

Eye-Opener Studies

Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

4: The Nature of God

“It’s called a ‘quetra’,” my friend and Christian brother informed me over the phone. I was actually puzzled about the name for the symbol frequently used to denote the triune nature of God, or the Trinity, if you prefer. I knew it must have a name, and I thought I’d simply forgotten it, and I wanted it for an article I was writing for *The Voice* magazine. ‘Steve’ll know,’ I thought. He’s a fund of such information and if he and my wife, Barbara, were part of a quiz team, I’m not saying they would win every time, but they’d give an excellent account of themselves. Certain sorts of trivia stick to some people more than others and, if they do know, you can sometimes save yourself hours of hunting for answers if you but ask them. In fact when I asked he didn’t know, so I planned to search for the answer myself a little later. Next minute the phone went. He’d obviously been bugged by his ignorance, as I had been by mine too, and he’d looked it up ahead of me. It’s called a ‘quetra’ and neither of us, in fact, had known that and forgotten it. We both learned something that day.

The Quetra

So here it is: the quetra. I’m sure you have seen it many times, and know what it stands for even if you didn’t know what it is called. It’s trying to depict the notion of ‘Three-in-One and One-in-Three’, which is how we articulate our understanding of the nature of God; at least that’s the orthodox view and has been for almost the whole Christian era. There are other views but these are usually labelled as being heretical and those who support them are placed outside the normal compass of Christendom. The problem is that the nature of God as being ‘Three-in-One and One-in-Three’ is very hard indeed to ex-



plain. Sometimes He is best understood as being simply One, yet at other times a positive duality is best. I say ‘duality’ because most of the confusion arises from the time when Jesus was here on Earth and made reference to His Father as a separate and distinct Being. Therefore how could They be One yet separate and then the Father withdraw from Him and forsake Him when He was on the Cross? There are no easy answers. If there are answers, we will not fathom them this side of Paradise - and maybe not even then! It depends on what God is willing to reveal to us in eternity. The Holy Spirit as a Person and as God is even more difficult to build into this picture yet He too is depicted in Scripture as being a Divine ‘Person’ and a part of the Divine Nature, and equally God too. It’s all very mysterious.

The notion of Trinity

That people have struggled with the notion of the Trinity is evident from the history of the church. There were two huge theological problems our early fathers had to contend with: a) this one, the Nature of God, and b) the incarnation of Christ, i.e. how He could be fully God yet also fully man too. We shall be having a look at this latter problem in study 6.

The word ‘Trinity’ is not found in scripture and therefore is a more recent construct. So much so when compiling one of the church’s most popular 20th-century hymnbooks, *Great Songs of the Church*, the editor struggled with that most famous of Trinitarian hymns, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!’. He felt he had to alter the last line of the first and last verses from, ‘God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!’, to ‘God over all and blessed eternally’. There’s nothing wrong with that as a stand-alone idea but it makes no sense in the context of the hymn, which is based on the text of Isaiah 6:3 and his amazing vision (picture over). It’s an Amer-



The seraph touches Isaiah's lips with the coal. (Is. 6:6-7)
Bible Picture Gallery

ican hymnal and unfortunately many other later ones simply myopically followed his lead in this and made the same alteration. The hymn 'Eternal Father strong to save' produced an inconsistency in its summation verse which begins, 'O Trinity of love and power..', but as the hymn as printed had its third verse excluded, 'O Holy Spirit who didst brood Upon the waters dark and rude..', and only the duality of Father and Son had been addressed in verses 1 and 2, the word 'Trinity' was redundant here and should, consistently, have been replaced as 'O Duality of love and power' - but then we don't believe and teach that, so it was never a starter. Churches of Christ traditionally 'don't do' the Holy Spirit very much, just as they 'don't do' Mary, the mother of Jesus much either, because others overdo them both, so leaving out verse three and then illogically addressing a 'Trinity of love and power' gets by unnoticed and bothers hardly any of us! When we came to *Favourite Hymns of the Church*, we concluded that it may not be a biblical word but it certainly is a biblical concept, so we kept it in quite deliberately - and we also included several doxologies which address Father, Son and Holy Ghost, e.g. 649 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow'. We can struggle with words such as 'Trinity', or 'Triunity', or 'Godhead', or 'Godhood' - all of which have been tried by brethren to help convey the notion of the unconveyable, unfathomable Nature of God to which mortal men and women must humbly bow and admit their, not wilful ignorance, but rather their inability to comprehend the Infinite. And, you know, if we could fully comprehend an Infinite God, He would not be much of a God, for He would be cast in our image not us, somehow, in His.

