

TRIUNE GOD – PLURALITY IN ONE GOD – A MYSTERY

To be able to delve deeper into this mystery of God's nature, it is important that we start by acknowledging the difficulty in comprehending God through the limitations of human mind. Given our earthly limitations, we cannot grasp the fullness of Who God is, but we can grasp as much as needed to acknowledge Him as our God, love Him, relate to Him and worship Him.

There are divisions of opinion through the centuries about God's nature. The Bible shows God first as the Creator, who then became God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God then came much later in the appearance of the man Jesus Christ on the earth, who said that the God of Israel was His Father, whilst Isaiah called Him "the everlasting Father" (Is. 9:6).

Understanding God then became more complicated, because the Scriptures show that Jesus was a normal man, whilst the same Scriptures clearly state that Jesus is God. Because of that some think of Him as the God-man, but Scripture does not back that up; there is no "God-man" concept in the Bible. Jesus was not half God and half man – those were attributes of mythological heroes such as Achilles and Hercules. In fact Jesus was genuinely 100% man in the flesh, whilst He is also 100% God apart from human nature. He said in His own words, in John 17: "4 I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. 5 And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was."

That was Jesus in the flesh, speaking to God in Heaven, testifying that Jesus was in heaven with God before the world was created. Following the time that Jesus lived in the flesh on the earth, the Bible explains to us that, following the ascension of Jesus, God began to work through the Holy Spirit on the earth. Then the Bible shows that the Holy Spirit is God, equal to Father God and to Jesus who is God.

Simultaneously with all of the above, the Bible clearly says that God is One; it is really quite simple, and it should be enough. The Bible speaks of God as Father, as Son, as the Holy Spirit. The Bible speaks of Jesus as a suffering servant in the flesh, and of Jesus as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords on the Throne of God. The Bible says that Jesus became the Lamb of God that died for the sins of the world, and that now He is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Commander of the armies of the heavenly host. The Bible says that no one can come to God except through Jesus Christ, and that no one can come to Jesus except it is given to him by God.

If we would choose to believe what the Bible says without trying to explain it; without trying to say it in the words of our human earthly intelligence; without trying to build theologies through philosophical debates about God; then the words of the Bible would be enough! But because of so many doctrines and debates about the issue, it is important that we clarify what we believe, and explain why we believe it.

There are 3 major efforts across the centuries to explain this mystery of God: modalism, tritheism and triunity. The different streams of thought are distilled in our days down to 2 major types of church doctrine: the "Trinity" and the "Oneness" ("Unitarians", or, "Jesus-only").

Let us look at some theological definitions that will help our communication: (there is no reference to particular sources of those definitions, because what follows is the culmination of research of different sources, authors and writings).

Modalism: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not equally and eternally co-existent, but are 3 successive manifestations of God, or 3 temporary modes of His activity. Modalism, which is actually a form of Unitarianism, denies that God in His own inner being is triune. Rather, it claims that the Father, Son, and Spirit are either temporary or successive roles adopted by God in carrying out the divine plan of redemption and that they in no way correspond to anything in the ultimate nature of the Godhead. Modalism does not recognize the independent personality of Christ, but regards the incarnation as a mode of the existence or manifestation of the Father.

Tritheism: the three Persons of the Trinity are three distinct Gods. According to tritheism, the Father, Son, and Spirit are three separate Gods, whereby the Father is one God, the Son is one God, and the Spirit is also one God.

Triunity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are One unique God, whose nature is threefold. Otherwise stated, God is 3 in 1, while at the same time He is 1 in 3. A famous preacher said that God made him understand it through the sun, the light and the heat. The sun produces light, the light produces heat, but all 3 are part of the sun; they are elements of what the sun is, and how we relate to the sun. The core of the sun is different than the light it produces, and the heat is different from the light, even though there is no heat without the light. They are three distinctly different chemical existences, yet, all three are the result of the same one substance that becomes three separate substances. All three separate substances cannot exist apart from one another, and all three refer back to the same core – the sun!

