

One Being, Three Persons

1 Corinthians 8:4-6; Ephesians 4:1-6;
Matthew 28:16-20

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Last week we looked at how the Trinity is revealed in the OT. The New, we said, quoting Augustine, the new is in the old concealed. The Trinitarian reality is really there, but in a shadowy form, embryonically. There is, we saw, real differentiation in God. His unity, even in the OT, is depicted as complex. This morning, we come to the second half of Augustine's famous aphorism: the old is in the new revealed. In the NT revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the mystery of the Triune God is cracked open for us.

Nevertheless, the Trinity has always had its detractors. It has been thought to be a later – usually 4th c --- (philosophical) imposition on the simpler NT picture of God. On this view, the council of Nicea in 325 AD is the enshrining of error. It runs afoul, many have said, of the biblical data, which its opponents feel is definitely on their side. And there has always been a steady stream of anti-trinitarians, from the ancient Arians to modern unitarians and JW's. (average Christian walking around). These groups insist – again, not without texts – they insist that the Scripture can and must be interpreted as teaching that the Son is less than, subordinate to, the Father.

The Trinity has been thought to borrow too heavily from non-biblical categories like person, substance, nature, essence, being and the like. And the opponents are often quick to point out that they just want to stick to the biblical language, and these are not biblical terms. And, of course, there were and are Jewish and Muslim scholars (not to mention atheists) who contend the doctrine is contradictory, irrational, and unintelligible.

Now, we have already laid the groundwork of a response. We have seen that the doctrine is rooted in the ancient Hebrew soil of the Scriptures of Israel. But today, from the NT, I hope to demonstrate that the classical doctrine, defined at Nicea, is in fact the teaching of God's Word. It is not a later imposition and, while it is a mystery, it is not unintelligible. And yes, later terminology DID develop, but even that is not an attempt to replace the biblical language. Rather, the vocabulary the church developed serves to illumine the varied language of Scripture.

We are not, contrary to many anti-trinitarians, bound only to the words of Scripture. If we were, preaching would be impossible. We are also bound –

inevitably – to use other words to unfold and clarify Scripture’s words. And we will do so under three headings. One God. Three Persons. And then, what I will call, relations. One God. Three Persons. Relations.

I. God

First, one God. The NT, every bit as much as the old, reaffirms that God is One. At no point does it countenance the idea that there might be more than one God. And this affirmation often comes in the context of some kind of plurality in God (recognition of others in God). For example, the famous baptismal text, which we heard from Matthew 28 (gospel lesson) commands us: To go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. What’s important to see here is that it’s the NAME, singular --- and God’s name is God’s character, his God-ness.

Whatever one wants to say of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they do not give God three names or three beings. The name of God is one, singular and unique. The OT name, the personal name of the God of the covenant is Yahweh. And this usage here by Matthew is probably an indirect reference to THAT name. So, even here, where we see three “persons,” (quotes) there is one God, one Name.

Or think of what Paul does in 1 Cor. 8 where he says: There may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. Here he is echoing the famous Shema of Israel from Deuteronomy 6: Hear, O Israel: *The Lord our God, the Lord is one.* For us too, even though we speak of the Father and the LORD Jesus Christ, for us too, there is but One God. All other gods, or so-called gods, Paul says, are, in fact, demons. Or, to give a third context where multiple persons are mentioned, think of Ephesians 4 (was also read) which states:

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

You have a mention of the Spirit, and the LORD (that’s the Greek equivalent of Yahweh) and the Father – yet it is clear that there is only ONE God. We see this assertion in other NT contexts as well. Negatively, James says, even the demons believe that God is One. Nobody, James’ point is, is doctrinally confused about this. God is one, Paul says in Romans 3, and that is why he will justify Jew and Gentile in the same manner.

So it’s important to say this: The NT, though it is written in Greek, is written by Jews about the Jewish Messiah, and is fully in accord with the Hebrew Bible. Thus, it unequivocally asserts the same monotheism which is ferociously

affirmed by the Law and the Prophets. Thus, our catechisms follow Scripture – in BOTH testaments -- when they ask: *Are there more Gods than one?* And answer: There is but one only, the living and true God. That's the one God.

II. Three Persons

Second, then, three persons. Even though the assertion of one and only one God remains, nevertheless, and we've seen some of this already, the NT reveals a rich plurality in God. Now, there are a lot of way to show this. Our larger catechism says this:

Q 11. How doth it appear that the Son and the Holy Ghost are God equal with the Father?

A. The Scriptures manifest that the Son and the Holy Ghost are God equal with the Father, ascribing unto them such names, attributes, works, and worship, as are proper to God only.

It would not be hard to show that the names, attributes, works and worship given to God, are given to the Son and the Spirit in the NT. We've already seen this in 1 Corinthians 8 where there is for us one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things. As in John 1, where we are explicitly told that the Word was God, through whom all things were made, the NT regularly places Jesus and the Father on one side, and all created things on the other.

With respect to the Spirit, we can (briefly) note that (according to Acts 5) to lie to the HS is to lie to God. The Spirit can be, Paul says, grieved. And Jesus says the Spirit can be blasphemed. As important as this line of evidence is, I want to focus on a second line of evidence. There are, if you will, triads, patterns of threes, which appear in profoundly important contexts. Let's briefly mention a few.

First, when Christ is set apart for public ministry at his baptism, the Father speaks, the Spirit descends, and the Son is baptized. Here there are clearly three – call them actors or participants, they would later be called persons --- but there are three agents at work – in unity – at the crucial opening, at the unveiling of Jesus to Israel. At his transfiguration, the Spirit being associated with the bright overshadowing cloud, the Father speaks, and the Son is irradiated with the divine glory. When we move from Jesus' ministry to the early church we see some very important triads. I've already spoken of the baptismal text where we are baptized into the name (singular) of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Clearly Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are (in some sense) PERSONAL names here, personal designations WITHIN the ONE Name of God.

