

The Trinity, One God in Three Divine Persons

We affirm that the Person of the Godhead who spoke to Moses at the burning bush as “I am” (Jn 8:58), and who appeared to Moses at Mount Sinai and spoke the Ten Commandments to the Israelites was the Son (Jn 1:18). At Sinai He said, “I am the LORD, your God, and I have brought you out of slave quarters in the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods in My presence!” (Ex 20:2-3). There are no rival gods. Although each of the Persons is God, we do not find “We are” there, but “I am.” The LORD of hosts, who appeared to Isaiah at the temple, must also have been the Son, since no one has ever seen the Father (Isa 6:1-3). Yet Isaiah heard both “I” and “Us”: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?”

Isaiah wrote: “This is what the LORD has said, Israel’s King and Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the First and I am the Last, and there is no God except Me’” (Isa 44:6). There are not two Firsts and two Lasts. Yet when the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus, appeared to the apostle John, He laid His hand on him, and said, “Stop being afraid! I am the First and the Last and the One Who Lives; and I died, and, behold, I am alive for ever and ever, and I have the keys of death and of Hades (Rv 1:17-18). There is only one Alpha and Omega. “The Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” is an expression that can refer either to the Father or the Son (Rv 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).

When one of the scribes asked Jesus which of the commandments was the first of all, Jesus quoted the most basic confession of all Jews, “Hear, Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one”, from Deuteronomy 6:4. Yet Jesus told the Jews, who knew that the Lord had promised that He personally would shepherd His neglected flock (Ezek 34) that He was the Good Shepherd, and He affirmed, “I and the Father are one.” “One” did not mean “one person”, but a unity, not only in will, purpose, and action, but also in nature. For in Greek the word for “one” is not masculine, but neuter.

When the rich young leader came to Jesus, thinking quite wrongly about the relationship of the Law to eternal life, Jesus wanted to teach him to despair of gaining life through good conduct. He wanted him to find true good in Jesus Himself, but tantalised him by seeming to deny that He was the only good God. Jesus asked him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except One, that is, God” (Mk 10:18).

In Jesus’ prayer to the Father on the night when His passion began, He said, “This is eternal life, to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent” (Jn 17:3). Some, like Origen and Arius too, assumed from this that only the Father can be called “the only true God.” However, the apostle John does not hesitate to use “the true God” for the Son: “We know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life” (1 Jn 5:20).

The practical importance is that, when we worship one of the Persons of the Trinity, or all Three, we do not come into conflict with any other God. When we pray we may pray to the Father, but we may also pray to the Son as Lord, as Stephen did: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”, and: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Ac 7:59-60). If the Holy Spirit were only a creature, distinct from the divine nature, it would be idolatry to ascribe glory to Him with the Father and the Son as we do in the Gloria. Then it would be idolatry to baptise in the one Name and yet link the Spirit with the Father and the Son (Mt 28:19). Peter reminded Christians, “the Spirit of glory and of God is resting on you” (1 Pet 4:14). In our hymnbook there are, quite properly, a number of hymns in which we pray to the Holy Spirit to come, to be our Guide, to teach us, and lead us to everlasting life.

Because there is one God, He has no rivals and tolerates no rivals. There is no appeal from God to a higher court. If He turns against any person, there is no one who can rescue him from His hands (Jb 10:7). It would be a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hb 10:31). If He blesses us, no other god can curse us. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rm 8:31). He alone is the one whom we must worship. In Him alone we have eternal life.

The distinctness of the three persons is already hinted at in the creation. Nothing that has been made has been made without the Son, the Word, who speaks (Jn 1:3). When darkness still covered the surface of the deep, the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the water (Gn 1:2). Before the creation of human beings, there was a divine consultation, in which the plural, “Us” was used: “God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, in Our likeness” Gn 1:26). The Jews accepted that the Messiah would be a son of David. Jesus confronted them with the mystery that in Psalm 110 two Persons are Lord, and that David’s son is also his Lord. “The LORD said to my Lord” (Ps 110:1).

In the New Testament the word “God” usually means the Father. The Hebrew word for God was chiefly used in contexts where His creative power was in view. “Lord” in the Old Testament was the name that was appropriate in contexts where His close gracious relationship to His chosen people was in view. Although God had appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, in the character of God Almighty, He had not made His character known to them by His name, the LORD. (Ex 6:3; 34:6). It is in line with this that in the New Testament and in our Creeds we refer to the Father as “one God”, and to Jesus Christ as “one Lord.” Paul did that when he mentioned the two Persons alongside each other. When he referred to “many gods and many lords”, he meant false gods and false lords. However, he wrote: “For even if there are so-called ‘gods’, either in heaven or on earth (as there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’), yet for us there is only one God, the Father, from whom all things come, and we exist for Him; and there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come, and we exist through Him” (1 Cor 8:5-6. Compare Eph 4:4-6; 1 Cor 12:4-6; 2 Cor 13:14).

When Paul contrasted the glory of the Old covenant with that of the New, he quoted what Moses had done. “Whenever Moses entered the presence of the LORD to speak with Him, he used to remove the veil until he came out” (Ex 34:34). The apostle Paul said that the “LORD” in this passage is the Holy Spirit. “This ‘Lord’ is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. As we all reflect “the Lord’s glory” in our unveiled faces, we are being transformed into the same

likeness, from glory to glory, just as it comes from the “Lord”, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:17-18).

There are differences between the Persons. Only the Son is begotten by the Father and became incarnate for us. It is the special work of the Holy Spirit to take the things of Jesus and show them to us. Both the Son and the Spirit intercede with the Father, but we are not told that the Father intercedes for us with the Son. Although each of the Persons is equal in Godhead, power, grace, and glory, the Father remains the Father. That seems to be what Paul meant when he wrote that the Son will finally hand the kingdom over to God the Father, and, “when all things have been put under Him, then the Son Himself will also be put under the One who has put all things under Him, so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:24-28).

However, we cannot distinguish the Persons from each other by their works here in the world. Each is Creator, Life-Giver, Saviour, and Sanctifier. Each Person is good, kind, merciful, gracious, longsuffering, slow to anger, desires our salvation, and will keep His promises. However, when we think of them separately, we do it as Jesus told Nicodemus. When we think of the Father, we think of the Father’s love (Jn 3:16). When we think of the Son, we think of Him who accepted the necessity, from our point of view, of the incarnate Son’s being lifted up on the cross (Jn 3:14). When we think of the Holy Spirit, we attribute to Him our rebirth (Jn 3:5). When we hear the Gospel, we remember that the Spirit, who moves like the wind, works faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the Gospel (Jn 3:8).

Nicodemus had come to Jesus on behalf of others, and so used the word “We.” “We know that You have come from God as a teacher” (Jn 3:2). Jesus linked Himself to the Father and the Spirit when He replied with the plural “We”: “We speak what We know and We testify to what We have seen, and you people do not accept Our testimony” (Jn 3:11). Our eternal destiny depends on our faith in one God in three divine Persons. They are for us, dwell in us, and will receive our unending praise.