

Blessed Trinity

By David Feddes

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). That’s the first sentence of the Bible. But who created God? The answer is that nobody created God. The Lord has always existed. He had no beginning and will have no end.

But that just raises more questions. What did God do before he started creating? Was God all alone before creation, with nothing to do and nobody to relate to? Wouldn’t that get to be boring and lonely? Children wonder about questions like that, and so do some grownups.

A child who asks what God did before he made the world is onto something important. The child senses that there’s a problem with thinking of God as a single, solitary individual who just happens to be stronger, smarter, purer and infinitely older than everyone else. If we picture God simply as the great, divine individual who made everything, then we can’t help thinking that that if he weren’t dealing with creation, he’d be doing nothing; and that if he didn’t have any creatures, he’d be all alone.

Then we might take the next step and conclude that God made himself a world to escape boredom and to give himself something to do; and that he made other individuals so that he’d have someone to relate to. What else would there be for God to do if he weren’t dealing with his creation? And how could a single, solitary God love and be loved apart from created beings?

Well, the true answer to all this is that God does not exist as a single, solitary individual. God is a union of three divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three divine Persons are eternally united in love and in the very essence of their being. Father, Son, and Spirit eternally have one another to love and to enjoy. Each one has such an infinity of wisdom, beauty, goodness and vitality that it would be impossible for Father, Son, and Spirit to feel bored with one another. Each gives and receives such an infinity of love that it would be impossible for Father, Son, and Spirit to feel lonely or in need of love.

What was God doing before he made the world? If I may say so reverently, God was busy being God and enjoying it immensely. From eternity Father, Son, and Spirit share a richness of being so full that no other being can add to it. From eternity Father, Son, and Spirit share such a mutual love that no other love is needed.

God Is Love

That puts the creation and all of God’s dealings with his creatures in a new light. God created all things and relates to his creatures not to address some lack in his being but to express a great overflow of his being. God formed this vast and varied creation not because he would otherwise be bored but because he is bountiful. God takes a personal interest in his creatures, not because he would otherwise be lonely but because he is love. “God is love” (1 John 4:16). Those are perhaps the most beautiful words in the Bible. But to sense the full impact and to be in touch with the reality those words describe, we need to know how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to one another in the being of God, and how Father, Son, and Spirit relate to us.

The Bible doesn’t just say that God loves, but that God *is* love. Love is who God is, even apart from the creatures he has made. God is love, and that can’t be true unless the being of God involves more than one Person. “Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love” (C.S. Lewis). But God is love, and so God is more than one person. God is love because God is Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three Persons united in mutual, eternal love.

It was out of a surplus of love—not a shortage of love—that this great God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). God created us for love: to be loved by him, to love him in return, and to love one another.

However, with our fall into sin, we messed things up. We cut ourselves off from God: we broke the rhythm of love and became self-centered. So what has God done? Has he simply cast humanity away? No, he loves the world so much that he’s gone to the trouble of rescuing us. Father, Son, and Spirit each play a distinctive part in this great rescue, and at the same time are fully united in accomplishing our salvation.

The final goal of creation and salvation is this: that we be caught up into the love and life of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). It’s a staggering thought, but it’s true. Believing in the blessed Trinity of love and being drawn up into the eternal life of Father, Son, and Spirit—this is the very heart of Christianity.

Difficult Doctrine

You may be thinking to yourself, “That sounds complicated. Why bother with a confusing idea like three in one? Why bother with doctrine at all? Don’t get me wrong: I’m a spiritual person. I believe in God. I’ve even felt him. But I don’t need dry, difficult doctrine. Experience is better than doctrine.”

Well, there’s a measure of truth in that. I’d rather be in touch with God than merely bat around certain ideas about him. But look at it this way. Suppose there’s a really great person you want to get to know better, and so far you’ve only had the opportunity to shake hands with him. Should you focus only on how you felt in that electrifying moment when you shook hands? Shouldn’t you also listen to what people say who know the person better than you do? And even more important, shouldn’t you listen to what the person says about himself, and take note of the things that he does? That may do more to help you really know him and develop a relationship with him than simply feeling aglow about the fact that you once shook his hand.

Or look at it from another angle. If a person has an experience of God’s majesty in nature, the experience may very well be real, and if the person then turns from experience to Christian doctrines, he is in a sense turning from something real to something less real.

