

The God We Worship

by the Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr.

Philip said to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father...” (John 14:8-9).

Jesus and His disciples

If we look closely at the Lord’s relationship with His disciples, one of the primary things He tried to do was teach them who He was (and still is). He wanted them to know that He was Divine. Through His miracles, His transfiguration, His walking on the water, His raising of Lazarus from the dead, and finally His own resurrection, He was working to get them to understand that He was (as one teaching in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church puts it), “Infinite, Uncreate, Almighty, God and Lord, altogether equal to the Father” (*Doctrine of the Lord* 55)—at least as far as they could understand these things.

He had some success. Speaking for the disciples, Peter once said: “We have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:69; cf. Matthew 16:16). And after Thomas saw that Jesus had indeed risen as He had said, he professed His faith by saying, “My Lord, and My God” (John 20:28).

There Is But One God

And yet, even these disciples didn’t quite understand the central message Jesus was trying to convey. They could not comprehend that He was the one God of heaven and earth. They could believe that He was the *Son* of God, but not God Himself, Jehovah come down on earth. They are not to blame for their misunderstanding. After all they talked with Jesus, ate with Him, traveled with Him—He was a Person to them. They also heard Him talk about God His Father, as if He was talking about someone else. So Jesus led them as far as He could in the right direction—that He was the Son of the living God. Anything beyond that was “wholly incomprehensible” to them (see *Arcana Coelestia* 6993:2).

We have to remember that at the time of the Lord’s birth there was extreme darkness in all the world about spiritual things. Jesus brought about the dawning of a new church which would see more clearly. And at such a dawning, there was a beginning of understanding, a beginning of belief and worship, with many things yet to be said and comprehended. As Jesus Himself said, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:12-13).

We now live in an era where that new truth is available. The Lord has revealed what He promised to reveal. He has opened up the Scriptures for us, and in them we may now see the truth about Him—the truth He taught so long ago, which was not then completely understood. He wants us to be absolutely clear about things those people were just beginning to understand. There are not two Persons, or three, in the God-head. There is one God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and He is the one we are to believe in and worship. This is why He was so blunt with Philip when he requested, in innocence (and perhaps even frustration), “Lord, show us the Father and it is sufficient for us” (John 14:8). The Lord said to Philip, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father, so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in Me?... Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me...” (John 14:9,10).

The central truth of the Word of God, the truth that Jesus tried to get people to believe while He was on earth is that there is but one God. He is not only the Son of God, but the God of heaven and earth, one with the Father (see *True Christian Religion* 379). This is what we are called upon to believe.

The Importance of a Correct Idea of God

There is a teaching in the work of the Heavenly Doctrine called *True Christian Religion*, which describes how important it is for us to understand who our God is:

A correct idea of God is to the congregation like the sanctuary and altar in a church, or like a crown on the head and a scepter in the hand of a king, as he sits upon his throne. From this hangs the whole body of theology, like a chain from its anchor-point. If you are prepared to believe me, the idea everyone has of God determines his place in the heavens (True Christian Religion 163).

Why is it so important for us to have a correct idea about God? Why is it that this one teaching—this one facet of belief—will determine our welfare to eternity? Why is it like the sanctuary and altar in a church, or like the crown and scepter of a king? Why is it the most important concept in all of religion? If I were to ask you, “How do you get to heaven?” I’d probably get responses such as “Live a good life,” “Obey the Lord’s commandments,” or “Shun evils as sins against the Lord.” These are correct answers. But a correct idea and belief in the Lord is even more basic than these statements.

It is no accident that there are two great commandments. The second one is, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). In general this is a command to live a good life. But the first and great commandment in the Law is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind (see Matthew 22:37-38). The reason for this is that we need to know *who* is asking us to live a good life. For religion to make sense, we have to know what kind of God the Lord is. Why is He asking us to act in certain ways? If we don’t understand why He needs us to act according to His commandments, what’s to convince us to do so when the going gets tough, when temptation sets in and we feel like doing something else? The truth about God is indeed the starting point from which all the other facets of religion hang as links of a chain from an anchor point.

Father/Son Imagery

Now some people might raise a legitimate complaint about the way the Lord has put His Word together. If it is so important for us to know who the Lord is, and specifically to acknowledge that He, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the one God of heaven and earth, why didn’t He just say so? Why in the world would He leave anything in His Word which would confuse us, or cause many people to misunderstand this most central teaching? Why would He speak to the Father as if to another Person? Why would He call Himself the Son of God, and yet expect us to believe that He is more than that?

We already discussed one reason: the people alive during His life on earth could not believe anything further than that He was the Son of God, and not God Himself. This is an important reason, for the Lord always accommodates Himself to the understanding of the people He is trying to lead. He is constantly trying to make Himself accessible and knowable to the extent possible. And He did just that for the people He taught and healed while He was on earth.

But as you have probably already realized, there is a much deeper and more profound reason for the way the gospels were put together. There is a truth about the Lord our God which is played out for us in the stories about Father and Son which we could not know otherwise. There are three ideas I’d like to share

with you today which illustrate how the Father/Son imagery can help us understand our God, rather than be a source of confusion about Him.

