

# The Trinity

So central is the doctrine of the Trinity, that we can find it summed up by the Apostle Paul at the end of his second letter to Corinth: *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you"* (2 Cor 13:13) These words form a brief statement of our belief. They point to the way in which Christians, from the earliest centuries of the Church, have felt that we can only speak of our experience of God by speaking at the same time of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In some periods of history there has been an attempt to "grade" these three expressions of the Christian experience of God. But Christian teaching is clear that we cannot "grade" or "rank" them because in each person of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - we can find the fullness of the divinity.

The theologian Karl Barth said: "Trinity is the Christian name for God." For many people their image of God is as a remote and inaccessible being - perhaps understood as the Creator or as a "life force", yet in no way personal or intimate. The doctrine of the Trinity stresses that this "Father" has come near to us in human form in Jesus and "lives in us" in the Spirit. St. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, was addressing Christians who had been converted from paganism: *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ ... he is our peace ... He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father"* (Eph 2:13-18).

The good news is that God is not aloof from the pain and suffering of this world, but has shown profound love and compassion for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the continuing experience of the Holy Spirit who sustains and strengthens us.

## Understanding the Trinity

The traditional view of God that has been held by Christians for the last 2,000 years is that he exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit - not that there are three separate Gods, nor that he is one God wearing three different hats (traditionally called Modalism) - but that there is only one God who exists as three distinct Persons. This view has its roots in the Bible and was spelled out in the Creeds by the Church during the fourth century.

Nonetheless, the revelation of the Triune God is confusing to many. Especially in the modern era it does not match our psychological understanding of "person," nor is geared toward our sense of logic. Athanasius, a 4<sup>th</sup> century Bishop of Alexandria wrote that the Trinity is incomprehensible, meaning it cannot be understood by mere unaided human intellect. However, it can be believed because it has been revealed in Scripture.

### Starting points

The purpose of this booklet is to make some sense of this view of God. In doing so there are two important points that should be made at the beginning, as these will have considerably bearing on how we approach the problem.

First, this is not a mere philosophical question. The answers we come up with will severely impact our lives - how we relate to God, our view of ourselves, our values, our convictions

about the meaning and purpose of life, our understanding of death - unless, of course, you simply choose to ignore this God and go your own way. For this reason you may find it a useful exercise to pray and ask him to guide you in your search for the truth. Second, if we are to know anything at all about this God, it will only be as he chooses to make himself known to us because he desires to have a loving relationship with us.

God has spoken through people to whom he chose to reveal himself in past ages, and finally he has spoken most clearly by entering this world himself in the person of Jesus. The Bible itself puts it this way:

*“In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe, who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being, and who sustains all things by his mighty word”* (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Not only has he revealed himself through Jesus, and the records we have of Jesus in the Bible, but he is also willing to reveal himself to us personally if we really want to know him.

In order to test this claim of Christians, that God has so revealed himself to the human race, then the obvious place to start is to look at the written records to find out what they tell us about him, and then to consider whether this makes any sense. That is the approach of this booklet. First we will look at the Bible, focusing on the New Testament, as this is where most of the teaching about Jesus and the Holy Spirit is contained. That is Part 1: What the Bible says about the triune God. Then we will explore the question: Does it make sense? That is Part 2. If you should find that you get a little bogged down in Part 1, then don't hesitate to skim this section and move on to Part 2. You can always come back to Part 1 and explore it in more detail later, maybe even with your Bible at hand to check out the passages mentioned.

## **PART 1: What the Bible says about the Triune God**

The Bible story tells us how God began to reveal himself over a period of time through appearances to individuals, beginning with Abraham (Genesis 12), and through certain historical events, chiefly concerning Abraham's descendants, the Israelite (Jewish) people. The Jewish people were very strong in the belief that the God who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, met with them at Mount Sinai, given them his commandments, and who had brought them into the promised land, was the one true living God of all the earth. This was in contrast to the many gods that the surrounding nations worshipped.

Over the years God foretold through the prophets, particularly from the eighth century BC onwards, that a figure would arise among them who would bring many blessings to God's people, whether they were Israelites or from among the nations of the world: *“Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel”* (Isa 7:14).

Several centuries later, during the reign of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, a child was born in the Jewish village of Bethlehem. At the age of 30 this individual, Jesus, began his public ministry and astounded people, both with his miracles of healing and with his claims. These claims included the assertion that he was the one foretold through the Old

Testament writings (e.g. Luke 4:16-21; John 5:39,40). He said many things about himself that the Jewish religious leaders rightly recognized as putting himself on a level with God. On a number of occasions they were ready to stone him for blasphemy for making such claims. At the same time he often talked about his "Father" in heaven who had sent him into this world. Of course, if the claims of Jesus are true, then God is no longer one person, but two!

