

The Nature of God: “Us”

Today we are starting a new series which will cover many of the core beliefs of the Christian faith. What do we believe about the nature of God, the nature of human beings, and many of the issues of our day, including origins and human sexuality? We want to search the Scriptures in order to find out why followers of Jesus have believed in a certain way throughout the centuries and to make a more solid foundation for our own faith.

So let's start at the beginning - with God. Who or what is God and why do Christians promote this thing called a “Trinity” as a way of explaining who God is or at least how He relates with humans? Because we believe that the Bible is a revelation to us of who God is, we would expect to find this revelation right from the start, and so we look at Genesis 1:1,2:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was empty; a formless mass cloaked in darkness. And the Spirit of God was hovering over its surface.

What do we notice? That the Creation that we are part of, that we live in, that we observe every day, was God's doing. And we notice that God's Spirit is identified, right from the start, as an expression of God, a form of God, a something that represents God's presence but in a unique way: The Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the earth. And, if we knew Hebrew, we would notice that the word for God in verse 1, the word *Elohim*, is a plural noun - which tells us that God is, somehow, more than a singularity - He's more complex than that.

Let's continue with the creation of human beings later in that first chapter of Genesis:

Then God said, “Let us make people in our image to be like ourselves. They will be masters over all life - the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky and all the livestock, wild animals and small animals.” So God created people in His own image: God patterned them after Himself; male and female He created them. (Gen. 1:26,27)

That is a loaded passage and gives us amazing insight into who God is.

1. First, it tells us that God is, in His nature, a plurality - in other words, more than one single being. He says, “Let us make people in our image.” Do you talk to yourself that way? Do you say to yourself, “Let us go to the store and buy a new pair of shoes today”? If you did that, people who overheard you might think you had some mental health issue. But when God does that, He is displaying the plurality of His nature; that in His unique being, He is one God who expresses Himself in more than one person.
2. The second thing we see about God's nature from this passage is that He is the Lord of all He has made. In making us in His image, He makes us able to master the natural world; but He is the overlord, the One who rules over all of creation, including us.

3. And the third thing, which goes hand-in-hand with His nature as a plurality, is that He is relational and He makes us to have relationship. “God patterned them after Himself; male and female He created them.” That suggests difference, oneness and relationship, all expressions of who God is.

Only two chapters later, in Genesis 3:22, we see again that God refers to Himself as “us”:

Then Yahweh God said, “The people have become as we are, knowing everything, both good and evil.

And again in the story of the tower of Babel:

Come, let us go down and give them different languages. (Gen. 11:7)

And in Isaiah 6:8, where Isaiah is called to be a prophet:

Then I heard the Lord asking, “Whom should I send as a messenger to My people? Who will go for us?”

All of these texts suggest that God is an “us”, a “more than one”; but doesn’t Scripture teach that God is one?

Over and over again, this is the clear teaching of the Bible. For example, in the *shema*, the great opening declaration of the law in Deuteronomy 6:4,5, we read:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, Yahweh is One. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

There are other Hebrew words that could have been used to indicate “one”, but the word that is used here in Deuteronomy is the same word that is used of marriage in Genesis 2:24:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

This is a word that expresses a unified one. The other main word for “one” is the word *yachid* and it means a solitary oneness rather than a united oneness and that word is never used of God in the Bible.

Another expression of this truth is found in Isaiah 44:6:

This is what Yahweh says - Israel’s King and Redeemer, Yahweh Almighty: I am the first and the last; apart from Me there is no God ...

And then in verse 8:

*You are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me?
No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.*

The Old Testament writings we have been looking at are clear: God is a united one, a plurality who expresses Himself as a unity, rather than a singularity.

Do we understand how this works? Or maybe a better question to ask would be, “How important is it that we fully understand the nature of God?” I would expect that the God of Creation, of infinite power and of great love would be more complicated and more wise than I could grasp and far beyond my understanding. Wouldn’t you expect that God would be a complex being who we can not explain fully to our preschool children and who we will spend a lifetime getting to know - only to realize in heaven that we still

need eternity to really know Him? That's my expectation. For now, the Christian concept of a single God expressing Himself through three personalities or modes of being, is an adequate expression of how He is presented in the Scriptures.

