

The Problem Of The Divine Trinity Examined

Some weeks ago a listener to this programme asked me about the Divine Trinity, whether I have anything that would help him understand it better and clear up much of the confusion of thought and terminology which surrounds it. For the past 1700 years, from the time of the Council of Nicaea, in 325 A.D., the Christian Church has talked in terms of three persons in the Godhead, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, each separate from the other and performing different functions, yet, mysteriously, incomprehensively, they are, together, one God. And, confusing as that is, the confusion is acknowledged and admitted, and there have been countless sincere attempts by Christian writers and theologians to at least partially unravel the difficulties and to make the whole concept more understandable.

In an article he wrote a few years ago the then Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne, spoke of the obvious paradox implied in the phrase "three in one". In fact, most writers I have consulted see the problem. The thing is, how to solve it. How do you reconcile, how do you make sense of teaching which, on the one hand, insists that there are three divine Persons, each separate from the other, each having different functions to perform, with teaching which, on the other hand, insists that together they are one God? That's the problem and that's what confuses people.

No one I know questions the Biblical insistence, particularly the insistence of the Old Testament, that there is one God only, ruler of heaven and earth. No one doubts, denies, or tries to get away from such statements as we have in

[Deuteronomy Chapter 6, verse 4](#), "Hear, O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord is One", or in [Isaiah Chapter 44, verse 6](#): "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel... I am the First and I am the Last; besides me there is no God."

The Old Testament is overwhelmingly and unmistakably emphatic that there is one God only, known by the name of Jehovah, Yehowah, or Yahweh, who said, "I, even I, am the Lord, and besides me there is no Saviour." ([Isaiah 43:10](#)). No one, as far as I know, has suggested that there is or was any sort of problem so far as the Old Testament is concerned. The problem arises when we come to the New Testament. And it is to the New Testament we must now turn.

What is handled in so straight forward a manner in the Old Testament, the oneness of God, is confused and obscured to some extent in the New by statements which suggest separateness between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, all of whom, the implication is, exercises different functions. Jesus prayed to the Father. He often spoke of the Father as someone separate from Himself. "My Father" He once said, "is greater than I". (John 14:28). And even the ethereal and far less knowable Holy Spirit seems to be given an individuality and identity in John's Gospel Chapter 14, where Jesus says: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray to the Father, and He will give you another Comforter, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you." (Chapter 14, verses 15-17).

At the time of His trial Jesus said, "But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God." (Luke 22: 69). What could be clearer, than that, the three, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, are separate Persons, each being, a distinct individual and having each of them, different functions to perform?

But where the New Testament is concerned this is but one part of the picture, one half of the story. There are other things said which say something quite different and these too are often overlooked. They must be considered alongside the others we've just mentioned, otherwise we are bound to get a lopsided or distorted view of what is involved.

A moment ago I referred to something Jesus said in John's Gospel which seems to suggest the Holy Spirit as being a distinct person or individual; an identity in its, or his, own right. As against this, do you remember how it was, after the resurrection and before His ascension, Jesus breathed on the assembled disciples and said, "Receive you the Holy Spirit". (John 20:22). He didn't, you will notice, introduce them to another Person, as someone separate from Himself. It is said He breathed on them. If anything raises questions about the Holy Spirit being a third Person in the Divine Trinity this must. Here the Holy Spirit is spoken of in terms of the Divine breath.

Then again you have the words of Jesus at the time He took His leave of the disciples, [Matthew 28, verse 18](#): "All power," He said, "in heaven and on earth has been given to me". There can only be one Person; one God; who is all powerful, and the risen Lord Jesus Christ said it was He, Himself. "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

When Jesus showed Himself to the by now aged apostle, John, on the isle of Patmos, He spoke of Himself as "the First and the Last". ([Revelation 1:17](#)). And these are the exact words which, as we saw, God in the Old Testament used in referring to Himself ([Isaiah 44:6](#)). Clearly, and here again, there can only be one Divine Being who is the First and the Last, the Beginning and the Ending. There can't be two. Indeed, when we think about it, we wonder whether Jesus could have said anything plainer to show that He, then risen and glorified, is one and the same, the God who spoke and revealed Himself in the Old Testament, the God of heaven and earth. As He said while on earth, "He that has seen me has seen the Father." ([John 14:9](#)).