However, before Jesus was crucified, he promised his disciples that he would ask the Father to send them "*another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you*" (John 14:16-17). The Greek word "another" that is used here implies "another like me". This "Spirit" that Jesus spoke of came to indwell the disciples of Jesus fifty days later on the Jewish Day of Pentecost.

Now all this complicates the matter even further, for if the Spirit is also God and distinct from the Father (and we will explore this later), then we now have not just two persons, but three. For Jews who had been steeped in the Jewish tradition of one God, this must have been all rather confusing. But as the testimony of the remainder of the New Testament, the writings of the early Church and the living Tradition of the Church, the belief of a Triune God has always been the Revelation of God and the teaching of the Church. It is to this testimony that we turn. In the following pages we will look at what the New Testament has to say about the following questions:

- Is Jesus really God?
- Is the Holy Spirit really God?
- Is the Holy Spirit personal?
- Is the Holy Spirit distinct from God the Father?

### **Jesus is God**

There are many approaches one can take when exploring this question in the New Testament. Here are some of them:

- His remarkable claims, miracles and signs.
- He is constantly given the title "Lord", the word that was consistently used of God in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (*Septuagint*) of the third century BC.
- He is referred to as God a number of times (e.g. John 20:28). Paul can declare, "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9). John says, "*...in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life*" (1 John 5:20). In the Old Testament he is called "the mighty God" (Isaiah 9:6) the same two Hebrew words used of God in a number of places (e.g. Isaiah 10:21; Jeremiah 32:18).
- His pre-existence before coming into this world is constantly assumed and sometimes directly stated (e.g. John 1:1,14).
- He was involved in the creation of the universe and it is his power that sustains it (e.g. Colossians 1: 16,17; Hebrews 1: 2,3).

- His role as judge of the human race (e.g. John 5:25-29; 2 Corinthians 5:10).
- His achievements in reconciling men and women to God and meeting their needs on the journey through life are often described in the same terms as the achievements of God the Father. Their roles often overlap (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5:19; and compare Hebrews 8:12 with Mark 2:5-7). That Paul, an avowed monotheist, should attribute every imaginable activity to him that Judaism reserved for God alone is particularly significant.
- There are numerous passages showing that we are to give him the same love, loyalty and devotion that we are required to give to God.
- He receives the same worship of created beings, in heaven and on earth, as does God the Father (e.g. Revelation 5:11-14 - Jesus is constantly referred to as “the Lamb” in Revelation, the one who was sacrificed for us).
- There are quite a number of passages from the Old Testament, quoted in the New Testament, where the original references refer to God, while the New Testament writers refer them to Jesus (e.g. Matthew 21:15,16/Psalm 8:1,2; Philippians 2:9-11/Isaiah 45:22,23).
- There are numerous titles or metaphors used of Jesus that are also used of God, such as Savior, Rock, Light, the Bridegroom, the first and the last, Alpha and Omega, I am, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Shepherd, Master, etc.
- The fact that Paul, a person steeped in the Old Testament understanding of the Spirit of God, should so easily call him the Spirit of Christ as well, is as strong a confirmation as one could get of Christ’s full divinity (e.g. Romans 8:9).

There is much more that could be said on the divinity of Jesus. However, more people have difficulty with the Holy Spirit than they do with Jesus. After all, Jesus did and said things that only God could be expected to do and say. But also he was always talking about his Father in heaven, so is obviously someone distinct from the Father. The New Testament writers distinguish Jesus from God the Father at every stage of his career - his pre-existence (John 17:5), through his presence on earth, to his ascension into heaven (1 Peter 3:22).

But who is the Holy Spirit?

### **The Holy Spirit is God**

To begin with, the very fact that his full title is the Holy Spirit (used about 90 times in the New Testament) points to his divinity. God is supremely the Holy One in the Bible (Isaiah 57:15). Jesus spoke of the Spirit as the Holy Spirit, as he was later to address God as Holy Father (John 17:11). In this respect Ephesians 1:13 is a significant passage. In the Greek it literally reads, “the Spirit of the promise, the Holy.” Both “the promise” and the adjective “holy” are emphasized in the Greek word order. He is not only the one promised by the prophets, he is God himself who has come to live with and in his people. Significantly, Jesus is also “the Holy One” (Acts 3:14).

The New Testament writers can quote passages from the Old Testament in which God speaks and say, “The Holy Spirit spoke” (e.g. Acts 28:25-27/Isaiah 6:8-10).

