in the 4th c. wrote a five-volume treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity, yet he felt he could never really wrap his brain around it. One day while walking along the beach and ruminating yet again on the matter he bumped into a little boy with a bucket, running back and forth to pour water into a little hole. Augustine asked the boy, "*What are you doing?*" The boy replied, "*I'm trying to put the ocean into this hole.*" Augustine smiled to himself because that was exactly what he was trying to do: trying to put an infinite God into his finite mind.

Thomas Jefferson called Christian orthodoxy "*the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic; that three are one, and one is three.*" These two attitudes show the kinds of responses the doctrine of the Trinity can elicit: either wondering worship or skepticism, even hostility. Augustine's response seems closer to the truth. This doctrine is not an explanation of the Godhead, but an exploration of the being and life of God. It is more of a description than a tidy definition. It reveals the truth that God is knowable, but incomprehensible. It bears witness to what we as Christians affirm, that God is known truly in Jesus Christ, but not exhaustively.

We encounter trinities in nature that offer analogies of the Triune God, but all are inadequate. H₂O, for instance, can be a liquid, a solid, and a gas.

We see it as water, ice, and steam. Fire is constituted of three separate components: fuel, heat, and oxygen, each of which is necessary to create a flame. We see it in physics. Light is constituted of three rays, or groups of wavelengths, distinct from each other, no one of which without the other would be light. Each ray has its own separate function.

What Christianity affirms is that God is sovereign, but not solitary. God is not simply a unity, but a triunity. God not only exists, but co-exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian theologians have also made a distinction between what is called the "essential Trinity" and the "economic Trinity." The first is what God is in essence and describes the life or being of God, *who* God is. This is how God is related to the divine self. The latter describes God in relation to the world. This is God's activity or *what* God does. In essence or make-up God is three persons--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--all three co-equal and co-eternal. In activity, God is revealed as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. There are not three separate job descriptions, but all act in concert. God creates, Christ creates, the Spirit creates. God redeems, Christ redeems, the Spirit redeems. God sustains, Christ sustains, the Spirit sustains.

Sometimes the confusion comes because we say God is three persons. In the early church that did not mean distinct personalities in the modern sense, but aspects of the same person. I, for instance, am Norman Bendroth,

but at the same time I am a son, a husband, and a father. In essence I remain the same even as I express different aspects of who I am. My identity remains the same. I do not have three separate centers of consciousness--one as a son, one as a father, and one as a husband. But even this analogy does not fully get at the meaning of the Trinity because my identity as father, son, or husband is defined by my relationships with other people, not in myself alone.

Nevertheless, we affirm the doctrine of the Trinity because it is taught in Scripture and affirmed by the historic Church. I cannot cite chapter and verse to support the concept of the Trinity, but it is suggested by implication in the Scriptures. The Old Testament merely hints at it and the New Testament writers assume it, but don't explain it. One of the intimations we find of the Trinity in the Old Testament is the plural form of the word for God, *Elohim*. Even in the famous "unity" passage of Deuteronomy, *Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one*, uses the plural form for God.

In the Creation narratives we see the same phenomena. At creation God said, "*Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness*," (Gen. 1:26); and after the Fall, God said, "*the human has become like one of us, knowing good from evil*," (3: 22). In our Old Testament reading today, when Isaiah saw God in the temple, he addressed God as, "*Holy, holy, holy*," three names for one God, and he heard the voice of God saying, "*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us*," (6:8).

There are, of course, numerous references to the Spirit of God in the Old Testament as well. The Creation account speaks of *the “Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters,”* (Gen. 1:2). And Job says, *“By (God's) Spirit the heavens were made fair,”* (26:13). Prior to the flood God said, *“My spirit shall not strive with humanity forever,”* (Gen. 6:3). Nehemiah asserted that it was God who delivered Israel from Egypt and *“you gave your good Spirit to instruct them,”* (9:20) while they were in the wilderness. Clearly, the Old Testament writers identified the Spirit with God.

The New Testament writers did not feel any need to "prove" the doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, by the time the Scriptures were written the early church had fully accepted the divinity of Jesus and the personality of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament writers weren't inventing a new doctrine of God, rather they were showing the God of the Old Testament consisted of three persons: the Eternal Creator who was the author of the plan of salvation, the Eternal Christ who came into the world and accomplished redemption, and the Eternal Spirit who was applying the redemption of Jesus to the world.

