

A Trinitarian God Romans 8:9-11

Years ago I was having my night time chat with one of my daughters as was our custom. We were just lying in her bed talking and somehow Jesus came into the conversation. Imagine that! We were talking about Jesus and this particular daughter asked a question that belied the small number of years she had been on this earth. She said, "Daddy, why did Jesus pray to God if he was God? I mean, if he was God, wasn't his praying just talking to himself?"

That was a good question. In fact, it was the kind of question that drove the Christians over the first 400 years of the church to develop the doctrine of the Trinity. Too many little girls and intelligent theologians were asking those kinds of questions. Was Jesus God and if so was he God from the beginning or was he begotten at a later time? Was the Holy Spirit God and if so, was the Holy Spirit coequal with Jesus and the Father?

The questions were addressed and great was the struggle that ensued as the church developed a mature and biblical understanding of God. The early years of the Christian church are filled with councils and creeds that evolved from this theological struggle. One guy, named Arius caused a great scandal because he led a movement that argued that since Jesus was the only begotten Son of God, he had to follow God, there had to be "a time when he was not." Since Jesus was begotten from God he had to come later. In other words, Jesus was God, but not coeternal with God. For that movement, Arius and his followers were branded heretics and the Aryan controversy continues to be one of the most interesting theological struggles the church has ever faced. Arius lost his battle, and the church came to declare with biblical confidence that the Son and the Father were coequal and coeternal.

There are probably quite a number of people who think that the doctrine of the Trinity is either too complicated or too inconsequential to deal with today. I mean, what has the doctrine of the Trinity got to do with my personal faith in Jesus, my prayer life, of helping me raise my kids in a world filled with drugs and violence? I'm just trying to keep my daughters from being kidnapped and sexually assaulted by a serial rapist. What's the Trinity got to do with my life?

Well, it has a lot to do with your life as a Christian because it has everything to do with your understanding of the nature of God. Some time ago I had a lady call me about a Unitarian she had met. She asked me, "What is a Unitarian? Are they Christians? There are a number of religious people and groups who do not hold the Christian view of a Trinitarian God. The Unitarians, for example, do not believe in the Trinity. They believe that Jesus was the Son of God, but not God. They have a Unitarian understanding of God, instead of a Trinitarian view of God. There are other unitarian religious groups. The Jews do not believe in the Trinity. These forerunners to the Christian faith are monotheists, they believe in one and only one God. They misunderstand the doctrine of the Trinity as a doctrine that acknowledges 3 gods. They can't go there. Another strong monotheistic group is the Muslims. The Muslims do not believe in the Trinity. They believe that Jesus was a great prophet, but certainly not equal with God.

So, you can see, if we're going to be able to share our faith (as God calls us to!) with people holding different views of the nature of God, we ought to understand the fundamental doctrine concerning the nature of God. We need to understand the basic doctrines of the Christian faith or we are likely to be seduced by non-Christian religions or cults. That leads us to discuss, reflect, and seek greater understanding of the Doctrine of the Trinity. Granted, we'll never be able to fully understand the Doctrine of the Trinity, for then we would be able to understand the full nature of God. When we get to the point that we fully understand God, we can no longer worship God. God is always beyond us, always beyond our comprehension, always effusive, more mysterious than we can articulate. Nevertheless, our love for God compels us to talk about God. And the fullness of the biblical message has driven us to Trinitarian language about God. Although we human beings are bound by time and space, the language of the Trinity makes it possible for us to speak of God in ways that somehow cut through our time and space. Through the language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we can begin to speak, though imperfectly, about the eternal God who has come to be intimately involved in our time and space, the infinite God who has chosen to be intimately connected with us.

Before I delve in fully to an explication of the Trinity, allow me to make a couple of preliminary comments. They may be unnecessary for many to hear, but allow me to say these things to get them out of the way.

First, Christians are monotheists. We have that in common with the Jews, the Muslims, and the Unitarians. We are all monotheists. Just because Christians have a Trinitarian view of God doesn't mean that we believe in three gods. We believe in one God and one God only, who has revealed himself to us in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christians believe in one God.

Second, just because we call God "The Father" doesn't mean we believe God is male. As Jesus said to the woman at the well, "God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship him in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). God is not male with a male body. To speak of God as "Father," as Jesus did when he walked the earth, is to acknowledge that God is like a father, he loves like a father, he protects like a father, he generates life like a father. God has attributes like a father. Now some people today would like to do away with our traditional language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit because, they argue, it is sexist. They would rather call God the Father, the "Parent." I am unconvinced by their arguments, and believe that the traditional Trinitarian language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is biblical, authorized by Jesus' own language, and is still the most fruitful language we can use to talk about God. Granted, all language is limited in efforts to describe the infinite nature of God. But the traditional language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (in our English language) is the best we have.