Paul’s language can fluctuate between God, Christ, and Spirit, depending on the emphasis of a given passage. For example, he can speak of the power of God (2 Corinthians 4:7), the power of Christ (2 Corinthians 12:9) or the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:19), all of which are at work in his life. This says much about how Paul viewed Christ and the Spirit in terms of deity and inter-relationship. Or note 1 Corinthians 12, where the subject changes from God in verse 6, to the Spirit in verse 11. Similarly in Acts 5, to lie to the Holy Spirit (verse 3) is to lie to God (verse 4).

Whereas in the Old Testament the temple building signified the place where God lived among his people, in the New Testament the body of believers is the new temple, the place where the Holy Spirit lives in his people (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:21,22). In the New Testament there is no difference between the way the presence of the Holy Spirit is spoken of and the presence of God. The presence of the Holy Spirit is the presence of God.

One of the most significant descriptions of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament is “the Spirit of life” (Romans 8:2). He is the one who “gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6). God in the Old Testament is supremely the living God, the source of life in all that lives. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of life because he is the Spirit of God. Significantly, Jesus is also spoken of as “the author of life” (Acts 3:15).

There are some offshoots from Christianity, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christadelphians and Unitarians that deny the traditional church teaching of the Trinity. The Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that Jesus was created by God the Father before the creation of the universe. He is a minor God. According to them the Holy Spirit is distinct from God the Father, but he is in no sense personal. He is merely God’s active force which he uses to accomplish his purposes in the world. Let us explore this issue.

### **The Holy Spirit is Personal**

By “personal” we understand that the Holy Spirit has all the qualities that we usually associate with persons. We can enter into a relationship with him in a similar manner to the way we have relationships with other people. He is not just a blind, unfeeling, unintelligent force. This presents us with a problem, because in our thinking persons usually live in bodies, and the Holy Spirit is spirit, as is God the Father, and doesn’t have a corporeal body.

Jesus is easier to understand, as he entered into our human experience, which involved sharing human nature and a human body. Obviously he was a person. However, when we explore the New Testament we find that the Holy Spirit is constantly spoken of in personal terms. The most obvious example of this is found in the use of the verbs that describe his activities. Take the following examples:

- The Spirit convicts people of guilt and judgment (John 16:8)
- guides God’s people (John 16:13)
- tells things that are to come (John 16:13)

- brings glory to Jesus (John 16:14)
- hears God's truths and makes them known (John 16:13,15)
- appoints pastors over God's people (Acts 20:28)
- speaks God's message (Acts 28:25, etc.)
- bears witness together with our own spirits (Romans 8:16)
- helps us in our weakness (Romans 8:26)
- intercedes on our behalf (Romans 8:26, 27)
- searches all things (1 Corinthians 2:10)
- knows the mind of God (1 Corinthians 2:11)
- teaches the content of the gospel to believers (1 Corinthians 2:13)
- lives among and within believers (1 Corinthians 3:16, etc.)
- washes, sanctifies and justifies God's people (1 Corinthians 6:11)
- gives gifts to his people as he determines (1 Corinthians 12:11)
- gives life to those who believe (2 Corinthians 3:6)
- cries out from within our hearts (Galatians 4:6)
- leads us in the ways of God (Galatians 5:18)
- has desires that are in opposition to the flesh (Galatians 5:17)
- strengthens believers (Ephesians 3:16)
- is grieved by our sinfulness (Ephesians 4:30)
- can be blasphemed (Luke 12:10) and lied to (Acts 5:3)

The Bible is more concerned to describe the Spirit's activity, what he does, than to deal directly with the question of his person, who he is. However, it is obvious that all these activities are those we associate with persons. They imply:

- Intelligence - most of the verbs used above imply intelligence. The Bible speaks of "the intention of the Spirit" (Romans 8:27)
- Feelings - he can be grieved or made sad. Joy is a quality often associated with the Holy Spirit
- Will - he decides the gifts he gives to his people (1 Corinthians 12:11)

These are the three main characteristics which make up personality.

Several significant passages that emphasize the personal nature of the Holy Spirit:

- *"The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God"* (Romans 8:16). If our own inner spirit has personal qualities, then so also must the Holy Spirit. Both "witness".

