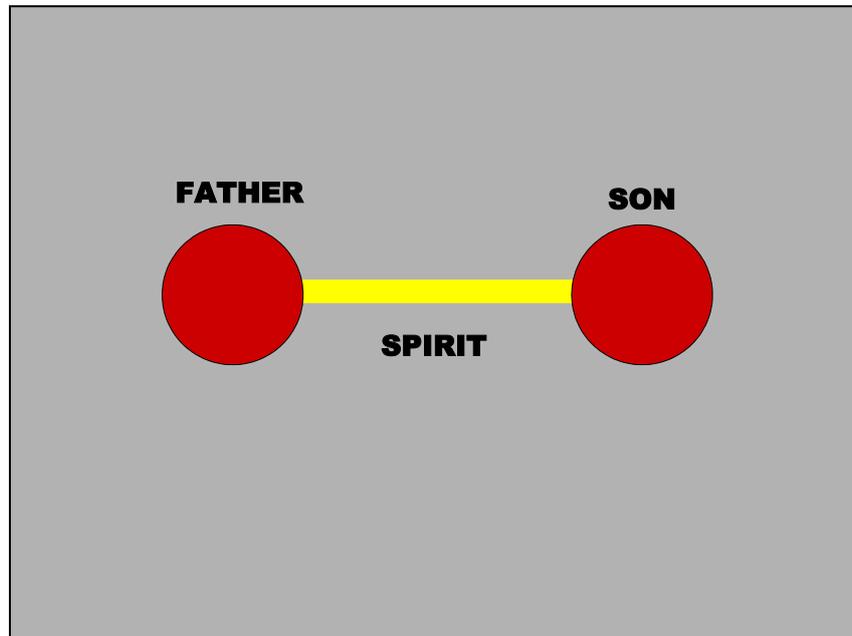


# God is a Community

## Part 1: God



### **The Christian Concept of God**

Along with Judaism and Islam, Christianity is one of the great monotheistic world religions. These religions all believe that there is only one divine reality (god) and that that divine reality is personal. What distinguishes Christianity from the other two (and therefore ultimately from all other religion) is its understanding that the single divinity has a Trinitarian structure. But what does that mean?

One of the ways to begin understanding the concept of God is to list all the attributes of God. We might begin with the many Biblical images of God such as father, shepherd, light, love, spirit and so on, or we might list the more abstract concepts attributed to God's nature (both within the Bible and without), namely that God is changeless, wise, almighty, infinite, eternal, etc.. As we gaze down such a list of divine attributes, we would find many words that stress God's total "otherness" or transcendence. God is limitless and infinite and in that sense different from any other known reality. Other attributes on the list emphasise God's personal nature, God's ability to relate in loving kindness as a father, lover, shepherd, etc., hence to be known personally in relationship by God's people. Unfortunately these two strands of thought about God (God's transcendence and God's ability to relate personally) have too often been seen as separate or even contradictory.

Classical theology tended to focus exclusively on the more abstract philosophical attributes of God, leading to a rather dry and somewhat irrelevant picture of God in which God remained distant and incomprehensible. By contrast, if we only focus on the relational images of God without taking God's transcendence seriously, we can end up with a very sentimental picture of God.

So how do we hold these two strands of thought together?

## **What Makes God God?**

We can approach this problem by considering which of all God's attributes is the most basic? In other words, which one can be regarded as the source or basis for all the other attributes of God? Which is the attribute that makes God God?

The answer to this question that was favoured by most medieval theologians was an interesting one: namely God's aseity. 'Aseity' means God is the one reality that is not dependent on any other reality for its existence. It means that God, and only God, is the source of God's own existence – God does not need any other reality to exist. To use the classical phrase, God is the only "self-subsistent" being.

