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Father, Son, and Spirit Is God: What Is the Point?

William C. Weinrich

In the words of the Nicene Creed, we confess as follows:

I believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God . . . God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made . . . who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man.

Here the fathers of Nicaea confessed the central and foundational significance of the biblical assertion that the Word became flesh. Two features of this Nicene confession must be highlighted. The first is the christological foundation of human redemption and salvation: “who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate . . . and was made man.” In these words the reality of human redemption is given a place and a form. The place and the form are the same: it is the man who is the Word incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. *Extra Christum non salus est* (outside of Christ there is no salvation). Christ is not merely the instrument through which or by which our redemption is effected. He is himself the reality and substance of our salvation. Salvation is not simply to be with Christ or to be close to him. Salvation is to be “in Christ” (ἐν Χριστῷ), to use a Pauline phrase. Christ may be our friend, but the fathers of the Nicene Council never used the category. “Friend” is not sufficient to indicate the central and eternal significance of Jesus. I want to emphasize this point. Christ is not merely the instrument of God’s will toward us, although he is also that. Christ is the instrument of God’s will to save because he is himself the incarnation of that will. We may say it also this way: God’s will to save is not only the cause of the sending of the Word into the flesh. God’s will to save is the very content of the sending of the Word into the flesh. God’s will to save is itself enfleshed, so that the life of the Christ, his words and his works, reveals and effects and is itself God’s will to save, that is, God’s will to make man new.

The second feature to be noted in the confession of Nicaea is that the man who is our salvation is not just any man. He is the man born of Mary, that human mother who is also confessed to be the “Mother of God,” Theotokos. She is this because the man born of her is confessed to be the

Word made flesh. In the one born of her, the one who from all eternity is and has been the Word of God is now flesh, flesh from her flesh. And this man has a name: Jesus. "I believe . . . in one Lord, Jesus Christ." The Gospels and the rest of the New Testament do not present an elaboration of the trinitarian mystery of God. What they do present is a narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of this man Jesus. The Word became flesh. Yes, that is so. But the one incarnate lived and spoke in such and such a manner; he died as the sacrifice for sin; and his resurrection revealed the new life that lay hidden within his death. At the end of it all, this man, who was the Christ, gave the Holy Spirit: "As the Father has sent me, so do I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:21-22). As Word, the Son is from all eternity the "place" of the Spirit. In the economy of the flesh, as man, the incarnate Word is the human place of the Holy Spirit. As the incarnate Word, Jesus, and none other than Jesus, is the human reality of the eternal Spirit. This means that the man Jesus, the humanity of the Christ, is the revelation and the reality for us of the eternal life-giving Spirit. It means also that Jesus is the true and perfect image of the eschatological existence of man, that is, that he is the image of what man is to become and will become when the dead are raised by the Spirit of him who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

All four Gospels begin with the story of the baptism of Jesus. This is not intended as mere historical report, *was eigentlich geschehen ist* (what really happened). The baptism of Jesus reveals that he who from all eternity is the possessor of the Spirit of the Father is become, as man, the human bearer of the Spirit. The Word incarnate is baptized, anointed with the Spirit, and so, as man, is the Christ. The man Jesus, and none other than the man Jesus, is the human place of the eternal Spirit, for he is the Word made flesh. As the one who is the Christ, Jesus is the one who baptizes others with the Spirit. Through this baptism of the Spirit, Christ does not give that which is separable from himself. He is the Spirit-bearer, and so Christ gives the Spirit through and in that gift which is himself. In Baptism Christ unites the baptized with himself and makes them to be of himself. They are "in Christ" and so in him are Christs, bearers of that Spirit which Christ himself possesses. Receiving the Spirit of the Christ in their baptism, those who are in Christ have received the foundation as well as the reality of their own present and future eschatological life. "Baptism does now save you," as the Scriptures say (1 Pet 3:21). The apostle Paul speaks of this participation in the Spirit in this way: "God sent his own Son in the likeness of the flesh of sin and because of sin, and so condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteousness of the Torah might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom

8:3-4). As the fourth-century treatise *On the Incarnation and against the Arians* put it: "For this reason the Word and Son of the Father, having been united with flesh, became flesh, a perfect man, in order that men, having been united with the Spirit, might become one Spirit. Therefore, he is God who is a flesh-bearer, and we are men who are Spirit-bearers."¹

Do you hear the elaboration of the Nicene Creed in the words of this treatise? The Nicene Creed says, "For us men and for our salvation"; the treatise says, "in order that man might become a Spirit-bearer." Salvation is not to arrive at some safe place, some gilded city on a hill, some Nordic Valhalla, nor some Islamic paradise with ten thousand virgins. Salvation is nothing other than the true participation of man in the life of God through the reception of that which God alone has to give: the gift of himself. To put this in another way: Salvation is to be united with God the Word in the humanity which for us he took as his own from the Virgin Mary. Jesus is the Savior of the world because he is the substance of salvation itself. As the eternal Son of the eternal Father in whom eternally the Spirit rested, Jesus is the revelation of God as the triune God. To believe in God is to believe in Jesus as God. However difficult it may seem, there is no God but Jesus. In his book *The Trinitarian Faith*, the Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance speaks of this centrality of Jesus as follows:

It is not too much to say that the relation of the Son to the Father revealed in Jesus Christ provided Nicene theology with its central focus and basis, for the incarnation of the Son opened the way to knowing God in himself. . . . In Jesus Christ the Son of God took our human nature upon himself and made it his own so completely that he came among us *as man*; and by what he was *as man*, he revealed to us what he was and is *as God*. That is to say, without giving up his divine nature, he united himself to us in our human nature so completely, that by living out his divine life within our human life as a real human life he revealed something of the innermost secret of his own divine life as the Son of the Father. But precisely in revealing to us his own nature as the Son, he revealed the nature of the Father, not just by word, teaching us what God is like, but by being what he was and is, the very Son of the Father incarnate in our human life."²

¹ Athanasius, *De incarnatione et contra Arianos* 8: καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ὁ Λόγος καὶ Υἱὸς τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐνωθεὶς σαρκὶ γέγονε σὰρξ, ἄνθρωπος τέλειος, ἵνα οἱ ἄνθρωποι ἐνωθέντες Πνεύματι, γένωνται ἐν Πνεύματι. Αὐτὸς οὖν ἐστὶ θεὸς σαρκοφόρος καὶ ἡμεῖς ἄνθρωποι πνευματοφόροι. *Patrologia cursus completus: Series graeca*, 162 vols., ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1857-1886), 26:996 [henceforth PG].

² Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 55.

There is, however, one further crucial elaboration to be made. The Nicene Creed does not stop with a statement of the Word's incarnation. The Creed immediately continues: "and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried. And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven." The Word was incarnate not because man was small, weak, and limited. In comparison to God, every creature is small, weak, and limited. We were created that way, and God called it "good." No, the Word was incarnate because man was a sinner and under the power of death and the devil. The life of the Christ was, therefore, not merely a model of good ethics, it was the revelation of that life free from sin and lived as the obedience of faith to the glory of God the Father. As the Son of the Father, Christ was the image of all sonship. As the Gospels depict it, the life of the Christ was the way of the cross. As the Spirit-bearer, as the Christ, Jesus goes obediently to the cross. For the salvation of mankind, in Jesus the life of the eternal Spirit is none other than the condescension of divine love. God is love, as the apostle witnesses (1 John 4:8). Thus, as the one who eternally possessed the Spirit, the Word incarnate is led by the Spirit to the cross, and there from the cross he hands over the Spirit (John 19:30).