- “...you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11). If Jesus is personal, then the Holy Spirit must be also.
- In Romans 8 the Spirit in our hearts prays for us on earth (verse 27), while Jesus prays for us in heaven (verse 34). This again suggests that as Jesus is a person, so is the Spirit.
- “I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie; my conscience joins with the holy Spirit “ (Romans 9:1). Paul here appeals to his relationship with both Christ and the Holy Spirit for his honesty, implying that as Christ is personal, so must the Spirit also be. Another verse with similar implications is Romans 15:30.
- Jesus said the disciples would be better off with the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives than they were with his company and friendship while he was with them on earth (John 16:7). That means the Spirit must at least have the personal qualities that Jesus possessed.
- It is significant that the “fruit” that the Spirit produces in believers’ lives, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22,23), are chiefly personal qualities, having to do with our relationships. They are also qualities often attributed to God in his relationship with us. A blind “force” or “influence” does not produce love! The Bible also speaks of the “fellowship of the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 13:14; Philippians 2:1). We may enjoy friendship with him and he creates friendship between believers.

It is true that to describe the effect of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the Bible does use impersonal metaphors such as fire, breath, wind and water. However, it is significant that Paul, who probably has more to say about the relationships that exist between the persons of the Trinity than any other writer, tends to avoid such images. Instead he uses verbs of personal action that are used elsewhere of God and Christ.

If the Holy Spirit is personal, as all the evidence indicates, then the next question to ask is: Is he a distinct person, in a very real sense separate from the Father?

### **The Holy Spirit is a distinct person from God the Father**

A good beginning point here is to note the number of passages in the New Testament that mention all three persons of the Trinity together, often within the space of either one or two verses. The following is a list of such passages. It is not an exhaustive list as there are other passages where two of the persons are mentioned, but the presence of the third can be assumed by implication.

Matthew 3:16,17	1 Corinthians 6:9-11	Hebrew 2:3,4
Matthew 28:19	1 Corinthians 12:4-6	Hebrew 3:6,7
Luke 1:35	2 Corinthians 1:21,22	Hebrews 6:4-6
Luke 1:67-69	2 Corinthians 3:3, 4	Hebrew 9:14
John 14:16,17	2 Corinthians 5:5-10	Hebrews 10:12-15
John 14:26	2 Corinthians 13:14	Hebrews 10:29-31
John 15:26	Galatians 3:1-5	1 Peter 1:2
John 16:13-15	Galatians 3:11-14	1 Peter 3:18

John 20:21,22	Galatians 4:4-6	1 Peter 4:14-17
Acts 2:33	Ephesians 1:3-14	2 Peter 1:21-2:1
Acts 2:38,39	Ephesians 2:18	1 John 3:21-24
Acts 7:55	Ephesians 2:22	1 John 4:1,2
Acts 10:38	Ephesians 3:4-7	1 John 4:13,14
Acts 10:46-48	Ephesians 3:14-19	1 John 5:6-9
Acts 11:16,17	Ephesians 4:2-6	Jude 20,21
Romans 5:5,6	Ephesians 5:18-20	Revelation 1:4,5
Romans 8:3,4	Colossians 1:7-10	Revelation 1:9,10
Romans 8:8-11	1 Thessalonians 1:5-10	Revelation 2:7
Romans 8:16,17	1 Thessalonians 4:1-8	Revelation 2:26-29
Romans 14:17,18	1 Thessalonians 5:18,19	Revelation 3:5,6
Romans 15:16	2 Thessalonians 2:13,14	Revelation 3:12,13
Romans 15:17-19	1 Timothy 3:15,16	Revelation 3:21,22
Romans 15:30	Timothy 4:1-6	Revelation 5:6,7
1 Corinthians 2:8-10	2 Timothy 1:8-14	Revelation 14:12,13
1 Corinthians 2:12-16	Titus 3:4-8	Revelation 22:16-18

The very fact that so many passages can refer to each of the three persons of the Trinity, with each having a distinctive role in our salvation, is the strongest possible evidence that the Holy Spirit is distinct from God the Father, just as Jesus is distinct from God the Father.

The following passages are particularly significant:

- *“After Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened (for him), and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove (and) coming upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:16-17). You will note that the Spirit descends on Jesus to empower him for his public ministry, while God the Father speaks from heaven.*
- Jesus’ final commands to his disciples, recorded in Matthew’s Gospel, includes the command to baptize converts, *“in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Baptism signifies our initiation into the divine family. We will explore some of the implications of this further in Part 2. Baptizing “into the name” (literal translation) is a Hebrew form of expression. Note that it includes under a singular name not only the Father, but the Son and the Holy Spirit.*
- *“In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God’s will. We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:26-28). This passage expresses the remarkable truth that when our praying is prompted by the Holy Spirit we are caught up in the free and open communication that takes place between two members of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit and God the*

Father. Both of these desire our good. One writer, Martin Smith, puts it this way: “Our prayer is not making conversation with God. It is joining the conversation that is already going on in God. It is being invited to participate in the relationships of intimacy between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is an eternal dance already in full swing, and we are caught up in to it. Prayer is allowing ourselves to join the dance and experience the movements, the constant interplay of the Persons of the Trinity.”

