



If the idea of God as both Three and One seems far-fetched and confusing, look in the mirror someday. There is (a) the interior life known only to yourself and those you choose to communicate it to (the Father). There is (b) the visible face which in some measure reflects that inner life (the Son). And there is (c) the invisible power you have in order to communicate that interior life in such a way that others do not merely know about it, but know it in the sense of its becoming part of who they are (the Holy Spirit). Yet what you are looking at in the mirror is clearly and invisibly the one and only you.



The Trinity is a complicated but truly amazing gift

***A Special Trinity Shofar* John 17:21**

Holy, Holy, Holy. If anyone was to utter those words, most Christian church goers would be able to continue the doxology. It has been a part of the Christian tradition from the earliest days of the Church. It comes from the Nicene Creed (325 AD) with the popular hymn ending *God in three persons, blessed Trinity!* Beautiful and much loved but what about the theology? Many a novice preacher has stumbled attempting to explain complicated theology to a congregation of lay people. Seminarians could also share stories of scratching their heads as uninspiring lecturers tried to put two thousand years of theological reflections on a mystery into a series of lectures.

Both students and congregations probably come away with the same confused reflections: What do we mean when we say God is one God in three “persons”? Does that mean three different personalities? How do these persons relate to each other? And how do we square this with the biblical affirmation from **Deuteronomy 6:4** that “*the Lord our God, the Lord is one*”? In all that complicated theology, is there any way in which the theology of Trinity can be personal? Can the Trinity be a central part of our daily spiritual living?

The Bible says some strange things about the life of the Trinity. For instance, the Father dwells in the Son, while the Son dwells in the Father. The Father is home to the Son, while the Son is home of the Father. As fourth-century theologian Hilary of Poitiers put it, Father and Son envelop one another and are simultaneously enveloped by one another. Simple.

A word worth learning – *perichoresis* - “mutual indwelling”

Since the early centuries of the church, Christian theologians have used complicated in talking about the Trinity - the word *perichoresis* for example. The term—means “mutual indwelling”—and has been used almost exclusively to describe the relationship between the divine persons in the Trinity and as well, the intertwining of the two natures in the one person of Jesus Christ.

In preparation for the feast of the Trinity, I have come to appreciate that word even though it is not used in the New Testament. The idea though is found in the Gospel of John. When Jesus talks about mutual indwelling, he is highlighting the similarities—rather than the dissimilarities—between the relationship of the Father and the Son, the church’s relationship

with him and the Father, and Christians' relations with one another. All of that is caught up in that word. Surprisingly, this term *perichoresis* can help us understand not only the God we worship, but also who we are and what we experience as Christians on a day-to-day basis.

Our In/In and In Relationships

In a most beautiful prayer from the Last Supper, Jesus asks the Father that all his disciples “*may be one . . . just as you are **in me** and I am **in you**. May they also be **in us***” (John 17:21). The Son is “**in**” the Father. At the same time, the Father is “**in**” the Son. And Jesus prays that the unity of the disciples would be *just the same as* the unity of the Father and Son. Christians form an earthly mirror image of the fellowship existing in the Trinity. Jesus prays that the disciples will be brought into the “*being-in-one another*” fellowship of the Father and Son. Our unity, with the Father and Son, and sharers in the Apostolic Tradition, is also an “in/in” relationship.

On one hand,

- the disciples are **in** the Father and Son.
- On the other, Jesus is **in** the disciples,
- and the Father is **in** Jesus.
- Disciples of Jesus are brought **into** the fellowship of the Father and Son **in** the Spirit, and
- by being brought into that divine communion they are brought into mutual indwelling with one another.

This is all great news! While Christ is home for believers, believers are equally a dwelling place for Christ. “*I have been crucified with Christ,*” Paul says, and “*Christ lives in me*” (Gal. 2:20). The mystery that Paul preaches is “*Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (Col. 1:27). Elsewhere, Paul says that the Spirit, not Christ, dwells in us (2 Cor. 1:22; Rom. 5:5). This forms the background for Paul’s claims that believers are “*temples,*” dwellings places, of God in the Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). There is an interconnectedness across the whole of creation.

Believers are **in** Christ. Christ is **in** them. The Spirit is **in** them, and they are **in** the Spirit. Believers **dwelt in** and are **in-dwelt**. They are caught up in the Spirit who dwells in them even while they are enveloped by the Spirit in whom they have all blessing. Of course, humans do not become God. The relation of the disciples to the Father and the Son is not identical to the relation of the Father and the Son. But, again, Jesus stresses similarities, which I think give us reason to use indwelling (*perichoretic*) to describe these relations. It is just the way God works.

