

GOD - THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

What are some ways you have understood the Trinity? What images or pictures come to mind when you hear the word "Trinity?"

It doesn't take much reading in the Bible before you hear names like "Holy Spirit," "Lord Jesus Christ", and "Father" in prayers and stories like this: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Corinthians 13:13). Right alongside these the Bible also refers to One Lord God: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4: 4-5).

This could easily be misunderstood to mean that Christians pray to three different gods, or that God simply appears in three different forms or times, each time with a different mask like you might wear at Halloween. But we trust in only *one true* God, not *three*. Yet, we know and trust God because he has given himself to us in his Son, Jesus Christ. So, instead of three "gods" or three "masks," if anyone should ever ask, "Who is your God?" we would answer: "We believe in one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who made everything including me and you"

When we talk to God in prayers or proclaim God's promises (like a preacher does at communion or in the pulpit) we can use God's whole name, "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," (like we do in a baptism), or we can use any one of the names for all. So sometimes we say, "Heavenly Father, thank you . . .," or "Dear Jesus help me . . .," or "Come, Holy Spirit and keep us in true faith." Each time we pray to the one, same and true God who has given himself to us wholly and completely in the Father of Jesus Christ, in the Beloved Son of the Father, and in their Holy Spirit.

What are some other names we use when we pray or talk about God? What difference does a name make?

Many times we get confused by this way that preachers speak about God, or about how Christians

Steven Paulson

pray. Sometimes people have tried to use pictures for this triune God, like an egg having a yellow yolk, egg-white, and a hard shell, yet all being one "egg." This is *not* like our God. God is not three parts that make up one whole thing. What we mean when we pray to Jesus, to his Father, and to their Holy Spirit is simply saying that we have no other God than *this particular man*, Jesus Christ whom the Bible talks about. Jesus alone is the one who leads us to trust in his heavenly Father, and through whom the Spirit is sent so that we really listen to Jesus when he speaks to us. That is what Jesus meant when he said to his disciples for the last time: "No one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). Without Jesus Christ, the Jewish man from Nazareth, who was Mary's son, who taught his disciples, was crucified and raised from the dead by his heavenly Father, we would not trust the heavenly Father. And without *his* Spirit, who is the one who makes us holy, we would not be able to trust Jesus' own promises to us, like "the one who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16).

This is why, when a person asks us who our God is we *first* tell them about Jesus Christ. We say how he was born, suffered, died and rose again, and this leads us to speak of Jesus' Father in heaven, who loves us so much that he gave his only begotten Son to die for us (John 3:16). When we tell this story to other people, we have faith that God will give his Holy Spirit, as Jesus promised, so that other people too can hear this story as God's gift to them--even though they realize they can't trust God on their own power.

Do you think there are other ways to know about God besides through Jesus? On what basis do we say Jesus is the key to understanding God?

One of the best ways of seeing what our God is like and does in order to save us is the story of Jesus' baptism. Jesus went to John the Baptist at the Jordan River and asked to be baptized. John thought that Jesus should be the one baptizing, as he had the power and authority of God! But Jesus convinced John it was proper, and when Jesus was baptized, "the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the

When a person asks us who our God is we first tell the story of Jesus Christ.

Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3). Here we can see what we mean by saying God is “triune,” or sometimes we refer to the church’s way of saying this by referring to Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three “persons,” of the one “essence” of God. When we call to God or preach him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit what we mean is that we have a God who is giving himself without holding anything back. Our God not only gives gifts like parents do at Christmas or Birthdays, but God has found a way (through the man Jesus Christ), to give his own Self to people who cannot and will not trust him. When we say we have a triune God we mean this God is *giving himself wholly and completely, keeping nothing back*—even while we were yet sinners!

What does God give to us? What do we actually receive when God gives himself to us?

Remember this is not three gods, or even three different people or three forms of appearing. Why the three person and one God? Because God is exactly the kind of real God who found a way to give himself to us who do not deserve, want or believe him-- wholly and completely, with all he is and has. As Isaiah said it: “I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me” (Is. 65:1). Watch how God does this:

1. First, God gives himself to us as Father in creation . The Father gives himself to us, with all heaven and earth by making us and putting us in a garden-world where all creatures serve and benefit us. That is the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the story of God’s way of being a God to us, giving all that we could need or want for our life as creatures. But we did not want God the Father there, as Adam and Eve showed by refusing to be God’s beloved creatures who trust and receive even the Father himself through the things made in the Garden. Instead, we sought him behind the created things, as if God was keeping great secrets from us about something called “Good and Evil.” So, this gift of God the Father through the created things has become obscure so we can’t see them as God himself and his promises for us. Sin is just that—not wanting God “in created things,” but trying to find God outside creation through secret ways of knowing like special religious ceremonies or in things we make ourselves.

What are some ways we try to find God behind created things?

2. But God does not let this stop him. He sends his Son to come and suffer our rejection and yet make things right between us and the Father whom we always refuse to trust. In Jesus, God comes to us again, deep in the flesh of his Son, Jesus of Nazareth. In fact God is so much given to us in Jesus that he suffered, died and was raised. But we did not want him as he gave himself in the cross either, since we want a God that shows us the secret way to escape death, not to go through it. Even

God who is Jesus Christ, the Son, was rejected by us sinners when he came. But God will not let that be the final word either! The Father made Jesus Lord of all by raising him. But this is finally not done just for himself, but God does this in order to save sinners. So, God finally gives himself to us in the Holy Spirit through his words of proclamation concerning the Son, that is, as a free promise to sinners. This promise comes to us apart from the law that demands we act, think and believe in God rightly by ourselves.

Can you think of any examples of us looking for a God who will help us avoid death?

3. But again, because we do not wish to find God there in Jesus (since it would put us in a very bad light indeed, having tried to get rid of Jesus Christ when he entered the world), God establishes what we Lutherans call the “office,” of preaching. That means, God’s public way of getting his Word out into the world: especially through your pastor preaching God’s law that shows us our sin, and then the Gospel of Jesus Christ’s cross and resurrection in order to save sinners. This office of preaching is God’s way of giving the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who takes the words preached and given in baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and uses them to put our old sinful selves to death and raise us up as people who finally trust the Father, through the Son and by the Holy Spirit.

When we say we have a triune God we mean this God is giving himself wholly and completely, keeping nothing back - even while we were yet sinners!

The doctrine of the Trinity then goes like this: God found a way to give himself to sinners apart from the law, in Christ whom we come to trust by his Spirit. We have no other God than Jesus Christ. In him we have the Father’s heart and the Holy Spirit keeps Christ coming to us as a promise that forgives sin and gives new life. What do we mean by all this stuff about Trinity? While we were looking up, God came down. In Christ we have all of God, as a gift, given to sinners for the forgiveness of sins, and in that way we finally trust him and call upon God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

How does the doctrine of the Trinity shape the life of your church?