

# Three Faces of God

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The doctrine of "the trinity," from the early centuries to the present, has been one of Christianity's most controversial doctrines. The concern whether Christians have compromised the doctrine of monotheism (i.e., belief in "one God") with a theism that consists of three Gods; which sounds very much like the polytheism of the Greco-Roman world in which Christianity was born.

In his book *The Christological Controversy*, Richard Norris, professor of Church History at Union Theological Seminary (NY), suggests that for four hundred years after the beginnings of Christianity, the question of the identity of Jesus was a topic of great debate. In fact, it was the most controversial issue in the history of the early church. In a companion volume, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, William Rusch, editor of the series, agrees with Norris and insists that this controversy even gave rise to the early church's doctrine of the trinity.

As popular as the doctrine of the trinity is, it may surprise many Christians to learn that much of the terminology and argumentation concerning this doctrine does not come from the New Testament; rather, it was the product of ecclesiastical and theological debate. The term "trinity" was not even used until the fourth century when Tertullian introduced it. And there was no fixed doctrine of the trinity until the Nicene Council in 325 AD where the leaders of the church in the East and the church in the West gathered and debated the issue. This council resulted in the authorized and/or orthodox statement of this doctrine, which is now found in the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign, maker of all

things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, of the substance of the father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made, things in heaven and things on the earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, and became man, suffered and rose on the third day, ascended into the heavens, is coming to judge living and dead. And in the Holy Spirit. And those that say 'There was when he was not,' and, 'Before he was begotten he was not,' and that, 'He came into being from what-is-not,' or those that allege, that the son of God is 'Of another substance or essence' or 'created,' or 'changeable' or 'alterable,' these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes. (*Documents of the Christian Church*, p 25).

Although this document was agreed upon by the ecclesiastical leaders of the Christian Church from the whole of Europe and Asia, it did not put to rest the controversy it was designed to settle. The doctrine of the trinity continued to be, and is yet today, one of the most confusing and controversial doctrines of the Christian religion. How did Christianity come to have such a complex doctrine? The Christians of the first century knew nothing of a "trinity doctrine" as such; perhaps, an explanation of the origins of this doctrine would be in order.

## History of The Doctrine of the Trinity

### *In the First Century*

One of the earliest doctrinal problems for the church of the second century concerned the seeming conflict between belief in God as one God (monotheism) and belief in Jesus as God. The Christians of the New Testament apparently saw no inconsistency in affirming monotheistic belief in the God of the Old Testament (Mark 12:29ff; [Deut 6:4; Isaiah 42:8], 1 Cor 8:4; Eph 4:6), yet, at the same time, referring to Jesus as God (Matt 1:23; John 1:1; 20:28; Titus 2:13), giving him the same titles used to describe or address God (Mark 1:1-3/Isa

40:3; John 4:42; 6:69; 20:28; Rom 10:9; Titus 2:13; Heb 1:8), and even offering him praise or worship as God (Matt 28:9; Rev 5:6-10). The early Christians did not believe that man could become God, but they had no difficulty believing that if God chose to do so, he could become man.

### *In the Second Century*

This same way of thinking appears to have continued into the second century as is evidenced from the writings of a group of churchmen who have been designated "the Apostolic Fathers." There are references in this collection to belief in one God and Creator (*1 Clement* 8, 19, 20; *Didache* 10), yet, Christ is also referred to as "our God" (*Ignatius, Ephesians* 18, 20), who preexisted and yet exists as a spiritual being (*Shepherd of Hermas, Similitude* 8.3.3, 9.1.1). There is, however, no "doctrine of the trinity" in the theology of the Apostolic Fathers. All three players of the divine drama of man's salvation are present but their relationship to one another is not addressed.

There is another group of second century churchmen whose writings do address the issue of the relationship of the Father to the Son and Spirit. These are "the Apologists" (i.e., the theologians of the early church who became known for their debates with Judaism and Paganism concerning the truth of the teachings of Christianity). It is here in these writings that we see the first attempts to deal with the seeming conflict between Christianity's belief in one God (monotheism) and belief in Jesus as God. It wasn't until much later that the role of the Spirit of God became a part of the discussion. As one can see from the language of the Nicene Creed (cited above), the issue was primarily Christological. In fact, only five words are used with reference to the Holy Spirit.

Irenaeus is perhaps the most representative of the apologists on this issue. His arguments centered in the role of Jesus as "the *Logos*" ("the Word" of John 1:1). He portrayed God the Father as a transcendent being who stands over and above the world, who entered into this realm of existence by means of the *Logos* who appears to be something of an alter-ego of God. God's manifestations

of himself as Father, Son, and Spirit are only necessary because of his self-disclosure or revelation of himself to man for man's redemption. The Father was so called because he begat the Son, the Son was so called because he was begotten by the Father, and the Spirit of God was so called because it was by means of spirit that God entered into our world and acted within it to effect the incarnation and empower the Son in his redemptive work.