Concepts

That it is impossible to describe accurately the Nature of God in words and images we humans can get some sort of a handle on is true, nevertheless we try, and there's nothing wrong with doing so. After all, when we talk to unbelievers and sceptics we are expected '*always [to be] prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks [us] for a reason for the hope that is in [us]*'. (1 Pe 3:15). Admitting that it is very difficult for us to explain what we believe about the Nature of God will not harm our cause at all, but trying to duck out of trying, by saying that we can't explain it and have to accept by blind faith, usually will not impress. If somebody tells me that there are fairies at the bottom of my garden but I can only believe what they are and that they are there by faith, I am not going to join the ranks of believers. Sceptics often have such a view of a belief in God and what He is like anyway; this would simply reinforce their prejudices in this regard.

The most common notion is our understanding of water - H₂O. It is of the same nature entirely but presents itself in three different ways to us, as liquid



Half Moon Island, Gerlache Strait, Antarctica 3.2.07

(water), solid (ice) and vapour (steam). There is no blurring or overlap. We all recognize H₂O in any of its three separate forms and know that which one it presents to us depends on its temperature. The picture above shows two of the three and even two forms of liquid (sea water and cloud) but it's too cold for steam, and there are no thermal springs around to add some to this picture. That there is naturally heated water in the form of steam can be seen in geo-thermal areas where hot springs and geysers are found, and, of course, there is plenty of steam

around when volcanoes erupt. Geysers form when underground water is super-heated close to the surface until the pressure forces its release. The picture is of Strokkur, in Iceland, which erupts about once



every 20 minutes. It is very close to the great Geysir, from which the phenomena derive their name, but this now only erupts about twice a year if you are lucky. (Apparently they can make it erupt by pouring soap into it, and do so if there is a visiting dignitary whom they want to impress; why it works with a large quantity of soap poured into it is not fully understood.) This solves the problem of having one substance presenting itself in three differing separate forms doing different things, yet still being of the one nature. Unfortunately the three cannot co-exist simultaneously under the same conditions, save briefly if applied heat is changing it from one form to another.

The best analogy, in my opinion, is an abstract one not a physical one. We humans readily recognize the three separate functions within our make up

of thinking, feeling and willing. We describe them and understand them as independent actions which combine together to make us what we are. Yet, though independent actions, they are generated interdependently. In other words what we think depends on what we feel and will; what we feel depends on what we think and will, and what we will depends on what we think and feel. If this sounds complicated, just think it through and apply it. The hypnotist tries to alter our actions by taking over and controlling us, however I understand he cannot ultimately 'make' us do anything which our natures will not allow us to do. He couldn't make me kill my children against my will and nature, to give perhaps an extreme example. (Some of us might well get a serious shock at what he could get us to do and we would never have expected this to be so; it's as well not to experiment and go down that line.)