You will note in the above passage that God knows the mind of the Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 2:11 the Spirit similarly knows the thoughts of God the Father. This is distinction, not identification. God the Father does not pray to himself. Nevertheless, the Spirit and God the Father act in harmony.

- *“There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone”* (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). In these verses, and those following, Paul is pointing out to the Corinthian believers the wide range of gifts and ministries that are given to individuals in the Christian fellowship, even though they are one united body. His appeal to unity is based on the fact that these gifts and ministries all have their source in members of the divine Trinity. His appeal for the need for variety is based on the fact that variety exists even within the Godhead itself. Diversity within unity belongs to the character of God. The Trinity is foundational to Paul’s whole argument.
- *“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). Here is one of the clearest references to the Spirit as one of the three Persons of the Godhead, each of whom is designated by that special ministry that belongs to him. That Paul can refer to the activity of the three divine Persons together in one prayer, with God the Father standing in second place, is as strong evidence as one could get that Paul was truly Trinitarian in his thinking.

Gordon Fee comments on this Pauline passage (from *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*): “That Paul would include the Holy Spirit as an equal member of this triadic formula, and that he would pray to the Spirit in their behalf, says as much about his understanding of the Spirit both as person and as deity as any direct statement of this kind ever could...It is for the later church to try to understand the ontological implications, how God is three in one; its reason for doing so at all comes about precisely because the church is forced to come to terms with Paul’s understanding of God’s character and activity in our behalf expressed in this kind of prayer.”

- *“...live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all”* (Ephesians 4:1-6). Paul wants the believers in Ephesus to develop those personal qualities that will enable them to demonstrate to the outside world a true unity of love. The fact that they are one

body, and should be seen to be so, he argues, is based on the fact that there is, “one Spirit...one Lord...one God and Father of all.” This passage puts into credal form the fact that God is experienced as a triune reality. It is the Spirit coming into our lives who builds us into one body or fellowship; it is Jesus, who died for us, in whom we put our faith for forgiveness and acceptance; and it is God the Father over all to whom we look for guidance and provision.

- *“How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God”* (Hebrews 9:14). It is the eternal Spirit, who empowered Jesus at his baptism for his public ministry, who enabled him to offer himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins on the cross. Here again, the Spirit is clearly distinct from God the Father. Each had their part to play in our salvation.

It should be becoming increasingly clear that Trinitarian language and ideas keep popping up constantly through the New Testament. The writers don't use the word “Trinity”. Nor do they set out to explain the Trinity. That was left to later generations, however successful, or otherwise. It was just that their experience of Jesus and all he had taught, and all they had experienced since the Holy Spirit had been given to God's people on the Day of Pentecost, clearly led in this direction.

J. Murray, in his “Commentary on Romans” in the *New International Commentary*, when speaking of Paul's description of the work of the three Persons of the Trinity in Romans 15:17-19, says: “It is not a case of artificially weaving these persons into his presentation; it is rather that his consciousness is so formed by and to faith in the triune God that he cannot but express himself in these terms.” This could be said of other writers of the New Testament.

### **Points for clarification**

There are four other matters that require some clarification before moving on to Part 2.

#### **The unity of the Trinity**

Though each of the Persons of the Trinity exercises a different role in meeting our needs and preparing us for future glory, these roles often overlap. They exist in a unity of love, and all their purposes towards us are achieved in harmony with one another. Thus, Jesus can say, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). Often similar activities are attributed to different Persons of the Trinity. As the Holy Spirit is so intimately associated with both God the Father and Jesus, he is not only called “the Spirit of God”, but also “the Spirit of Christ” (Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6; Philippians 1:19). Paul can sometimes use a form of shorthand. Instead of saying, “Christ lives in his people by the Spirit”, he simply says that Christ lives in his people (e.g. Romans 8:10; Galatians 2:20).

#### **The submission of Jesus to the Father**

There are those who argue against the traditional understanding of the Trinity by pointing out those passages in the New Testament where Jesus is spoken of as being in submission to the Father. He declared that the Father had sent him (John 5:30), that he only did what

the Father told him to do (John 12:49), and that the Father was greater than he (John 14:28).