These writings provided a pool of ideas out of which later theologians drew the doctrine of the "economic trinity" which was, in reality, a way of seeing God (i.e., God's self-disclosure) in and through the multiple roles he played in the salvation drama.

### *In the Third Century*

Of all the third century theologians Tertullian appears to have been the most influential, especially with a view to the formation of what was eventually to become the classic view of the trinity in fourth century thinking. He was the first to use the term "trinity" (Lat. *trinitas*). He argued that God has existed in unique solitariness eternally, but within his existence, as an immanent or indwelling presence, was his *Logos* (reason/his Word) and his Spirit; hence, the orthodox doctrine of "the trinity."

Tertullian used term which was to play a major part in the formulation of this doctrine. It was the Latin word *persona*, translated in English, "person." This term eventually found its way into the trinitarian expression "God in three persons" which too easily creates the idea of three individual Gods, entities, or beings. For so many the idea of personhood implies the idea of autonomy (i.e., independence, freedom from the influence or control of others).

### *In the Fourth Century*

The major figure of fourth century and the final development the doctrine of the trinity was Arius. Arius was totally Unitarian in his view of God. He taught that only God the Father was eternal and uncreated. The *Logos* was a being created by God in the beginning

and was creation of God having the titles "God" or "Son of God" only as angels bore the title if God. In the view of Arius, Jesus of Nazareth was a lesser deity, not fully God nor fully man. Arius' view was the final step in the controversy leading to the Nicene Council called by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 325 AD. At this meeting the views of Arius were condemned as heresy and the "orthodox" view of the trinity was expressed in the Nicene Creed cited above.

## The Trinity and the New Testament Teaching

### *The Problem of the Trinity*

The problem we face here is well expressed in the opening lines of Emil Brunner's chapter titled "The Triune God" in his book *The Christian Doctrine of God*:

When we turn to the problem of the doctrine of the trinity, we are confronted by a peculiarly contradictory situation. On the one hand, the history of Christian theology and of dogma teaches us to regard the dogma of the trinity as the distinctive element in the Christian idea of God, that which distinguishes it from the idea of God in Judaism and in Islam, and indeed, in all forms of rational theism. Judaism, Islam and rational theism are unitarian. On the other hand, we must honestly admit that the doctrine of the trinity did not form part of the early Christian - New Testament - message, nor has it ever been a central article of faith in the religious life of the Christian Church as a whole, at any period in its history. . . . Certainly, it cannot be denied that not only the word "Trinity," but even the explicit idea of the Trinity is absent from the apostolic witness to the faith . . . (*Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 205).

From this fact we must not conclude that the concept behind the development of this doctrine is unbiblical. The fact is that in the New Testament we see the Father, the Son, and the Spirit addressed as "God.". Our question, simply stated, is this: "What do we do with this New Testament teaching?" The early Christians were, without doubt, monotheists. The earliest disciples and converts to

Christianity were Jews and the *Shema* of Deut 6:4 would have stood at the heart of their faith. The polytheism of their world was considered a violation of the first two of the 10 Commandments as well as the *Shema*. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, affirms his monotheism again and again in his letters. But Paul had no problem referring to Christ as God (cf. Titus 2:13, especially the Greek text) and the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of God, which would have meant that the Spirit of God was as much God as the spirit of Paul was of Paul. The language of the New Testament stands for itself and cannot be compromised. It is the product of men inspired of God, a claim that cannot be said of the churchmen or the creeds, confessions of faith, and the declarations of dogma of the first four centuries of the Christian church. If the terminology used creates more confusion than clarification, then perhaps we should abandon the terminology and be content with the language of the Scriptures.

### *The Essential New Testament Teaching*

If we determine to accept only those teachings that are clearly developed for us in those writings we believe to be inspired of God, then where does this leave this matter before us? We must believe that God is one (Mark 12:28-30; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 4:6), that he is our Father (Matt 5:48; Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 8:6; 2 Cor 1:2-3; Gal 1:4; Eph 4:6), that the Son of God is none other than "God with us" (Matt 1:22-23; John 1:1-2; 20:28; Rom 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb 1:8ff; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 5:20), and that the Spirit of God is nothing less than God's very spirit and is as much "of God" as any of our spirits are "of us" (1 Cor 2:11-12).