The core of the sun would represent Father God, whom no one can see, because He is a consuming fire. The light of the sun would represent the Light of the world, Jesus Christ; He dwells in unapproachable light, and that is the light-producing core of the sun. The earth cannot exist without the light of the sun, and indeed mankind has no life without Jesus. The heat of the sun originates also in the core of the sun, but comes to the earth through the light; that would represent the Holy Spirit that comes to men through Jesus, and warms their hearts to God.

Trinity: God in 3 persons. For some this means 3 Gods, since each person is a unique entity (tritheism). For others, it means that One God has a threefold nature (triunity).

Oneness or Jesus-only: God is One who manifests in different forms, modes, or, expressions. So, they follow the same theology as Modalism or Unitarianism, possibly with minor modifications. In simple words, each manifestation of God is like a different face of the same one person, whose internal substance is Jesus, who is the Father Himself.

Appraisal of the differences

From what we may possibly conclude through the above definitions pertaining to God's nature, as we compare them one next to another, what we are really dealing with here is not some essential differentiation of doctrines that ultimately point to diverse destinations. Rather, we are looking at the vanity of human intelligence and earthly wisdom that wants to explain and control God's unknown nature through words and mental reasoning. However, ultimately all those mental efforts point to the same source of divinity: One God, whom we know as Father, as Son and as Holy Spirit – it seems that all definitions agree to that fundamental principle.

All genuine Christians accept God as One unity, and all accept that there are three different references in the Bible making mention of the same God, as one unbreakable unity. One reference is to the Father, the other to the Son Jesus, and the third to the Holy Spirit. All accept that only through Jesus we all gain access to the Father God. All accept that we need the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus and the eternal life He gives. All accept that in the New Testament our contact with God takes place through the Holy Spirit. Those are the essential things that certify our identity in Christ and constitute our membership in His Church. All other efforts by theology to explain God through human intelligence are the result of vanity and man-centered perceptions of the invisible God.

Why we believe what we believe

We do not want to engage in debates and arguments. We do not want to humiliate the personal convictions of other believers in Jesus Christ. We do not claim that we have the whole truth and everyone else is deceived. What we want to do is present our own conviction with simplicity of heart, wishing that each believer may be able to reach their own through the knowledge of the scriptures and personal relationship with God. As it is written: Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind (Rom.14:5).

The witness of the original Hebrew texts

Our conviction is derived by the study of the Scriptures. We believe that the One God has a 3-fold inner nature; He is Tri-Une. I.e. His inner nature is not arithmetic unity but there is a compound unity (hence, plurality) in Him.

Our conviction comes from the revelation of the original Hebrew scriptures of the God of Israel. The Old Testament presentation of God in the Scriptures reveals plurality in the One God. Here are some examples:

Gen 3:22: Then the LORD God (Jehovah Elohim) said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us".

Gen. 11:7: "Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language."

Isaiah 6:8: ... the Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"

Ecclesiastes 12:1: Remember now your Creator ... (Literally: CREATORS).

Psalms 149:2: Let Israel rejoice in their Maker. (Literally: MAKERS).

Joshua 24:19: ... holy God ... (Literally: HOLY GODS).

Isaiah 54:5: For your Maker is your husband (Literally: MAKERS, HUSBANDS).

Some confusion arises from the foundational statement of Deuteronomy 6:4: Hear, O Israel: "The LORD our God, the LORD is one!" On the basis of this scripture many are troubled at the thought of plurality in God.

However, the word "one," which is the Hebrew word ECHAD, does not mean an absolute arithmetic "one" but a compound "one". Let us see the use of the word in other scriptures:

In Genesis 1:5 the combination of evening and morning comprise one (echad) day. In Genesis 2:24 a man and a woman come together in marriage and the two "shall become one (echad) flesh." In Ezra 2:64 we are told that the whole assembly was as one (echad), though, of course, it was composed of numerous people. Ezekiel 37:17 provides a striking example where two sticks are combined to become one (echad).

Thus, use of the word "echad" in Scripture shows it to be a compound and not an absolute unity. At the same time, there is a Hebrew word that reflects absolute unity: YACHID, which is found in many Scripture passages, e.g.

