

David W. Lloyd: Who is God? A Trinitarian View

David W. Lloyd
Seekers Church
June 2, 1996

Who is God? A Trinitarian View

(School age children were present and gave many of the responses.)

What do you think of when you hear the word "God?"

Although many Greeks in Jesus' time believed in one God, many if not most Greeks that Jesus and the disciples encountered believed in not just one God, but many. What were some of the names of the Greek gods and goddesses?

To the Greeks, "God" could be Zeus or his wife Hera, Ares, the god of war, Hephaestus and his wife Aphrodite, Apollo, Athena, Poseidon, Pluto, and Demeter.

To the Roman soldiers in Jerusalem, there were also many gods and goddesses. What were the names of some of them?

To the Romans, "God" could be Jupiter or his wife Juno, Mars, the god of war, Vulcan and his wife Venus, Mercury, Minerva, Neptune, and Ceres .

Why were there so many?

That's right, each god or goddess represented something about the world that people knew. Some gods and goddesses were symbols of the sun, moon, stars, and planets. Others represented the seasons, or forces of nature like earthquakes. And others represented emotions, like love. The god's real self was concentrated in the name.

The name of god included all the authority, power, and holiness of the god. Knowing the god's name allowed a person to call upon that god for blessings or requests, or to give proper thanks, and possibly to manipulate the god by doing a ritual act, such as a dance or sacrifice.

For Jesus and his fellow Jews, there was only one God. Who was this god? God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When Moses saw the burning bush and asked the name of God, he was told, "I AM WHO I AM," which is a vague way of saying, "I'm not telling you." By Jesus' time, it was forbidden to pronounce God's name. When people wanted to say God's name, they said "The Holy One of Israel."

What was this God like to the Jews of Jesus' time?

They used words like "king" and "lord" and "ruler of all" and "judge" and "righteousness" and "rock" and shepherd."

In contrast to the gods of Egypt, Babylon, Canaan, Greece, and Rome, the Holy One of Israel acted on behalf of the whole people, not just an individual. God was the God of the Exodus from Egypt, the one who cared for the people of Israel and led them from slavery, and who continued to care for them even when they turned away and worshipped Egyptian gods, or Canaanite gods, or Babylonian gods, and who turned their

attention away from these other gods by allowing the people of Israel to become oppressed, and then rescuing them.

The God of Israel had creative force that acted in history. This force was likened to breath or to a wind, and was called the "spirit of the Lord." Sometimes people read the creation story in Genesis, our Old Testament lesson for today, and hear that "the spirit of the Lord moved upon the waters." Human and animal life was due to the acting of God's spirit. Isaiah saw the spirit of God as the "mouth" by which God spoke to the people.

So if we try to represent the relationship between the God of Israel and the spirit of God, and the Jews of Jesus' time, it would look something like this.

But Jesus talked about God differently. He had a special relationship with God that was so unique that people remembered what Jesus called God. Do you know the words in the Aramaic language? "Abba." If we want to be formal, we can translate that as "Father." But we get the sense from the New Testament that Jesus used the word "Abba" the way we would use the word "Dad." That is, it was a close relationship that was very personal to Jesus, so personal that he chose to be faithful to Israel's covenant with God through a life that was an example of sonship.

Jesus' understanding of that covenant led to his death. We know that he knew he was going to die, and that his death would be painful. He didn't want to die, and he prayed to "Dad" for strength, but even more, he prayed that his friends and disciples would have the same relationship with God that would allow them to call God "Dad." In a few moments we will perform a ritual that helps us claim that relationship. When we gather in the circle to eat the bread and drink from the cups and do this in Jesus' name, we are announcing that we are choosing to live in faith to God as sons and daughters, like

Jesus did, and we are choosing to live so faithfully that we can die painful deaths, if need be, for God's sake, the way Jesus did. And so, each time we repeat the acts of eating bread and drinking the juice in our circle, we can call God "Dad."

Something happened when Jesus died. He came back to life again! Now this wasn't so surprising to many of the people of that time. Lots of Jews believed that resurrection was possible. And of course, some of them had seen Jesus bring a number of people back to life. Now there were other preachers and healers during Jesus' time, and some of them had large followings and even disciples. We could say they led movements. But when these other preachers and healers died, their followers drifted away and their movements died. But Jesus' movement didn't die. And since the movement didn't die, in another sense Jesus was alive again in a different way. The more the disciples thought about it, the more they began to understand that the way Jesus chose to live and die was special, so special that it made them think of parts of scripture – what we call the Old Testament – that seemed to predict what had happened. And so the more they thought about it, the more they were sure that Jesus had actually come from God, and had now returned to God. So they used language that said Jesus was "exalted" and "glorified" and "ascended to God." Jesus had promised to send them something, a force or a spirit, to comfort them and strengthen them.

And the day that they knew in certainty that Jesus had made them strong enough to live that way was Pentecost, what we celebrated last Sunday. They felt the creative power of God coursing through them, and they seemed to come alive with passion. People could see a new spirit in them – the spirit of the Lord. And it gave them the strength and courage and the ability to communicate what they had experienced with Jesus so that others could experience it too. Now the disciples and the new believers could call claim a relationship with God that

enabled them to call God "Abba." They could do this because of Jesus' example and because of the spirit God sent.