This is a very logical, philosophically rigorous answer to the question, because it can easily be shown that all God's other attributes flow from this one attribute: If God is self-subsistent, then God alone determines God's being. God is therefore totally free, unlimited; and if unlimited, then infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, etc. It is, however, a very abstract answer. It does not help us to understand any of the relational attributes of God – or even how any of them are possible.

## **God is Love**

There is however a much more Biblical idea about God that we cannot ignore when talking about what makes God God, and that is the idea that God is love. When John (1 John 4:8) says that "God is love" he is not simply saying that God loves us, he is bearing witness to the rich Biblical tradition that describes God's very essence as Love. At first glance this might seem like a strange answer: sure, God is "loving" and we experience God's love, but is "love" not something God *does*, rather than something God *is*? This is where the doctrine of the Trinity comes in!

For the doctrine of the Trinity is the belief within Christianity that the single Divine Being has an internal structure, and that that internal structure is a relationship of love – the Father loves the Son, the Son receives love and loves and obeys the Father in return, and the Holy Spirit is the Bond of Love between them<sup>1</sup>. In other words, we are not just saying that God is loving or lovable or that God does love, but that the complete relationship of love exists in (and as) God – God *is* love. To return to what we said earlier, what makes God God is then not simply that God is self-subsistent *Being*, but more accurately, that God is self-subsistent *Love* – God does not need any other reality to love or be loved, love in its entirety already exists within God.

What is more, if Love is the most basic "essence" of God, then all the other divine attributes need to be reinterpreted, not as abstract philosophical ideas but as aspects of love. Let's take a closer look at some of these aspects of love.

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<sup>1</sup> It might be difficult for some of us to think of a relationship *as* a being, rather than as something that exists *between* two or more beings. Perhaps a bit of physics can help us. Before Einstein, people only thought of matter consisting of tiny solid particles. Then the formula  $E=mc^2$  exploded onto the scene, and suddenly matter and energy were interchangeable so that today quantum physics conceives of reality not as tiny solid particles, but as tiny pockets (quanta) of energy and the complex network of relationships between those pockets of energy. In other words the relationships are no longer seen as simply the connections between elements of reality, but as elements of reality themselves. If creation reflects the creator, then maybe modern physics supports a Trinitarian view of God!

## **The Attributes of God**

### **1. God is Transcendent / Simple / Infinite**

*Classical formulation:* God's transcendence refers to the belief that God does not form part of the created order but is a reality that goes beyond anything that we could conceive. God's simplicity means that God is neither made up of any smaller parts, nor that God is one of many other gods. God's infinity refers to the limitlessness of God. In fact all three of these divine attributes are really just the aseity of God restated – the idea that God is not dependent on anything else for God's existence.

*As an aspect of Love:* As we have seen, the idea of the Trinity as the self-subsistent relationship of love that *is* God, is simply a way of understanding how God exists as pure love, not needing anything or anyone else outside Godself in order to either give or receive love.

### **2. God is Invisible / Spirit / Omnipresent**

*Classical formulation:* In a sense, this is just another way of looking at God's transcendence. Here we have to do with the question of how God is related to the created order. And the traditional understanding has been that although God does not need creation, creation needs God. God exists, invisible in the world, yet necessary for the world as the Spirit who holds together the whole of creation. "If God forgot about you for an instant you would cease to exist."

*As an aspect of Love:* To say that we are totally dependant on God, is not just an emotional or spiritual statement, but goes to the very core of creation's dependence on the creator. We will consider this idea again when we look in more detail at the creation.

### **3. God is Changeless / Immortal / Eternal**

*Classical formulation:* God's Immutability (changelessness) is the idea that God does not change. Everything else may change, but God stays the same undying (immortal) for ever (eternal). In classical theology this was one of the more abstract philosophical ideas about God, owing more to Greek philosophy than to the Bible. The logic went as follows: God is infinitely perfect. If God were to change, God would either change from perfection into something less than perfect or from something less than perfect into perfection. But God is always perfect, therefore God cannot change. While this makes good sense philosophically, there are a number of practical objections that can be raised against it. Firstly, the Bible speaks often about God changing, repenting and responding. Secondly, the Incarnation of God as the human being, Jesus of Nazareth, was not only in itself a change that God underwent, but as a human being, God continued to undergo changes all the time, not least of all in Jesus' death on the Cross. Thirdly, the Christian practice of (intercessory) prayer relies on the hope that God can and does change, otherwise it would be a futile exercise.