Gen 22:12 And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only [son] {"yachid"} from Me.

If Moses intended to teach God's absolute oneness instead of a compound unity, "yachid" would have been a far more appropriate word than "echad". So Moses intended to show the plurality of One God. He wanted people to know that there is compound unity in God.

In line with the New Testament Scriptures

The same message of "echad" is equally revealed in the words of Jesus and other New Testament scriptures, confirming the concept of compound unity revealed in the Old Testament.

John 10:30 "I and [My] Father are one." – {When Jesus spoke those words, He was in the flesh, on the earth, doing the will of His Father. He could not have been the same person as the Father, because He became a curse and He died; does God turn into a curse? Does God die? Jesus was tempted in all things – is God tempted? Clearly Jesus and His Father were different persons, and yet Jesus said: "we are ONE" – that is the same as "echad": compound unity!}

John 17:11 "Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We [are]. – {Here the many become "echad-one", same as in Ezra 2:64}

John 17:21 "that they all may be one, as You, Father, [are] in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. 22 "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one:"

Acts 1:14 These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

Acts 5:12 And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch.

"All with one accord" is not merely an emotional agreement. The concept of all being of one mind as if they were one person reveals a deep and essential unity, even though each individual maintained their own personal identity; this is exactly the concept of the compound unity which is inside the nature of the Godhead. In other words, the Father has His own identity and personality; Jesus has His own, and so does the Holy Spirit. Still, all three are in one-accord unity, acting and functioning simultaneously like an absolute One. It is clear that the early church, after the ascension of Jesus, had been able to reach such a deep level of one-accord unity that were willing to share all their belongings with one another. Can it be that they experienced the "echad"-oneness which is in God's nature? Can it be, that because they became "echad", they reached such a great level of God's presence and power, that we have not yet been able to experience in our own times? Is it not true, that so many voices call out for unity in our days, saying that without unity we shall never see God move with true power?

Old Testament research continued

Going back to the Old Testament scriptures now, we continue the research of the word "yachid" (absolute arithmetic one) in Judges 11:34 When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she [was] [his] only ("yachid") child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter.

We also find "yachid" in Psalm 22:21; 25:16; Proverbs 4:3; Jeremiah 6:26; Amos 8:10; Zechariah 12:10. The emphasis in all of those on the meaning of "one" is "only one".

The plurality of the compound unity which is in God is further shown in the Hebrew Scriptures where the term Elohyim ("el'o'heem") is applied to two personalities in the same verse.

One example is Psalm 45:6-7 – "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever: A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions".

The first Elohyim is being addressed and the second Elohyim is the God of the first Elohyim. I.e. it says that "God's God has anointed him with the oil of gladness". It obviously makes reference to the Son Jesus and the Father God.

Another example is Hosea 1:7 – "Yet I will have mercy on the house of Judah, will save them by the LORD their God, and will not save them by bow, nor by sword or battle, by horses or horsemen."

The speaker is Elohyim who says he will have mercy on the house of Judah and will save them by the instrumentality of Jehovah, their Elohyim. So Elohyim number one will save Israel by means of Elohyim number two. For us today it is clear that the Scriptures refer to the Son Jesus Christ, who is the only Lord, and the only true salvation for all men. Even though Jesus was God (Elohyim number two), His Father God (Elohyim number one) sent Him to the earth so that through Him salvation is not "by bow, nor by sword or battle, by horses or horsemen". Salvation is only through faith in Jesus, Whom God sent in the form of a bond-servant, and appearance of flesh in the earth.

Not only is the word "Elohyim" applied to two personalities in the same verse, but so is the very name of God "Jehovah". One example is Genesis 19:24 – "Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah from the LORD out of the heavens".

Clearly we have the first Jehovah ("yeh-ho-vaw") raining fire and brimstone from (a second) Jehovah who is in heaven, the first one being on earth. Shortly before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Lord had appeared to Abraham in person, and He was not one person only...

Gen.18:1 Then the Lord appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. 2 So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, 3 and said, "My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. 4 "Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 "And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant." They said, "Do as you have said."