In the same way, if a man has once looked at the Atlantic from the beach, and then goes and looks at a map of the Atlantic, he also will be turning from something real to something less real: turning from real waves to a bit of coloured paper. But here comes the point. The map is admittedly only colored paper, but there are two things you have to remember about it. In the first place, it is based on what hundreds and thousands of people have found out by sailing the real Atlantic. In that way it has behind it masses of experiences just as real as the one you could have from the beach; only, while yours would be a single isolated glimpse, the map fits all those different experiences together. In the second place, if you want to go anywhere, the map is absolutely necessary. As long as you are content with walks on the beach your own glimpses are far more fun than looking at a map. But the map is going to be more use than walks on the beach if you want to [cross the ocean to another land]. (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

Doctrines aren’t God. They’re just a map. But let’s remember two things about that doctrinal map. First, it’s based on the experience of many people who were in touch with God. In fact, their mighty encounters with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would make any experience of yours or mine seem small and confused. Second, remember that if you want to get any further in your relationship with God, you need the map.

A certain experience you've had may be real, and even exciting, "but nothing comes of it. It leads nowhere. There is nothing to do about it. In fact, that is just why a vague religion—all about God in nature and so on—is so attractive. It is all thrills and no work; like watching the waves from the beach." But you will not set sail or reach another land by watching the waves, and you will not get eternal life by simply feeling the presence of God in flowers or music. You need the doctrines, the truth about God, to map out the way, and you need to be caught up into the life of God. Of course, if you only talk about God and never meet him, you won't have fellowship with God and eternal life—doctrine without personal involvement leads nowhere. But neither will you have true fellowship with God if all you do is cling to a feeling you once got when you met him briefly. You must get to know him better. You must learn who he is, what he's like, what he's done, and what he wants to make of you.

Listen to the words of Jesus himself. After he rose from the dead and before he ascended to heaven, Jesus told his followers, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19). Jesus doesn't just want people to "have experiences." He wants people to belong to him, to be his disciples, to obey him. Also, Jesus doesn't want people to muddle along with an indefinite sense of the God they belong to. He wants them to be baptized and marked with a definite name—the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Jesus doesn't say "in the *names*" of Father, Son, and Spirit, but "in the *name*." The threefold title *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*—is the name of the one true God.

What God Reveals

Every major branch of the Christian church teaches the doctrine of the Trinity. According to this doctrine, God forever exists as three divine Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each Person is fully God. Yet there is only one God. As the Athanasian Creed puts it: "The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God." Is that good theology, or just bad math? Already when you're small, you learn that one plus one plus one equals three. But it sounds like, in order to be a Christian and believe in the Trinity, you have to believe that one plus one plus one equals one. That doesn't seem to make much sense. Why would anyone who believes in three divine Persons keep insisting that there is only one God? Why would anyone who understands simple arithmetic believe in the Trinity?

The reason Christians believe in the Trinity is that this is how God has revealed himself. The doctrine of the Trinity isn't something that anybody could have dreamed up. It is a response to God's self-revelation. It's the church's best effort to map out what God reveals about himself. God reveals his nature as Trinity in the coming of God's Son in human flesh and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into human hearts. God's nature as Trinity is displayed in these actions of God, it's written in the Bible, it's professed in the church, and it's experienced in the lives of Christians.

Anybody who believes in one God would have no problem granting that the invisible, eternal Father is God. But some might question the deity of Jesus or the Holy Spirit. They might say that Jesus is less than God and that the Holy Spirit is only God's power, not a divine Person, and that the Father is therefore the only one who can truly be called God. But the Bible plainly teaches that both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are divine and personal, along with God the Father.

Referring to Jesus as "the Word," John 1:1 says, "The Word was God." Jesus acted as God's equal when he exercised authority to forgive sins, and when he commanded the forces of nature through various miracles. In talking to his Father in heaven, Jesus said, "Father, glorify

me in your presence with the glory I had before the world began” (John 17:5). Jesus told some religious leaders, “Before Abraham was, I AM!” (John 8:58). He had existed from all eternity as God the Son, before Abraham was ever born. Indeed, the reason the religious leaders gave for crucifying Jesus was that he claimed to be equal with God. And Jesus proved himself to be the Son of God in power when he rose from the dead. After Jesus’ resurrection, Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). So, then, the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus is God.