This is explained by Paul in Philippians. *“Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross”* (Philippians 2:5b-8). In order to reconcile us to God and lift us up to his level, he came down to our level. He took upon himself our full humanity. *“Now since the children share in flesh and blood, he likewise shared in them ... he had to become like his brothers in every way...”* (Hebrews 2:14,17). That meant that he behaved towards his heavenly Father in the manner in which we are meant to behave, in submission and obedience. That he was willing to take not only our human nature on himself, but also the consequences of our sins, demonstrates the amazing self-giving love and condescension of God. While Jesus lived on earth the Father was greater than he. That was Jesus’ choice, for our eternal good.

In the same way the Holy Spirit chooses to submit himself to both the Father and the Son. One of his chief ministries is to focus our attention on Jesus, rather than himself. Thus, Jesus can say of the Spirit, *“He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you”* (John 16:14). This submission in love, for our benefit, is in no way inconsistent with the full divinity of each. Rather, it is an example of the way we ought to behave towards one another (Philippians 2:5)!

### **Glimpses of the Trinity in the Old Testament**

The Trinity is not something that the writers of the New Testament thought up, and which contradicts all that God had revealed to his people over preceding centuries. There are hints of the Trinity in the Old Testament which can be seen more clearly in the light of the fuller revelation of God that came to us through Jesus. The idea of the Trinity did not take God by surprise!

Of the 377 instances of the Hebrew word (*ruah*) for breath, wind and spirit in the Old Testament, there are approximately 94 that refer to the Spirit of God. His activity there is associated with God’s power in creation or in the lives of individuals. He equips people for leadership, inspires prophecy and the revelation of God’s truth through chosen individuals. He is the presence of God with his people. These activities are also associated with the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. His coming to indwell God’s people in a new way, as happened on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), was clearly foretold (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27).

There are many prophecies about the coming of Christ throughout the Old Testament. There are times when God appears to individuals in human form (e.g. Joshua 5:13-15; Daniel 10:4-11). Some would see here the appearance of the second Person of the Trinity, Jesus, prior to his literal taking of human nature in Bethlehem.

Some would see hints of the Trinity in the plural term “us” used for God (Genesis 1:26), or in the threefold “Holy, holy, holy” of the angel’s worship (Isaiah 6:3). It is interesting that the Hebrew word translated “one” in the famous statement of Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one,” that precedes the command to love him with all

our heart, soul and strength, is a word that does not necessarily mean “one single individual”. It is a word that “stresses unity while recognizing diversity within that oneness.”

### **Not an invention of the fourth century church**

Some have tried to argue that it was the church of the fourth century that came up with the idea of the Trinity and that we have been stuck with it ever since - except for those groups that have “seen the light”. This is simply not historically accurate. All the pointers towards the truth of the Trinity were there in the personal experiences of the first Christians and the New Testament writings right from the beginning.

As well, we have the extra-Biblical written record of Christians from the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century well into the 5<sup>th</sup> century and beyond that make clear the belief and understanding of the Church and her members was of the Triune God. Included in such writers are Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine of Hippo and more.

The First Council of Nicaea (now Isnik in modern Turkey) held in AD 325, which spelled out the doctrine of the Trinity in its simplest credal form (known to us today as the Nicene Creed), was called by the Emperor Constantine because of divisions that had arisen among Christians. These divisions had arisen largely because of the teaching of a priest, Arius, who taught truths that were contrary to the generally accepted views of the church. Specifically, he taught that Jesus was inferior to God the Father. His views were rejected by the Council. Of all the bishops present at Nicaea only two failed to subscribe to its decision.

The debate at Nicaea centered largely around the person of Christ. The Creed contains declaration of belief “in the Holy Spirit” without elaboration. Other creeds written over the following hundred years developed further emphasis on the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Of the early Church Fathers, Irenaeus and Origen share with Tertullian the responsibility for the formulation of the doctrine which later was expressed in the creeds. Athanasius led the debate at Nicaea. At the hands of Augustine a century later it received a formulation, enshrined in the Athanasius Creed, that is accepted by Trinitarian churches to this day.

It is important to state that all this debate was undergirded by appeal to the writings of the New Testament. The ultimate decisions were made on the basis of the teaching of Jesus and his apostles. As Gordon Fee expresses it, it was precisely on the basis of the experience and language of the New Testament church that “the later church maintained its biblical integrity by expressing all of this in explicitly Trinitarian language.” The teaching of the New Testament still remains today the basic reason why the vast majority of Christians acknowledge God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Having explored some of this teaching, let us move on to the question, “Does it make sense?”

