

The Godhead

The challenge of the tri-unity of God's self-revelation

THE ONE WHO IS

Expressing divine being

In giving this single session to a direct study of the biblical teaching about God we have no alternative but to be highly selective in our focus.¹ It is beyond the scope of this single unit to include a study of the nature, character and attributes of God and the many other issues besides. Our purpose is simply to direct our attention upon 'the nature of the expression of the being of God'; an examination of what Christian doctrine traditionally refers to as 'the Trinity'. The word 'Trinity' is not found in the Bible and creates many difficulties in understanding. It was first used by Tertullian (c.190 CE), but did not become part of the formal theology of the church until the 4th century CE. We prefer to use the phrase 'Godhead'; as it is free from the communication problems that the word 'Trinity' has attached to itself over the years.²

Christian teaching about the nature of the expression of the being of God has been described as 'the distinctive and all-comprehensive doctrine of the Christian faith'. As the central teaching of the Christian faith it affirms that God is one, personal and triune. It draws together belief in the personal nature of God, incarnation, atonement, life of the Spirit, and the ultimate relation of redeemed people to Christ in God. At its heart it proclaims three inseparable truths:

- One God
- Father, Son, Holy Spirit, each God
- Father, Son, Holy Spirit, each distinct

Revelation and experience

The Bible does not give us anything approaching a formulated statement about the nature of the Godhead, but it contains all the elements for constructing as true an understanding of a profound mystery as is possible. The truth is implicit in the Hebrew Scriptures, and more clearly explicit in the New Testament; and on this basis was expounded by the early church. It is essential to understand that the truth that 'in the unity of God there is a tri-

¹ Of course a multitude of dimensions of the biblical teaching about God are covered on the Workshop programme as a whole

² Other religions seem much happier with the concept of some kind of 'godly trinity'.

• *Hindu Trimurti*: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva (creator, maintainer or preserver, destroyer or transformer). Sometimes interpreted as 'one being' but *Trimurti* not generally seen as a mainstream Hindu concept. (Hinduism has no founder and no prophet and has been about 5,000 years in its development)

• *Taoism: Trinity of the Three Pure Ones* – highest gods in pantheon of gods; the Jade Pure one, the Supreme Pure One and The Grand Pure One. Jade Pure one manifested spontaneously at the beginning of the universe (sometimes called 'primordial'). Taoism originated about 500BC. The presumed founder Lao-Tse is almost a mythical figure

These faiths have little or no angst about concept of a 'trinity' due to accepting panoply of Gods. Christianity has found this a challenge because it arises from monotheism plus has to contend with lots of Greek ideas about God as eternal, unchanging etc.



unity of persons' can be known only because of the revelation of the person of Jesus. It would remain completely unknown without it.

It is important to remember that the New Testament understanding of Godhead arose out of the spontaneous expression of Christian experience. It was a fact in experience long before it was formulated into a doctrine. As we shall see it was the pressure of the necessity for Christians to distinguish Jesus from God, and yet to identify him with God, that led to their experience being formulated in words.

Parable and paradox

It is of course always a struggle to discover those words that will do justice to the truth of revelation and experience. This struggle reaches its climax in our attempt to express in verbal form the biblical teaching about Godhead. It has been so well said, that:

‘Our conception of God must fall short of his real being,
and our language of him must fall short of our conception’

Down through the centuries of Christian teaching many people have looked for a solution to communicating this truth in parables from nature:

- ‘Shamrock’ - The Celtic missionary Patrick used the single stem with three leaves of the Irish shamrock to try and communicate the idea of the Trinity to the people of his day
- ‘Triple Point’ - The unity and diversity of ice, water and steam, at a unique temperature, pressure and volume there is a continual exchange of molecules, retaining balance or equilibrium.³

While these may be useful aids to reinforce communication, they are crudely finite illustrations that are quite inadequate to express the infinite nature of God.

So as we embark upon our task we shall be straining conception and language to their limits. We must heap paradox upon paradox. Yet for all our limitations, and incompleteness in our statements, we must look in everything for the ring of truth.

THE HEBREW BIBLE

Awesome monotheism

'Monotheism', the belief that there is only one God; it is foundational to all biblical revelation about God. It is deeply embedded throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, and no understanding of Godhead must detract from this bedrock truth.

When God revealed his name to Moses as ‘YHWH’ – ‘The One who is’ (Exod 3:14; 6:2-3), implicit in that revelation was the understanding of the oneness and unity of God. One God, and the oneness of God, is the cardinal teaching of the Jewish faith. Centuries after

³ They must be understood to be able to coexist together as at ‘triple point’ in physics, otherwise they illustrate one of the most famous heresies about the ‘Godhead’, as we shall see!



the biblical period the great Jewish philosopher, Maimonides (1125-1204 CE), was to express Hebrew faith in the words:

‘The Creator ... is a unity ... there is no unity in any manner like unto his,
and he alone is our God, who was, and is, and will be.’