Singular and plural appear to be used interchangeably, in reference to the Lord, who appeared to Abraham as three men!

the Lord appeared – three men were standing

when he saw them, he... said, "My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight

My Lord, ... do not pass on by – wash your feet, and rest yourselves

My Lord, ... do not pass on by – They said

We then find singular and plural used interchangeably again further down in the same chapter, v.16 Then the men rose from there and looked toward Sodom, and Abraham went with them to send them on the way. 17 And the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing?"

the men rose – the Lord said, "Shall I hide ...

We have seen that the Hebrew Scriptures confirm the plurality of the compound unity that is in God. The first person is consistently called Jehovah, while the second person is given the names of Jehovah, the Angel of Jehovah and the Servant of Jehovah. Consistently and without fail, the second person is sent by the first person. The third person is referred to as the Spirit of Jehovah or the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit. He, too, is sent by the first person but is continually related to the ministry of the second person.

In our times of the New Testament economy, we have already seen how those Hebrew Scriptures have been fulfilled in the revelation of God as the Father (Jehovah), with Jesus being the "Servant of Jehovah" on the earth, as He came to the earth to serve the Father. At the same time, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is continually related to the ministry of Jesus Christ, whom He reveals to mankind.

Our own conviction and principle of faith regarding God's substance and nature:

The Bible shows three manifestations, or, revelations, or, persons and calls those three as One God. We choose to believe what the Bible reveals to us about God, that He is One and at the same time He is Triune in essential being, revealing Himself to mankind as Father, as Son and Lamb of God, and as the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Scriptures reveal One God not in the sense of arithmetic unity, but in the sense of a Unity that is of three-fold substance, or, inner nature.

Some would claim that the terminology of "manifestations of God" versus "persons of God" makes a big difference, whereby a "manifestation" is not a "person". I.e. a "manifestation" is only an outward appearance without a different internal being and nature, whereas the term "person" is identical to the concept of a unique internal being and nature. According to this line of thinking, three different manifestations of God are only external appearances of the same One Person, who maintains the One and only inner substance and nature. Alternatively, according to the same thinking, three different persons would constitute three different natures and inner substances. In essence those people would claim that three manifestations point to One Inner Being, whereas the concept of three persons point to Three Inner Beings.

If that perception were true, then the preceding paragraph would be incorrect and invalid in saying that "the Bible shows three manifestations, or, revelations, or, persons and calls those three as One God". However, our conviction is that any manifestation of God must be accompanied by a respective inner being and nature, otherwise God would be playing theater with His creation, putting on different masks and acting out different roles, to manipulate our

perceptions, as it were. We cannot find any rational or benefit that would explain and justify a modalistic change of external appearances of God.

We believe that if God presents Himself as Father, then He has in Him the inner nature and substance of the Father; it is the person of the Father that manifests. God thus reveals the Father's internal nature that is in Him.

If God presents Himself as Son, then He has in Him the inner nature and substance of the Son. It is the person of the Son that manifests, revealing the different nature and function of the Son. Each person has His own substance and nature, performing His own function, according to His different nature. However, it is the same God! It is not two gods, but two manifestations of two respective substances, that is, of the two persons that are inside the One God.

Same is true for the Holy Spirit. If God presents Himself as Holy Spirit, then He has in Him the inner nature and substance of the Holy Spirit. It is the person of the Holy Spirit that performs His own function, thus manifesting this third nature and substance of the One God that reveals Himself to mankind.

We believe that a "person" is the external appearance, that is, the manifestation of an inner nature and substance. We therefore do not accept that the "three manifestations of God" are different from the "three persons of God". If there are three manifestations, then there must be three persons behind those manifestations. If there are three persons, then there are three substances, or, inner natures, each one of them performing their own functions of the One God.

Through the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19, we see that God has chosen to present Himself to mankind through Jesus Christ as the Father, as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit. At the same time, in Deut. 6:4, and Gal.3:20, we learn that God is One, while God and Jesus are different as it is written in different parts of the Bible.

E.g. in Revel. 1:1 we read: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants, things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified [it] by His angel to His servant John, ² who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw".

