

## Jesus' Name and the Trinity

From the outset of the New Testament we are confronted with a person who is at once like us and yet altogether different.

Jesus of Nazareth is presented to us as a truly human person who had emotions and intelligence similar to ours. He felt pain and loneliness, just as we do. And even though he never sinned, he wrestled with the same kinds of temptations we all face: pride, self-pity, fear, doubt, dishonesty, hate and the misuse of his human sexuality (Hebrews 4:15). When a close friend of his died, he “was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved”; he wept (John 11:33). He knew fatigue, hunger and thirst (John 4:6; Matthew 4:2). He even confessed ignorance regarding the time of the end of the world, saying that only his Father knew when that would happen (Matthew 24:36).

At the same time the New Testament presents this person, Jesus, as someone altogether different from other people. He is called God (John 1:1-3; 20:28) and identified as Yahweh, the God of Israel (Hebrews 1:10-12 with Psalm 102). He declared, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). His religious contemporaries understood the implication of what he said -- in effect “making himself equal to God” -- and “so they picked up stones to throw at him” (John 5:18; 8:59).

The revelation, “Jesus is God,” poses monumental difficulty, because the Bible declares that there is only one God: “Hear, O Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone” (Deuteronomy 6:4). And this God is utterly distinct from his creation: “I am Yahweh, and there is no other; besides me there is no god . . . I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I Yahweh do all these things” (Isaiah 45:5-7).

In order to maintain the unity of God, some would say that Jesus is simply the Father, many times denying that he is truly human. They would explain away this distinction that Jesus drew between himself and the Father as simply being different roles played by one and the same person. (For example, my wife maintains a number of relationships: she is a daughter to her parents, a wife to me, a mother to our children and a grandmother to our grandsons.)

While appealing to the human need to figure out God on our terms, this simply does not do justice to the New Testament witness. Jesus prayed to God and called him Father. According to Matthew, at the same moment when Jesus was baptized on earth, his Father spoke from heaven, and the Spirit of God came down (Matthew 3:16, 17). He spoke of himself not only as one with the Father (John 10:30), but also as different from him -- even saying, “the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28). Jesus said, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23). He spoke of another, too, “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name” (John 14:26).

This distinction within the overarching unity of the Godhead is succinctly put in John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

As the early Church sought to maintain the mystery that God is both one and three, and as they worshiped the Lord Jesus as one who is both God and man in his one person, they encountered people who explained away the mystery. Clever folk imagined that they could define God in such a way that finite man could comprehend him without any sense of rational tension. But as a friend of mine, Ameal Jones, put it, “No human language can weave a verbal net to capture that.”

Biblically driven Christians stated the mystery of Godliness: There is only one true God, yet the Father is God, Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is God. There are not three gods, only One. Yet the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct from each other: Jesus is not the Father, nor is he the Holy Spirit. This was put so beautifully by the fourth century Patriarch, Athanasius.

Ancient statements of faith did not come up with a new teaching; they only defended the biblical message against those who would attempt to put God in a rational box, easily figured out by his creatures. Paul said, “Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great” (1 Timothy 3:16). The biblical scholars who met at Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon simply set forth what the Bible itself teaches. But they did so by showing how the truth of who God is differed from the rationalistic theories that attempted to explain it away.

In the course of time a term was coined to express this, the word “Trinity.” The word is not in the Bible, but it does sum up what the Bible itself teaches about God, that he is one and yet he is three: One God who eternally exists in three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Rather than rejecting the New Testament witness because we cannot fully comprehend the essence of who God is, humility calls for us simply to worship him.