Well, we have that out of the way. Christians are monotheists and just because we call God "Father" doesn't mean we believe God is male.

So what does it all mean? What does the language of the trinity do for Christians today? I believe the language and understanding of the Trinity can help Christians have a richer, more powerful and commanding experience of God. And let's do that one person at a time.

Father

By the language of Father, we speak of the Transcendent One. We speak of the One who is Source and Creator. We speak of the One who is the Given for all that is holy and good. If we do not speak of Father, then we do not speak of the divine at all, but only of ourselves. With the language of the Father we speak of God who is before us, to whom we are accountable, for whom we are brought to life.

My father served in the army at the end of WWII and the beginning of the Korean War. He told me the story of the time he was based in the Philippines. He was supposed to pull guard duty that night. He had been out on authorized leave, but returned later than he was supposed to. I really don't remember why he was late (Perhaps he didn't want me to know!). Anyway, because he was late they had to send someone else to guard duty that night. Late during the night, my Father learned that the man who took his place was killed by a sniper. As you can imagine, this affected my father in very sobering fashion. He felt both remorse for the lost life of the one who took his place, and gratitude for the extension of his life. For as he said, "If that had been me, you might not be around." He was reminding me correctly, that my life flowed from his life. In that sense, my life depended on his life, is grounded in his life.

God's fatherhood names that dependence of all humanity upon God as the Source and Progenitor of life. God's fatherhood describes God's creative and procreative dimension. Without that fatherhood, we simply would not be. That's part of what it means to speak of God as our Heavenly Father.

Son

Christians also speak of God as Son. As Son, God puts on a human face. As Son, God resides in human flesh and form. Again what is significant about the Son is his humanity, not his maleness. The great prologue of John's Gospel does not say, "And the Word became male." No, it says, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." Through his flesh, male and female alike beheld the glory of God. Through the Son, God knows us from the inside and we behold God as One with us.

Most of us remember 9-11 and the awful destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center through terrorist bombers. Mayor Rudy Gulliani stepped into this national crisis in a very personal way. He made his way to the heart of the downtown area even while buildings were still collapsing. He could be seen exhorting the fire and police officers who were putting their lives on the line. He provided hands-on crisis management and frequently gave "in person" reports about the status of rescue and cleanup efforts. He was visible and present in a way that gave New Yorkers comfort and strength when they needed it the most. Can you imagine Mayor Gulliani's effectiveness if he had merely stayed in his office and wrote a few notes and memos to the fire and police officers? Or if he had simply written sympathy notes to the family members of fallen heroes instead of attending funerals in person? Or if he had stayed in a televised studio to speak to New Yorkers through the impersonal medium of television? What transformed Gulliani from a mayor of mixed opinion, to a revered leader was his physical and personal presence in a time of crisis.

God who transcends our time and space doesn't merely wish us well from afar. God puts on a human face. God bears human sorrow and suffering. God feels human thirst and hunger. In so doing, God draws us into the deepest fellowship possible. God

embodies a form with which we can commune. God creates in human terms a saving relationship for us. If we can't comprehend the whole of God's being, we can comprehend what God has made evident through the Son who, for us, put on a human face.

Holy Spirit

Christians confess one God and one God only; still, God's reality requires that we speak of God as Spirit. The Spirit is the power and presence of God. God is not only the Transendent Creator. God is not only the One who is Immanent, the one who has come to be with us in the flesh. God is the one who continues to be with us, even when his flesh is no longer visible to the eye. God is the ongoing power to alter, transform, and renew life in this age, and the ages to come.

When Jesus was comforting his disciples before his walk to death on the cross he said to them, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever –the Spirit of truth" (Jn 14:16-17). Later he added, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (14:26).

The Holy Spirit is our teacher, our reminder, the instigator of conviction of sin, the One who prays for us when we don't know how to pray for ourselves. The Spirit groans on our behalf when our words are trapped, our hearts are filled with pain. The Spirit empowers us with gifts so we can serve God and build up the body of Christ. The Spirit is manifest through the fruit of love, joy, peace, and other attributes of Christ. The Spirit is the Holy Spirit, it is the Spirit of God, it is the Spirit of Christ.