If God gave to Jesus this revelation, then God and Jesus are different. Alternatively we would have to assume that God acts out theatrical roles putting on different masks; or, we would be dealing with a schizophrenic manifestation of a personality that speaks with himself as if he were a different person. There is no benefit on behalf of God for such theater, and the scripture would be equally powerful if it simply read: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, that He revealed to his servants the things which must soon take place".

The power of the revelation neither diminishes in any way, nor is the message empowered through the written clarification: "which God gave Him". This clarification is irrelevant to the message and benefits no one other than God himself, who obviously wants to make clear to mankind how the persons of God interact between themselves. This is even more relevant at this place, whereby we are talking about the resurrected Jesus who has already ascended on to Heaven; we are not talking about the man Jesus while He was still in the flesh on the earth, prior to His crucifixion, but about Jesus in His divine form, sitting at the right hand of God in heaven.

John is so clear in his own mind about the difference between God and Jesus, that he found it important enough to write about himself: "who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ".

Also, when it comes to the present reality of the resurrected Jesus, following His ascension to the heaven, we read in Hebrews 7:25 "He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them".

If we come to God through Jesus, and if Jesus makes intercession to God for us, then, God and Jesus are different (even though Jesus is God, and it is given that God is One).

We also find the same differentiation between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. E.g. in John 14:16 Jesus said "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever". If we accept with simplicity of heart that Jesus speaks literally, He does not play

theater, He is not deceiving the world, and He does not lie, then, according to His own words, Jesus differentiates the three between themselves. He said: I, the Father, and another Helper, which simply means that Jesus is other than the Father, and the Holy Spirit is other than the Father and Jesus.

This is the same testimony of the most beloved disciple of Jesus, John, who wrote in 1 John 5:7 " For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. 8 And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one".

Conclusion

We therefore believe what the Scriptures show us about the One God; He is One, while at the same time the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are distinctly different. Now, are they different persons, or, are they different manifestations of one person? We really don't know and we don't care to attribute further mental characteristics to the revelation of God through the Scriptures. If God wanted us to know in more detail, then He would supply more names and attributes for Himself through the Scriptures. If He does not, that means we do not need to know more while we are on earth.

We believe that whoever has a personal relation with God through Jesus Christ is a child of God, and he is accepted by God not thanks to his own perceptions about God's nature, but thanks to the blood of Jesus that was shed to redeem us from the power of death.

In our understanding and conviction, those who perceive the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as external manifestations and appearances of One internal being and person, are not enemies or much different to those who perceive the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as three different persons manifesting three unique internal beings, but still One God.

We believe that both sides make a genuine effort to explain the mystery of God, and we should respect each person's perceptions, as long as the Scriptures do not permit us to know for sure who is right and who is wrong. As it written in 1 Cor 8:1: "... We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. 2 And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows **nothing** yet as he ought to know. 3 But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him".

Exhortation for a personal relationship with God

As a result of the scriptural revelation and our personal experience with God, we believe that it is important for us to know the fullness of God; we need to be able to relate with the One God as with the Father, and as with the Son Jesus, and as with the Holy Spirit. The Christians who cannot relate with the Father, and with the Son, and with the Holy Spirit, are still Christians as long as they have believed that Jesus died for their sins. We, however, exhort all to seek a deeper and fuller relation with God by exploring the fullness of Who God is. All the children of God should know Him as the Father, and should know Jesus Christ, and should be able to relate to the Holy Spirit.

To note, we find it interesting according to our observations that there are Unitarians (Oneness, Jesus-only) who know the Father, have the Son, and relate to the Holy Spirit very well, while there are Trinitarians who have no personal revelation or relation with each of the three; they only relate to God in general, while some of them have no relationship with the Holy Spirit. Therefore we have Unitarians with a 3-fold relation and we have Trinitarians with 1-fold, or, perhaps 2-fold relation! That shows how vain our intellectual theology is, and we advise that the children of God drop the debates on theological perceptions and interpretations and pursue a deeper personal relation with God in whom we have believed.

In the Love of Christ!

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