It is at the cross that Jesus is supremely the Christ for us, for there he gives that life which he possesses, namely, the life according to the Spirit. In the forgiveness of sins is life and salvation. As the event of divine love, the cross is the life-giving act of the Christ, revealed in the fact of his resurrection. Thus, to be united with Christ in his death is to be resurrected with him and to receive that Spirit which is his by right and by nature. *To believe in God is to believe in the crucified Jesus.* In the humility of his death, Jesus reveals himself to be the true Son of the Father who from all eternity receives what he is and has from him who is the Father. He is the "only-begotten Son, God of God." The humble obedience of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, therefore, is not the resignation of the creature before the majesty of the divine will. This "not my will but thine be done" is the revelation of man partaking in the eternal subordination, if I might say that, of the Son to the Father. Unlike in the garden of man's primal sin, in *this* garden man partakes of the eternal sonship of the Son. It is Jesus who there speaks, the man who willingly places himself at the disposal of his heavenly Father. But he does so as the Son made flesh, and so makes known the eternal fact of the reality of God. The Son is the eternal image of the Father's will; the Son is the instantiation of that will, freely accepted and freely lived. Therefore, as the human enactment of divine love, the death of Jesus is the revelation of man as son of the Father. As Paul says: "We have not received the spirit of slavery, but the Spirit of the adoption

of sonship, by which Spirit we cry out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Rom 8:15). That is the language of Baptism, through which we are baptized into the death of Jesus and from the waters rise to the newness of life. "Our Father, who are in heaven." In the early church no one prayed that prayer unless baptized, for only the baptized had been made sons in him who is the true and eternal Son of the Father. The baptism of Jesus (water, Spirit, Father's voice: 'this is my Son') is the form and basis of all Baptism: "Unless one is begotten of water and the Spirit, one cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

In Christian discourse concerning God, Jesus matters. He matters, not tangentially or as something important among other things of importance. Jesus matters substantially and essentially. We must recognize that Christian discourse concerning God and Christian prayer to God is rooted in Christology and is expressed christologically. Christian discourse and Christian prayer is concrete and particular because the substance of all theology and the substance of all prayer to God is found in the Gospel narratives of the New Testament. For example, consider this collect for Easter Sunday: "Almighty God the Father, through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ you have overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us. Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of our Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by your life-giving Spirit."³ Note that the story of Jesus is the basis and the content of the life of faith lived by the life-giving Spirit. Note also that the collect is addressed to "Almighty God the Father." The power and majesty of the Father is not abstracted from the work of his only-begotten Son. The transcendence of the Father is not above and beyond the reality of Jesus. The transcendence of the Father, his power and his majesty, is revealed precisely in the work of the Son because the Son is the eternal habitation of the Father's majesty. As the evangelist says: "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand" (John 3:35). God the Father is almighty, and his might is revealed not in his sheer power or in his sheer otherness. The Father's might is revealed *as* the power to give that life which is of God himself. And in the reception of that life by faith we come to know that "Almighty God" whose reality is love. If you wish to define God, read the Gospel of Matthew, or the Gospel of Mark, or the Gospel of Luke, or the Gospel of John. You can say nothing of the God who is, that is, of the God who is trinitarian love, that is not already there in the canonical narratives of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The trinitarian

³ The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 49.

reflection of the church did not begin as a speculative attempt to systematize biblical data. The trinitarian dogma arose as an effort to articulate the reality of that God who reveals himself *as he is* in the death and resurrection of the man Jesus.

It is important and necessary that we emphasize the fundamental position of the man Jesus in Christian theology, faith, and life. Strangely enough, the fundamental position of Jesus in Christian revelation does not always seem to be recognized. Not too long ago the phrase "all theology is Christology," advocated by some of us at Concordia Theological Seminary, was heavily criticized as unhelpful and even errant. It was asserted by some that the phrase compromised the reality of both the Father and the Spirit as distinct and equal persons. Even Luther's famous hymnic words describing Jesus as the valiant one who fights for us, "Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is, Of sabaoth Lord, And there's none other God," sung with gusto in "A Mighty Fortress is Our God,"⁴ was not enough to bring light to some well-known, traditional, and highly honored LCMS personalities. On one occasion a leader of the LCMS asked me if it was not equally true to say that "all theology is Patrology."⁵ I knew immediately that the man did not understand the theological assumptions of the Nicene Creed. And so I responded to him that one could, to be sure, say "all theology is Patrology," but only if one wanted to be an Arian heretic. As Athanasius once wrote, one cannot even know the name "Father" apart from the Son, for the Father as the Father is revealed in the Son.⁶ Philip's statement put to Jesus is, as it were, the question for which the Nicene Creed is the response: "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied." Jesus' answer to Philip shows with brilliant clarity the christological focus of biblical trinitarian faith: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father?' Do you not believe that I am in the Father and

⁴ *Lutheran Worship*, hymn 298, stanza 2; The Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), hymn 262, stanza 2.

