

Three Faces of God

Do you ever take the time to read the warning labels that are included with your medications and personal care items? If you paid close attention to the warnings that come with these medications, you wouldn't take any of them! I recently tried a new shampoo that warned that it had the potential of making my hair turn orange, a very frightful prospect for this Gamecock fan. One of my prescriptions warns that I shouldn't take it if I am pregnant or planning to be, or if I am a nursing mother. I might be safe there. Another medication has been shown to cause cancer in laboratory rats; it has been a while since anyone accused me of being a lab rat, but it has happened. Other medications will curl your toenails and cause you to grow facial hair; I hope it is never prescribed to you women! I shouldn't operate a motor vehicle while taking some medications, and I should take great care to avoid all alcoholic beverages. Doggone it!

Just as there are no perfectly harmless medications, there are no perfect doctrines in any religion. There are realities that we experience; putting those realities into words that capture the truth without overly limiting God or excluding those who disagree with us is a real challenge. The early church debated the nature of God and of Christ for four centuries before formulating the doctrine of the Trinity. I don't believe that it is possible to express the triune nature of the One God without trespassing the border between truth and heresy. Even my sermon title, Three Faces of God, is heretical but true.

As difficult as it is to proclaim, the doctrine of the Trinity is very important. It is one of the defining doctrines of the Church Universal. To deny the Trinity will separate a church body from the rest of Christianity. Even the National Council of Churches requires member bodies to agree on this doctrine, and if one looks at cults in our world today, one will see that they err somewhere in their doctrines about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Although this doctrine is very important to our understanding of God, it is nowhere clearly laid out in the Bible. The word "Trinity" is conspicuously absent from our Bibles. Yet in many passages we see references to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let's look at some of the questions in the early church that gave birth to this doctrine.

Christianity came out of Judaism which vigorously taught that there was One God: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is One." I am reminded of the story of the child who heard the confession, "the LORD our God is one," and the little child said, "I sure thought God was older than that!" God revealed Himself to the Hebrews, not as a god or chief of gods but as the only God. Early Christians were monotheists. Jesus taught that there was One God. God alone is the Creator; all else is the

created. But here is the problem: Who is Jesus, Creator or created? If we draw a line and say that everything above the line is Creator and everything below the line is the created, where do you put Jesus, above or below the line? There were those in the early church that said that Jesus was only a human being - created. Others said that He was only a divine apparition, a ghost who only appeared to be human. But the Apostles proclaimed that Jesus was the divine Son in human flesh, both really human and fully God. Pentecost further complicated the issue! Was the Holy Spirit Creator or created? As the church wrestled with this issue, it was criticized for returning to paganism because it sounded like they were proclaiming 3 gods. Can you begin to grasp the dilemma of the Church fathers?

Further complicating the issue were questions concerned how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were related to each other. Was there a heavenly hierarchy where God was King, Jesus was second in command and the Holy Spirit in third place? Is the Father alone eternal, or are Jesus and the Spirit also eternal? These questions divided the church as church leaders literally fought among themselves, excommunicating one another. Origen who lived from 185 to 254 AD was the first theologian to use the word Trinity in His theology about the Godhead. That's right! The origin of the word "Trinity" to describe God can be traced to Origen! Finally after the Roman Empire became officially Christian in 313 AD, Emperor Constantine was worried that this question might do what invading armies had not been able to do for centuries - divide the empire - and so he paid the expenses of the various church bishops to attend a summit meeting now known as the Council of Nicea in 325. That council settled part of the conflict but it took other councils to finally settle it. It was not until the Council meeting in Constantinople in 381 that the issue was settled and the questions put away. These answers are expressed in the Nicene Creed: there is One God, the Father Creator, the only-begotten Son - begotten, not made (that is, Christ is not a created being or a lesser God but eternal God) - true God from true God, of one Being or substance with the Father - and Holy Spirit, who with the Father and Son is worshiped and glorified.

At last the issues were mostly settled by the Trinitarian Formula! There is only One God who has come to us in three distinct relationships. There is no inferiority or superiority in the Godhead. Father, Son, and Spirit are equal and co-eternal. God has been the Trinity always. By the way, you might be interested that this issue is what led to the split between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in 1054 AD. We in the West say that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son while our Eastern brethren say that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, so even today this issue divides the Church along an east-west theological iron curtain.

For those of you still awake, the doctrine of the Trinity teaches that the

distinction between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is in function or job in relationship with us and not in nature. Each person of the Trinity has a different role in our lives, a different task. In some ways I am also a Trinitarian personality! I am a father, I was a son, and I am a husband. I am one person, but my function in the family has been based on my relationship to children, parents, and a wife. That helps me understand God better.

To call God Father is not to say that God is male but rather to say that God's love for us is parental in nature. Our daughter Hillary was born a feminist! One time when she was about three, I told her to sit down in the grocery buggy because they don't let little girls stand up in them. She responded, "What about little boys?" When I told her that they didn't allow little boys to stand in buggies either, she sat down. Another time I was telling her that God is our Heavenly Father, and she looked at her Mother and said, "You just think that because you are a boy!" To call God "Father" is to recognize that we are God's children, not God's pets.

What is it that our parents do for us? Our mothers give birth to us, our fathers claim us by giving us their last names, and together they give us discipline, ordering our lives, and they love us sacrificially. To call God Father is to recognize that God gave us life by making us, that we are given the name "child of God," that God has given us commandments for guidance and discipline, that God loves us sacrificially as demonstrated by Christ, and that God made all that is. The orderly creation speaks to us of an orderly Creator.

A little boy was seen at the bottom of an escalator, looking down at the ever-moving first step. An adult asked, "Son, are you afraid to get on?" The boy said, "No. I'm just waiting for my chewing gum to come back around." Seasons come around in an orderly fashion, comets fly back by earth in predictable cycles. The orderly creation speaks to us of an orderly Creator.

To call God "the Son" is to celebrate the fact that God came to be one of us here on earth. Perhaps God came as a child to us because even the hardest of hearts will warm up to a child. Paul called Jesus "our elder brother." It is true that sometimes it is easier to talk to a big brother or sister than to our parents. Perhaps by becoming our big brother, God was assuring us that we can talk freely with Him about anything. He understands because God the Son has been with us in the flesh.

Whereas the Father is our Creator and the Son is our Savior, the Holy Spirit is the sustainer of our lives. The Spirit is the presence of God that we experience in our daily lives. He is the strength to live the Christian life. What water is to fish and air is to humans, the Spirit is to Christians. He is the atmosphere in which we live and grow as Christians. In Him we live and move and have our being. The Spirit is best seen by what He does in us. The Spirit convict us of sin, leads us to faith in Christ, assures us that we are God's children, causes us to remember spiritual lessons, conveys God's will to us, empowers our lives, and fills us with God's goodness, growing the fruit of the Spirit within us.

The doctrine of the Trinity is difficult to understand, and perhaps that is good. God always should be somewhat of a mystery to us, beyond our comprehension. But that same doctrine assures us that God loves us so very much that He gave life to us in the beginning, that He redeemed us when we went off the right path, and that He sustains us daily with His presence, making His home in us. He is an awesome God! He is one God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

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