There's one thing I must throw in about the Holy Spirit that helps us maintain a consistent Trinitarian understanding of God. Since the Holy Spirit is the 3rd person of the Trinity and equally God along with the Father and Son, we need not be afraid of the Spirit. Sometimes we get the impression that only the Pentecostals and charismatics have the Holy Spirit. It's as if the Spirit isn't around unless someone is crying, or raising their hands, or fall on their knees or something else physically demonstrative. There are times when some Christians talk about being "filled with the Spirit" as if the Holy Spirit came to us in ounce-size bottles. He has 4 ounces. She has 8 ounces. The guy over there sweating and jumping up and down has a 2 liter bottle of the Spirit! But a Trinitarian view of God means you either have God or you don't. You either have Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in your life, or you don't. The Holy Spirit isn't an add on for the really spiritual people. The Holy Spirit is the immanent, present, powerful presence of God in our lives, in the church, and in the world today.

Relationship

But the question remains, "How do they all relate together? How does the Father relate to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, etc?" Or to ask the question in plain, cut to the chase language, "Why did Jesus have to pray to the Father, if Jesus was also God? Was Jesus merely talking to himself in the desert?"

Augustine, one of the greatest minds of the Western world, put his head to thinking about the question my daughter raised. Augustine, a master of words, took 15 books to talk about the Trinity, 15 books that took him over a decade to write. Augustine's *On the Trinity* continues to be helpful in thinking through that which is

difficult to think about, and talking about that which is difficult to describe, namely, the nature of God who comes to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Early on in his massive treatise, Augustine had 7 statements about God:

The Father is God.

The Son is God.

The Holy Spirit is God.

The Son is not the Father.

The Father is not the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not the Son.

And then, after these 6 statements, Augustine adds one more.

There is only one God.

This is the thinking that's tough to get into our brains. We have experienced God in the world, and God has revealed himself in Scripture in 3 distinct persons, but we believe in only one God. That's hard to comprehend. It reminds me of a conversation a pastor had with a skeptic years ago.

The pastor asked the skeptic: "Do you mean to say that you don't believe in the Trinity as taught in the Bible?"

The skeptic answered: "I don't know about that, but I know that I can't get it into my head. And therefore I don't believe it."

"What size hat do you wear?" asked the pastor.

"Six and seven-eighths," the skeptic said. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I was just wondering, replied the pastor, "how you expect to get the full comprehension of the Almighty into six and seven-eighths."

The Trinity is a 2000 year old challenge to comprehend because in the Trinity we are attempting to comprehend the very nature of the Great Almighty, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, the author of all Good, and the Ultimate Judge of every living creature.

Without being audacious about it, however, let's give it a try. This is an imperfect analogy, but it's one that can be helpful.

I am one person – Don Gordon. But I play the roles of at least 3 different persons. I am a father, husband, and son. My 3 daughters know me primarily as a Father. They have never known me when I wasn't a father. My wife knows me as a husband. Other people who know her and not me, will think of me in terms of being her husband. I'm also a Father, but her friends who know her and not me will think in terms of being her husband. I'm also a Father, but her friends would know me as her husband. And then my parents know me as their Son. Their experience of me has been quite different than my wife's experience of me as her husband, and my children's experience of me as Father. And yet, in all 3 instances I am Don Gordon. If people were to look at me through one of these persons, say as Father, they would miss a greater understanding of me. I'm much more than Father, and yet I am always a Father. I am much more than a Son, and yet I'm always a Son. I'm much more than a husband, yet I am always a husband. I am a Father, Son, and husband all at the same time.

Conclusion

Can you begin to see the beauty, and yes, the necessity of the Trinity. God is so great that only Trinitarian language presents God to us as God has revealed himself to us, in different ways, at different times. At times we are awestruck and bow down to worship the Heavenly Father who created us. At times we stand amazed at the love of the Son born on a cross at Calvary, suffering so that we might be made whole persons. There are moments when we worship God that we are enlightened by the Holy Spirit to a newer, fresher, deeper, more meaningful understanding of God. In this strange but wonderful language of Trinity, we meet God the Source of life who relates to us, God who puts on a human face for our sake, God who is still active in the world and who is bringing triumphant power to bear on the future. This is the God who stands before us and who calls us into blessed fellowship.

I can't help but praise him!

Gloria Patri

Glory be to the Father
And to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.
As it was in the beginning,
Is now and ever shall be;
World without end, Amen. Amen.