⁵ Here "Patrology" is used as a dogmatic category for teaching about "the Father," not, as it is oftentimes used, to denote historical study of "the early Church fathers."

⁶ For example, Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 1.34: "Therefore it is more pious and accurate to signify God from the Son and call him 'Father,' than to name him from his works only and call him 'unoriginate.'" *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952-1957), 4:326 [henceforth NPNF²]; PG 26:81. For further discussion, see William C. Weinrich, "Trinitarian Reality as Christian Truth: Reflections on Greek Patristic Thought," *CTQ* 67 (2003): 336-340.

the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14:8-11). The whole point of the Nicene struggle against Arian subordinationism was to assert that only in the reality and work of the incarnate Son is the Father known.⁷ The point was made already in the second century by Irenaeus: "For the manifestation of the Son is the knowledge of the Father."⁸ The hermeneutical insistence that "all theology is Christology" must be maintained if the New Testament identification of the God of Israel as including the man Jesus and as revealed by him is to be confessed.

More recently, a missiologist in the LCMS has suggested that the practice of addressing prayer to the name "Jesus" is unhelpful as Christian witness in a Muslim context. He claims "strong biblical authority" for using the term "Lord" rather than the name "Jesus" in Christian prayer. The use of "Lord," he argues, would not reinforce Muslim misconceptions that Christians worship a human being. As laudable as the motive may be, a more mistaken analysis and prescription can hardly be imagined. There is no biblical warrant for the use of the term "Lord" as an embarrassed substitute for the name "Jesus." Indeed, if the term "Lord" is used in order to *avoid* the name of Jesus, one has left the New Testament proclamation altogether and has compromised the biblical foundations for the Christian doctrine of God. The fact is we do worship a human being, namely, Jesus, Son of God and Son of Mary, Word incarnate. "I believe . . . in one Lord, Jesus Christ . . . true God of true God." One ought not assuage Muslim misconceptions by eviscerating the very content of the Nicene confession of the New Testament evangel.⁹

⁷ Hence the necessity of asserting the deity of the Son. If the Son were not "of the same essence" with the Father (ὁμοούσιος τῷ Πατρί), then the Father would not be known in the Son. See also Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 4.6.3: "For no one can know the Father, unless through the Word of God, that is, unless by the Son revealing [Him]"; also 4.6.4: "For the Lord taught us that no man is capable of knowing God, unless he be taught of God; that is, that God cannot be known without God"; also 4.6.5: "The Father therefore has revealed Himself to all, by making His Word visible to all; and, conversely, the Word has declared to all the Father and the Son, since He has become visible to all." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 1:468 [henceforth ANF].

⁸ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 4.6.3 (ANF 1:468).

⁹ Note this from Luther, *Sermon 48 on John*: "Outside this Man Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary and who suffered, you must not seek God or any salvation and help; for He is God Himself." Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), 22:494. See also The

As we have attempted to express in our comments above, the content of the term "God" or the content of the term "Lord" is unknown and unknowable if they remain defined only by abstract power and might. To know God only according to will is not to know God at all. It is to know God only by his power and might. To paraphrase how Irenaeus expressed it: We do not know God according to his power; we know him according to his goodness and mercy.¹⁰ Nor is God's power beyond and above God's mercy, as though, so to speak, there were the deity of omnipotence apart from or perhaps even higher than the deity of mercy. As illustration of the point, let us consider the confession of Arius concerning God:

We acknowledge one God, alone Ingenerate, alone Everlasting, alone Unbegotten, alone True, alone Immortal, alone Wise, alone Good, alone Sovereign, Judge, Governor, and Providence of all things, unalterable and unchangeable, just and good.

