

God In Our Midst

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Here in this lesson we continue the discussion introduced in the previous lesson on the trinity. That lesson we titled "*The Trinity or Three Faces of God.*" This lesson is a discussion of that "face" God has revealed to us in "the Son." This is what Jesus of Nazareth was - a revelation of God. He came to show us the Father, and when we have seen him, we have seen the Father (cf. John 1:18; 14:8-9; 16:25).

This concept may be hard to grasp. But struggling to grasp hard concepts is good for us. The problem is that of a finite being trying to grasp the concept of an infinite being. But what point is there to having revelation from God if that revelation is not intelligible or knowable? It must be the case that what this infinite being has revealed to a finite being concerning himself is knowable. If not, what is the point of the revelation? God (the infinite) has revealed himself to his creation (the finite).

As we have discussed in previous lessons, "God is" and this may be determined from observation of creation itself - reason demands the existence of God. Further, he has revealed himself to us, he has made his name known and he has made his nature known. He has throughout history made himself known through revelation to chosen ones and this revelation is in collected form in the Scriptures. But there is more. He has made himself known to us "in person," and there is a tremendous significance to this. As expressed by one writer:

What kind of God is the Creator and Ruler of the world? He is not a God of sheer naked power and unpredictable whims. He is not a dark, threatening, invisible Being before whom we

must live in terror and uncertainty. He is none other than the God whom we know in Jesus Christ, the God who is for us and not against us. (D. C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, p 104.)

If God Came Down

The Problem of Semantics

Perhaps, we would do well to borrow a literary device of C. S. Lewis. He would often raise a hypothetical question to get at a difficult issue by placing man in the position of God. With the incarnation he would probably ask the question, "If man were to try and imagine the best possible way for God to become one of us without ceasing to compromise his monotheistic nature, what would the most creative minds of human race come up with?"

This is the question we will attempt to address in this lesson. If God came down here and walked among us, how would we experience him and how would we talk about what we had experienced? We are immediately faced with the problem of language.

Our language must give every care not to portray the God of the early Christians in the language or images of the religions that surrounded them, keeping in mind that they were strict monotheists. But how do we do that? We may choose to speak of God as the Scriptures speak of him; i.e., he is a God revealed to us by means of his names: *Elohim*, *El Elyon*, *El Olam*, *El Shaddai*, *Yahweh*, or *Adonai*.

We may also choose to speak of him by the names given him in the New Testament: the Father, the Son of God, Immanuel, the Holy One, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Holy One or the Holy Spirit. The use of many names does not remove the problem of multiplicity. The same problem confronts us with such terms as "beings" or "entities," which can very easily communicate the idea of multiple beings or entities when applied to God as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. One could say "the Godhead," but, in reality, the Greek terms translated "Godhead" in the New Testament simply means "deity"

(*theotes*), "divine" (*theios*), and "divinity" (*theiotes*). One is simply saying "members of "the Deity," which leaves us with something of the same problem.

Seeing Faces Again

A unique term found in Scripture is "**presence**," which, in both Hebrew and Greek, literally means "**face**." The Hebrew term is *panal* and is found in Gen 3:8 (they hid themselves from the presence/face of *Yahweh*); 4:14 (from your face/presence I shall be hid); Exod 33:14-15 (my presence/face shall go with you); Num 6:25 (the Lord make his face/presence to shine upon you); Deut 5:4 (the Lord spoke with you face/presence to face/presence); see also Psalms 9:3; 13:1; 17:2; 51:11.

As discussed in the previous lesson, the Greek term for presence is *prosopon* and is translated as face or presence. This may be seen in Matt 11:10; Luke 1:76, 2:31, and 7:27, "I will send my messenger before your face/presence;" also 18:10 "they behold the face/presence of my Father always;" 22:16 "do not regard the person [*prosopon* - face/presence] of men." In all these references the term face represents one's presence. In this sense we may speak of the "three faces of God," in that with each name (Father, Son, Spirit) God's presence is represented and something of God is revealed by that "face/presence."

