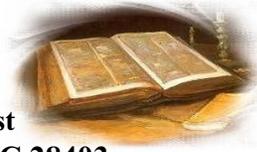


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God With A Capital "G" - Part Three ---- By Allan Turner

God Is His Attributes

For example, the Bible tells us that God is love (**I John 4:8,16**). It informs us that God's love is great (**Ephesians 2:4**), eternal (**Jeremiah 31:3; Ephesians 1:4,5**), infinite (**Ephesians 3:18,19**), and dependable (**Romans 8:35-39**). If the theme of the Bible is man's redemption, then the central word of the Bible is love. In fact, the Bible tells us that the motivation for the scheme of redemption is God's love for His creation. How much did God love His creation? He loved it so much that He was willing to give His only begotten Son so that it could be redeemed (**John 3:16; I John 4:9**). But, what kind of love would do such a thing? To understand this, we must realize that God's love for mankind is a distinctive kind of love called agape (pronounced ah-gah-pay). And what is agape? Primarily, agape is good will toward others. It is deep, tender, and warm concern for the happiness and well-being of another; it is charity toward those in need.

When the Bible says, "God loves us," it means that He really cares about us and always does what is best for us. God's love is different from other kinds of love in that it seeks to

give and not to get; it seeks to satisfy not some need of the lover, but rather the need of the one who is loved. This is what God is, i.e., this is His nature! Strip from God His love and we no longer have the God who has revealed Himself to His creatures. Strip from Him His love and what remains is something similar to the gods of the pagans, which are idols for their own destruction (**Hosea 8:4**).

Nevertheless, what the Bible does not say about the essence or nature of God is just as important as what it does say. For instance, although the Bible teaches that God is His attributes and characteristics, it does not teach that any particular attribute of God is God; i.e., the Bible is not saying, and has never said, that "Love is God." On the contrary, what the Bible teaches is that "God is love" (**I John 4:8,16**). Clearly, then, the Bible instructs us that God is His attributes and characteristics. Anyone who believes the Bible, believes this. Consequently, God is, has been, and always will be who and what He is at this exact moment.

God Is Triune

In the one state of being God (**Deuteronomy 6:4; Romans 3:30; I Corinthians 8:4**), there are three

distinctly different personalities: the Father, the Son or Word, and the Holy Spirit. Each one of these personalities shares fully the one essence, nature, or state of being God. Everything involved in being Deity is possessed by each of these personalities. In other words, the Bible teaches there is one, and only one, God; but it just as plainly teaches that the Father is God (**John 6:27; Galatians 1:1; Philippians 2:11**), the Son is God (**John 10:30; 20:28**), and the Holy Spirit is God (**Acts 5:3,4**). Even so, it must be understood that although the Bible says that God is three persons in one essence (**cf. Matthew 28:19; II Corinthians 13:14**), it does not teach "Tritheism" (i.e., three Gods). As Roy Lanier, Sr. wrote in his book, *The Timeless Trinity*: "We do not affirm that one God is three Gods; we affirm that there is but one infinite Spirit Being, but within that one Spirit essence there are three personal distinctions, each of which may be, and is, called God; each capable of loving and being loved by the others; each having a distinct, but not separate, part to play in the creation and salvation of man" (p. 46).

We think it prudent to caution that, when thinking of God, it is possible to use "person" or "personality" in a wrong sense. If we are not precise in our thinking, we might conclude that the three persons or personalities that are God are just like human persons or personalities, except more complex. This would be a serious mistake. Human personalities are totally different from each other, and

their relationships are often inharmonious and completely external (i.e., they do not partake of the same essence). On the other hand, the three personalities that are God partake of one essence and are always harmonious. In other words, we must not try to think of divine personality within the limits of human personality, as if God were but a more complex image of the human person. To do so would be idolatry, pure and simple (**cf. Romans 1:23**). Consequently, one must not press too far the concept of personhood when applied to God. What, then, are we saying when we speak of God in three persons?

God In Three Persons

As we have already pointed out, divine personality is the archetype of human personality; it is not the other way around. If, of course, this is true, then there must be some similarities between divine personality and human personality. In fact, there are! As Paul taught the Athenians, "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising" (**Acts 17:29**). In other words, we are not lifeless, impersonal matter, and neither is God. The Bible teaches that God is Spirit, and we, who are His offspring, have a spiritual nature. The Bible teaches that God is personal, and we, who are His offspring, partake of personhood. In his excellent book, *What The Bible Says About God The Creator*, Jack Cottrell points out four elements that

are characteristic of personhood: (1) rational consciousness, (2) self-consciousness, (3) self-determination, and (4) the capacity to have relationships with other persons (p. 237). These characteristics are, in fact, a very intricate part of the portrait God paints of Himself in the Bible, from beginning to end. Based on the Scripture alone, no one would ever doubt God's personhood.

