

# One God, Three Persons

## Coming to grips with God's revelation of himself

### Introduction: A difficult concept to grasp

Accepting that God is a "Trinity," let alone understanding it, can be really difficult. Nevertheless, the Bible does speak of God as being "one" *and* as Spirit, Son and Father. It also attributes the title "Lord" to all three and accepts that each is to be individually worshipped, and that each was involved in the Creation with separate responsibilities and activity. The problem is, that even those who *do* believe that God is as he says he is also find that reason and logic stop short at the concept of "Three in One" or "One in Three."

To say that God is beyond human logic and understanding is to state the obvious, yet the very point of God coming to earth to be one of us and to live amongst us was to come in *self revelation*. God the Son came, among other things, to *reveal* the Father, *and* that God was infinitely more than he had previously made known to Israel, when he'd stated "The Lord our God, the Lord is one."

This understanding still prevailed in Jesus' time, and he affirmed it, to the approval of the scribe in Mark 12. But Jesus *also* went on to claim that he was God, and that God was even his Father! He asserted that his Father and he were One, *actually IN* each other, which provoked the accusation of blasphemy. It was evident that his accusers, without fully understanding, knew that Jesus was claiming to be God. But this presented a picture of God that reached far beyond what he had formerly disclosed about himself in his relationship with Israel. It is little wonder then, that the Jews of Jesus' time, and people of our time too, find God's revealed knowledge about himself so difficult to grasp.

### Grasping, first of all, that God is not static

The picture of God in the Old Testament is of the great "I am," who is and was and always will be, which makes God appear to be static, though, that he only is and does what he's always been and done. It is not a picture of God doing as he pleases, or doing completely new things that he's never done before. It could be a scary thought, then, that he may actually be developing his word and his relationship with us and creation, revealing what he had previously not revealed and interacting with us in ways that are beyond our reason and ability to fathom. He did tell us his thoughts and ways would be way beyond us, **Isaiah 55:8**, but it can still be difficult to live with!

There is a way of coming to grips with it, though. When God named himself as "I AM that I AM," the language he used *ALSO* included the meaning "I WILL BE what I WILL BE." He is not, therefore, an immobile and unknowable "unmoved mover" - as imagined by the Greek philosophers and the Jews of Jesus' day. He is dynamically working amongst us, progressively developing his word and his creation, advancing unerringly to his predetermined end of reconciling all things in Jesus Christ (**Colossians 1:19-20**). And if that concept is new and unnerving, that God is dynamic and progressive, we also know God is love, so his developing relationship with the creation and with us is always one of unconditional and faithful self-giving.

### To what end is God working?

Accepting, then, that God is dynamically and progressively advancing us toward his predetermined end, what is that end? Well, this is where understanding that God is a

trinity (or triune) comes in, because what God is he also created us to share in, too. That's the end he's working toward.

So, what is God? Being triune means he's a communion. He's an internal and intrinsic relationship of love, mutual and reciprocated between the Father, Son and Spirit existing as One Being. And God's purpose for creating humans is to share in this communion of love.

God chose not to live alone but in fellowship with his created beings. Not that he needed to share his life of love in order to be God, but because he personally and freely chose to be "God for us" and "God with us." He is the "God who shares" - his very Being, nature and existence *as love* determining the direction, certainty and security of our relationship with him and the final outcome. As Almighty God he cannot fail, either.

### **The church's evolving understanding**

The Apostle Paul, like us, grappled with this great mystery, but when he understood the astounding facts of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, he burst out with "O, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements, and his ways past finding out!" Once understood, it's obviously marvellous!

It still took the church some 300 years, though, to refine the understanding that the Father, Son and Spirit, each of whom are fully God, shared a relationship of reciprocal love which actually *is* the One Eternal God. The Council of Nicaea, directed by such pillars of the church as Irenaeus and Athanasius, attempted to put this into textual form for the church, out of which came the Nicene Statement of Belief.

But even then the church still hadn't fully come to terms yet with the deity of the Holy Spirit, so a further refining of the doctrine of the Trinity took place in the Council of Alexandria and finally at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.

Gradually, as God worked with the church, this revelation about himself became the foundation of the church's belief and the central pillar on which the gospel rests. And all those obscure statements and "scandalous" claims Jesus made to his disciples and to the people of his day finally made sense. It all fitted with God as he describes himself - as One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### **Remembering what the early church understood**

Centuries down the line, in this smorgasbord of squabbling religions, those foundational beliefs and understanding reached by the early church fathers can be easily forgotten or neglected. And yet it was by meticulous and careful surrender to the guidance of the Spirit and Scripture that they came to know of the nature of God as he revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

They came to understand the vital truth of who God is and therefore to what end God is taking us. They understood that the One Eternal God is a Communion, a relationship of love in which God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit co-exist and dwell in each other as One Being, which enabled the church to worship God as he really is.

This vital understanding and acceptance of God's self-revelation is recorded for us in the 1700 year old Creeds which underpin the church's liturgy, like this quote from the Nicæan/Constantinople Councils of 325-381 AD:

"We believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible, and we believe in the one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten from His Father before all time, Light from Light, true

God from True God, begotten not made, of one and the same Being with the Father, through whom all things were made. For us men and for our salvation was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made man.....”

How certain they were back then, and what a pity it is that what they understood is so remote and poorly understood today.

### **Conclusion**

So, it was God *himself* who came to us and amongst us, becoming one with us and acting for us, in his earthly life and work of self-disclosure and redemption. If this were not so, then the gospel message of the love of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit would have no divine validity. Its message of redemption, reconciliation and salvation would be groundless.

But God’s self disclosure, revealing himself as the One God who *is* love - Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity (as expressed by Athanasius) - assures us that God the Father and God the Holy Spirit are directly and personally present in the revealing and saving activity of Jesus Christ.

As a result, we can be confident that in our belief and worship, Jesus’ Father is also our Father and his God is also our God (**John 20:17**). And the Holy Spirit is the one through whom we are given to share in the Communion of Love which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit eternally *are* as the One true God.