



How many "Persons" is God?

Greetings to You All,

As we remember Pentecost, the time when God sent the Holy Spirit in a powerful and dramatic way, it is good to consider what it really means when we talk about God in a Trinitarian sense - being Father, Son and Holy Spirit, yet only one God. The GCI website contains a wealth of information on this theme. Following is an example.

Many people have only a hazy idea of what the Bible teaches about the oneness of God. Most do not really think about it. Some imagine three separate Beings. Some picture one Being with three heads. Others think of one Being who changes from Father to Son to Holy Spirit whenever he wills. It is easy to make such mistakes.

Many people use the word Trinity as a definition of the biblical teaching about God. However, if asked, most would not be able to explain what the Bible actually teaches about how God is one. In other words, what many people envision when they speak of the Trinity is not really biblical. Some of the confusion lies in the use of the word Persons.

The word Persons, which is normally included in English-language definitions of the Trinity, causes people to think of three Beings. "One God who is three Persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," is a common way the Trinity is explained. But the ordinary meaning of the word *Person* is misleading when it is applied to God. It gives the impression that God has limits, and that his threeness lies in his being three separate individuals - which is not the case.

The English word person is derived from the Latin word *persona*. The word *persona* was used by theologians to describe the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the Latin language, but it did not convey the same meaning as the English word person conveys today. It was a word originally used for a role that an actor portrayed in a play. It was also the word for "mask," because actors wore different masks for each character they portrayed. But even this concept, though it does not allow the error of three Beings, is still weak and misleading when referring to God. It is misleading because the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not mere roles being played by God, and because an actor can play only one role at a time, quite unlike God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all the time. Even though a Latin theologian may have understood what he meant when he used a word like *persona*, the average person would not. Likewise, the English word person is easily misunderstood by the average individual when referring to God, unless it is accompanied by an explanation that "Persons" in the Godhead should not be thought of in the same way as "persons" like any of us humans.

When most English-speaking people think of one God who is three Persons, they cannot help but think in some way of three separate divine Beings. In other words, the terms persons and beings are usually thought of, in English, as meaning the same thing. But that is not how God is revealed in the Bible. There is only one God, not three. The Bible reveals that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the way the one true God of the Bible is, the way God exists always.

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