Persons and/or Personalities

May we call him "a person?" If we did, what would we intend to communicate by this term? The term "person" is from the Latin *persona* and was used by theologians of the third and fourth centuries to speak of God as one who had revealed himself by means of a *persona*. This word was used for a mask worn by an actor in the theater to help him play his role more effectively. The mask, in effect, represented a character he way playing. The term later came to be used to refer to the role itself rather than the mask. It is this word that gives us our English word "person." In conversation this word is used for and autonomous being (i.e., a human being) who stands

separate and apart from other autonomous beings. When we use the word "persons" to refer to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, it is difficult to avoid the concept of three autonomous beings who stand separate and apart from one another in existence and activity.

Perhaps the term "personalities" may be used but personality is simply an extension of one's personhood. It is the case that God has experienced personhood in that he was personified in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and entered into human existence in the incarnation. Here is a point we cannot let slip away from us in all of this discussion about trinitarian terminology, namely, that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth God was here. God has been here in the same sense that we are here. He has walked among us as one of us and once we have realized that, nothing can ever be the same for us. This is the central belief of Christianity, that Jesus was the presence of God in our midst. But how do we understand God as being here in our world and at the same time being beyond our world?

The God Who Is "Here" and "There"

One may speak of God as three beings, entities, persons or personalities in speaking of the Father, Son, and Spirit or speak of the presence/face of God, if one understands that it is only God's expression of himself in our world that is under consideration. We must express ourselves in such a way that the Biblical portrayal of God remains in place and the monotheism of both Old and New Testaments is not distorted. Perhaps it would be just as well in this discussion for us to simply express ourselves as he has expressed himself. His presence in our world if space, time, and matter must, of necessity, require some means of expression, but that expression of his existence cannot be thought of as the sum of his existence. We may say that God is revealing or expressing some aspect of his being within our world, and we must keep in mind that we are talking about an existence beyond our comprehension expressing itself in such a way that we can comprehend something of it.

Ways and Means of Revelation

When speaking of God's revelation of himself to man, we are again confronted with the problem of "God talk" or "talking about God." We may call it a revelation of his existence, a manifestation of it, an expression of it, but, however we choose to speak it, it is the fact that what is being said here is that an infinite being has entered into and experienced existence within our finite dimension of existence. How he is able to do this is something a finite being has no way of understanding because we are only capable of understanding that which is finite

Man's Experience of God

According to the Scriptures, man has experienced the existence of God. He has experienced God's existence as the Creator or Father and he has experienced God's presence in his world in the movement of the *Ruach Elohim* (Spirit of God), wherein his presence and power were active in our world. Through these experiences man has known him as "God with us." Man has also experienced God as "one of us," God in our midst. In the existence of Jesus of Nazareth God was here. But here we need be careful in that in this way of talking about God we cannot think of any expression of his existence as the sum of his existence. The manifestation of his existence in the Son does not eliminate his existence as the Creator or Father, or *the Ruach Elohim* (Spirit of God). God does continue to exist beyond our world while, at the same time, experiencing existence within our finite, space-time dimension of existence.

Infinity within the Finite

In order for man to experience the existence of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth it would have been necessary for God to take on such characteristics as are necessary to experiencing existence within that realm of existence as a part of that realm. But such an experience did not concentrate his existence so that he was "here" and nowhere else. His existence was "here" but his existence was "there" as well. He can be "here" and "there" at one and the same time, and

both manifestations of his existence be truly and fully God. He is the Father, and he is the Son, and he is the Holy Spirit. All are expressions of his existence, all exist within his existence, and all may be expressed at one and the same time and all be revelations of "One God."

All expressions of his existence, no matter what name we give that expression, are of one Supreme Being and only one Supreme Being. The only sense in which he can be spoken of as "them" is from our point of view, in that we are seeing him from within our world of finite limitation. When Philip said to Jesus, "Show us the Father," Jesus' reply could be problematic in terms of his truthfulness. He said to Philip, "In that you have seen me, you have seen the Father." Was he saying that to see him was to see the first person of the Trinity? Would it not have been more accurate to say, "In that you have seen me, you have seen the Son"?

If God is three persons in the sense many understand this concept, then was he saying to Philip, "In that you have seen me, you have seen the first person of the Trinity?" Should he have said, "In that you have seen me, you have seen the second person of the Trinity?" Was his answer correct, incorrect, ambiguous, evasive, or was he saying something to Philip that was filled with mystery and wonder, something that is true in a sense that we cannot understand?