Nothing could express the transcendent unknowability of God more than this Arian confession. Note the strong and repeated insistence on God's unique otherness, that is, the insistence on God's *isolation* from all others—alone, alone, alone; *μόνος, μόνος, μόνος*. In another passage Arius describes God as the one who is *ἀναρχος μονώτατος*, he who is "without beginning and utterly alone" (note the superlative form). The unipersonalism of Arian monotheism did not allow God to be conceived as a being capable of self-communication. For the Arian, the movement of God toward any other was necessarily an act of will. Therefore, that other toward whom God moves must necessarily be a creature, not only distinct but also separate from God. Hence, for God "to beget" his Word or Son was for God "to create" his Word or Son. For the Arian, to know God according to his will and power, that is, to know God as "creator," was to worship God rightly and sufficiently. To this claim Athanasius responded that to speak of God as "creator" was not to speak of God as he is according to his nature. It is merely to speak of God as he is toward his works. "What likeness is there between Son and work, that [the Arians] should parallel a father's function with that of a maker . . . ? A work is external to the nature, but a son is the proper offspring of the [Father's]

Faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, "Religious Pluralism and Knowledge of the True God: Fraternal Reflection and Discussion," *CTQ* 66 (2002): 295–305.

¹⁰ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 4.20.1: "As regards his greatness, therefore, it is not possible to know God, for it is impossible that the Father can be measured; but as regards his love (for this it is which leads us to God by his Word), when we obey him, we do always learn that there is so great a God" (ANF 1:487).

essence."¹¹ The term "proper offspring" is important. It expresses the central and determinative claim of the Nicene Council that apart from the Son there is none who is or can be called God. God's works are external or extrinsic to the reality and nature of God. The Son, on the other hand, is internal or intrinsic to the being of God. The eternal existence of the Son is proper to the identity of God. If, however, the Son is internal to the reality of God, then the Son is proper to the fatherhood of God. The name "Father" is correlative to that of "Son" such that God can be confessed to be eternally the Father only as that divine person who exists in relation to another who is eternally his Son. The Father-Son relation is constitutive of the reality of God. There is strictly and ontologically nothing that can be called "God" that is other than or apart from that Father-Son relationship.

In the Gospel narratives, this eternal relation of Father and Son is revealed in the baptism of Jesus: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). Thus spoke the paternal voice from heaven as the Spirit descended upon the person of Jesus. The life of this man, anointed as the Christ, is the revelation of the inner life of God. Jesus is the Christ only as the human reality of the Spirit. The man Jesus, or, if you will, the humanity of the Christ, is the human form of the life of God. But the point that I wish to emphasize is this: The revelation of the Trinity at the baptism of Jesus is the revelation of that gift given in the baptism of the church. True deity gives, bestows, and communicates, and that which true deity has to give and to communicate is itself. As Paul says, "We have received the Spirit of the adoption of sonship, by which Spirit we cry out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Rom 8:15). Paul says this concerning Baptism. United and bound to Christ in his death and resurrection, we are ushered into the inner life of God himself. In the Spirit we address God as "Our Father," even as Jesus did in the revelation of that filial relation to his Father which is the content of his own deity.

G.K. Chesterton claimed that if one wishes to understand the essence of a religion, then one should attend to its images. What a person believes to be ultimately true will be given expression through those forms used to express what is true. Whatever exists in the world exists through forms. Therefore, a religion that expresses itself in the world will do so by those forms and images which reflect its truth. To illustrate the difference between Christianity and Buddhism, for example, Chesterton reflected upon the difference between the figure of the Buddha and that of the Christian saint. The Buddha is corpulent, at rest, with the sly smile of one

¹¹ Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 1.29 (NPNF²4:323).

who is holding back secrets. The figure of Christianity is that of the saint, gaunt, tired, and worn from struggle with the devil, fingers often folded in the plea for assistance and rescue.