Now, I want to highlight the importance of this text. First, its early. We are not scrounging around in 2nd c. authors, or 4th c. councils, and fabricating a doctrine of the Trinity. This is something that the church did – instinctively, without sorting it all out, without even understanding it deeply. And notice – this is not a question on the fringes of the church's life. This is about baptizing and making disciples. This goes to the heart of the church's mission in the world. They were Trinitarian in practice from the beginning.

There's an old joke that a philosopher is someone, who, when he finds out something works in practice, wonders if it works in theory. Well, the church was Trinitarian in practice before it was Trinitarian in theory. It was Trinitarian on the ground – before it developed theological clarity and guardrails/boundaries for how to speak and teach about the Triune God. And that speaks to the natural, uncontrived, organic reality to which the church has, from the beginning, borne witness. It would be a lot easier for Christianity to explain itself to the world, if it DIDN'T embrace this doctrine. But its not just discipling and baptizing which are stamped this way. Everything bears a Triune stamp.

Think of the Ephesians 4 text evoked, earlier, which is about walking in humility and gentleness, walking in a manner worthy of our calling. Its there that we are told that there is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith one baptism. One God and Father of all. The three-fold structure is imprinted on the full scope of our life together. Thus, the church receives the triadic benediction of God in the following words from 2 Corinthians 13: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Now, here I want to add an important caveat. This is not a game of trying to find threes everywhere – though there are a good number of them to be found. But this is not, first and foremost, about combing through the Bible for Trinity proof-texts. What we are doing can, and finally does, rest on a more basic kind of discernment. A way of reading the big contours of the NT which allows us to see the structure of things – and to not lose the forest for the trees. Namely, that the whole warp and woof of the NT is simply the Father revealing the Son in the Spirit. Or, put differently, the whole NT is the Son and the Spirit showing us, and bringing us, to the Father.

Once one grasps this -- and a careful reading of the upper room discourse in John's gospel alone would be enough to see it --- once one grasps this, the proof-texts basically become almost the whole NT. Put differently, the church is embraced by the Trinity --- against her will, no one consulted us --- the church is embraced by the Trinity, before she embraced the Trinity (2 x's).

So, take the grand complex opening sentence of Ephesians 1, verses 3 through 14. One of the most spectacular sentences ever written. Here we see, painted in broad strokes, the glory of God's grace, which, it turns out, has a threefold profile. The Father who choses and predestines, the Son who redeems and forgives,

and the Spirit who seals and guarantees our inheritance. Or there is the fact that, in the Spirit, the Lamb assumes/shares the Throne of God the Father and is the recipient of Worship. The worship of the church – seen in the Revelation 4 and 5 – is Trinitarian. How could it be otherwise, for Paul puts it succinctly: we all, in one Spirit, have access to the Father, through him (Christ).

So whether its shared names, attributes, works and worship, whether its triadic texts, or whether its broad triadic patterns, the one God is differentiated into three distinct agents. And this by the apostolic witness of the Scriptures, not by the later contortions of the church.

III. Relations

This brings us to the last point – relations. You might think “we’ve established one God and three persons – that’s it. What’s left to do?” Well, a danger lies right here. Just what do we mean when we call these three-- the Father, Son and Spirit—persons? If we think they are persons basically the way we are persons, we will err – and this is a common kind of cognitive idolatry.

For us, three human persons, say, Joe and Jill and Jane, three persons means three human BEINGS. They share a generic thing called human nature, but not a numerical unity. God is numerically ONE in nature. Unlike us, for God, three persons means ONE divine BEING (three humans sharing the exact same soul). Clearly “person” here cannot simply be transferred – without purification – from our experience to God’s being without idolatry. And this idolatry abounds. Where we think of the Trinity at all, we tend to think of it as a council of persons, a confederation, negotiating and planning together, splitting the work up, and then executing it.

All of this is deeply corrupt. God is not three beings. Tritheism. He is three persons in one being. God does not have three wills. He has one will. He does not have three of any attribute we looked at earlier in this series. All of this raises the question: If persons in God do not result in division, or in 3 beings in God, how are these persons distinguishable from each other? Here’s the answer. The persons in the Trinity are distinguished by their mutual relations. So, Scripture repeatedly asserts the following:

The Father is the Father OF the Son, the Father OF our Lord Jesus Christ. The Son is the Son OF the Father. And the Spirit is the Spirit of God, and the Spirit of his Son. These are what we call relations of origin. The Father is from no one, the Son is from the Father, and the Spirit originates from the Father and the Son. And these relations of origin mean we can speak of each member of the Godhead as having a special personal property. The Father has the unique personal property of paternity. He begets the Son.

The Son has the unique personal property of filiation, meaning that he is begotten by the Father. And the Spirit has the unique personal property of spiration (passive), meaning he is breathed forth, spirated by the Father and the Son. These 3 persons (marked by the relations of origin), in their communion, just ARE the One being of God (not 4 things). Primally, from eternity, the One God just IS these persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each possessing the whole divine essence AND a unique personal property. These persons are like human persons AND radically unlike human persons.

This is the rich, deeply personal, culmination of what was veiled in the OT. This is the mystery of the Holy Trinity. It is more to be adored than understood, revered than dissected. But we must say what Scripture says. And we have tried to do that. This is anything but tame or manageable or simple. But thinking on this thick and mysterious God, under the guidance of Scripture, is preparation for the only task of eternity. And it is the antidote to our current cognitive idolatry. This is our God. This is the Holy Trinity. He dwells in unapproachable light, and he has shown us his face in JC. Blessed be his glorious name. Amen.

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