A tripartite being

We are told that we humans are tripartite beings consisting of spirit, soul and body. Paul drew our attention to this as he signed off in his First Letter to the Thessalonians: *'Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.'* (1 Thes. 5:23). We therefore recognize that this is our created nature, our God-given nature if you will. This should not surprise us because right back in Genesis, just before He created Adam and Eve, God told of His intentions: *'Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."*

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.'*

(Ge 1:26-27)

There are many thoughts which could be raised, sermons preached and articles written about what it means, or what God meant, by creating humans in His image. One thing we do know is that it does not mean that God has two eyes, a nose, a mouth and arms and legs. It has to do with both of our natures and basic make-up. For instance we read in John's First Letter that *'God is love'* (1 John 4:8, and 16). If God is love - and He is - we must

have been created with love as our fundamental nature. The Fall and sin ruined that to a great degree but that must not distract us from this fundamental truth. Humans were created to have a loving relationship with God. A quick survey of God's other created creatures and we can soon tell that they operate by instinct not love, though we can sometimes marvel at the affection and loyalty higher mammals can and do sometimes display. Many Christians also do not realize that the angelic beings were not created to love. They worship and serve the Lord God and willingly do His bidding (at least the faithful ones do!) but they never are said to love God and act for Him because they love Him. It was mankind which God created for love and with whom He wanted to have a freely given relationship of love. It was Adam and Eve who were the pinnacle of Creation not cherubim, seraphim, archangels and angels. They are *'ministering spirits'* (Heb. 1:14) - but more of them in Study 9.

So, if man is made in God's image and is a tripartite being, it is quite reasonable to assume that God too is a tripartite Being. Enigmatically He does not declare specifically that He is, yet in Genesis chapter 1 He clearly sees His creative activity as being a plural effort. *"Let us make man..."* (Gen. 1:26) He spoke the universe into existence by His Word, and we all know who is, and of course was, God's Word (John 1:1). We also see the Spirit of God moving, or hovering, on the face of the waters. (Gen. 1:2). The One God of Father, Son (or Word) and Holy Spirit are all involved in Creation. It was the Father's plan, the Son who carried out the plan and spoke it into being, and the Spirit who maintains and sustains it. And you know this is exactly what happened over the Plan of Salvation, which the Father planned, the Son carried out and the Spirit sustains. There's a beautiful consistency and wonder in the greatness of our God.

The 'omni' words

When thinking of God and what He is like, it should not surprise us that we think of Him as having three

major attributes. Number is important throughout the Bible. It's a study in itself. The numbers 1 and 3 are especially associated with God, even if we had never coined the phrase about God as being 'Three-in-One and One-in-Three'. So when God speaks we frequently know it is God involved because of the number 3. In the example from Isaiah 6:3 and the hymn we have already discussed, the expression 'Holy, Holy Holy!' lays down a numerical statement that it is God at the centre of the message. When the Lord called to the boy Samuel in the night, Eli the High Priest knew it was God calling to him after the third call (1 Sam. 3:8). And the three-

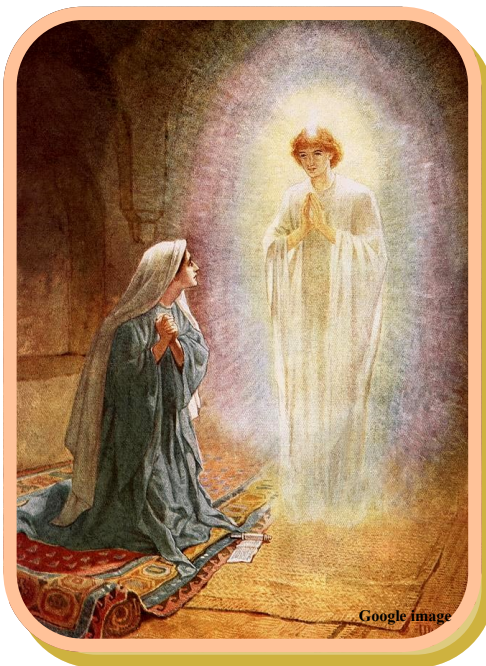
fold nature of God lies at the heart of Christianity for Jesus told His disciples to baptize believers in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19), which He would not have done had the Three not been co-equally One. Indeed He did not use the plural word for 'name' - 'baptizing in the names of...' - so the singular underscores the Oneness of the Three.

