

Three's a Family

The Mysterious Three-Part Oneness of God

We all want stability. No one wants roller-coaster moods, nerve-wracking anxiety, or irrational thoughts and perceptions. As it turns out, the number three might be a key to keeping us steady.

Consider these facts about the stabilizing power of three: If you put three points anywhere in space, but not in a straight line, exactly one plane goes through all three. Three-point geometric shapes, or triangles, are the most stable of all forms, and therefore are used in bridges, monuments and domes. Three-point stools are virtually impossible to tip. There are three primary colors, three notes determine a musical chord, and three chords determine a musical key. Dig down into structures of space, shape, and song, and you find it—three.

Three stabilizes relationships, too. Psychologists have noted a phenomenon called “triangulation”; when stressed in a two-person relationship, we will include another person in an attempt to balance it.¹ Arguing siblings run to mommy, feuding partners see a counselor, and estranged business partners hire a mediator. Beyond conflict situations, relational triads provide a context for thriving, unselfish love. Couples bear children, and—if all goes according to God’s plan—love flourishes as the relationship moves from dyad to triad. And, of course, God provides a stabilizing center for all relationships, for “a threefold cord is not quickly broken” Ecclesiastes 4:12.

The flourishing and stability of the universe rests upon the three-point “configuration” of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This means that the self-giving love first demonstrated between the members of the Godhead creates the structure of our souls, our relationships, and even reality itself. In the Creator God, “all things consist,” or “hold together” Colossians 1:17. As trite as it may sound, it’s true—love makes the world go ‘round.

How God can be three but one is a mystery. “Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?” Job 11:7. The implied answer is “No.” We cannot fully understand the nature of God. But the Bible reveals enough about His nature to help us understand His character. And as you’ll see, the three-in-one nature of God reveals His character in a profound and meaningful way.

Dyadic relationships (relationships of two) can become selfishly contractual. One partner gives as long as the other gives back. Introduce a third, as when a married couple brings a child into the world, and selfish love groans under the strain. In love between three, each individual must enjoy the love between the other two even though not a part of it. Possessiveness, jealousy, and envy cannot survive in a loving trio.

Healthy triads feature observatory joy—a positive regard for the bonds of others. Good mothers rejoice when fathers play with their children; loving fathers enjoy seeing mother nurturing her little one; parents’ love for each other predicts the happiness of the child.¹ We see a heavenly

¹ <https://www.gottman.com/blog/how-a-parents-affection-shapes-a-childs-happiness-for-life/#:~:text=Next%2C%20a%202013%20study%20from%20UCLA%20found%20that,of%20affection%20impacts%20children%20both%20mentally%20and%20physically.>

form of this observatory joy when, for example, the Spirit appears as a dove when the Father affirms the Sonship of Jesus at His baptism (See Matt. 3:16-17).

Although we don't find the word "Trinity" in the Bible, the Bible does *allude to* a Trinity in Old Testament, and *expose and explain* it in the New.

Alluding

The very first chapter of the Bible establishes the plurality of God. First of all, "God" is the Hebrew *Elohim*, which is plural. Then in Genesis 1:26 this Creator God refers to Himself as "Us." Of the Tower of Babel (See Gen. 11:1-9) God said, "Come, let *Us* go down and there confuse their language, that they might not understand one another's speech," (vs. 7).

Now, recall that God created man and woman in His image. Jesus later taught that in marriage, "the two shall be one flesh," Mark 10:8. Our unique capacity to be individual yet intimate, singular and yet plural, is part of what makes us uniquely like God.

Scholars point out what are called "triadic passages" in the Old Testament. In Numbers 6:24-26 God instructs Moses in the priestly blessing: "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace." Notice the passage uses "Lord" three times, suggesting three Persons in one. In Isaiah 6:1-8, the prophet stands in the presence of a Holy God. In verse eight, God self-refers as "Us." Notice the angels identify God by saying, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts," suggesting a triune God. When Isaiah saw this loving unity, it "ruined" him (vs. 5). The holy love of the heavenly Trio exposed his unholy selfishness.

Exposing and Explaining

Now let's move into the New Testament. At the baptism of Jesus, the Trinity makes a sort of debut, with all members definitively present (See Matt. 3:16-17). In Matthew 28:19, Jesus proclaims the Great Commission, saying that believers should be baptized "in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In Paul the Apostle's benediction to the Corinthians, he says, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen," 2 Corinthians 13:14. In all these examples, we see three separate roles, but one God.

It's not difficult to conceptualize how three can be one. In healthy human families, the family itself becomes a separate entity, forming its own unique characteristics. We might say of a certain family, "Oh, the Smiths. You know how they are!" because while each individual Smith remains distinct, the Smith family has a collective personality of its own. In a similar way, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit play distinct roles, yet form a unity called "God."