To illustrate the central points we have attempted to make, perhaps it would be helpful to engage in a little Chestertonian phenomenology. Let us consider the topic "What is the point?" of the confession that God is triune by considering some comparative images. In emphasizing the man Jesus as the *locus* of the revelation of God and the foundation of the confession that God is Father, Son, and Spirit, we have necessarily emphasized that the one God is such in his nature that he gives, bestows, and communicates. God addresses us; he speaks to us not through the reality of his sheer deity or through commands of exalted might, but in the humanity of the Word, so that through the work of the cross the eternal sonship of the Word may be given to those who through water and the Spirit are made to be children of God.

Islamic piety and belief is expressed in the "witness," in the Shahada: "God is God," or "There is no god but Allah/God." I have given expression to what we might call the Christian "Shahada": "The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is God" or "There is no God but the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Let us consider first the so-called "Verse of the Throne" of Islam:

Allah, there is no God but he, the Living, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep seizes him. To him belongs what is in the heavens and in the earth. Who can intercede with him, except by his permission? He knows what lies before them and after them and they know nothing of his knowledge, save such as he wills. His throne encompasses the heavens and the earth and he never wearies of preserving them. He is sublime, the Exalted.¹²

In a way similar to that of Arius but in fact more strictly and absolutely than Arius, the reality of God is expressed by words of exalted abstraction. God's transcendent otherness is emphasized, and there is no knowledge of God himself. God gives knowledge only by his will, and that is given in the book of the Quran. God is sublime and exalted, but that sublimity is such that it not only distinguishes God from all others but separates him from all others. The exalted status of God is coordinated with the submissive obedience of the believer. As is well known, the term "Islam"

¹² Quoted in Robert Clarence Bush, ed., *The Religious World: Communities of Faith* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers; New York: Macmillan, 1982), 316.

comes from the Arabic verb which means "to submit." A Muslim is thus one who submits. The word "mosque," the term for Islam's house of prayer, means the place of submission, or the place where one submits. How does this way of belief express itself in the form of worship and in the form of prayer?

It is instructive to compare the posture of prayer assumed by the Muslim and by the Christian. Corresponding to the high majesty of Allah, the Muslim worshipper assumes the posture of submission, indeed, of abject submission. This posture is that of placing one's forehead upon the ground, an indication of total submission to the will of Allah, whatever that may be. This posture of prayer signals the distance between Allah and those who pray to him. Of course the distance is one not of space but of relation. At every point the Muslim worshipper assumes the posture of submission. As the "Verse of the Throne" puts it, "He is sublime, the Exalted." Of course, the Christian also knows the righteous God before whom he must ask for mercy. Petition on bended knee as confession of sins is offered is also essential to Christian piety. It is, however, as sinners repentant that Christians fall upon their knees. As sinners forgiven through the cleansing waters of Baptism and the words of absolution, Christians pray standing, a mark of their status as children of God addressing their heavenly Father. As we know from early Christian art, the primitive posture of Christian prayer was that of standing with arms outstretched in the form of the cross. The event of the cross had freed the sinner of guilt and shame and from the bondage of sin. One who in faith was united to Christ in his death was no longer a slave but a son. A classic text of this new status is John 8:32-36:

"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." [The Jews] answered him, "We are Abraham's descendents, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free?'" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

The story of the prodigal son is the well-known parable of this new status in the household of God. Note the climactic meeting (Luke 15:20-24):

When [the prodigal son] was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Bring out the best robe and put it on him,

and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." And they began to be merry.

One cannot imagine this restored son bowing before his father with forehead to the ground. In the midst of festive celebration, such a posture would simply be out of place and inappropriate. Within the context of the church's worship, this merriment is called the "Eucharist," or the "Lord's Supper," or simply "Communion." None of these names suggests submission to one exalted. Consider these words, for example: "Take, eat, this is my body given for you; take, drink, this is the new testament in my blood." The one who submits here, the servant who gives food and drink, is, as we confess, none other than the eternal Son of the eternal Father made flesh "for us men and for our salvation." This is the central and defining posture of prayer in the Christian communion: receiving that which the Lord has to give, the gift of himself in his body and blood.