In the incarnation the existence of God was experience by men in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, through him God walked in our midst. In the person of Jesus God was here, so much so that he could say, "In that you have seen me, you have seen the Father," and "I and the Father are "one!" In what sense were they one? Were they actually three in reality but only one in the same sense that a man and woman are one in marriage? This is not what Jesus was saying.

He Came to Show Us the Father

In John 16:25, Jesus says to his disciples, "Though I have been speaking figuratively [in parables/stories, etc.], a time is coming

when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father." Later, in John 17:6, Jesus says in his prayer to the Father: "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word."

He Has Made Him Known

Jesus came to show us the Father, especially the love, the mercy, the grace, and the salvation of the Father. In John 1:18, the apostle John tells us: "No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God [Son], who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." There are different readings in the many of the ancient Greek manuscripts of the Gospel of John here in this verse. Two of the best and most ancient manuscripts read "only begotten son," the oldest papyri manuscripts, however, read, "only begotten God." It appears that an early scribe was attempting to make it clear that the only begotten one under consideration was the Son, even though the oldest texts called him God.

The Only Begotten God

There are two issues of note found in this verse. The first concerns the expression "only begotten." What is the meaning of this expression and how (or better "when") does it apply to Christ? The rendering "only begotten" is a translation of the Greek word *monogenes* which is taken from *monos* (only, alone) and *genes* (to be begotten, conceived, given birth to). This is the primary meaning when used of persons. When used of things it may mean, "unique, or one of a kind." Here, however, and throughout the Gospel of John, this term applies to the person called the Son of God, and its meaning is "only begotten." How and when was this one we know as Jesus of Nazareth begotten? Was he eternally the Son or did his role as Son begin when he became the incarnate manifestation of God here on earth?

The Word Became Flesh

According to John 1:1-2, this one was eternally with God as the *Logos* (the word), and, according to v 14, the *Logos* became flesh (human) and dwelt among us. Both Matthew and Luke describe Christ's entrance into this world in terms of "a begetting." In Matt 1:18-25 we are told that Jesus of Nazareth was brought into existence through a miraculous conception of the divine existence of God with the human existence of a female virgin named Mary. Luke 1:26-38 and 2:1-21 tell of the same event, with an interpretation of what was happening found in 1:35, "And the angel answered and said to her, The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you: wherefore also the holy thing which is begotten shall be called the Son of God." It would appear that the sonship of Jesus (i.e., his role as the only begotten Son) began with the incarnation.

This interpretation is consistent with Paul's writing in Phil 2:5-11, wherein he speaks of Jesus as, "existing in the form of God," and "being on an equality (lit. being in sameness) with God," then emptied himself and entered into oneness with man. In Col 1:19, Paul tells us that, "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him," and again in 2:9, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." There can be little doubt that the New Testament portrays Jesus as existing in equality with God (not in a secondary role) before his incarnation and becoming "the Son" at his incarnation.

The second issue here in this verse concerns the expression, "he has made him known." This line of Greek text literally translates, "the one who is in the midst of the Father, that one has revealed him." The word translated "revealed" here is *exegeomai*, the word from which we get the term "exegesis," which, in Biblical scholarship, means the discipline or art of interpreting the text of Scripture. Jesus is "the exegesis" of God - he has interpreted him for us. He came to show us the Father and that revelation of God centered in his own life and teachings. This is made manifestly clear by Jesus' words in John 14:5-9,

Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, and how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; and from now on you know him and have seen him." Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; so how can you say, "Show us the Father"?

"One of Us" and "God with Us"

The truth that Jesus was "one of us" is of great significance to us. He experienced our existence. He was human as we are human and has shared human existence with us. This aspect of his being is beautifully preserved for us in writings of the New Testament. There one see him truly as "one of us," as a man whose hands were scarred from the carpenter's labor, whose skin was tanned by the Palestinian sun, whose face showed the features of strength and character, whose eyes could pierce one's soul, whose voice was strong enough to shout above a storm yet soft enough to draw little children to him. One sees him as a man capable of deep feeling, whose affections for his fellow man reached out and enveloped him. One sees him as a man who touched people with his mind and spirit, whose life said to other lives, "I care!" One sees him as a man who communicated with his fellowman as one of them, a man whose mind reached out and took hold of other minds and filled them with the teachings of God, teachings so unique and beautiful they held his listeners spell-bound. He spoke to people concerning things they had longed for ages to hear. They knew that what they were hearing was marvelous and wonderful and that the one from whom they were hearing these things was just as marvelous and wonderful. He was a man in the fullest sense of the word. He was truly "one of us," but the wonder of him lies in the fact that he was more than "one of us," he was also "God with us."