The Hebrew Scriptures proclaim the 'oneness' and 'unity' of God most clearly in the *Shema* (Deut 6:4-9), the most important of all Jewish declarations of faith:

‘Hear, O Israel:
the Lord (Yahweh) our God (*Elohim*),
is one Lord (Yahweh).’

This central biblical statement on the Hebrew concept of God is seen as stating ‘absolute monotheism’. However, it is open to a number of possible translations:

▪ **‘Yahweh is our God! Yahweh alone!’**

This emphasises the exclusive position of Yahweh. The environment in which this revelation took place was infested with 'polytheism' (the belief that there are many gods), which constantly imperiled Israel's unique faith. The *Shema's* emphasis on the 'oneness' and 'exclusiveness' of Yahweh stands in total opposition to polytheism. The Exodus, the event that forms the backcloth to the *Shema*, illustrates in action the exclusiveness of Yahweh, God's conquest of Egyptian gods and divine rule over nature.

▪ **‘Yahweh our God is one single Yahweh!’**

This emphasises the oneness and unity of God. It has been said, 'God is not a God who can be split up into various divinities and powers (like the Baals, etc.) but one who is united within, as a single being, everything that Israel thought of as appertaining to God.'

So whatever translation is taken, and both may be intended, the truth of absolute monotheism is clear.

Provocative questions

However, God's 'monotheistic unity' is not necessarily a 'monolithic unity'. A close study of the Hebrew Scriptures raises tantalising suggestions that by no means everything on the subject on the nature of God's being has been said. There are statements, observations and implications throughout the text that suggest there is more and that raise provocative questions.

At this point we must move cautiously. Because we stand on the ground of New Testament revelation and centuries of Christian reflection upon it, it is difficult for us to read the Hebrew Scriptures without immediately imposing new covenant perspectives on the text. When searching these documents for clues to an understanding of the Godhead we must remember that we can make verses say anything we want to if we are not careful. We must read the text sensitively so as not to miss the most beautiful and subtle truths to be discovered at the first level of understanding. With this word of caution we begin to explore what further revelation, and truth in embryo, is to be found within the Hebrew text.



▪ **The use of the word *Elohim***

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures the plural *Elohim* is used for God, [the singular would be *Eloah*], with the verb in the singular. Some Christians, who insist that it demands revelation of a plurality in Godhead, make much of this. Of course this plural form is able to contain, perfectly, all the unfolding revelation of God's being that is to be brought into focus in the new covenant. However, in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures, *Elohim* must be understood as an honorific title; in the same way as royalty say 'we' when they mean 'I'. The Jewish community would have had no other understanding than it referring to the greatness and majesty of God.

Closely linked with the use of *Elohim* are other passages which link the plural with the singular when God is speaking:

- Gen 1:26 'Let us (pl) make human kind ...'
- Gen 3:22 'They have become like one of us (pl) ...'
- Isa 6:8 'Who shall I (sing) send, who will go for us (pl)?'

Again, while these are tantalising phrases, they are first and foremost to be understood only in an honorific sense. To do more is to squeeze the text too hard.

▪ **The presence of 'theophany'**

A 'theophany' is a visible appearance of God in human form. Their occurrences in Scripture are fascinating and shrouded in mystery. Frequently they are in the form of 'the angel of Yahweh' who is sometimes given and accepts divine honour (cf. Gen 16:2-13). Two theophanies in particular hint at something more to be understood:

- **Gen 18:1-22** The three visitors who call at Abraham's tent at Mamre: 'The Lord appeared to him ... behold three people stood in front of him'⁴
- **Josh 5:13-16** Joshua before 'the commander of the Lord's army'; Joshua worships him, he is commanded to remove his shoes as Moses was at the bush in Midian

The particular interpretation of these passages is difficult, but they are pieces in the unfolding pattern of revelation.

▪ **The Messiah ascribed with divinity**

The figure of the Messiah is not merely that of a human person; but is ascribed with divinity even when seen as a person distinct from God.

- **Isa 7:14** '... and shall call his name Immanuel (God with us)'
- **Isa 9:6** 'He will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God ...'

▪ **The work of the Spirit**

The Spirit of God is spoken of in various forms of operation. When all the various references to the Spirit are drawn together the cumulative evidence reveals more than just a reference to divine power, but rather distinct personality.