The Bible also shows that the Holy Spirit is God. The Bible’s formulas for baptism and blessing include the Holy Spirit along with the Father and the Son. How could that be so, unless the Holy Spirit is also God? The Bible often refers to the Holy Spirit as “the Spirit of God.” Some who deny the Trinity argue that the Spirit is not a Person but is just a force, the impersonal power of God. But Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as a Person, a Comforter or Advocate (John 14:16,26; 15:2; 16:7). The apostle Peter said that lying to the Holy Spirit was lying to God (Acts 5:3-4). Elsewhere the Bible warns, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Ephesians 4:30). You can’t lie to a force; you can only lie to a person. You can’t grieve a power; you can only grieve a person. The Holy Spirit is not just a force. He is a Person, and he is God.

The Bible shows that three distinct Persons are God, yet the Bible also reveals that God is one. The oneness of God is taught clearly throughout the Bible, beginning in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 6:4 says, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” In Isaiah 46:9 the Lord says, “I am God, and there is no other.” The New Testament is just as insistent that there is only one God. 1 Corinthians 8:4 declares, “We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.”

There you have it: the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. There are three divine Persons, yet these three are somehow united as one God. When Christians speak of the Trinity, it’s not that we don’t understand arithmetic. It’s that the God who has existed from everlasting to everlasting is much greater than any notions about him that we might come up with on our own, and he has revealed himself to be one God in three Persons. The inspired writings of the Bible explain and confirm what the actions of God in history have shown: the reality of one God in three Persons.

In response to God’s actions and his Word, the church professes and celebrates the triune God. Every time someone becomes part of the church through baptism, that person is baptized “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” as Jesus commanded. When Christians receive God’s blessing in the church, the person leading the worship pronounces the blessing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Often it’s a direct quote from a blessing in the Bible, which says, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). The Christian church declares, in the words of the Athanasian Creed: “The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God” (Athanasian Creed).

Trying to Understand

All Christians believe one God in three Persons. All agree that God is three in a certain sense, but in another sense he is one. But what does this mean? And why does it matter?

One of the easiest solutions is to say that there is really only one Person who is God, and that “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” are just three different titles for three different modes in which the one God operates.

For example, I am one person with several different roles and titles. I’m “Dave” to my friends, “Daddy” to my children, and “Pastor” to many other people. It’s easy to see that

although “Dave” is David Feddes, “Daddy” is David Feddes, and “Pastor” is also David Feddes, there are not three David Feddeses, but one. Those three titles simply refer to one man, myself, who has the three roles of friend, father, and minister.

Is that what the Trinity is? Are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit simply three roles played by the same divine Person, who is called Father in his work of creating and caring for people; called the Son, or Jesus, when he is providing forgiveness of sin and victory over death; and called the Holy Spirit in his work of living within Christians and making them more holy? No, the Trinity is not just one Person with three different roles. God has far more than three roles and titles, but God is exactly three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Another variation on seeing God as one Person in three different modes deals with different phases in God’s career, so to speak. In this approach, talking about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit would be similar to talking about Barack Obama the professor, Barack Obama the senator, and Barack Obama the President. There have not been three Barack Obamas but just one, whose life includes these three different career phases.

Some people have mistakenly thought of the Trinity in a similar way, viewing God as one divine Person who has existed in three major phases. Originally, he was the Almighty, invisible Father. Then, about two thousand years ago, he moved out of that phase to become a human being in the Person of Jesus until his resurrection and ascension. Then, on Pentecost, God entered a new phase when he came upon the church as the Holy Spirit. But is this all that the Bible means when it teaches that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God? No, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three divine *Persons*, not just one Person in different phases.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—that’s who God is and always was and always will be. God was Trinity before the creation of the world. All three Persons have existed together from all eternity. The Son of God entered Mary’s womb and was born in a stable, but that is not when he began to exist or when he became the Son of the Father for the first time. That’s when God took on a human nature, but before coming into the world as a baby, God the Son existed with God the Father from all eternity. Likewise, the Spirit of God did not begin to exist on the day of Pentecost. That is when he came upon Jesus’ followers with great power and filled them with the life of God, but the Holy Spirit has forever proceeded from the union of Father and Son and that the Spirit is from eternity the third Person in the being of God.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not all the same Person. After Jesus was baptized, says the Bible, “he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’” (v. 16-17). The voice from heaven was God the Father speaking to his Son; it wasn’t Jesus acting as a ventriloquist and causing a voice from heaven to talk about himself. Also, the Spirit who descended on Jesus is not the same Person as Jesus. The Bible clearly teaches that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct Persons, and that each of these Persons is fully divine.

