

The Trinity

By Roland Foster

[Disclaimer: I am not a professional theologian. I'm an amateur; a layman who loves to dabble in Christian theology. I don't present my ideas as "the truth," but rather as "this works for me." Use at your own risk.]

The Trinity, a.k.a. "God in three persons" — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It seems that many people have difficulty making sense of this.

I think the word "persons" can be a little problematic. In our world, person A is not the same "being" as person B. I think it might be helpful to say that "God is one Supreme Being. We experience Him in three ways, from three different perspectives."

Think of an engineering drawing of an object, perhaps a machine. Often there are three views of the object: a front view, a side view, and a top view. They are all views of the same single object, just seen from different perspectives. I'm not saying this is a perfect analogy; I'm just saying that three views of one "something" should not be beyond our understanding.

So let's look at God from three different perspectives.

God, the Father

When we look at God the Father we see an infinitely creative mind, in control of infinite power. We know very little about this Supreme Being. What we do know, we learn from observing His creative and sustaining work (creation), what He says about Himself in the Holy Scriptures, and any direct revelation He chooses to give to an individual.

He is the Creator and the Law-Giver. Everything in our entire universe was spoken into existence, in all its vastness and intricacy, by Him. His mind imagined it, and His powerful words created it. Among other things, He established the laws of physics and He set forth rules for human behavior — his "moral law."

God's ultimate act of His original creation was to make human beings "in His own image." He made them male and female, so they could procreate and "fill the earth." And He gave them the freedom to disobey His rules — which they quickly proceeded to do. Interestingly, this did not surprise God, because nothing ever does. He knew it would happen, and He knew what He would do about it — His Plan of Redemption.

God, the Son

God's plan to redeem fallen humanity required the sacrifice of "the Lamb of God" — a perfect human being, one who had never sinned, and thus whose blood would suffice to atone for the sins of all people, for all time. The perfect human being could not be tainted with Adam's sin nature, passed down through the generations.

The Nicene Creed states that God the Son was "begotten of His Father before all worlds." The Scripture passages that back this up, I think, are these:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. (John 1:1-2)

This confirms the "before all worlds" part of the creed. And then,

So also Christ ... was appointed by him who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." (Hebrews 5:5)

Which points back to

I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you." (Psalms 2:7)

There is also the entire first chapter of Hebrews, which again confirms both parts of the creedal statement.

Based on these references, I believe it's clear that the "begetting" of the Son took place before the Creation event. So at some point in time (in whatever time stream exists in Eternity), before God (Father/Son) spoke our universe into existence, He (Father) in some way delineated some of Himself — still God, but somehow separable from the Father (we'll see why later), and He called that aspect or "part" of Himself "Son," and also, "the Word" (see John 1:1).

Then, at the right moment in the time stream of the created universe, God implemented the Incarnation part of His plan. We don't know the mechanics of what took place, but in effect God somehow, by the Holy Spirit, fertilized an egg in Mary's body, and the Son aspect of God entered into the fertilized egg. The reason Jesus is God's "only begotten Son" is that God the Father "begot" Him, both by becoming the separable Son, and by fertilizing that human egg.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... (John 1:14a)

In that fertilized cell, in that developing embryo, God included Himself. He included every virtue that human beings are capable of, but He did not include the poison of human selfishness, which is the rebellion against God that He calls "sin." And, and this is very important: although, being God, Jesus still possessed His divine powers, He never used them before His crucifixion — because He didn't need to.

I believe that Jesus was wholly human, a male child, then a man, who lived and died without exercising any divine powers. Yes, He was really God, as He claimed to be many times. But when He changed water into wine, healed the sick, raised the dead, and walked on water, He did not do those things by godly power. He did miraculous things as an obedient man, filled with and guided by the Holy Spirit, just as other human beings performed miracles before and after His Incarnation.

This whole business causes difficulty for some people. Can God be, at the same time, the Heavenly Father, present in Heaven (and everywhere), and possessing all of the power and majesty of the Godhead, and simultaneously be reduced to the puniness of a single completely human being, exercising no powers beyond those available to any human? Can God do that? I say, of course He can, and He did. He had to, in order to fulfill His plan. If He had not limited Himself to human capabilities, He would not have been "fully human." His sacrifice would not have been a real sacrifice, and His death would not have been a real death.

Why did I say that the Son was "separable" from the Father? Jesus indicated that this was so, when He said that the Father knew things the Son didn't know; and again on the cross, when He cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

God the Son was one of us. He became a human being for many reasons, but for me the four most important reasons are:

1. To redeem human beings by being an acceptable sacrifice, and suffering the penalty for our sins.
2. To show us, by the horrible severity of the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus, how serious our sins are, and how awful the punishment that we truly deserve.
3. To enlighten us considerably more about the nature of our loving God.
4. To show us how human beings ought to behave toward God and each other.

God, the Holy Spirit

In my view, the Holy Spirit is God's spirit, the essence of who He is, in the same way that your spirit is the essence of you, and my spirit is the essence — the eternal aspect — of me. When my body has died and returned to dust, or water vapor and ash, I will still exist. The part of me that is created in the image of God, my spirit, is eternal. To think that the Holy Spirit is a person distinct from God the Father is, in my view, simply nonsense.

The Holy Spirit is God (Father/Son/Spirit) in "visiting mode;" how God "localizes" Himself in order to visit and interact with individual human beings. He can place His Spirit on someone, as He did the prophets of old; and He can "pour out" His Spirit to touch and fill millions of individual humans all at once, as promised in Jeremiah 31.

The purpose of the Holy Spirit's presence with us is to help us. But, to help us do what? To me the answer is obvious: He helps us love God and serve Him obediently. God is with us, by His Spirit's touch upon our lives, to help us come to Him and please Him. That's what we are created for, and we can fulfill God's intention for each of our lives only with the help of God, by His Spirit's presence with us.

In summary, God is one God who comes to us in three ways. As I've said, I think "three persons" is perhaps not the best way of describing those three ways.

Further thoughts

The Father (I AM) is God (Father/Son/Holy Spirit) over us
— Creator, Sovereign, loving Provider.

The Son (Immanuel, Jesus) is God (Father/Son/Holy Spirit) with us
— Teacher, Friend, Advocate, Brother.

The Spirit (Holy Spirit) is God (Father/Son/Holy Spirit) in us
— Conscience, Guide, Helper, Power source.

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