- The Spirit equips the Messiah for his work (Isa 11:2; 42:1; 61:1)
- The Spirit equips the people with faith and obedience (Joel 2:28; Isa 32:15; Ezk 36:26-27 etc)

⁴ This story is of course graphically epitomized in the Rubiev ikon 'The Trinity' which is an interpretation of the Abraham and the three visitors story



▪ **The personification of wisdom**

In Proverbs 8:20-28 'wisdom' is spoken of as being a person, sharing with God in the work of creation:

'I was beside him like a master craftsman' (v30)

However, wisdom appears to be created. Nevertheless, 'wisdom' in the passage has long been attempted to be linked with 'the logos' in John 1:1-14 (cf. also Job 28:23-27).

▪ **The threefold source**

There are occasions where a threefold reference suggests plurality in the unity of the Godhead:

- **Gen 1:2-3** The opening of the Hebrew Bible attributes the existence and pre-existence of all things to a threefold source (God, Word, Spirit)
- **Isa 48:16** The 'servant of the Lord' links his work with that of God and the Spirit. 'And now the Lord God has sent me and his Spirit'
- **Num 6:24** This threefold blessing of Aaron is suggestive of the apostolic blessing in 2 Cor 13:14:

'The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.'

'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.'

THE NEW TESTAMENT

New dimensions

While the Hebrew Scriptures proclaim the 'oneness' and 'unity' of God they are strewn with hints that much more remains to be revealed. As the New Testament opens the truth is out! With the dawning of the New Testament era and the ministry of Jesus the true dimension of Godhead becomes immediately apparent:

- **The angel's communication to Mary** (Luke 1:31-35)
 - The Holy Spirit came upon her (Spirit)
 - The Power of the most high overshadowed her (Father)
 - The child was called the 'Son of God' (Son)
- **John the Baptist's preaching** (Matt 3:11)
 - Repentance towards God (Father)
 - Faith in the coming Messiah (Son)
 - Baptism in Holy Spirit coming (Spirit) – water just a symbol
- **Jesus' baptism in the Jordan** (Mark 1:9-11)
 - The Father speaks
 - 'This is my beloved Son'
 - The Spirit descends as a dove



At the conclusion of Jesus' ministry (Matt 28:19), we are presented with the first express statement of the Christian teaching about the Godhead. This simple statement becomes the skeletal formula for all later creedal statements:⁵

‘... in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit’

Notice that ‘the name’ is singular but that its expression is plural.

So Jesus states there are distinctions in the Godhead, but at the same time it is important to realise that scripture is always guarded in how it permits these distinctions to be stated.

Incarnation focus

It is the incarnation that brings the biblical understanding of God to crisis. It is in Jesus that the New Testament teaching about the Godhead begins to unfold clearly. It was derived from, and tested by, the truth of the incarnation:

- The incarnation distinguishes *between* Father and Son, and yet sees them *both* as God
- The God of the Hebrew Scriptures is ‘Father’: what is unique to the New Testament is that ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ are God, and that God is ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3)
- Jesus Christ is *truly* God the Son, and *distinctly* God the Son (Jn 1:1,18; 20:28; Col 2:9; Titus 2:13; Heb 1:8,10)

Jesus directly linked himself to the God of Israel:

- **Mt 22:43-46** Jesus says he is the ‘Son’, not just of David, but from a source that made him David's lord, and that this had been so even when David uttered the words of Ps 110.
- **John 8:58-59** Jesus identifies himself directly with Yahweh; ‘Before Abraham was, I am.’ There are also the distinct ‘I am ...’ sayings throughout John’s Gospel.
- **John 18:5-6** Jesus, when asked to identify himself in Gethsemane, utters the declaration, ‘I am’, and they all fall backwards; there is shock at his statement and power in the words.

Jesus makes it clear that there is a distinction between himself and the Father and the Comforter. John 14–17 contains some of the most important scriptures about the relationship between the persons of the Godhead. In summary it teaches that:

‘The Father who is God sent the Son, and the Son who is God sent the Spirit, who is God’
So the teaching of Jesus witnesses to the personality of each distinction within the Godhead, and sheds light on the relations between them.

⁵ Eusebius (c263-339) quotes Mt 28:19 as ‘Go and make disciples of all nations in my name’, but no extant manuscript of Matthew has this shorter version. (Mt probably written around 80 CE) This so-called baptismal formula was a key scripture in later discussions (3-4C) about the divinity of the Holy Spirit. See also 2Cor 13:13, ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you’ (from c. 55CE). Be aware that some scholars think these verses are later additions



While the Holy Spirit is shown as distinctly personal in the Gospels (cf. Mk 3:22-30; Lk 12:12; Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:7-15), it is the events at Pentecost that bring the personality of the Holy Spirit into greater prominence for the early Christians, and also shed greater light onto the relationship with and person of the Son (cf. Acts 2:32-33; 1 Cor 12:4-6; 1 Pet 1:2; 2 Cor 13:14).

Natural progression

What is so striking about the New Testament teaching about the Godhead is that the belief and declaration that God is both one and yet triune took place without a struggle or controversy among the Jewish people who had held, for centuries, an uncompromising faith of one God alone. They held tenaciously and faithfully to monotheism amid an ocean of pagan polytheism, which constantly threatened to engulf them. However, on entering the church, with its belief in the deity of Father, Son and Spirit, they were not conscious of any break in their ancient faith, only fulfillment. The fact that the New Testament teaching about Godhead is clearly triune and yet presented no embarrassment or challenge to Hebrew Christians emphasises how new covenant revelation harmonises entirely with the Hebrew Scriptures, and how what is embryonic within them can be brought to birth painlessly in the medium of the Spirit.

THE HAMMER OF HERESY

Searching questions

As the early Christians proclaimed the gospel it drew a response from people with a wide variety of religious and philosophical backgrounds. It was obvious that it would not be long before beautiful verses, like the apostolic blessing, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all' (2 Cor 13:14), would be probed by searching questions:

- What is the relationship of these three – Father, Son and Spirit – to each other?
- What is the exact nature of God's threefold revelation of himself?
- Are these characteristics simply due to revelation or are they part of the divine essence itself?

It was the Greeks in particular, and surprisingly not the Jews, who were troubled by these questions. The Greek philosophic cast of mind demanded answers to these tantalising issues. In the search for answers the door was opened for all sorts of individual solutions to the problems. The result was that many of the attempts to resolve the questions proved either quite inadequate or stood in conflict with other aspects of revelation. Resolving these difficulties became yet another challenge for the church.

Searching for truth

The word 'heresy' comes from the verb 'to choose'. It is used to describe an individual or a group who 'choose' to express their belief in a manner that is different from the one followed by the main stream of the faith. The church in fact owes a great debt to heretics. It was the pressure that they, as individuals searching for ways to express the truth, brought upon the church that forced her to state her theology in such a way that truth and error could be recognised for what they were.



The task that the 'heretics' thrust upon the church was a necessary one, but also an impossible one to fulfill perfectly. The best that creedal statements could do was to attempt to deal clearly with false teaching in the light of Scripture and give some fundamental pointers to the truth. The process of expressing truth in words must be both ongoing and living and always rooted back into Scripture as the absolute. The creeds are historic examples of how the church attempted to express truth in the light of particular errors they faced and the limitations of language and insight they had at the time. We must also remember that as church and state became increasingly linked there were political forces at work behind the creeds.

It is important to remember that a large proportion of 'heretics' were very saintly individuals whose sole desire was to express the truth and to promote Jesus. It was only when their solutions to difficult theological problems were seen as inadequate that the church as a whole had to reject them. There were of course always a few heretics whose intentions were far less noble because they were unprepared to accept the challenge of biblical revelation. However, it must be added that there have always been some individuals who have supported the orthodox cause for political reasons and self-advancement rather than a desire for truth.

The crisis for the church's teaching on the Godhead came in the extent to which the unity of God was stressed to the detriment of the nature and relationship of the persons of the Godhead. Questions about the nature of the incarnation become inseparable from those about the nature of the Godhead as a whole. Two main heresies illustrate the extremes of the solution sought.

Modalistic monarchianism

This approach to expressing the Godhead in words stressed that it was all-important to uphold the unity of God against any possibility of the idea that there might be 'three Gods'. It taught there was no distinction in 'personhood' within the Godhead, that the one divine personality had merely three 'modes of existence'.

The most popular presenter of this idea was Sabellius (c. 250 CE), and so it is often referred to as 'Sabellianism'. He held that the one God played out three roles in history, like a single actor playing out three different roles on stage, wearing a different mask/face for each role:

- God as Father and Creator revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures
- God as Son revealed in Jesus
- God as Spirit now present and worshipped in the church

The Godhead becomes 'an economic trinity for the purposes of revelation', not an 'essential tri-unity'. God is one, with three aspects or 'modes' to his revelation; hence the popular name 'modalism'..

This way of expressing Godhead has also been nicknamed 'Patri passionism'; if there is no real distinction whatever within the unity of Godhead then the Father suffered in the form of the crucified Jesus. But God's nature does not change like an actor changing their role on stage. Modalism is error in the light of Scripture because it denies that the Father, Son and Spirit are eternal attributes of the divine essence.⁶

⁶ Beware speaking of water, ice and steam as a picture of Godhead without the concept of 'triple point'!



Arianism

In 318 CE, Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, quarreled with his bishop over the person of Christ. His ideas were to split the church for half a century and nearly destroyed the orthodox faith. Arius went to the other extreme from Sabellius. He was influenced by Greek ideas, which saw God as untouchable and transcendent. If this were so, he could not conceive how a true incarnation of God was possible. In stressing the unity of God, Arius defined the Son and the Spirit as lesser subordinate beings whom the Father 'willed' into existence for the purpose of acting as his agents with the world and human society.