### Conclusion

It is clear that we see "the presence of God" interacting within his creation and the word used for his presence is the Greek word for "face." The Greek word for "presence" is *prosopon* [πρὸς + ὤψ] defined in all major lexicons, Classical and Koine, as, "the face, countenance, the appearance, the presence of someone, the individual or the personal presence of someone." The word *prosopon* is found in the NT translated as "face," "appearance," "person,"

“countenance,” and “presence.” The Latin word used to translate the Greek *prosopon* is *persona*, from which derives the words, “person, personification, personality.” In Acts 3:19-20, Peter admonishes his listeners,

*Repent, therefore, and be converted in order that your sins may be sent away, in order that there may come times of renewal from the presence (prosopon - face) of the Lord.*

Again, in Acts 5:41, the apostles are said to have gone their way from the presence (*prosopon* - face) of the Council (Sanhedrin) rejoicing.” In 1 Thess 2:17, Paul speaks of being separated from the church there in presence (*prosopon* - face) but not in heart.” Again in 2 Thess 1:9, Paul speaks of the evil as being separated from the presence (*prosopon* - face) of the Lord at his coming. Perhaps, one of the most explicit uses of this term for the presence of God is found in Hebrews 9:24, where the writer speaks of Christ entering into the heavenly Holy of Holies to appear before the presence (*prosopon* - face) of God on our behalf. So essentially, the presence of God may also be called the appearance of the face or “a face” of God.

With this information how may we understand these New Testament occurrences of titles of deity being used to speak of a different presence or manifestation of God? What do we see revealed to us concerning the issue of God being spoken of in different personas (faces or presences) in the Scriptures? This may be seen in the very opening lines of the Hebrew Scriptures.

*In the beginning God [no question as to who is under consideration here], created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God [who is this?] was hovering over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:1-2).*

Is it the case that we have two distinct “faces/presences” of God here? One is spoken of as *Elohim* (the plural of *El*) and then it is the *Ruach Elohim* that moves or hovers over the face of the surface of the waters. In fact, the *Ruach Elohim* is revealed in the Hebrew

Scriptures again and again as the presence of God that interacts with his physical creation (see: Genesis 6:3; 41:38; Exodus 31:3; 35:31; Num 24:2). Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (OT) in is the *Ruach Elohim* (Spirit of God) that comes upon man in the empowerment of that man as one gifted with special abilities or a prophet. This is also the case in all NT references to God interacting with man. It is the spirit of God that comes upon Jesus at his baptism to inaugurate his as the Messiah and declare him as the Son of God.

Whether Jewish reader or Christian, both can clearly see "God" and the "Spirit of God" mentioned in the same verses of the Hebrew Scriptures. Is this just a poetic metaphor for one and the same entity, or is it a clear expression of two distinct images of God being presented? How many figures to you see in the text, one or two? Whose face is looking back in the expression "God created" and whose face is looking back in the expression, "the Spirit of God was hovering?" Is it the case that what we have here is something clearly intelligible or do we have a kind of terminology that usually results when an infinite concept is revealed in finite language?

It is not necessarily wrong to ask such questions in seeking a greater understanding of who God is and how he has revealed himself to us; this is what faith is about, it must have content to truly be believed. We must not, however, make a doctrine owing its very name and language to the theological controversies of the early centuries of our era, a matter of faith for the present day Christian.

This lesson has been titled, "Three Faces of God." It is not intended to communicate that the expression "three faces of God" is another way of saying "the trinity," but the presentation of a way of "speaking where the Scriptures speak" rather than remain content with the language created by early churchmen who could see nothing other than we have presented here but chose a different way of expressing what they saw. Perhaps we may better see "three faces of God" here easier that we can see a very complex doctrine of "the trinity." We will leave this discussion here and follow it with two other lessons on "the three faces of God."

## Questions For Discussion

1. What do you think of when you hear the expression, "the trinity?"
2. Where did you learn about this doctrine?
3. What do you understand by the term "monotheism?"
4. What do you think Exodus 20:1-6 and Deut 6:4 mean in terms of this discussion?
5. Why do you think some people insist that it is a rejection of monotheism to believe in the doctrine of the trinity?
6. Discuss the significance of the Nicene Creed's statement of the trinity. Can something like this inform our faith as New Testament Christians? If so, how so? If not, why not?
7. Do you think that the first century church had a doctrine of the trinity? Is there any significance to the fact that the church of the 2nd century did not have a trinity doctrine?
8. Do you think that the problem with this doctrine is more a matter of semantics more than anything else? If so, how would you solve this problem?
9. Do you think there is anything wrong with using language or terminology which is not found in Scripture to express belief or interpret one's understanding of Biblical teaching?
10. What do you think a person must believe about God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit in order to be a Christian?