God’s Self-Communication

Our difficulties with the theology of the trinity come not from the theology itself, but with our understanding of creation, how we use human language to talk about God, and what it means for God to reveal himself to us. Human language is a primitive tool for divine mysteries.

Many of Scripture’s descriptions of God use created realities to speak of God: God is Rock (Ps. 18:2), Light (1 John 1:5), Sun (Ps. 84:11), Shield (Prov. 30:5). And his relation to humanity is described in terms of human relations: he is King (Ps. 47:7), Father (Isa. 63:16), Lord (Deut. 6:4), Husband (Isa. 54:5). He loves, cries, gets angry and speaks.

- No one really believes that God is a literal rock.
- No one who says “God is light” is suggests that the Almighty has a constant velocity of 186,000 miles per second.
- No one attributes every aspect of human fatherhood to God the Father.

Christian teaching recognizes that these are figural expressions, similes and metaphors. And when we apply words like *exist* to God, we have to reckon that he exists in a way different to the way we do. God exists as Creator and source of existence, while human existence is created and dependent.

While the Bible was written at a very different time, its writers have no problem in using analogies from creation. Of course, the Bible describes God in created terms because the Bible was written by, to and for creatures. But they were not limited to language they make up on their own. Rather, Scripture claims that many of these terms are God’s own self-descriptions (**Gen. 15:1**). They believed that human language can speak of, name, and describe God accurately. This is because God himself revealed himself to them. They used God-breathed words.

We cannot get around the Trinity as mystery

The biblical writers may well have been theologically naïve from our perspective and perhaps they were not fully able to comprehend God’s transcendence. They used the language and theology of their own times not worrying whether that language might be adequate for later more philosophically refined cultures. And that language is powerful.

- The prophet Isaiah writes of trembling in awe before God’s majesty but also describes him as a Lord who sits on a throne wearing a very long robe (**Isa. 6:1**).
 - It is an amazing piece of literature. He manages to write transcendence and figurative descriptions side-by-side. Both – the transcendence and the humble robe together seem significant to Isaiah.
- In **Ezekiel 1** the prophet has a similar vision but, in his, God rides off in a heavenly chariot.

The Bible is unselfconscious about the theological language it uses because its writers assume that creation and human nature, and therefore human language is all created by God. They are all a part of the divine plan for creation. All creation (this is worth stressing) is communication from God about God (Ps. 19). God made rocks and intended them to display aspects of his glory. God created humans in his image to be suitable icons of his character.

God directly formed human families and organisations, governments, nations so that “fathers” and “kings” depict in various ways the way God relates to his creation, to human beings, and to his people. He designed the world so that fathers and sons would point toward the eternal Father who loves his eternal Son. God created everything to communicate of himself.

All created things were intended to communicate something about God. Because God is the Creator who knows and governs his universe, there can be nothing wrong or inappropriate in calling God Rock, Sun, and Father, or in suggesting that there are analogies between human father-son relations and the eternal relation of the Father and Son.

This is basic biblical spirituality and theology. There is nothing wrong in suggesting that divine relations are mirrored in human relations, that marriage is a living icon or image of the covenant between Christ and his church.

God's Life Displayed

What the Bible shows us is men and women of faith, in the Spirit, can find fingerprints of the Trinity throughout God's creation. This is what "indwelling" means. With our eyes open, we see it everywhere, the imprint of God's life in his creation—which is what we'd expect if he is the Creator who has created all things as an expression of his own eternal glory.

The traditional doctrine of the Trinity used by the Church for over 1,800 years, with its use of the language of "indwelling," illuminates and so transforms the world we live in, helping us to discover clues to the Trinitarian life within creation. Within human history and activities. Not only that, an indwelling imagination of the world and human existence works itself out in Christian ethics. In the way we live with others around us. This is a powerful way to reimagine the way we live with others and understand ourselves as a part of the ongoing activities of the Trinity in our lives. How does that work?

Others "indwell" in our lives in a whole range of ways. Some close and others incidental. Once we are aware of this we ought to open our lives hospitably to them. But we also "indwell" the lives of others. We should then see others not as obstacles to what we strive to do in the world but as potential homes in which we can dwell together. A world of mutual indwelling implies an ethic of hospitality, welcome, invitation, companionship, centred on a common table. It is a world alive with the fruits of the Spirit... *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,* ²³ *gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things...* (**Galatians 6**). This wonderful world created by our Triune God is a world organized by and for love.

And when we get to this point in our reflections, we are brought back to the prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper. Jesus calls us to be one with each other, even as the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father, to live as humans in a way that displays the very life of God.

Concluding reflections:

Celebrating the Trinity provides us with an opportunity to