## **PART 2: Does it all make sense?**

The Revelation from Scripture (as we covered in the previous section) are:

- a) that God is one and personal,
- b) that the Spirit is the Spirit of God and therefore personal,
- c) that the Spirit and Christ are fully divine, and
- d) that the Spirit is as distinct from Christ and the Father as they are from each other.

Can we make sense of all this? There are three approaches I would like to take in exploring this question.

### **The Personality of God**

The Bible states that human beings were created in the “image” and “likeness” of God (Genesis 1:26). Whatever this means it implies that we all possess certain qualities that find their counterparts in the nature of God himself. Therefore, we may learn certain things about God by having a look at ourselves.

One thing that is clear about us humans is that we are “persons” with intelligence, feelings and will, and the ability to communicate and relate to other persons. Another thing that is clear is that we are social beings. It has been said that 80% of our joys and pleasures in life come from our relationships with others. It is also true that most of our hurts also come from relationships that are spoiled. God declared at the beginning of human history, “*It is not good for man to be alone*” (Genesis 2:18).

Broken human relationships were one of the first results of human rebellion against God (Genesis 3 and 4). However, Jesus came not only to die for our sins that we might be reconciled to God and one day go to heaven to live with him, but also to recreate this “togetherness”. The New Testament has a very strong emphasis on this. It is one of the prime ministries of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who have received him to build this fellowship of love amongst God’s people. This fellowship is described as a family, a body, or a temple in which God lives by his Spirit (See particularly John 13:34; 17:20,21; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 2:19-22; 4:1-16). Racial, social and gender characteristics should be no barrier to it (Galatians 3:28).

All this points strongly to the fact that God himself is not only personal, but somehow exists in relationships. Jesus himself declared that the unity of love that he desires the church to demonstrate to the world should be patterned on the unity that existed between him and God the Father (John 17:20,21). If we, in our relationships, are meant to demonstrate the character of God, then the idea of the Trinity provides a very good explanation of what he could be like. And a very good starting point for looking at the kind of partnership that should exist in a marriage, the most intimate of all human relationships, is to examine the relationships that exists between the Persons of the Trinity.

In 1995, a prominent group of Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant scholars and church leaders gathered in South Carolina to re-examine the theological differences that have separated them for centuries. Plenary speaker, Orthodox leader Patrick Henry Reardon, said at that gathering: “The relationship that exists within the Godhead is the basis for unity in every human relationship, be it marriage, family, or church.”

I like the way that C. S. Lewis, the Oxford and Cambridge scholar and Christian apologist, expresses the idea of God as super-personal. He was always a very clear thinker. In his book *Beyond Personality* he puts it like this:

“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. Now the Christians quite agree. But the Christians are the only people who offer any idea of what a being that is beyond personality could be like. All other people, though they say that God is beyond personality, really think of Him as something impersonal: that is, as something less than personal. If you are looking for something super-personal, something more than a person, then it isn’t a question of choosing between the Christian idea and the other ideas. The Christian idea is the only one on the market.”

It appears to me that those groups which deny the Trinity, whether they be offshoots of Christianity or other religions that believe in a personal God of sorts, are deficient in teaching on relationships. This appears to be the fact whether it be our relationship with God, or with others. The emphasis is on rules or religious observances, whereas in the New Testament the major emphasis is on relationships - what Jesus has done to break down the barriers to those relationships, and what the Holy Spirit can do in our lives to promote those qualities that will enable us to enjoy them, in this life and the next. Of course, that does not mean that we Christians who do believe in the Trinity, always get it right.

This brings us to the next point, which is closely related: the nature of love.

### **The love of God**

Though love is not the only quality that God possesses, as some seem to think, it is certainly emphasized in the Bible. John can say that God is love (1 John 4:8). As the New Testament constantly stresses, this love was supremely demonstrated in the dying of Jesus for our sins, and is personally experienced by believers through the Holy Spirit in their lives. “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:5).

Now love can only be given or received if there is more than one person involved. This raises the question: “If God is a single individual, as we understand individuals, then could he give and experience love?” Obviously, the only way to do this would be by creating inferior beings with whom to share that love. But if God has always been love then naturally this raises a problem. As C. S. Lewis expressed it, “If God was a single person, then before the world was made, he was not love.”

Richard of Saint Victor wrestled with this problem in the twelfth century. Created beings are exceedingly poor receivers and depressingly low-wattage transmitters of love. Therefore, said Richard, there must be at least two persons in God himself. Yet God is also perfectly good. A thoroughly good being would not jealously protect two-person love, but would generously share such love with a third. Thus, he concluded, “In order for love to be true, it demands a plurality of persons: in order for love to be perfected, it requires a trinity of persons.”