The New Testament has numerous references to the Trinity as well. Rather than cite them all, let me just give you a few examples. In the first Gospel the last words of Jesus were: *“All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”* (Mt. 28:

18-20). Paul made constant reference to the Trinity. Ephesians is laced with Trinitarian formulas: “*Through (Christ) we both have access in one Spirit to the Father,*” (2:18). “*There is one Body and one Spirit...one Lord (Jesus), one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us all,*” (4: 4-6). We are to be filled with the Spirit “*always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father,*” (5: 18-20). Jude, Jesus' half brother, urges his readers to pray in the Spirit, to keep themselves in the love of God, and to wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ until eternal life (Jude 20-21).

By now you're asking, "So what?" Is there any practical impact of believing in the doctrine of the Trinity? What difference will it make in how I live my life? What's the cash value? How do I get traction out of this? Let me suggest several ideas. The first is that the supreme example we have for unity among ourselves is found in God almighty. Jesus prayed for us “*that they may be one as we are one.*” There is no rivalry, no competition, no irritability between members of the Trinity. They are perfectly united in spirit and in purpose. There is no envy or jealousy between them; there is mutual deference. This is God's will for us as individuals, as families, as a church and as nations. Reality is grounded in God.

Second, to affirm the Trinity is to affirm that God is social, relational, and personal. Before the creation of the universe, God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit

were ever in communion and fellowship with one another. This means that there was interaction and communication between persons. As persons made in the image of this God we are personal, social beings who can communicate and cooperate with one another. The Trinity depicts a living God who reaches out in love, who becomes incarnate in human flesh, who is approachable. And this has social implications. If God dwells in community, then so must we. As individuals and as society we cannot be isolationists. This cuts across the American notion of the self-made person, the lone ranger image, the idea that I pulled myself up by my own bootstraps. Those are all myths. We are radically interconnected because God is so and made us so. Consequently, our public life should seek first the common good and not just my personal good.

Third, to affirm the Trinity means that God is not static, but active. To the ancient Greeks God was the unmoved Mover, the Absolute. As such God was lifeless, untouched by human pain and suffering. There was no individuality, but all was swallowed up in God's oneness. The God of the Bible is not lifeless, but living. The God of the Bible is not static and immobile, but dynamic and mobile and active in the world. This is a God who answers prayers, who gets involved in your life.

The founders of our country, Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, George Washington, and others, were "Deists." They believed that God simply crea-

ted the universe, established natural and moral laws, set it all in motion, and then became an absentee landlord. This God was rather indifferent about human affairs. But the true God came to us decisively in Jesus Christ. Our God is not just a divine monarch who sits above the world, but is our Savior and Friend who is involved in the world.

Jesus revealed that God is not an imperial, masculine father, but that God is our tender "Abba," and as such is both motherly and fatherly. In fact, to call God Father has nothing to do with masculinity. God is not male. God needed both men and women to be an adequate expression of the divine image. God is the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," God is not like a male father writ large on the universe, for this father is unlike any father we have ever known. This Father gives birth (Jer. 31: 15-20; Hosea 11). The Council of Toledo, an ancient church council, spoke of creation as coming from "the womb of the Father." Fathers don't have wombs, but this father does. It is argued helpfully by some women theologians that the incarnation had to take place in a male body to challenge the macho images of God that were popular in Jewish culture at the time of Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of a vulnerable, compassionate love that calls into question all of our own ideas about what constitutes true humanity and true deity.

The theological point of calling God "Father" and Christ the "Son," is not that God has male chromosomes, but that God is one in essence, but distinct

as persons. In Jesus' day, religions abounded with female deities and fertility cults. In one sense, there was no other image that he could have used to distinguish the one true God from all the others and communicate that God was both personal and parental. When a mother is pregnant and the child is *in utero*, they are one, even as they are two. A father impregnates the mother, yet remains distinct. The child has the father's DNA, but is differentiated more so from her father than from her mother. Hence, one in essence, but distinct as persons. These are deep waters and worthy of several sermons, but we must move on.

Lastly, to affirm the Trinity is to affirm that God is inexhaustible and incomprehensible. God is complete within the divine self and as such is not dependent upon the creation. God desires to live in communion with the world, but is not dependent upon the world. God as our Maker has a dream for us, a dream of shalom, of wholeness, of perfection, of complete happiness. Jesus is the vision made manifest to us of the kind of dream God has for us, of what human beings were meant to be like. The Holy Spirit is the active presence that brings the dream to reality. The Maker of the promises and the creator of the vision has the capacity to keep the promises and fulfill the dreams. When you are exhausted, when you can't go on, when you can't make sense out of it all, our Triune God has inexhaustible resources.

When we encounter the Triune God we encounter mystery. But mystery is not something that goes contrary to reason, but beyond reason. We can apprehend that God is three persons in one being, but we can't comprehend how this is true. And this is fine with me, because I wouldn't want to worship a God I could figure out.