And that's how the Church grew. If we look at a representation of what this meant, it looked something like this:

Here we have God and the spirit and here we have the people, but now we have Jesus with God. It wasn't settled whether Jesus was God, or was merely with God. For example, in Paul's letters to the churches, he never says that Jesus is God. He says that Jesus is the Messiah (in Greek, the "Christ") and is the Son of God and has ascended to the Father, but he doesn't really discuss Jesus as being the one and same thing as God.

For several hundred years the relationship of Jesus to God was unclear, but not really a problem: Jesus was divine and was with God. But by the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth century, Christians had had lots of conflicts with Roman rulers who believed in many gods. Those conflicts had led to the deaths of thousands of Christians. When Christians of those times ate bread and drank wine during their communion rituals, they knew that promising to live in faith like Jesus could actually result in their arrest and painful death just like Jesus. So it had become important to know what you actually believed.

Also, just like Christianity today, there were Christian communities all around the Mediterranean that were different from each other. Some of them claimed to be Christian but seemed to believe things and to act in ways that didn't seem to resemble the Christian faith of other communities. And so there was a lot of discussion about what God was like and what Jesus was like and what the Holy Spirit was like.

One of the issues was whether Jesus was merely with God or was really God. One group said that Jesus was fully human, and when he died he became with God. But God is eternal, and since Jesus had been created – there was a time before he was born –

Jesus couldn't have been God. The other side said that Jesus had existed from the beginning – as the Gospel of John begins, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...” Moreover, they had been saved by Jesus – they had experienced new life from his example, and if Jesus wasn't God, how could there be salvation. So Jesus was God, or as the Greek expressed it, of the same substance and being as God. Ultimately this second view was pronounced the correct – the orthodox – view at the Council at Nicea in 325 and at later Church Councils – it took 131 years before everyone finally agreed. We can see this in the Nicene Creed on page 880 in the hymnal. The key phrase is in the second paragraph, the seventh line: “of one Being with the Father.”

And so now the chart looks something like this.

Or, you can see it in the Mercedes Benz auto symbol. The Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, had the three pointed star as his personal symbol because “Haile” means “The power of” and “Selassie” means “trinity.” Many of the full figure photographs of him showed him holding his hands like this, as a three pointed star.

This is the doctrine of the Trinity. As the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy” says, “God in three persons, blessed trinity.” Or as the hymn “Come, Thou Almighty King” says, “To thee, great One in Three.” But how can there be three in one or one in three?

Let me show you two photographs. Do you recognize anyone?

(pass around photograph of my family reunion and my wife's family reunion)

Notice that in the first photo I am my parents' son, and my sisters' brother, and in the second photo I am the son-in-law of Sharon's parents and brother-in-law to Sharon's siblings. In both of them I am my daughters' father, and my wife's husband and uncle to my nephews and nieces. To my mother I am

her son. I am not her father or husband brother or son-in-law or uncle. To Sharon I am neither son nor son-in-law, nor father nor brother nor uncle. And so on. To me I am just me. I am all of these other relationships when I am with these other people, but I am always me.

I think the doctrine of the Trinity is like that. The Father is neither the son nor the Holy Spirit, and the Son is neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. But the Father is God and the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God.

This doctrine has held up pretty well for more than 1500 years. There are times when we experience the "Fatherness" of God. And there are times when we experience the "Sonness" of God. And there are times when we experience the "Holy Spiritness" of God. I encourage you during the offering to reflect on who you pray to – Father, Son, or Holy Spirit. Or, turn in the Hymnal to Hymn 61, "Come, Thou Almighty King" and reflect on which of the first three verses you feel closest to.

But now the question for us is whether the doctrine of the Trinity still helps us understand God. Some of us struggle with the concept of God as "Father," because it appears to exclude women. Such people either substitute one of the other attributes from the "Holy One of Israel" or use "Father/Mother." This is one area where our English language fails us. There are occasional references to God in the feminine in both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, but for the most part, they don't build the identity that supports the relationship that Jesus had with God. Peter called me this week to suggest a replacement for "Come, Thou Almighty King." It had a different set of words for the first verse: "Come, Thou Almighty God, help us Thy name to laud." The second and third verses didn't change, so the hymn now has two-thirds of the Trinity. Do we need to add "Mother" and change the triangle to a square? The

challenge is how we can say "Abba," like Jesus.

Others have trouble with the "Son." Here, too, some have difficulty with a gender for God. Others have trouble with the fully divine nature, fully human nature of Jesus, claiming that the "Son" is the Christ-spirit within all of us. But has there been a woman in history whose teachings and example have changed so many lives? And if Jesus was merely like us, fully human but not fully divine, how come no one else in 2000 years has come close to having the impact on people's lives? (Maybe Christology in more dimensions should be saved for another sermon.)

Others appear to have trouble with the "Holy Spirit." How frequently do we actually pray for the Holy Spirit to come upon us, to shower us with gifts of the Spirit? And how frequently do we name the Spirit at work in the world when we see it? Do we need it in the Trinity anymore?

I do not have the answers to these, but I think the Trinity poses question for us as Seekers. Especially now, as in a few moments a ritual of passing of bread and cups to each other with special words calls us to remember the mightiest act of God – the redemption of the world.