Arius stressed the phrase in Colossians 1:15: 'He is ... the first born of all creation.' He said that this implied that the Son was not eternal but the first created being. His famous phrase, 'There was a time when the Son was not' summed it up succinctly. The Arian 'Christ' is neither properly God nor properly human, rather a 'mean' somewhere between the two. The consequences of this teaching are clear:

- No incarnation of God is possible
- No revelation of God is possible
- No redemption is possible, Christ himself would need a mediator
- No worship of Christ is possible; this would be creature worship and idolatry

The champions of truth attacked Arius. They stressed Christ's equality with the Father (cf. Jn 10:30; 14:9; Rm 9:5 etc.). They only finally won the day in 381 CE when, at the Council of Constantinople, the church finally turned its back on Arius' views.

EXPRESSING THE TRUTH IN WORDS

Struggling with the problem

We must remind ourselves again that Christian teaching about the Godhead does not spring from the early Fathers of the church, but from revelation and apostolic teaching based upon it. All controversies of the first four centuries of the church were attempts to express adequately the facts of Christian revelation in an age, which had neither the concepts nor the language to do justice to the truth. Let us be sympathetic in our judgment of those pioneers in Christian thought. Let us also recognise the problems they faced in trying to harmonise understanding in a Christian community divided by language and therefore by concepts. Greek was used in the East and Latin was used in the West.

Christian teaching on the Godhead became established through the work of many individuals. People such as Irenaeus, Origen and Tertullian were early formulators; others such as Athanasius proclaimed it, and finally someone like Augustine gave it a more permanent shape. While these people were the main contributors we must not forget that many others were also involved.

▪ Irenaeus (c 175-195 CE)

He was a very important influence in early Christian thinking, summing up the thought of the second century. He saw God as one, the Father of all things, yet containing within himself from all eternity his Word and his Wisdom. In making himself known to the world



these are shown as the Son and the Spirit. They are the 'hands', or 'vehicles' or 'forms', of his self-revelation. For all their limitations, Iranaeus' ideas were moving in the right direction.

▪ **Origen** (c 185-254 CE)

One of the greatest thinkers of the early church, Origen made important contributions to this subject as to so many others:

- He stressed the 'subordination' of Christ [*logos*] to the Father, based on John 14:28, 'The Father is greater than I'
- He stressed the 'eternal generation of the Son'; that the Son was not a created being but existed from all eternity with the Father. God is 'eternally Father' so the Son must be 'eternally being begotten'. The Son is subordinate to the Father because he derives his reality from him

▪ **Tertullian** (c 160-220 CE)

His contribution is important because he provided the terms which since his time have been regarded as the orthodox expression of the doctrine of the Godhead in Western Christianity:

- He coined the word 'Trinity' (Lat. *Trinitas*) by which the doctrine has become known.
- He defined Godhead as being: 'one substance' (Lat. *Substantia*) in 'three persons' (Lat. *Personae*)

The word *substantia* had the sense of 'essence' or 'being', not the 'material' sense which the word 'substance' has today. The word *personae* had the sense of a part played in social life, a party in a joint legal suit; the social function of an individual. The word did not have the sense of separate 'individual' which 'person' has today.

Tertullian does not stumble into 'modalism', nor 'tri-theism' (three gods) rather there are three centers of expression in one identical nature. He avoided emphasising unity at the expense of distinction.

▪ **Athanasius** (c.296-373 CE)

The orthodox position of the Christian church on the subject of the Godhead was established at the councils of Nicaea (325 CE) and Constantinople (381 CE); the creeds came from these councils. Athanasius, who came from Alexandria, was one of the driving forces behind them. In fact it has been said that he, almost single-handed, saved the church from pagan intellectualism, and particularly Arianism.

Shaping a solution

One of the many problems in framing the creeds was not simply finding the correct words with which to express the truth, but also resolving the fact that some Christians spoke Greek while others spoke Latin, and the fact that exact parallels did not exist between the words which they wished to use. It was for this reason that, in the heat of dispute, some of the problems seemed insoluble. The eventual solution was as follows:



	LATIN	GREEK
three in one	<i>personae</i> <i>substantia</i>	<i>hypostasis</i> (not <i>prosopon</i>) <i>homoousios</i>

▪ ***Personae / Hypostasis***

- The natural equivalent to the Latin *personae* is the Greek word *prosopon*, but the modalists used it with the sense of 'face', and so it was rejected
- The word *hypostasis* was chosen to parallel the Latin *personae*; these two words stand midway between the idea of 'abstract substance' and 'concrete individual', as suggested by our English word 'person' (Heb 1:3 *hypostasis* says Jesus is 'the very image of God's nature')

▪ ***Substantia / Homoousios***

- The Greek equivalent to the Latin *substantia* was *homoousios*; both have the non-material sense of 'essence' or 'being'
- The strength of *homoousios* is its affirming that the very essence of God is the very essence of Jesus; the fact the modalists had used this non-biblical term was not seen as insurmountable

We must always remember that the creeds aim to provide no more than a practical base for a working faith; they do not aim to try to solve the theoretical riddles of philosophical theology.