*As an aspect of Love:* It is worth pointing out that the Biblical idea of God's changelessness was never intended as a metaphysical statement (i.e. a statement about the nature of God's Being) but rather as an affirmation of God's constancy, God's faithfulness, the fact that God could be relied upon to save, the fact that God could not be diverted from God's purposes. God can be trusted. To say, furthermore, that God is infinitely perfect, does not have to

mean that God is statically perfect, i.e. that perfection can only mean one thing. Could we not rather say that God's infinity means that God is infinitely creative, that God can find an infinite number of ways to be perfect? Therefore we could say that God changes between infinite expressions of perfection. What remains unchanged and undiminished is God's existence as love. Practically speaking, to paraphrase Shakespeare, "How does God love thee? In uncountable ways!"

#### **4. God is Impassible (i.e. God cannot suffer)**

*Classical formulation:* Related to God's immutability, is the idea that God cannot suffer. The philosophical point being made here is that God cannot be acted upon – God cannot be affected by anything outside of God. The philosophical concern with the assertion of this attribute was again to safeguard the idea of God's transcendence and power. God cannot be pushed around by the forces of nature and human fickleness that cause us so much anguish. But again, if God cannot be acted upon then what is the point of prayer? And more importantly, if God cannot suffer, then what are we to make of the suffering of Jesus on the Cross?

*As an aspect of Love:* Again we must be careful not to be too abstract about this idea, for the issue at stake is God's faithfulness. God cannot be blown about by every fancy the way we can. But this does not mean that God is incapable of suffering in a very real sense. Indeed, the very act of loving opens God up to the possibility of suffering. God suffers so deeply because God loves so deeply. By loving freely and calling forth a free response of love, God creates the possibility for God's love to be freely rejected – and a rejection of love *is* suffering. Within the inner life of the Trinity such rejection and suffering has in fact not taken place, because God is perfect Love; yet in loving the creation (and humanity in particular) God does encounter the rejection of Love in the form of sin. By becoming human in Jesus Christ, God furthermore experiences the full extent of the consequences of sin, namely death – the final rejection of all that is loving and good. In Trinitarian terms the suffering of the Cross is experienced as follows: God the Son experiences the pain of death; God the Father experiences the loss of a Son; God the Holy Spirit experiences the pain of separation (the breaking of the Bond of Love through death).

#### **5. God is Omnipotent (All-powerful) / Almighty**

*Classical formulation:* There are no limits to what God can do. This has given rise to some silly speculative questions such as, "Can God create a rock so big that God cannot pick it up?" I say "silly" because it should be obvious that the one thing which God cannot do is to contradict Godself, and to say so is not to place any limitations on God, but rather to affirm something about the nature of logic. More serious though is the question of the relationship between God's omnipotence and human freedom. If God has the power to overrule our will, are we really free? And if we have the freedom to reject God's will, is God really all-powerful? Again the answer lies in God's inability to contradict Godself. If God has chosen to limit God's power for the sake of allowing free human choice, then God cannot "take back" that power. But then, to say that God is omnipotent is simply to assert the fact that the power was God's to give up in the first place. As you might imagine there is heated debate amongst

theologians as to just how much power, if any, God has in fact relinquished in favour of human freedom.

*As an aspect of Love:* Without getting into this debate, it is possible to say at least two things about God's power with absolute certainty. The first is that the original context of Israel's assertion that God is all-powerful, was their total confidence in God's ability to save. There is no power from which God cannot save us. The second is that we can have absolute confidence in the power of God's love to both save and transform us. There is no power that can separate us from the love of God, nor is there any limit to the transformation that God's love can bring about in our world.