God

the

Son

This Godhead is a power-sharing phenomenon. Specifically, Jesus the Son shares authority with God the Father, and is Himself fully God. In Matthew 1:21, the gospel writer tells us that Jesus will "save His people from their sins," which none but God can do. Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, saying that Jesus was, "God with us" (See Matthew 1:23). John speaks of Jesus as Creator in John 1:1-3, plainly stating that He "was God."

In John 10:15, the tender Shepherd says, “I lay down my life for the sheep.” Unlike pagan substitution in which an angry deity vents pent-up rage on an innocent victim, Biblical substitution is a mutual decision and a joint event. Skip down to verse 30, where Jesus says, “I and the Father are one.” Jesus wasn’t God’s punching bag, He was God’s *partner* in the plan of salvation.

Now for a powerful story in the eighth chapter of John. Notice that Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees (vs. 13),² who have accused him of being demon possessed (vs. 48). Perhaps because searching souls were listening, Jesus laced His rebuttal with a promise that those who keep His Word will not die (vs. 51). The Pharisees became incensed, asking Jesus if He thought He was better than Abraham, who was dead. He said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad,” (vs. 56). Now follow the rest of the conversation:

“Then the Jews said to Him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?’

“Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM,’” (vs. 57&58).

Could Jesus speak any more plainly about Himself? He used the “I AM” appellation of God from Exodus 3:14. He claimed to be God! Not only does this assert that God is more than one person, but that Jesus Himself was divine. This sent the Pharisees over the edge! They attempted to stone Jesus to death, but He escaped (vs. 59).

Hebrews 1:1-8 describes Jesus as “much more” than the angels (called “spirits,” “ministers,” and “flames of fire,” vs. 7). In verse eight, God speaks to His Son saying, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.” Yes, God Himself called Jesus God.

It is true that Hebrews 1:6 calls Jesus “firstborn.” But notice that in Psalm 89:27, God says that He will make David his *firstborn*. Yet David was the *youngest* son of Jesse (See 1 Sam. 16:11). The term firstborn often indicates rank rather than birth order. The point of Hebrews 1:6 is Jesus’ position rather than His origin; He has no origin, because He is God, coeternally One with the Father and the Spirit.

God the Spirt

The quiet member of the Godhead, the One who comes to glorify Christ (See John 16:14), is no less a divine Person than the Father and the Son. Turn to a dramatic story in Acts 5:1-4. The early Church had begun to grow and flourish. In an act of status-seeking, a man named Ananias pretended to give a sacrificial offering. The Holy Spirit gave Peter a flash of divine discernment, calling Ananias’ bluff. He said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?” Notice that Peter speaks of the Holy Spirit as a divine Person who can be lied to.

² This was the legalistic sector of the Jewish leadership of that day, the other sector being the Sadducees, who were also riddled with corruption and love of power. However, there were good and honest people among them, including Sometimes the Bible uses the expression “the Jews” to refer to Jewish leadership.

Read John 14:15-18. When Jesus announced His parting, He said, “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever,” John 14:16. The word “Comforter” is the Greek *parakletos*, which can mean, “one who comes alongside of” or “one who speaks cheerfully to.” This is an intelligent, personable Being.

Imagine a contractor building a house for you. The job is to take six months. Suddenly the contractor develops a serious illness and announces that he can’t finish your house. But, he assures you, he will send another contractor. Imagine your shock when you visit the construction site the next day, and see that the contractor has left only a generator, a power source. How would you feel? You’d feel cheated. The building of a house requires intelligence in addition to power. So it is with the building of a church. In New Testament times, in building the foundational structure of the Christian faith, Jesus brought in an intelligent “contractor,” the Person of the Holy Spirit, to do the job.

Takeaway

“God is love.”

Typically we think of this statement as referring to God’s love for humanity. Yet this statement was true before God created anyone or anything. “God is love” refers, not only to the love flowing from God, but the love within God. The Father, Son, and Spirit—three full individual divine Persons—have loved each other since forever and will love each other for eternity.

That our heavenly family is three Persons living in unbroken, self-giving love for one another is good news. It stabilizes us! Regardless of our origins on earth, we can stand, put our heads up and our shoulders back, and say of our divine family of three: I came from a good home.

Quiz

1. Passages where God is mentioned three times are sometimes called _____ passages.
2. The Hebrew *Elohim* is _____, as in “In the beginning, Gods” . . .
3. The Bible reveals enough about God’s nature to reveal His _____.
4. A positive regard for the bonds of others might be called _____ joy.
5. Jesus said, “I AM that I _____.”
6. Ananias _____ to the Holy Spirit.
7. The Greek word for “the Comforter” is _____.
8. In building the foundational structure of the Christian Church, God sent, not just a power source, but a Being of _____.

Answer Key

(Cover these answers while you fill in the blanks.)

1. Triadic
2. Plural
3. Character
4. Observatory
5. AM
6. Lied
7. *Parakletos*
8. Intelligence

ⁱⁱ See, for instance, the theories of Murray Bowen at <http://www.thebowencenter.org/>.