1. Many Names for One God

First, let us remember that when we're discussing the Lord, we're discussing the Infinite. And, as one teaching so eloquently points out, "The human mind, for all its loftiness and superb analytical power, is finite, and there is no way of rendering it anything but finite. Therefore it is incapable of seeing the infinity of God as it is in itself, and so of seeing God" (*True Christian Religion* 28).

This passage goes on to say that we can see God in shadow—in other words, as He has revealed Himself in Scripture. This is where the various names of the Lord help us out tremendously. We cannot know everything there is to know about God; indeed, we would be foolish to try. But the Lord has made it easier for us to know some things. He has given us an ability to look at different facets of Himself, different Divine qualities that He possesses. And He labels each of these qualities with a different name. So we have Jesus, which means *Savior*; we have Christ which means *King*; and we have Jehovah, which literally means *the One who Is, or exists*; and Immanuel which means *God with us*. We also have some of the Lord's activities categorized under different names: He is the Creator and Redeemer; He is our Preserver and Comforter. All of these names help us to look at one aspect of God at a time, understand it, and put it together with the other things we know about Him, so that our faith in Him can develop.

The same is true of the three most dominant names for God, which are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These also are different aspects of the one God, highlighting certain of His Divine qualities, so that we can come to understand Him more fully. So the first idea about the imagery of the trinity is that, although it may seem like a source of confusion for people, it is actually designed to help us understand our God more fully.

2. The Trinity

The second idea which will help us see the value in the imagery of the trinity, is to see how these three aspects or names of God make one in concept. A teaching which is extremely helpful in this regard states that, "These three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are the three essentials of a single God, which make one as soul, body and activity do with a person" (*True Christian Religion* 166).

The beauty of this teaching is that it makes so much sense. We all have a soul—a life force within us. And we all have a body. And these two together make it possible for us to do things—to think and speak and act, to walk, to express love, to reason, and to serve other people. Working from this fundamental way in which we have been created, we can realize that it works the same way for God, for we are created in His image and in His likeness (see Genesis 1:26-27). This means that God has a soul and a body, and that He acts by means of these two. The conclusion then is that *Father* is the name which describes the Soul of the Lord, or His life-force—why He acts, what He cares about, who He is at His core. *Son* is the name of God which describes His body—the Human form we see in our Lord Jesus Christ, showing forth or revealing to all who He is, and what He wants for us. And *Holy Spirit* is the name given to what God does—the effect He has on us, the providence, enlightenment, comfort, and eventual salvation He can bring to us.

3. The Soul, Body, and Activity of God

With this concept of the soul, body and activity of the Lord in mind, we can turn to our third idea about the Father/Son imagery of the gospels—specifically to one story where all these ideas come together. The story is the one of Philip asking to be shown the Father, to which Jesus responded, "He who has

seen Me has seen the Father.” Jesus began this teaching episode by saying to His disciples, “In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). We can now understand what the Lord was really saying to them. If we think about the *Father* as the soul or life-force of God, we can see that His inmost desire is to bring us into heaven. What drives God at His very core, and causes Him to do every single thing He does, is love—a love for us and a desire to make us happy from Himself (see *True Christian Religion* 43). This is God in Himself—love for all people—and that love is described by the name *Father*. What better image could we be given of God’s love, than that of a Divine Parent who cares for His children with infinite mercy?

Yet Jesus says that *He* would prepare a place in heaven for us, that He would return and lead us there. Further He told the disciples (and us), that we know how to get there—we know where He goes, and we know the way (see John 14:3-4). Thomas reacted to this statement by saying, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?” Jesus replied, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by Me” (John 14:5-6). This is why Jesus came on earth—to reveal to people through His actions and His teachings what kind of God He is and what He expects from us. “No one comes to the Father, except through Me.” “I am the Way the Truth and the Life.”

We have many teachings about our Lord, and all of them help us to understand Him. All of them show that He is a God of love—a God who cares for us with more compassion and mercy than any human being could ever do. This is what Jesus Christ showed to us. This is God teaching us about Himself, showing us His plans for us, and explaining why He asks us to act in certain ways. The *Son* teaches us this, and through the *Son*, we see the love of the *Father*. Or, to put it another way, through the body of our Lord, we can see His soul. As a teaching in the work *True Christian Religion* says, “By means of the Human, Jehovah God brought Himself into the world and made Himself visible to human eyes, and thus accessible” (188:6). And once we realize that He is accessible, we see that He can make a difference in our lives; He can affect us. This is His operation, which is described under the name of the *Holy Spirit*.

Conclusion

The beauty of these concepts of our God is that they makes Him believable. He has a singularity of focus: all His energy is directed toward making us happy to eternity in heaven. Everything He teaches leads us toward this goal. In everything He does, the Lord works to bring us closer to Him so that He can be a bigger part of our lives. He wants us to understand that He, the Lord Jesus Christ, is our one and only God. He wants us to understand the way He has put the gospels together—that we can see more about Him through the Father/Son imagery than we could without it.

By means of the stories of Jesus Christ, living in this world, teaching people and healing them, He offers us a real picture of the kind of God He is—not merely an intercessor between us and God the Father, but God Himself, who has the ability to teach us and heal our lives. He is one with the Father. This is the truth that Jesus was trying so hard to lead His disciples to understand. There is but one God, and we are to place our lives in His hands. It is the first and great commandment, expressed in this way, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

Amen.

Lessons: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; John 14:1-11; *True Christian Religion* 379