Who Is The God We Worship?



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This is an excerpt from a theological paper written for worship leaders by Dr. Don Williams and Brenton Brown. The passionate contention of the whole paper is that an understanding of God's identity, and the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, will focus, improve, demand and stir up our worship of Him. If you would like a copy of the paper in its entirety, please contact Vineyard Churches UK at 44 020 8336 1734.

The Biggest Mystery Of All God is greater than our minds or any formula we construct about Him. We cannot package Him. He exists in unapproachable light. He is scary and fascinating at the same time. He is magnificently vast, eternal and mysterious. Yet He allures us in His love. Some have said the parable of "The Prodigal Son" should be re-titled the parable of "The Running Father."

God is a person, and personality is self-revealing. And we only know Him as He discloses Himself to us. Our proper response is not to speculate about His nature, but to bow down in worship. Augustine defines Christianity as faith working toward understanding. He writes, "I believe in order to understand." The biggest mystery is not the Trinity, but that God chooses to reveal Himself to us at all!

Why Trinity? Central and unique to the Christian faith is the belief that the one God has disclosed Himself eternally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As a result, Christians are monotheists, but "complex" monotheists. There is plurality within the identity of the one God. The Word of God and the Spirit of God are a part of who God is. They also function in His creating and ruling the world.

Why do Christians believe this, especially when it contradicts reason (how can one be three?) and opens them up to the charge of a veiled polytheism: believing in three gods rather than one? The answer is that the earliest Christians were forced into this by the sheer weight of revelation and their accompanying experience of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We must remember that all of the earliest Christians were Jews.

What The Jews Believed About God The Jews defined themselves against the pagan world of polytheism as monotheists. The worship of only the one God was at the heart of their faith. They recited the Shema twice daily: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." And of course the first commandment was to have no other gods before Yahweh, the one God. As they exalted Yahweh as one, they renounced the many gods and goddesses of the surrounding world and engaged in bitter confrontation with them. Any good Jew was ready to pay in blood rather than worship the pagan deities.

However, the Old Testament also clearly reveals Yahweh to be more than the transcendent God. Within his identity there is the Spirit of God, the Word of God, the Wisdom of God and the Glory of God. He is the creator and at the same time the Spirit which hovers over the waters in creation. He is the creator and at the same time speaks creation into being through His Word and Wisdom. He is sovereign and at the same time rules through His Messiah/Son who bears the divine name and through the Son of Man who receives His Kingdom and is the object of worship. He fills heaven with Himself and at the same time, in the book of Kings, fills the temple with the Glory of His presence.

The Retelling Of The Story When we turn to the New Testament we find the astounding fact that this branch of Judaism – the original church - sees Jesus in the identity of God. In the prologue of John's gospel we are shown that He is the Word of God through whom creation came into being; He is the Word of God through whom revelation is given; and He is the Word of God who becomes incarnate as Jesus – fully human as well as divine, in order to save this fallen humanity. John calls him God, but not all of God: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." No wonder his Gospel ends with Thomas confessing to Jesus: "My Lord and my God!"

There is no doubt that the first generation of Christians worshiped Jesus within the framework of Jewish monotheism. That's why Paul expands the Shema to include both God and Christ: "...yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." Here, claiming that Jesus pre-existed creation, Paul puts Jesus into the most sacred Jewish confession but still distinguishes the Father and the Son from pagan polytheism. N. T. Wright notes, "From here on, we must say that if Trinitarian theology had not existed, it would be necessary to invent it."

Moreover, the Spirit of God, who is within the identity of the one God in the Old Testament, reappears in the New, prophesying the coming of the Messiah, impregnating Mary, filling Jesus in His Baptism, empowering Him for His Kingdom ministry and filling the Church (rather than the Temple) with His power, glory and presence at Pentecost.

So the New Testament contains the raw materials for the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, in the Great Commission, the Risen Lord commands his disciples to baptize in "the name (singular – the name expresses identity) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." And with this raw material, the church fathers shaped the doctrine that God is Tri-une in His very being. From all eternity He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

What Sort Of Salvation? But what does the doctrine of the Trinity mean for us today as Christians? The Bible is the great love story of God the Creator who is also King, intervening in His fallen creation to restore it to Himself. As King, He binds Himself to Israel in an eternal covenant, promising to bless her and the nations through her. "Blessing" is a salvation word. While God sends charismatic leaders to rescue his people (beginning with Moses), His ultimate promise is that He Himself will come and accomplish salvation. This He does in His Son. So it is crucial that the Son is part of the identity of the one God. If not, then it isn't God who comes and it isn't God who saves us.

The crucified Jesus, dying for the sins of the world, is not an innocent third party upon whom a wrathful God pours His judgment. The crucified Jesus is God Himself, in His Son, bearing away His own penalty for sin in Himself. Herein is God's love, pure and free. To place this on ourselves as human accomplishment is to pierce the gospel at its heart and turn God into something other than He is. We steal the glory from God and take it for ourselves. The old ruse of the Garden of Eden is back, "You shall be like God." But because of the Trinity, salvation is not our work. It's God's sheer grace.

An Empowering Spirit When the Spirit of God enters, it is God Himself who takes up His residence in us. The Spirit is part of the one God's identity, and God Himself lives in us, transforming us and empowering us and making us like his Son. Just as He filled the Jerusalem temple with His Glory, so He fills us with His Glory. Supporting evidence for the fact that the Spirit is part of God's identity is Jesus' promise to His followers of "another Counselor" when He departs physically from them (John 14:16). The Spirit can take His place and complete His work in them.

The Case For Community If the one God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit from all eternity, then to worship Him in spirit and in truth, we must worship Him in the fullness of His self-revelation. Since we become like what we worship, as we worship the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, our churches will be conformed to Him and experience the full life of the triune God in our midst. More and more, we will reflect His eternal community in our communal life.

Living in community is not optional. Because God is Trinity, He always lives in community and calls us into community with Himself and with each other. We do not accept Christ and then join the church. When we are joined to Christ, the Spirit joins us to the church. Our faith is personal but not individualistic. We live with and for each other. And through our worship, God draws us into community with Himself (represented by our "I" songs) and with each other (represented by our "We" songs). Paul makes the startling statement that we are to address each other with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs as we make music in our hearts to the Lord. Worship is relational and communal to the core.

The Meaning Of Worship Remember, worship leaders have a powerful role in moulding the faith as well as the experience of the church. They need both to honor and experience God's Trinitarian fullness more and more. For it is our joy and calling in the Vineyard to be faithful to the truth of God as he is self-revealed. Exclusive focus on the Creator will weaken the church; we need to worship and adore the Redeemer. But focus on the Creator and Redeemer to the exclusion of the Sanctifier will also weaken the church. It is the Spirit who brings New Birth, empowering, revival, gifting and community – conformity to Christ. Awed by His majesty, allured by His love and transformed by His Spirit, we will become the holy people God has called us to be. Sharing His character, we will share intimate fellowship together with Him as he repopulates this planet with images of Himself.