Following the councils of Nicaea (325 CE) and Constantinople (381 CE) much more work was done on the theology on the Godhead. Initially the concentration was upon the relationship between the Father and Son. As this question was resolved, the relationship of the Spirit to the Godhead was also resolved. In 416 CE Augustine made the classical statement on the doctrine, and it was upon that, that the creedal statement '*Quicumque Vault*' (c 430 CE) was based.

'The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God.'

In 451 CE the Council of Chalcedon finally drew together and ratified all the orthodox ideas that had been accepted up to that date.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

The problem of 'person'

Since Tertullian used the Latin *personae* to speak of the tri-distinctions within the unity of Godhead, English-speaking people have automatically transliterated this into the word 'person', which we have already indicated above is too concrete a concept to be really adequate. In searching for adequate communication the following must be carefully considered:



- The essential being of God is a single unity; a unity that is a tri-unity, not three separate and distinct individuals or persons
- The modern word 'person' is quite inadequate in describing Godhead; nor does it convey the ideas implied by the early Christians
- We use words from the realm of 'personality' because it is the highest category of human experience we know, but these words all imply 'individuality' and 'limitation'
- We know very little about 'personality'; in fact true personality is only to be seen in God who is unlimited by heredity and environment
- It is significant that Jesus always used the homely titles of Father, Son, Spirit, and never resorted to technical terms
- We have no English word that describes 'distinction without difference'
- 'Person' suggests 'tri-theism but stripped of 'individuality' might do;
- 'Aspect' suggests 'modalism' but stripped of 'impersonality' might do.
- God is not three individuals, 'but personal self-distinctions within one divine essence'; while each is self-conscious and self-directing there is never opposition, or independence of will, feeling or action
- God is in himself a threefold centre of life but his life is not split into three; he is one in essence, personality and will

The issue of 'unity'

The use of the word 'unity' has caused many problems in discussions about Godhead:

- If unity is seen as inclusive rather than exclusive the problem is reduced;
- If unity is measured by 'the absence of internal multiplicity' (i.e. 'being monolithic'), then it is a monotheism that is incompatible with biblical revelation;
- If unity is measured by 'the intensity of unifying power in the life of the whole' there is no problem (cf. Jn 17:20-23)
- There is diversity in the persons, characteristics and operations of the Godhead; there is some subordination in relation, but not in nature
- The Father first, Son second, Spirit third
- The Father works through the Son by the Spirit (Jn 14:28)
- The Father sends the Son, the Son send the Spirit
- The Son reveals the Father, the Spirit reveals the Son (Jn 14:9)

The question of 'equality'

Within the Godhead there is equality in dignity; it is unique in nature, honour and dignity:

- 'Fatherhood' is the very essence of the first person of the Godhead from eternity (cf. Eph 3:15)
- 'Sonship', the only begotten, is the very essence of the second person of the Godhead
- the Spirit alone knows the depths of the nature of God (cf. 1Cor 2:10-11), this puts the seal on the equality of the three

The biblical revelation of the interrelationship of Father, Son and Spirit within Godhead has been brilliantly summarised by Swete as:



'None is a separate personality from the personal life of God ... each is an externally existing mode of the Being of God, and not a separate centre of consciousness and self-determination; the one God thinking, willing and acting in one of his eternal spheres of thought, volition and activity ... none is a divine individual but the indivisible Godhead subsisting and operating in one of the essential relations of his tri-personal life.'

How these things can be a mystery!

The implications of Godhead

Christian teaching about the Godhead unites 'activity' and 'being'; it seeks to explain the relationship of God's activity to his inner nature.

▪ The Christian teaching about God demands:

- Unity of Godhead
- Full deity of the Son, who was 'begotten'
- Full deity of the Spirit, who 'proceeds' from the Father and the Son
- Subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father

▪ The Christian teaching about God implies:

- There is a God who self-reveals to humankind
- There is a God who communicates with people
- There is a root and pattern for all fellowship (Jn 17:21)
- The life of God displays variety

FRESH THINKING ON THE GODHEAD

We will reflect briefly on some 20th Century theologians and writers who have done some important work on the Godhead. They have put their emphasis on the 'inner-life' within the Trinity and its implications for humanity. They help us to see how such an understanding of the Godhead might affect the way we perceive others and live our lives today.

They step away from grappling with the 'Greek' ideas about the exchangeability, impassibility, oneness of God that have caused so much tension in the past.