One God, Not Many

Well, then, if we agree that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three distinct Persons—are God, why don’t we just state the obvious and say there are three Gods? When the Greeks said that Zeus, Apollo, and Hermes were all gods, they didn’t pretend that these three were somehow one God. So how are Father, Son, and Spirit one God, any more than the gods of ancient myth?

For starters, the Bible teaches equality of the three Persons within the oneness of God. In the legends, one god was the chief deity in the pecking order. For the Greeks, it was Zeus who had the most power; for the Romans, it was Jupiter; for the Vikings, it was Odin. In contrast to

all this, no Person in the Trinity lacks any of the divine attributes of the others or is inferior. Within the being of the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all equally infinite in power, splendor, wisdom, love, and holiness. All are equally eternal, uncreated, without beginning or end. This is true because all three Persons share the same divine essence.

Another obvious difference between the one triune God and the false gods is that in the Trinity there is a complete oneness of will, a total unity of purpose, a perfect harmony. Father, Son, and Spirit never disagree or squabble. That's a far cry from the mythical gods who were constantly bickering and doing things behind each other's backs. In the oneness of will that exists in the Trinity, the Son never contradicts the Father's will. Never does the Father want one thing, the Son want another, and the Spirit something else. Jesus the Son came to do the will of his Father. Likewise, the Holy Spirit always does his work in perfect cooperation with the purposes of the Father and the Son. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in will and purpose.

The oneness of God also means that there is no division of authority, where each divine Person controls a different aspect of life. In the ancient superstitions, one god would be the god of war, another the god of sex and fertility, another the god of wisdom, and so forth. So, depending on what you needed at the time, you would try to get on the good side of the particular god who controlled that part of life. The great truth that God is one means that he is Lord over every part of life, not just some specialty. He is Creator and Master of all things.

Since God is one, you can't get out of his territory and into the territory of a god who will perhaps be different. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit don't each rule different parts of the universe. The Trinity rules as one God with no division of territory. The Bible tells about a time when the Lord helped his people to win a battle over superior forces. The people opposing them weren't about to give up, however. They figured that they had lost the first battle only because it had been fought in the hills. The enemy king's officials advised him, "Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they" (1 Kings 20:23). They figured a god who controlled what happened in the hills might not be so strong on the plains, so they fought the next battle on the plains—and suffered an even worse defeat than before. They learned the hard way that there is just one God who is equally in charge on both hills and plains.

God's Word simply won't permit us to talk about three gods, even though there are three divine Persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united in full and equal deity; they are united in will and purpose; they are united in joint reign over all things. And the oneness of the Trinity transcends even these aspects of unity. There is a unity within the Trinity which underlies these things, and which is deeper, stronger, and also more mysterious.

The Bible compels us to believe that the three divine Persons share in the same divine being or essence. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not the same Person, but they are united in the same being. They are distinct from one another, but never divided or separated or independent from each other. All three share the same divine essence and are united as one divine being, from eternity past, right now, and into the eternal future.

More Than Personal

We're used to thinking of persons as separate individuals, so we can hardly imagine how three persons could be one being. But why should we suppose that God can be reduced to our level and understood in our terms? Not only is God personal, he's more than personal. God is not just one Person but a superpersonal union of three divine Persons. C.S. Lewis writes,

The human level is a simple and rather empty level. On the human level one person is one being, and any two persons are two separate beings... On the Divine level you still find personalities; but up there you find them combined in ways which we, who do not live on that level, cannot imagine.”

A good many people nowadays say, ‘I believe in a God, but not in a personal God.’ They feel that the mysterious something which is behind all other things must be more than a person. And in a sense they are right about this. But although they say God is beyond personality, they end up thinking of him as something impersonal, as a vague sort of power, or as a great void: that is, as something less than personal.

