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The Mystery of the Trinity

QUESTION: I'm trying to comprehend the mystery of the Trinity. How do we comprehend God the Son and God the Spirit without demoting them to less than God the Father?

RESPONSE: The good news is that you don't have to figure it all out from scratch.

Historically, it took Christianity's very best minds 300 years and even then, "it's a mystery" was one of their major conclusions. *Mystery*, for them, referred to what we can't know by reason but have learned by revelation" (i.e. the Scriptures).

What we can do is start with some really basic confessions, which require faith in the revelation of Scripture and some critical analysis thereafter. We can't rationalize these mysteries with finite arguments. But here is a basic set of faith statements, known by revelation:

1. We worship one God.

We always start with the One. We don't have three gods. That's

tritheism. How many Gods? One. One nature. One essence. One substance. One being. One. And that divine essence is 100% love. There can be no inferiority in that Oneness. Indeed, it's more than the Oneness of unity, like you and I could enjoy. It is the Oneness of Invisible Union, where all the activities of the One God (Father, Son and Spirit) are without division.

2. That One God has revealed Godself as eternal, triune love.

This eternal love subsists of three co-eternal persons (not parts) in a community of other-centered, self-giving love. The One God is said to be triune and tri-personal. If God were a monad (one solitary person), he could not be love because he could only love himself, which isn't really love. God IS love because Father, Son and Spirit are self-giving, co-eternal, infinite love, forever sharing One divine nature.

It is extremely difficult for us to imagine One divine Being as also a Divine Community of Persons, but so the Scriptures and the Body of Christ (by the Spirit) have revealed. One God,

One Love, revealed as the indivisible Father, Son and Spirit, co-equal and co-eternal.

We attempt poor analogies of the Trinity by speaking of the complexity of human nature, which subsists of spirit, soul and body, or of mind, emotions and will. But even when these are at war within us and subordinate one to the other, we recognize we normally still live as one, indivisible human nature, however conflicted. Such analogies can help us conceive of oneness in diversity but to be truthful, they also usually just lead to new heresies.

3. Where did the Arian heresy arise?

That is, where did some Christians stumble into the subordination (or inferiority) of the Son or Spirit? Well, they wouldn't have so long as they remembered God is One nature and Christ is One person. But the moment they compromised or waffled on those revealed truths, they could stumble on two possible points.

a. They might think that the Father sending the Son or the Son sending the Spirit implies

subordination and inferiority. Similarly, they might think the Son's begottenness of the Father or the Spirit's procession from the Father implies inferiority.

But why should it? Even in our human relationships, if my wife sends me to the store for groceries and I consent to go, have I conceded inferiority? My submission to her wishes is based on mutual love among equals, not subservience as a lesser human. And even less so if she actually goes with me (as the Son does nothing apart from the Father). Sadly, not all men/husbands have understood this.

My wife and I also begat three sons, does this make my sons inferior human persons to me? And even less so as they are adults who have become my co-equal brothers in Christ. No, neither sending nor begetting need imply subordinationism.

And this was the point in the line from the Nicene Creed that says Christ is "*Light from Light, True God from True God.*"

The analogy is that sunlight proceeds from the light of the sun, but both are indivisible light. As our sun shines, the sun itself and the sunshine it sends share one essence: the light. Photons are photons.

This too is a limited analogy, but it at least highlights how Light = Light even as the sun sends sunshine. And what do you know? This is exactly what the book of Hebrews says:

"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). The being and the image are one. *"Anyone who*

has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

b. Alternatively, Arians (past and present) might also suppose the Son's human birth and his submission to the Father implies inferiority. This is slightly more difficult, because Jesus said, *"If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I"* (John 14:28).

As the early church puzzled over this, they remembered again that we must start with the principle of One. Father and Son are One. One God. One Divine Nature. And the Son IS the Image of the Father.

Jesus said, "*the Father was greater than I,*" not because he is less than fully God or a lesser god, but because Jesus was also a man. As a man, he recognized God as greater than man.

The Son is, first of all, one indivisible Person. That one Person is both fully God and fully human, *indivisible* and not to be thought of in parts.

If we accept that, we're fine. Then we can move forward: this One God-man shares one divine nature and identity with his Father, and yet Christ *also* related to his Father as a human, as humanity. He imaged God *to* humanity and vicariously submitted to God the Father *for* humanity. Creator and creation were united in the one Person, divine nature and human nature subsist in the one Person, AND [here's the

paradox] the human nature submits to the divine both in Christ and in Trinitarian relationship.

So, we believe that Jesus said, *"The Father was greater than I"* (John 14:28), not because Jesus is less than fully God or a lesser god, but because Jesus was also a man. As a man, he recognized God as greater than man.

A Mystery above our paygrade!

Like I said, it's a mystery above our paygrade, but Christ-followers came to believe this because all the alternatives either compromised Christ's humanity

or deity, making him less than fully human or less than fully divine. If the goal is to get our heads around it, we'll be frustrated because it truly is beyond us.

But if we make it a matter of faith and theological conviction, our guiding principle is the unity of the Trinity and the unity of the Person. The rest falls into place if you make the other truths subordinate to those two premises. And as faith statements, they really are premises. □

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