What we haven't seen much of so far is the idea of three distinct "persons", for lack of a better term, the ideas of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We saw that the Spirit of God hovered over the waters at the beginning of the process of Creation, but that's not much to go on.

Let's look at a familiar passage in Isaiah that talks about a child who will be known as both God and eternal Father:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Is. 9:6)

The child that is to be born will rule Israel - that's the sense of the phrase "the government will be on his shoulders". But what comes after that is shocking to those who are sensitive to the holiness of God: this child will be called by divine titles: the Wonderful Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. This child will obviously represent God in such a clear and powerful way, that he will be given the titles that belong to God alone.

Let's look at a couple more passages in Isaiah to build onto this idea of a God in three persons:

Come near me and listen to this: "From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there." And now the Sovereign Yahweh has sent me, with His Spirit. (48:16)

And this, more familiar one:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Yahweh is on me, because Yahweh has anointed me to preach good news to the poor,
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted
To proclaim freedom for the captives
And release from darkness for the prisoners
To proclaim the year of Yahweh's favor (61:1,2)*

In both cases, it is Jesus who is speaking, the servant of Yahweh, the One who is to come, the Messiah of Israel and in both cases He has been sent by the LORD God and in both cases He is accompanied by the Spirit of that Sovereign LORD. In Isaiah, at least, you can follow the work of God's servant who is sent by Him in the power of the Holy Spirit to do His work and in Luke 4 we see clearly that Jesus understood the prophet to be speaking about Him and about His mission.

Now, what have you noticed so far? Besides reading Scripture verses and commenting on them, what stands out from this first half? To me, it's that we can know that God is presented as a plurality and that He acts through His Spirit and His Son and Servant,

and we can know all that without being a Christian believer. This is all from the Old Testament, the Jewish Bible, as it were. We haven't got to the teaching of Paul or the Gospel writers yet, or the statements of Jesus about who He is. The nature of God didn't change when Jesus arrived in the Bethlehem manger - He has always been in a relationship ... within Himself.

Admittedly, some of those statements aren't clear declarations of the relationships between Father, Son and Spirit, but they do suggest relationship and they do fit well with the concept of a Triune God that the early church taught and defended through the centuries. Remember that the Hebrew culture is very different from the Greek culture that has so influenced western thinking in our day. The Greek thinker would want to lay out precise relationships and functions, whereas the Hebrew mindset would be more descriptive, more likely to paint a picture and let you figure it out. What we see in the Old Testament are pictures of God and His ways of relating to human beings, particularly to His people Israel. In those pictures we see a God who calls Himself "Us" who represents Himself as being One God in different modes of expression - the Spirit, the King, the Servant are some of those.

So, let's open the pages of the New Testament and just peek in. We won't develop a full-blown Christian theology of the Triune God in these next few minutes, but merely illustrate it - like the Hebrews of earlier days, we'll paint the picture and you can see it for yourself.

We've just finished a series on Mark, so let's dip back into Mark to see what Jesus revealed about His identity to a group that included some teachers of religious law. This is the story of Jesus healing a paralyzed man who had just dropped in ... thanks to a few of his friends who dug a hole through the roof:

*Then they lowered the sick man on his mat, right down in front of Jesus. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "My son, your sins are forgiven."
But some of the teachers of religious law who were sitting there said to themselves, "What? This is blasphemy! Who but God can forgive sins?" (Mark 2:4-7)*

Did Jesus just slip up there? Did He maybe not know that forgiving someone else for sins they had committed against God was blasphemy? Of course He knew, and He did nothing to defend Himself against that charge.