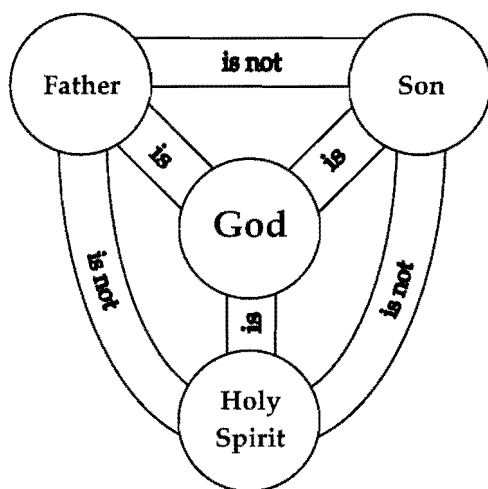


Figure 1.

Finally, let us consider two very different representations of the Christian "Shahada": "There is no God but the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." The first is a well-known symbol of the Trinity (see figure 1 above). When I was a small boy, this symbol was often displayed in liturgical covers over the altar or pulpit, and I have seen it displayed often in other churches as well. Of course, as a symbol it is wholly correct in its overt claims. One may think of it as a symbolic attempt to express the statements

of the Athanasian Creed. There are three distinct persons, each of whom is God. As doctrinal statement the symbol is fully accurate and orthodox. As symbol of the Trinity, however, the living God who is made known in the incarnate Son and in his innocent sufferings and death, this symbol is decidedly insufficient. First of all, the symbol suggests that there is something called "God" which is outside of the reality of the three persons. This is precisely what the Council of Nicaea wished to deny. When we say "God," we mean nothing other than "Father, Son, Holy Spirit." Of course, that is not the doctrinal intent of the symbol, but as a symbol it fails precisely at this point, and it is a significant failure. But perhaps the most important limitation of this symbol of the Trinity is its pure abstraction. God is depicted as a series of circles giving rise to a triangle. Not the reality of Person, but that of geometry dominates the symbolic vision. The symbol is incapable of suggesting that this God, precisely because he is the Trinity, is not only capable according to his nature of communicating himself and his divine life but has, in fact, done so in the incarnate servitude of his Son. The Nicene Creed says, "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven . . . and was made man." Abstract symbols of the Trinity cannot and do not represent the biblical fact that only in the life of the incarnate Christ is God known to be Father, Son, and Spirit of holiness. Moreover, abstract symbols of the Trinity cannot and do not indicate the biblical fact that in the economy of divine love the sinner's humanity is assumed by the divine Son in order that the humanity of the sinner may be redeemed and made whole. "Was made man," that is, made to be what we are to become in union with him who was made man. In devotional contemplation of the symbol of Figure 1, we might conclude that in faith we are to become a circle or a triangle!

How very different is the representation of the Holy Trinity given in Figure 2 (see p. 40). This painting by the Spanish artist José de Ribera (1591-1652) presents the Holy Trinity in all the splendor of its biblical and salvific reality.¹³ In contemplating this image of the Trinity one really can confess the Nicene Creed in all of its incarnational and cruciform dimensions. Several aspects of Ribera's painting deserve emphasis. First of all, in this painting the so-called immanent Trinity is depicted as the economic Trinity. That is, God as he is in himself is depicted as he is in his redemptive work. Second, the Father is depicted as the one who presents his Son to us as the sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin. It is as though the Father, who is looking straight ahead at the viewer, is saying: "Here is my Son, the crucified, who is the very reality of my fatherhood for you. In him,

¹³ Ribera's painting of the Holy Trinity is in the Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain.

and only in him, am I your Father in heaven." Note that with his left hand placed upon the head of Christ the Father expresses his love and blessing and with his right hand, as it were, points toward the sacrificial Son as the sign of his paternal blessing. Note also that the legs of the Son protrude outward toward the viewer as though to indicate that the Father communicates his fatherhood to us in the giving of the Son: "In this manner did God love the world, that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). Third, note the Holy Spirit, who is the bond of love between the Father and the Son and whose outstretched wings mirror the outstretched arms of the crucified. The life of God granted to us through the person of the Holy Spirit is the life of the crucified, that is, the life of love which is the reality of God.