## **6. God is Omniscient (All-knowing) / Wise / All-seeing**

*Classical formulation:* As Creator God knows every detail about every one of God's creatures. As Sustainer of the creation, God knows every action that takes place at every moment. As the utterly transcendent One, God knows Godself fully, while we only know God in part. So far, so good. But what about God's ability to know future events with absolute certainty? On the one hand, the Bible seems to be clear that God does know the future, hence God's ability to inspire prophecy. On the other hand, there again seems to be a contradiction here between this Divine attribute and human freedom. If God knows my future actions and choices with absolute certainty, then when they arrive are they truly free? The Bible itself seems capable of holding God's foreknowledge and human freedom in tension despite the logical dilemma.

*As an aspect of Love:* As an aspect of Love, the focus of God's omniscience falls on a very different type of knowing. Here we do not experience God's ability to see all as a threat: "Beware, God is watching you!" but rather as the ability of a Lover to "see" into the very heart of the beloved. The Hebrew term *yada* which refers to the intimate way in which a husband and wife "know" each other is applied here to describe the way in which God knows everything about the ones God loves – their hopes, fears, foibles and dreams.

## **Taking the Trinity Seriously**

Finally, I'd like us to give some thought to what it would mean for us to take the existence of God as Trinity seriously. I say this because while our creeds all affirm the doctrine, I believe most Christians today find it confusing and therefore treat God as a singular entity with little or no thought to what it means that God exists as a loving community. Here are some of the implications.

### **1. God takes the Incarnation of Jesus Seriously**

Well of course God does, but what I mean rather is the serious implications that Jesus' Incarnation has for the life of God. By being incarnate in space and time (in history), God has forever become part of our world. For all eternity there is a human being who is part of the inner life of the Trinity.

### **2. We share in God's own life**

God became part of our world so that we can become part of God's world. The flipside of God being eternally part of our world through Jesus is that we, as part of Jesus' world, now also have access through Jesus to God's own inner life. What this means practically and immediately is that the same Spirit of Love which binds Father and Son together in the Trinity is now also available to us both as the Bond of Love uniting us to our heavenly Father, and as the Bond of Love joining us together in community.

### **3. The Trinity and Salvation**

Salvation has often been understood individualistically – it's all about me being saved and reconciled to God. But when we realize that the God to whom we are reconciled is a community, and moreover that that community is now a Divine-human community in which Jesus is not the only human, then salvation takes on a whole new meaning. Firstly, it means that I am not saved alone, but along with the rest of the saved community. Secondly, it means that the experience of salvation is not limited to the experience of reconciliation with God, but also the experience of reconciliation with others. Thirdly, my participation in the building up of the Divine-human community is in turn also part of other people's experience of salvation. When we reach out to the poor, the oppressed, the lonely and treat them as our brothers and sisters, we are enabling them to experience not simply human love and caring but also what it means to share God's own community life – we are enabling them to experience salvation!

### **4. The Trinity and Prayer**

Most Christians pray to "God" and trust that the heavenly switchboard will put our prayers through to whichever person of the Trinity happens to be on duty. In other words we pray without being conscious that God is a Trinity. One way to become more conscious of the fact that God is a Trinity is to think carefully how we wish to address God in a certain situation. Are we approaching God as the Father who guides, protects and loves us? Are we speaking to the Saviour who knows our temptations and trials and can understand our pain? Are we calling upon the empowering Spirit of Love to move in and through us to bring healing to relationships and communities? Another way is to think about how we pray *with* the Trinity – in other words, to realize that when we pray our words become part of the ongoing conversation within the Godhead. The classical way of expressing this is to say that our prayers are made *to* the Father, *through* the Son, *in the power of* the Holy Spirit.