▪ John Macquarrie ⁷

He uses the language of existentialism with its focus on existence and being. He sees the phrase 'one substance and three persons' as failing to communicate with people today. Modern understandings of personhood lead to a greater danger of dividing the theological concept of substance. He attempts to re-interpret the concepts. Macquarrie uses the fundamental concept of 'Being' (not a *being* or *supreme being*), which combines dynamism with stability, movement, becoming and 'letting-be'. This does not mean 'leaving alone' but empowering, enabling and bringing into being in a positive and active sense. As human persons we are 'beings' too. He sees the Trinity as; Primordial Being (Father), source of all that is and of all possibilities, 'Expressive being' (Son), pouring out

⁷ 1919-2007. A theologian and author (writing over 30 books), engaged with existentialism. His 'Principles of Christian Theology' (1966) translated into many languages. He worked and studied in Germany, Glasgow, New York and Oxford. Ordained in Church of Scotland, later became an Anglican priest



the energy of Primordial Being who would otherwise be hidden, and 'Unitive being' (Holy Spirit), relating beings to Being and restoring unity. A criticism is that the language is still hard to grasp! The primary definitions of 'Father', 'Son' and 'Spirit' are in terms of their functions, not their attributes. But it does allow for a dynamic Godhead, encompassing change and growth within the concept of perfection (cf Jn 15: 1-2, which implies growth and change in Jesus, with the Father removing branches in Jesus that bear no fruit). This perhaps accentuates the idea of human involvement in the relationships within the Godhead, through use of *Being* and *being* language. The Godhead becomes less remote, different and separate from humanity than in the case of a transcendent, immutable God influenced by Greek ideas. So immutable may mean consistency and stability, perfection may be dynamic, not a static state of rest in an end-state. So here is a dynamic and enabling Godhead, which draws humanity into a closeness and where there is continual growth and change.

▪ Hans Kung⁸

He does not develop a distinctive approach to the doctrine of the Trinity but calls for new thinking and interpretation. He queries the language that is used, such as the word 'person'. He suggests that Jesus does not speak of God as person. Kung focuses on the 'unity of operation' and the 'mode of co-ordination' as the important aspect of Godhead, asking, "How the Godhead function?" and sees the relational aspects within the Godhead as the central ones. What does scripture say about how Father, Son and Spirit relate and interact with each other, rather than putting the emphasis on questions about source and hierarchy. The unity of Godhead is the 'unity of operation and revelation'.

Jurgen Moltmann⁹

Experiences in Prisoner of War camps in WW2 left him with an impression of the importance of hope, and to question the meaning of suffering, it possibly leading him to develop a theology that some call 'The Theology of Hope', with emphasis on the coming Kingdom of God and its implications for now.

Moltmann sees the concept of the impassibility of God (God untouched by human feeling) as highly problematic for the development of a doctrine of the Trinity. He rejects the language and concept of 'substance' which he sees as creating 'a prison' for our thinking', but rather develops a 'social doctrine' of the Godhead. He begins with the triune nature of God and investigates the concept of unity. This starts with history of Jesus and then examines the developing theme of unity within the New Testament between Jesus and the Father, and then the Holy Spirit, which includes humanity. Godhead is 'habitable' – we can

⁸ Born 1928. Catholic Theologian. Professor of Ecumenical Theology, University of Tübingen (Emeritus Prof since 1996). Authority to teach theology revoked by Catholic church in 1979, due to Kung's rejection of the doctrine of papal infallibility. Remained a priest. A colleague in his early days at the University was Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict 16th) with whom he was to have serious disagreement. Kung is keen on inter-faith dialogue, and president (since 1995) of Global Ethic Foundation, calling for dialogue and peace between all religions, all of which seek of the Absolute, as a pre-requisite for world peace. Many well known speakers at the Foundation's events include Helmut Schmidt (2007) Kofi Annan (2003), Tony Blair (2000). Kung also calls for, greater ecumenical dialogue, decentralisation of authority in the church and equality of opportunity for women and men in the church. Generally regarded as a liberal theologian.

⁹ Born 1926, Hamburg, Germany. He was Prisoner of War in Belgium and the UK. Post-war, trained in theology and became Prof Systematic Theology, University of Tübingen, 1967-1994



dwell in it, just as Jesus dwells in the Father. The implications for the Christian community of faith are that we are to move towards the quality of relationships as in the Godhead. The Godhead focuses on interactions and relationships, on the 'inner-life' of the Godhead, and how it circulates, rather than questions of sources and origins and hierarchy, which prevail within in a static understanding of the Godhead.