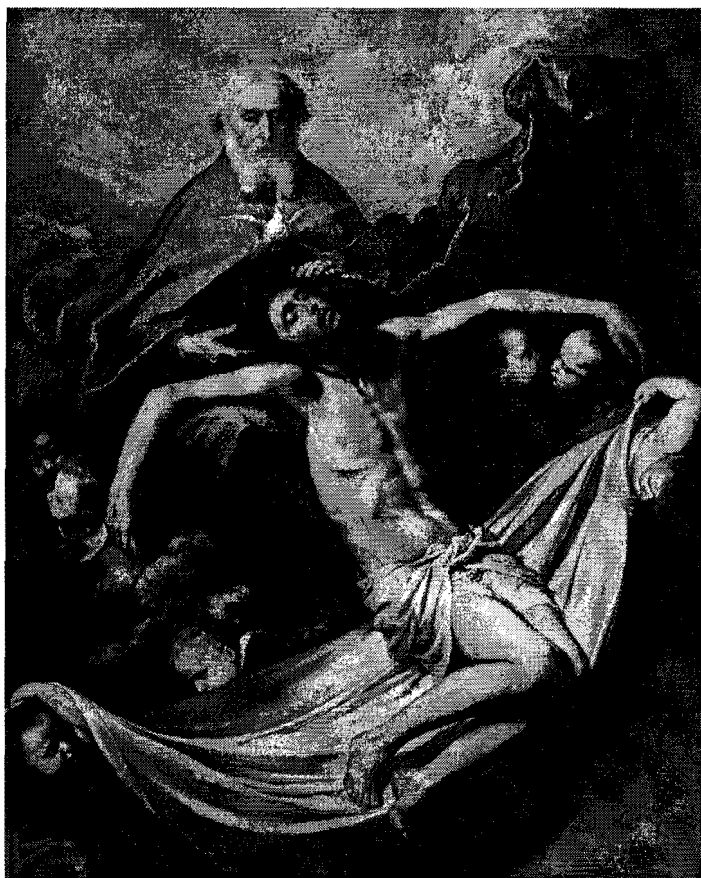


Figure 2. José de Ribera, *The Holy Trinity*, c. 1635–1636. Oil on canvas, 226 x 118 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

The Holy Trinity: What is the point? The point is this: In Christ we are no longer slaves with foreheads on the ground, but brought out and up from the dust of death, we are exalted as sons in the house of God the Father. The great ascension hymn of Christopher Wordsworth, "See the Conqueror Mount in Triumph," expresses this exaltation of man (the real theme of the Festival of the Ascension of our Lord):

See, the Conqueror mounts in triumph;
See the King in royal state,
Riding on the clouds, His chariot,
To His heav'nly palace gate!
Hark, the choirs of angel voices
Joyful alleluias sing,
And the portals high are lifted
To receive their heav'nly King.

Who is this that comes in glory
With the trump of jubilee?
Lord of battles, God of armies, —
He hath gained the victory.
He who on the cross did suffer,
He who from the grave arose,
He has vanquished sin and Satan;
He by death hath spoiled His foes.

While He lifts His hands in blessing,
He is parted from His friends;
While their eager eyes behold Him,
He upon the clouds ascends;
He who walked with God and pleased Him,
Preaching truth and doom to come,
He, our Enoch, is translated
To His everlasting home.

Now our heav'nly Aaron enters
With His blood within the veil;
Joshua now is come to Canaan,
And the kings before Him quail.
Now He plants the tribes of Israel
In their promised resting place;
Now our great Elijah offers
Double portion of His grace.

Thou hast raised our human nature
On the clouds to God's right hand;
There we sit in heavenly places,
There with Thee in glory stand.
Jesus reigns, adored by angels;
Man with God is on the throne.
Mighty Lord, in Thine ascension
We by faith behold our own.

Glory be to God the Father;
Glory be to God the Son,
Dying, risen, ascending for us,
Who the heavenly realm hath won.
Glory to the Holy Spirit!
To One God in Persons Three
Glory both in earth and heaven,
Glory, endless glory, be.¹⁴

¹⁴ *The Lutheran Hymnal*, hymn 218.