Furthermore, if the self-existent, eternal, infinite, and immutable Spirit has three personalities, and this is what the Bible teaches, then the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit partake of personhood. As such, each enjoys rational consciousness, self-consciousness, self-determination, and relationships with other persons. This means that the Father is conscious of Himself as an individual person apart from the Son and the Holy Spirit and vice versa. It means that the Father, of His own free will, decided to send His Son into this world for the redemption of mankind. It means that the Son, of His own free will, responded positively to His Father's decision when He came to this earth and experienced death for fallen humanity. Finally, it means that the Holy Spirit, of His own volition, came to this earth to do the bidding of the Father and the Son. And although it must be understood that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were and are all involved in man's redemption, nevertheless, each person in the Godhead had work to do that was unique only to Him (cf. **I Peter 1:1,2**). When one reads the Bible,

these truths are clear. (By clear, we do not mean that we think it is easy for finite creatures to understand how this threeness is rooted in the divine essence. On the contrary, by clear, we simply mean that the doctrine of the triune nature of God is explicitly taught in the Bible.)

The Economic And Ontological Trinities

Theologians speak of the “economic Trinity” and the “ontological Trinity.” These are constructs that attempt to define God. The so-called economic Trinity refers to the “division of labor” that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and concerns itself principally with the different works done by the three persons of the Godhead in relation to the scheme of redemption. For example, the Bible depicts God the Father as foreknowing and choosing the plan whereby man could be redeemed (cf. **Romans 8:29**). In His role or work, the Father is never portrayed as being the One sent. On the contrary, the Father sends the Son and the Spirit (**John 5:37; 14:26; 20:21**). In turn, the Holy Spirit is involved in the work of sanctification (**I Peter 1:1,2**), and He is also the agent of inspiration (**John 16:13; II Peter 1:21**). In this connection, it is interesting to note that it is only blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and not against the Father or Son, that is unforgivable (**Matthew 12:31,32**). (Surely, one can see from this that the three persons of the Godhead are truly distinct.) Of course, it is the works of Jesus, the Son of God, which receive most of the

attention in the New Testament. This is because it is He who “became flesh, and dwelt among us” (**John 1:14**). It was only the Son who experienced death for us. It was only the Son who was resurrected from the dead, taken bodily into heaven, and seated at the Father's right hand. It is only the Son who is the High Priest and Mediator between God and man (**I Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:14**).

Therefore, the Bible teaches that, when it comes to the scheme of redemption, there are works done by the Father that are not done by the Son or the Spirit; there are works done by the Son that are not done by the Father or the Spirit; and there are works done by the Spirit that are not done by the Father or the Son. It is this Bible-based division of labor or economic Trinity that sheds some light on the so-called ontological Trinity (i.e., how the three persons of the Godhead are related within their own being, totally apart from any manifestations or works directed outside themselves). Discerning a threeness in the external manifestations and works of God is not too taxing, but when one turns his attention to the ontological Trinity, things begin to get a lot harder. For instance, are the appellations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit eternal distinctions within the Trinity or are they derived from the various works of God in the scheme of redemption? Particularly, from the standpoint of the Scriptures, is the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ authentic? Alexander Campbell, for example, taught that Jesus Christ pre-existed as the Divine Logos or Word of God (cf. John 1:1), but that His Sonship began with the incarnation. According to Campbell, the entire “relation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit began to be” during the days of Augustus Caesar (The Christian System, pp. 9,10). Personally, I am not certain that the eternal Sonship of Christ is Biblical, and, furthermore, I do not really see what difference it makes. There are several explicit references to the Deity of Christ in the Bible; consequently, His Deity or equality with God does not depend on an eternal Sonship relation.

How, then, do we explain the ontological Trinity? Personally, I do not think we can with any large degree of specificity. When we do try, we seem to fail, and fail miserably. Furthermore, many attempts to explain or depict the ontological Trinity (i.e., three in One) actually incline toward idolatry (cf. **Romans 1:22,23**). We must always remember that God is not a man; therefore, He cannot ultimately be explained or understood by trying to compare Him with finite creatures. And although it is absolutely impossible for three finite creatures to consist of the same essence, nevertheless, God, who is three Divine persons, and Who is identified in the economy of redemption as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is also, and at the same time, one self-existent, eternal, infinite, immutable Spirit Being. *** **Completed in Next Bulletin*****