In fact, the next time in Mark's gospel that Jesus is accused of blasphemy, it is clear that He is inviting the religious leaders to make that accusation. This time we are at Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin and the chief priests are trying to find an excuse to get rid of Him:

*Then the high priest stood up before the others and asked Jesus, "Well, aren't you going to answer these charges? What do you have to say for yourself?"
Jesus made no reply.
Then the high priest asked Him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the blessed God?"*

*Jesus said, "I am, and you will see Me, the Son of Man, sitting at God's right hand in the place of power and coming back on the clouds of heaven."
Then the high priest tore his clothing to show his horror and said, "Why do we need other witnesses? You have all heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?"
And they all condemned Him to death. (Mark 14:60-64)*

If you don't believe that Jesus thought Himself to be God in human flesh, then you must believe that He lied so that they would crucify Him.

Muslims question that Jesus was God and will often use the argument that, if He really was God, why didn't He come right out and say it? The obvious answer from this passage is that it would have resulted in His immediate execution. Jesus did enough and said enough that the authorities were upset with Him and plotting against Him, but He waited until the time was right before making the bold declaration we just read.

What He declared before the Sanhedrin was to ensure His immediate execution - because He claimed to be God Himself. The phrase "I am" was God's answer to Moses' question: "When the Israelites ask me which god sent me to them, what shall I tell them?" God said, "Tell them 'I AM' has sent me to you." (Exodus 3:14) Next Jesus uses the phrase "Son of Man" to describe Himself, a title that comes from the book of Daniel, chapter 7, vv. 13,14:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

You see the parallel between Mark 14 and Daniel 7 in that both describe a Son of Man who comes on the clouds of heaven. The Daniel passage goes on to say that the Son of Man is given divine authority and the worship of the nations and an everlasting kingdom. This can be none other than the "Messiah, the Son of the blessed God", and that's who the high priest is asking Jesus to confirm or deny as being Himself. And Jesus finishes off by declaring that these religious leaders of the Jews will see Him, seated at God's right hand in the place of power - this is claiming to be equal with God. If this isn't true about Jesus, then He is a blasphemer, claiming an equal status with God.

There are, of course, many New Testament references that help us form an understanding of the nature of God, but let's just look at one more very simple expression that Jesus offers at the end of Matthew's Gospel.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Matt. 28:19)

Hold on a minute. Why does Jesus ask us to baptize disciples in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Why not just in the name of Father God? Why not just in

Jesus' name? Why include the Spirit? Because each of the three "persons" of the Trinity are important and have a significant role to play in our lives as believers. We belong to God in relationship with Him, just as He is in relationship within Himself and with us.

Okay, I've used up almost all my time and we haven't yet got any applications. What difference does it make to the way we live tomorrow if God is triune or solitary? Here are some things we can think about and apply:

1. While a majority of the people I meet are reluctant to jump into conversations about spiritual things, there is one important exception. In my limited experience, the Muslims are eager to talk about their beliefs, their understanding of the Christian faith and what common ground we might have between us. When they talk about Christians having "three gods", we need to be able to answer their concerns biblically, showing them how to correctly interpret the verses they are quoting. A book you would find helpful in dealing with their questions or countering their arguments is No God But One: Allah or Jesus? by Nabeel Qureshi, a former Muslim who converted to Christianity and who now works with Ravi Zacharias Ministries as a speaker and debater. Understanding the biblical concept of God is a valuable tool for people who have the opportunity to become involved in discussions with Muslims.
2. It is also a valuable tool for people who want to understand themselves. After all, if we are made in God's image, we bear some of His characteristics. For one thing, if God is a relational being in His very essence, then relationships are going to be key to how we function in this life. We need to know how to love people without being controlled by them, how to serve people without serving their agendas, how to relate with people who are suffering, who are angry, who are disappointed. This relationship thing is the stuff of life and doing it well makes for a much better life experience than doing it poorly. We can learn a lot about relationships by studying the way in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit function in unity and love.
3. One of the most basic ways in which gaining even a limited understanding of who God is helps us is that it shows us in a new way how awesome and wise and great He is. The more we study His nature, the more we realize how limited our understanding is. We are given enough to go on, enough to build a relationship with God, but it's also just enough to keep us humble, to remind us that we actually don't know that much and that it is God who is truly great.

Next week we will see some other ways in which Jesus shows us His nature in relationship to us.