Kallistos Ware ¹⁰

The Trinity as a model for human existence.¹¹ God as self-sacrificial, mutual love and the threesome nature enables this love to be expressed and draws humanity into this relational understanding. He has said:

“The doctrine of the Trinity ought to have upon our life an effect that is nothing short of revolutionary. Made after the image of God the Trinity, human beings are called to reproduce on earth the mystery of mutual love that the Trinity lives in heaven - because we know that God is three in one, each of us is committed to living sacrificially in and for the other; each committed irrevocably to a life of practical service, of active compassion. Our faith in the Trinity puts us under obligation to struggle at every level, from the strictly personal to the highly organised, against all forms of oppression, injustice and exploitation. In our combat for social righteousness and ‘human rights’, we are acting specifically in the name of the Holy Trinity”¹²

Many contemporary theologians and writers are encouraging us towards living the trinitarian Godhead:¹³

- We need to re-think the biblical witness to the Godhead, with a focus on the 'inner life' of the Trinity
- There is a need to stress relationships, not hierarchy, along with mutual and varying interactions, not focus on ideas such as source and precedence
- We need to recognise both dynamism and stability within the Godhead
- Consider the biblical witness to relationships between the Godhead and humanity, and within humanity

Reflect on some of these implications of these scriptures for relationships within the Godhead, relationships between God and humanity, and for our relationships with each other?

“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me”
(Jn 5:30)

¹⁰ Born in Bath 1934. Read Classics and Theology, Oxford. Joined Orthodox church in 1958. Ordained as priest in 1966. Lecturer in Eastern Orthodox studies, Oxford, 1966-2001. Priest of Greek Orthodox Parish, Oxford. Supporter of ecumenism and of women's ordination

¹¹ 'The Human Person as an Icon of the Trinity', 1985; a lecture, available at www.unionwithchrist.com/human-person.pdf.)

¹² Kallistos Ware 'The Orthodox Way' p 39

¹³ See Alistair McFadyen, 'The Call to Personhood', Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990 and John Taylor, 'The Christlike God', SCM Press, London, 1992



“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you: abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love”

(Jn 15:9-10)

“As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be (one) in us... so that they may be one as we are one”

(Jn 17:21-23)

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father”

(Jn 10:14-15)

In conclusion:

“The doctrine of the Trinity is not mere speculation about the depths of God; it is equally an analysis of the heights of Man”

Raimundo Panikkar¹⁴

“I am only truly human, truly personal,
if I relate to others after the likeness of the Trinity”

Kallistos Ware¹⁵

Questions

1. Why is it important that we try to express the doctrine of the Godhead in words?
2. What are the dangers of trying to express the doctrine of the Godhead in words?
3. Jews, Christians and Muslims are all monotheists; believing in only one God. The traditional Christian belief in both the divinity and deity of Jesus can appear to challenge this idea. Do you think the deity of Jesus emphasises the unity of God? Explain your conclusions. What should be some of the practical consequences of a Christian belief in the tri-unity of God?

Reading and Resources

G Bray, *‘The Doctrine of God’* IVP, 1993

D Brown, *‘The Divine Trinity’* Duckworth, 1985

TN Finger, *‘Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach’* Herald, 1987

EJ Fortman, *‘The Triune God’* Hutchinson, 1972

E Hill, *‘The Mystery of the Trinity’* London, 1985

JND Kelly, *‘Early Christian Doctrines’* A&C Black, 1977

H Kung, *‘On Being a Christian’* Collins, London, 1977

A McFadyen, *‘The Call to Personhood’* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990

A McGrath, *‘Christian Theology: An Introduction’* Blackwell, 1994

J Moltmann, *‘The Trinity and the Kingdom of God’* SCM Press, London, 1981

A Richardson, *‘Creeds in the Making’* SCM, 1935

¹⁴ Born in Spain 1918. Father Indian, mother Catalan. Studied philosophy, science and theology. Is labelled an ‘Indian philosopher’. Ordained Catholic priest in 1946. Professorships in Rome and principally the USA, plus studies in India. Author of over 40 books

¹⁵ Kallistos Ware, ‘In the Image of the Trinity: collected works, vol 2’, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006



V Lossky, **'The Vision of God'** Crestwood, 1984
J Taylor, **'The Christlike God'** SCM Press, London, 1992
AW Wainwright, **'The Trinity in the New Testament'** SPCK, 1962
J Macquarrie **'Principles of Christian Theology'** SCM 1966 (Rev Ed 2003)
K Ware, **'The Human Person as an Icon of the Trinity'** 1985. (Lecture, available at [www.unionwithchrist.com/human person.pdf.](http://www.unionwithchrist.com/human%20person.pdf))
K Ware, **'The Orthodox Way'** St. Vladimirs Press, Crestwood, NY, 1985
K Ware, **'In the Image of the Trinity: collected works, vol 2'** St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006

"The Divine Dance". A set of 4 CDs by Richard Rohr, available for £20 from Agape Ministries at http://www.agapeministries.co.uk/index_old.html. On the same page is a follow-up series called "The Shape of God" on CD or DVD for £25.

