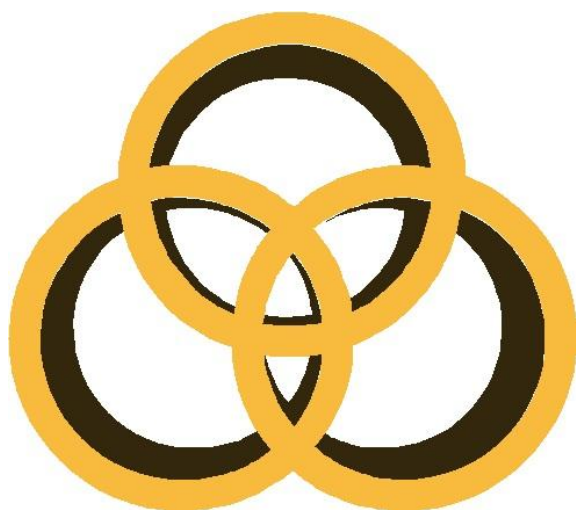# THE DIVINE NATURE

Very early in his ministry, Jesus came into conflict with the Jewish religious leaders because, as they said, he was "making himself equal with God" (Jn. 5:18; 10:33). Indeed, the Fourth Gospel directly calls Jesus "God the only Son" (1:18, NIV). While New Testament passages which directly apply the designation "God" to Jesus are not numerous, they certainly do appear (Jn. 1:1; 20:18; Ro. 9:5; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15; 2:9; Tit. 2:13; He. 1:8; 2 Pe. 1:1). At the same time, the uniform assertion of the Old Testament is that there is only one God (Dt. 6:4; Is. 44:6; 45:5-6). The New Testament agrees in the basic Christian confession, "Yet for us there is but one God, the Father … and one Lord, Jesus Christ" (1 Co. 8:6).

So, then, what is the Christian understanding of the Divine Nature? How can there be God the Father, and God the Son, and at the same time be only one God? And furthermore, how does the Holy Spirit fit into the Divine Nature? These questions concern one of the most basic affirmations of the Christian faith, that is, the affirmation that the Divine Nature has a three-in-one character. Such a statement is admittedly paradoxical, but it is the only way to do justice to the various biblical statements about God.

John begins the Fourth Gospel with the paradoxical assertion that the Word "was with God" and yet "was God" (Jn. 1:1-2). It is apparent that John understood the Son to be pre-existent with the Father in the beginning (1 Jn. 1:1-3), and his term "the Word" is his way of referring to Jesus, God's Son. In making such a statement, he indicates that there is both unity and distinction between God, who is the Father, and the Word, who is Jesus our Lord. The Word who was with God and who was God became flesh, an act which Christians call the incarnation. Paul says much the same thing, though in different words, when he explains that though Jesus was in very nature God, he surrendered his rank and appeared in a body (Phil. 2:6-7; 1 Ti. 3:16). In still another biblical document, the writer says that the Son is the exact representation of God's being (He. 1:3).

The uniqueness of Jesus as the Son of God is most clearly expressed in the Fourth Gospel. The Son of God is from heaven (3:13), and it is to there that he returns (6:62; 16:28). He was loved by the Father before the creation of the world (17:24), and he alone knows the Father fully (1:18; 6:46). Yet in spite of this apparent distinction between the Father and the Son, there is also an interpenetration which prevents a separation of the Father and the Son into independent Beings (10:30; 14:8-11; 17:11, 21-23). The unity between the Father and the Son is clear in that there is undivided honor (5:23; 13:31-32), a singularity of purpose (5:19), and a unity of essence (12:44-45).

Turning to the Holy Spirit, one of the first things to observe is that several important references to the Holy Spirit are personalized in John's Gospel. The Holy Spirit is *Someone*, not *Something*—a divine "He" not a divine "It" (14:26; 16:13-14). This fact is more apparent in the Greek text than in English, due to grammatical considerations, but the fact remains that the Holy Spirit is not just an impersonal force. Furthermore, to receive the Holy Spirit is to receive Christ himself (14:16-20). Even though the Holy Spirit is said to proceed from the Father, yet he is sent by the Son (14:26; 15:26; 16:7). Once more, these sorts of statements, when taken as a whole, imply interpenetration as well as distinction. The Holy Spirit is described as interacting with God (Ro. 8:26-27; 1 Co. 2:11), yet at the same time He is God (Ro. 8:11). The Holy Spirit can also be called the Spirit of Jesus (Ac. 16:7; Ro. 8:9; 2 Co. 3:17; Ga. 4:6; Phil. 1:19; 1 Pe. 1:11). Yet there are not three divine Spirits but one (Ep. 2:18; 4:4)!

The evidence of the New Testament, then, is that in a paradoxical way there is one Divine Nature within which are three clear personal distinctions between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As such, it is appropriate to speak of the triadic conception of God in the New Testament. There is no perfect analogy

within the physical world, though the imperfect analogies of water, ice, and vapor, or sun, sunlight, and heat may provide partial analogies. The New Testament does not seek to explain this triadic paradox, but merely asserts it. In passages such as the baptism of Jesus (Mk. 1:10-11), the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19), the salutations in pastoral letters (1 Pe. 1:2), and closing benedictions (2 Co. 13:14), this triadic way of speaking about God is employed. Even internally within his letters, Paul frequently arranges his statements around the triad of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Ro. 15:30; 1 Co. 12:4-6; Ga. 4:6; Ep. 2:18; 4:4-6; Tit. 3:4-6).

Thus, the triadic pattern of the Divine Nature is central to the faith of the New Testament. The faith of the early Christians was that there was one God who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is entirely proper to refer to the Father as God, the Son as God, and the Holy Spirit as God—even though there are not three Gods but one!

This same triadic conception of the one eternal God continues in the literature of the Christians who followed in the post-apostolic period. Clement of Rome, for instance, writes: "Do we not have one God and one Christ, and one Spirit of grace poured out upon us?" (about the 90s A.D.). The triadic baptismal formula became the most popular one and is reflected in the *Didache*: "Baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (about the 120s A.D.). Justin Martyr speaks of Christian baptism in a similar way: "For in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water" (about the 140s A.D.). Polycarp, the disciple of the apostle John, composed a praise to God which reads: "I praise thee … through Jesus Christ, your Beloved Son, through whom be to you with him and the Holy Spirit glory" (about the 150s A.D.). By about 180 A.D., the theological term *Triados*, or Trinity, was being used, and while this term is not found in the Bible, the triadic concept of God surely is. The term Trinity has survived through the centuries as the one most generally accepted for describing the three-in-oneness of God.

Eventually, the term *Persona*, or Persons, came to be used to describe the distinctions within the undivided Being of God, though it should be pointed out that the term was not intended to mean that God was three individuals on the order of three human persons. Rather, the term was meant to describe the three internal self-distinctions within the Being of the one undivided God. Finally, the statements of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed became the standard confessions of faith in the three-in-one God: "I believe in God the Father Almighty … and in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord … and in the Holy Spirit."

The church through the ages has exalted and worshiped God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doxology of Patrick, the 5th century missionary to Ireland, beautifully expresses this faith:

"I bind unto myself today,
The strong name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One, And One in Three,
Of Whom all nature hath creation,
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word.
Praise to the Lord of my salvation:
Salvation is of Christ the Lord!"

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