People sometimes quibble as to what Jesus meant when He said, "I and the Father are one". I have heard it said that he meant that He and the Father were one in spirit, or one in outlook and intention, 'at one with each other', and that sort of thing. But the Jews who heard Jesus didn't think this. It is said that they took up stones to stone Him because, they said, "you, being a man, make yourself God". ([John 10:33](#)). Jesus was saying that He was God, the one God. The Jews listening to Him realised this and they were all for stoning Him.

What, then, you must by now be asking, is the truth of the matter? Who was Jesus? What is the Holy Spirit? Are they three or are they one? How are we to think of God? Tell me, what is the Divine Trinity?

Let's go back to what no one argues about and about which there is no confusion, and that is the teaching in the Old Testament that there is one God and that beside Him there is no other; no other Saviour. And let's use this as our starting point. One God, known and referred to as Jehovah.

Now look at what is said, still in the Old Testament, about the promised Divine intervention in human affairs. Do the prophecies talk of the one God, Jehovah, sending another? His Son? No. They talk about Him coming Himself. Look at [Isaiah 25](#), for example: "It will be said in that day, 'Lo, this is our God, we have waited for Him, that He might save us. This is Jehovah; we have waited for Him; let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation. (verse 9). And then, an even better known prophecy, [Isaiah 40](#), "A voice cries, 'In the wilderness prepare the way of Jehovah, make straight in the desert a highway for our God". (verse 3).

For the purpose of overcoming the power of evil then threatening the destruction of the human race Jehovah God Himself descended into the world, assuming human nature and a human body by birth of the virgin Mary. He veiled over His divinity as the only way of coming face to face with the evil then so heavily pressing upon people. Another way of putting it is to say that Jesus Christ was God come on earth, for all that God Himself, or the Divine, was often heavily obscured within Jesus. That obscuring, causing at times a real sense of separateness, was necessary, if evil was to show itself and be overcome. Hence the times Jesus prayed to God and spoke to Him as if He were someone separate from Him. That's how it sometimes seemed. In reality, it was not so. The unknowable, inscrutable, God, Jehovah of the Old Testament, descended into the world and in the course of time, completely glorified the human nature and body He assumed. For all that, there was a sense of separateness while on earth and to which we have referred, causing Jesus to cry out and to pray, they are not two. They are one. As we think of the risen Lord Jesus Christ we are able to see in our minds the one God made knowable in glorified human form.

Does this mean then that there is no such thing as the Trinity?

There is no such thing as a trinity of three, co-equal Persons in the Godhead. But there is a trinity of essentials which, by way of an analogy with ourselves, we need have no trouble in understanding.

Although you are one person, just as I am one person, yet each of us human beings consists of three essentials, these being soul, body, and influence proceeding forth (or personality). We are one, yet we consist of this trinity of essentials.

So with the one God. His "Soul" is the Divine Life Itself, referred to as "the Father"; His "body" is the Son. (And it is perfectly true what Jesus said. We only know "the Father" by means of "the Son", or, as is meant, we only know the otherwise unknowable Divine by means of the human He assumed in coming on earth). His influence proceeding forth is "the Holy Spirit", working in the minds and lives of people, as it does. Not three Persons, you see, but three essentials, just like the three essentials of soul, body, and influence proceeding which together comprise each of us. And, of course, there is never any suggestion that we are more than one person, is there?

Because the subject is both an extensive and important one I will be taking it up again next time, looking more particularly at some of the difficult Scripture passages which can be stumbling blocks where this matter of the oneness of God, in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, is concerned.

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