Whether we fully accept this logic or not, it does provide an insight to the eternal existence of love. Suppose this constant self-giving and receiving, which we call “love”, has eternally existed between the three Persons of the divine Trinity? The situation then arises whereby we may be caught up in that love, the love that has always been there, because God has always been there. Darrell Johnson says well in his book *Experiencing the Trinity*: “At the centre of the universe there is a relationship....It is out of that relationship that we were created and redeemed, and it is for that relationship we were created and redeemed.”

It is worth emphasizing also, that if we find and grow in our relationship with and love for God, and our experience of his love, it will have a profound effect on our relationships with our fellow humans.

### **The correspondence of the Trinity to our basic needs**

In his very helpful book *Searching Issues* Nicky Gumbel, a minister on the staff of Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Brompton, London, tells of a woman known to him, an occupational therapist. She was trained in psychology in a humanist secular setting before she became a Christian. She had been taught that we all need three things. First, we need a point of reference. We need to know who we are, where we have come from and where we are going. Secondly, we need a role model (who might be, for example, a therapist) and thirdly we need a facilitator to help us to get there (this might come from a counselor or from some group help). When this woman became a Christian she said she realized that God is our point of reference, Jesus is our role-model and the Holy Spirit is our facilitator. She saw that the Trinity meets the deepest psychological needs of every human being.

When we commit our lives to Jesus as the Savior who died for our sins and rose from the grave, and as the Lord of our lives, then we enter into a personal relationship with God through the waters of baptism. We are born spiritually into his family and have the right to call him “Father” as Jesus did. We are loved with an eternal love by the one who created the Universe. He has a purpose for our lives. He has promised to care for us. He has planned an exciting future for us beyond the grave. We know why we are here and where we are going. We belong! Can you imagine a more significant reference point?

Jesus took upon himself our human nature with all its limitations. The only thing he didn't share in was our sins, other than by bearing the penalty for them on the cross. He set us a perfect example of how human beings are meant to live, in relationship with God, with others and with ourselves. He is the ideal role-model.

If that was the end of the story we would know nothing but frustration, as the life that Jesus lived is beyond our frail capabilities. However, when we accept the forgiveness that is available to us through the death of Jesus, God provides us with a facilitator, the Holy Spirit. His purpose is to transform us by his literal presence in our lives, so that more and more we might grow into what he intended (see 2 Corinthians 3:18). Of course, the process will not be completed in this life, but one day it will be, when he presents us “*unblemished and exultant, in the presence of his glory*” (Jude 24).

If our relationship with each Person of the Trinity so meets our deepest psychological needs, then could it not be that God, being who he is, created us with this in mind? In many respects, what we are corresponds to who God is.

### **Understanding only grows with personal experience**

In any human relationship, if you really want to know someone and understand what makes them tick, you must first commit yourself to them. You must also allow them to share their lives with you. So it is with God. But once you have surrendered your life to him, things will begin to happen. You will become aware of the Holy Spirit at work in your life, doing things the Bible says he will do. Your love for Jesus will grow - the one who suffered for you and who now represents you in heaven. Your trust in the promises of your heavenly Father will grow as you search them out in his book, as will your desire to please him. In short, the Trinity will begin to make sense, even if you don't understand it all. It will also make much more sense than anything else!

There will always be areas that we don't understand. However, we can sort out these when we get to heaven. The Western church, in seeking to explain the Trinity, has tended, from the time of Augustine, to start with the unity of the Godhead and then explain the differences of the persons. The Eastern church started with the apostolic witness and the church's experience of the three divine persons, and then explored, as an act of worship, the marvelous unity within the Godhead. We can safely leave it to the theologians to sort out such things. The New Testament gives us all we need to know in order to experience God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and to grow through our lives in our enjoyment and understanding of our relationship with them.

### **A Final Thought**

What is it that God wants to do in our lives? The Bible describes a number of things. He wants to bring forgiveness for our failures, healing for our hurts, direction to our aimlessness, joy to our emptiness. Jesus said the purpose of his coming into the world was that we might know life in all its fullness (John 10:10). Most of all, however, he wants to make something of us, to produce something of his own character within us. And that means allowing him to come and live within us by his Spirit. We can't know God, or experience any of his blessings, and still keep him at arm's length!

If we are willing to open up our lives to God in this intimate way, then we will begin, not only to understand who he is, but to experience the reality of his love. This is the love of the One who has revealed himself as the Father who created and watches over us, the Son who lived among us and gave himself for us, and the Spirit who comes to make his home with us forever. Karl Barth showed great insight when he wrote, "Trinity is the Christian name for God."