Perhaps no Christological title better reveals this aspect of Christ's paradoxical nature than the Greek term John uses to describe

him, "the *logos*." According to John, this one who was Jesus of Nazareth, "was in the beginning with God . . . and was God" (John 1:1-2). Our English term "word" hardly expresses the fullness of the Greek term *logos*, in that in Greek it is a multicolored term. Words are sounds (when spoken) or symbols (when written) that stand for ideas or concepts held within the mind. The Greek word *logos* stands not only for the sound or symbol, it stands also for the very idea or concept itself. This is, perhaps, the reason John chose it to describe Jesus as the very revelation of God. Jesus of Nazareth was the very expression of God himself, that which expressed the very concept of God.

In this sense Jesus is the "Word of God." This expression may, in its most ancient sense, be applied to Scripture, but it may also be applied to the incarnate Son of God. In this an analogy may be drawn which beautifully exemplifies the sense in which Jesus may be called "the Word." Where the one is the Word of God inscribed, the other is the Word of God personified. The Scriptures contain the concept/idea of God, as revealed by God, clothed in ink and parchment, and set forth in the form of a book or ancient scrolls. Jesus was, in a similar sense, the concept/idea of God, as revealed by God, clothed in human flesh, and set forth in the form of a man rather than a book/scrolls - he was the very concept/idea of God clothed in human flesh.

Conclusion

The belief that Jesus of Nazareth was "God in our midst" to the early Christians is abundantly evidenced from the NT Scriptures. We conclude this lesson with that testimony:

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, **Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace** (Isaiah 9:6).*

*Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, And **they shall call his name Immanuel**; which is, being interpreted, **God with us** (Matt 1:23).*

*The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare **the way of the LORD (Yahweh)**; Make straight in the desert. A highway for our God (Elohim) . . . The **glory of the LORD (Yahweh) shall be revealed**, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken," (Isaiah 40:3 and 5).*

*In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ²and saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare **the way of the LORD** [in the Hebrew text "Yahweh"]; Make **his paths** straight" (Matt 3:1-3).*

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

*If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. Philip said, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. Jesus answered: Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? **Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father**. How can you say, Show us the Father? (John 14:7-9)*

*Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." And Thomas answered and said to Him, "**My Lord and my God**" (John 20:26-28).*

*Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, **who is God over all**, forever praised! Amen (Rom 9:5).*

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing **of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ** (Titus 11-13).*

*But **to the Son** He says: "**Your throne, O God**, is forever and ever; a*

scepter of righteousness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness more than your companions" (Heb 1:8-9 and Psalms 45:6-7).

*Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who through the righteousness of **our God and Savior Jesus Christ** have received a faith as precious as ours (2 Peter 1:1).*

*We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true - even in his Son **Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life** (1 John 5:20).*

One thing is clear from the witness of the NT, Jesus was a man, "one of us," but he was also "God with us." In what sense was this true? The NT clearly presents him as the presence or face of God; "in that you have seen me, you have seen the Father," says Jesus to Philip," (John 14:9). In what sense was this true? This is the question faith must answer for the believer.

MWLIII

Questions for Discussion

1. Why is important to know what the early Christians believed about Jesus?
2. How can knowing what they believed insure the genuineness of our beliefs as Christians?
3. Do you think Jesus believed himself to be God? Why is this question important?
4. Do you think the expression "God in three persons" is problematic? If so, why?
5. Why are such terms as: beings, entities, presence/face, the

Godhead, personas and personalities a problem in discussion the Biblical portrayal of God as the Father, Son, and Spirit of God?

6. Discuss the ways in which Jesus showed us the Father?

7. Was Jesus the "eternal Son" or did he become the "the only begotten Son" by the incarnation? Discuss your answer.

8. Why is it important for us to know that Jesus was "one of us?"

9. In Heb 4:15 we are told that Jesus was tempted just like we are; why is this important to us?

10. What does the array of Scriptures at the end of these notes say to you about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth?