

“Father, Son, Holy Spirit.” Sounds a bit too male for some Christians and it does reinforce the notion of God as having a gender. Some prefer “Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier.” It is a more inclusive way of naming God and it has some roots in the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, although using functions or attributes to name God is a little heretical.

So there’s that.

St. Paul gave us “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.” And St. Augustine made 20 attempts at alternative Trinitarian language, the most famous of which is: “Lover, Beloved, Love.” Then there’s the more recent “Mother, Child, Womb” based on the Book of Isaiah and the writing of 16th c. French Protestant John Calvin.

“Three persons in one substance” calls up the image of three people in a bucket of syrup without providing any real clarity. We understand that God is not two dudes and a dove, and yet we still struggle come up with a satisfying label for the Trinity.

We share a monotheistic understanding with Muslims and Jews, the other children of Abraham, that God is One. What makes us different is our experience of that one God as “three-in-one” and “one-in-three.” And it’s that distinction we celebrate in Western Christianity on the first Sunday after Pentecost every year.

And yet, our scripture doesn’t provide a doctrine of the Trinity; only tantalizing hints. “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” or “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” In our Gospel reading, even John’s Jesus makes distinctions between himself, the Spirit of Truth and the Father, implying the unity between the three without describing the details.

Writing in the early 3rd century, Tertullian was the first to use the term “Trinity” in Christian theology, and yet the church was unable to articulate a developed doctrine of the Trinity until 350 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

The earliest Christians experienced God as absolutely *beyond* them, totally present *with* them and also *within* and *among* them. In other words, they knew God as the utterly transcendent source of all and also uniquely

manifested in Jesus Christ and also noticeably influential in the Spirit within their community and within their own lives. I imagine that you have experienced God in at least some of these ways. If you haven't, keep at it. You will.

We trust and are devoted to one God. And we also encounter the Holy One in three distinct and interwoven ways: "beyond us, with us and within us." The difference in those encounters moves us to seek a way to talk about the Trinity that captures what we have observed.

Oddly enough, the folks who may have stumbled onto the most fruitful path are atheists. They stop short as soon as they start, and yet there are amazing revelations just a little deeper in.

What they get right is that God does not exist! And that's where they stop.

But the Trinity is a mystery, not an absurdity. If we take just a few more trusting steps, we notice what our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith encountered. We notice God beyond us – utterly transcendent. That is to say, God as nothing, or rather, "no-thing." God not as one "being" among other beings, but God as Being-Itself; the undefinable fullness of God that we can't contain.

Even so, God is well within our experience. We are reduced to poetry in our pointing to this aspect of God. We can *indicate* without restraining the unlimited ocean of infinity, the womb that differentiates and integrates all dualities, and from which all creation issues.

And while the earliest followers of Christ noticed God present with them in the historical person of Jesus, St. Paul met Christ in the same way that we do: as the incarnated, crucified, resurrected and ascended Word made Flesh. For those who walked with Jesus and for those who have known only the Risen Christ, Jesus embodies God. That's because, as John's poetic prologue points out, the Logos, the Word, that is to say, the Consciousness that was present with God in the origin is not *other than* God, is inseparable from God and yet not Being-Itself and somehow not the Holy Spirit.

Again, with our ancestors, we notice that God does not *have* awareness or thoughts or consciousness; God is Consciousness-Itself. We rely on poetic descriptions of God as the supreme awareness in which all possibilities exist *like* thoughts exist in the human mind. Infinity, uncreated, yet arising as self-

luminous awareness, the light of wisdom giving form and intelligibility to all things.

John's Jesus tells those gathered around him at table, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." The early Christians and all those who still gather around God's holy table encounter the presence of that life-changing reality. We notice the indwelling loving presence of God that is closer to us than our own heartbeats.

This aspect of God, the Spirit, the breath of God, is the creative energy of the Kosmos that gives actuality to forms conceived in the divine awareness.

God does not *have* life or love; God *is* love. God within us is the life of God working within us and around us to shape all things toward their own unique fulfillment as people and communities manifesting the divine. We notice the breath of God within us inspiring us to courage and generosity, to humility and insight, encouraging us to braid our lives with God's in the creation of beauty, the generation of goodness and the nurturing of truth.

And so, the Trinity that can be spoken of, to borrow a phrase, is not the eternal Trinity, and yet we must say something. All we can use are symbols. Our words become maps of human minds thinking about God. Maps aren't the territory, and yet they can direct us to that which can be apprehended but not fully comprehended. Even as our words fall short, there are ways of talking about God that help orient us toward the Divine and other ways of talking about God that can distract us.

We can never capture all of God's truth, and so we must rely on poetic and symbolic language to describe God who utterly transcends and yet permeates all time and each individual existence. Whatever we name the Triune God must remain exploratory and provisional, never exhaustive.

And so, rather than belaboring the pursuit of the perfect description of the Trinity, we can share experiences of the life-changing reality of God. God comes to people in as many different ways as there are people to receive. That's the mystery. And we can talk about the mystery, but better *first* to invite encounters – to open ourselves and others to God whose liberating imagination bewilders and expands the human mind and heart.

Each and every new day that we are given, we have the opportunity to support each other in reopening and sharing the gift of grace – to behold the sacredness of life and to trust the connection of our oneness with God and

with each other. Even in the most mundane challenges of our own lives, we can participate in the life of God through Jesus the Anointed in the Holy Spirit.

We can choose to be resentful of one another or to let God expand our gratitude. We can decide to let our differences harden into contempt or to ask God for a path back toward reconciliation and forgiveness. We can prefer to be right at all costs or allow God to broaden our minds to consider that more than one perspective might contain some truth.

There is no realization too large or moment too small to lean into the mysteries of God's grace enticing us into ever deeper relationship. God gave birth to 200 billion stars in the Milky Way Galaxy alone and to 100 billion galaxies in just the part of the universe that we can see. The Holy One gives life to at least 357 species of hummingbirds with that same love.

And so, our most appropriate response is not to nail the perfect description of God, but to drop to our knees. The point, after all, is awe, not clarity. The children of God are not a family of the flawless, but a community of the adequate. The movement of the Trinity within us, around us and beyond us, individually and collectively, is what nourishes and informs our mutuality with God and each other.

Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams once wrote: "Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted. The whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tell us that God desires us, *as if we were God*, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity.

"We are created so that we may be caught up in this," Williams goes on, "so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God. The life of the Christian community has as its rationale – if not invariably its practical reality – the task of teaching us this: so ordering our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as occasions of joy."

Works cited or consulted:

- Greene, Adam Lewis. *Bibliotheca*. Santa Cruz, CA: Writ Press, 2016.
Hart, David Bentley. *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.
Hart, David Bentley. *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.
Hefling, Charles. *Our Selves, Our Souls, and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1996.

Ward, Keith. *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2003.