Christians are the only people with any idea of what a being that is beyond personality could be like. Christians know that God is more than a person; God is a superpersonal union of three divine Persons. And therefore God is not just a power; God is love. It is out of the overflow of God’s love that he created the world. It is out of the overflow of God’s love that he redeemed his people by sending his Son to live a perfect human life, die a terrible death, and rise again for their salvation. It is out of the overflow of God’s love that his Holy Spirit comes into the hearts of believers and floods them with the love and life of the Holy Trinity.

The deep and mysterious oneness of God’s being is related to a marvelous oneness of love, a love that has forever united the Persons of the Trinity with each other. There is no way we can fully describe or understand this union of Father, Son, and Spirit, since God transcends any earthly comparison we might use. But maybe we can get a hint of this unifying love if we think of a husband and wife who have enjoyed a long, loving marriage. Sometimes both have the same thought at the same time, or one knows how the other is feeling without being told. They’ve been together so long, loving each other so much, knowing each other so well, that sometimes they almost think, feel, and act as one.

Now take that and multiply it infinitely. The love among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is immeasurably greater than the love of a husband and wife. Not only that, but Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have existed together in perfect harmony, not just for several decades, but for all eternity. When the Bible says “God is love,” it’s not just because God is loving toward us but also because God’s inner being is characterized by the eternal love that unites Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three divine Persons have forever been united by their mutual love and also in the very substance of their being.

Relating to God

Even after we know something of the reality of the Trinity, we still confront a great mystery. The being of God is a blazing light that we can’t look at directly or figure out completely. We’ll go blind if we try. But, like the sun, this blazing light of God enlightens and warms everything it touches. The Trinity is hard to explain; the Trinity is hard even to imagine; and yet the Trinity is the one true God, the only God worth worshiping.

It is impossible to have a right relationship with God while being part of a religion which denies the Trinity and doesn’t accept Christ as divine. I’ve heard it said, “Even if some people don’t believe in Jesus, at least we all believe in the same God.” Is that so? How can you reject Jesus and be right with God the Father? If you don’t love Jesus, you can’t love the Father. Jesus declared, “He who hates me hates my Father as well” (John 15:23). We don’t all believe in the same God. Any religion that rejects the Trinity rejects God, because the Trinity is God. There is no God apart from the union of Father, Son, and Spirit.

In order to have a healthy relationship with God, we must know who God is and how to come to him. Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6), and he also says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). Salvation is a work involving the Father and the Son. And the Father and Son do nothing apart from the Holy Spirit. “If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ” (Romans 8:9).

Each Person of the Trinity is essential in the work of salvation and in establishing God’s Kingdom of love. Ultimately, God’s purpose is that his people become one in love in a way that somehow reflects the loving oneness within the Trinity (John 17:11). God is love, both in the eternal love that the Persons of the Trinity have for each other, and also in the way God relates to his people. There is nothing more wonderful or more necessary than to be drawn into living faith in this marvelous God.

You may ask, “If we can’t understand a three-personal Being, what’s the good of talking about him.” Well, the point isn’t just to talk about him but to be drawn into the three-personal life. You can enter into relationship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—even though you can’t understand the deeper mysteries of the Trinity. That relationship can begin right here and now.

How? In prayer. When you pray, the one you’re trying to get in touch with is God. But if you’re a Christian you know that what is prompting you to pray is also God: God inside you. But you also know that all your real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who is God—that Christ is standing beside you, helping you to pray, praying for you.

See what’s happening? God is the one to whom you’re praying, the goal you’re trying to reach. God is also the One inside you who is pushing you along. God is also the road or the bridge along which you’re being pushed toward that goal. The whole threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on every time an ordinary Christian says a prayer.

Praying to the Father, prompted by the Holy Spirit, through the Son, Jesus Christ—this kind of prayer is nothing less than fellowship with the Trinity of love. I pray that as I have shared with you what God says about himself, the Lord has been drawing you into a saving knowledge of him. If you’re already a Christian, if you confess one God in three Persons, if you’ve been baptized into the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I hope that even now you are filled with awe and deep joy at the wonder of God and long to know him better and better. In our minds we can’t fully understand the deep truths which the Triune God reveals about himself, but in our hearts we can bow down in worship before the majesty and mystery of these three infinite, magnificent, eternal Persons united in a perfect oneness that surpasses all human imagination or description. And we can look forward to the day when we will no longer see dimly but see clearly and directly, and have all of eternity to enjoy the life and love of the blessed Trinity.