Therefore when we use big words to characterize the Nature of God we use three of them and say that He is 'omnipotent' (all powerful), 'omniscient' (all knowing) and 'omnipresent' (ever present everywhere at once). And indeed He is but we have to be careful how we apply some of these attributes as we tell others about Him. If we make unsustainable claims for Him we can sow seeds of doubt and discord in some minds.

Things God cannot do!

When the angel Gabriel was talking to Mary and was telling her that she was to be the mother of the Saviour, Mary had a very godly question to ask him: *'Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"*

And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived



The Annunciation

a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For **nothing will be impossible with God.**” (Lk 1:34-38 emphasis added).

But is this true? Is there nothing which God cannot do, and are there some things He will not do? When Gabriel made that statement there was a context of having special babies and raising up mighty men for Him. It was not an all-embracing



Birth of Isaac: not impossible for God not being disrespectful. I can sin; God cannot, by definition. Sin is rebellion against the known will of God, therefore if God does it, it is His will and not sin. It is God who defines sin for there is no higher authority to whom reference can be made. That's why God had to swear by Himself as the Hebrew writer argued: *'For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.'* (Heb 6:13-18).

God, therefore, cannot lie, but we can. God cannot deny Himself nor do anything contrary to His Nature, but we can. We mentioned earlier that a hypnotist cannot make us do anything contrary to our nature, which is why people were shocked in early 2016 when a hypnotist made some apparently nice people attempt to kill others in a demonstration, but there's nothing to stop us from doing so by our own choice. Adam, of course, was the exemplar of this truth for he was not created with a sinful nature. He chose that path himself. Okay he had some

satanic 'encouragement' to do so but he did not have to. It is God who defines right and wrong so He cannot sin.

Then we have things which are impossible because of the nature of the world which God created. He cannot do things which are logically, or intrinsically, impossible. The great Christian apologist C.S. Lewis, writing in *The Problem of Pain* (1940) pointed out that the impossible does not become possible simply by prefixing it with the words 'God can'. He wrote, 'His Omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to Him but not nonsense.' You cannot fit a physically square peg into a physically round hole and not leave gaps, and nor can God. As Lewis pointed out, God could not give us free-will and genuine choice and then deny us the right to choose. And on that question there are some who believe that there is no such thing as free-will and free-choice for we are just the products of chemical reactions and what we think is freedom of choice is no such thing. The religious philosopher John Hick resolved that one. He pointed out that 'if the mind has the intellectual freedom to come to rational conclusions, it cannot rationally conclude that it is not free rationally to conclude.' (*Death and Eternal Life*, Macmillan, 1985 edition, page 117). Such determinists have no argument since there is nothing rational about their conclusions, if we employ their arguments and understanding. We do have freedom of choice because God made us that way. We can therefore use that freedom to do things He cannot do for we are not pre-programmed only to do what our 'Programmer' designed us to do. Sin actually is the astonishing measure of God's omnipotence, not because He designed us to fail but rather because He designed us with the freedom to fail if we so chose. Creation was indeed an awesome thing and even before one creative word was uttered, God laid the plan of salvation and weighed up the cost of it all (Acts 2:23, Eph. 1:4, Rev. 13:8), then He deemed it worth it because true, genuine, freely-given love is the greatest power on Earth and in heaven for it is the very power of God Himself. *'God is love.'*

What God will not do

Because God wants a genuine relationship of love with us, He will not force us, or coerce us, into loving and serving Him. He may occasionally put

strong pressure on to us but ultimately the choice is ours. Saul of Tarsus did not *have to* take up the challenge and become the apostle Paul, and God did not dupe him into accepting the call. A little noticed verse in Acts 9:16 tells us that the Lord told Saul “*how much he must suffer for the sake of my name*”. And the list of some of Paul’s trials in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 shows us the measure of the man and the depth of his freely-given love to accept a challenge like this. He was talking about people who boasted about their service for the Lord but who were false apostles, when he wrote: *‘Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I*



Paul being beaten

was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?’ (2 Co 11:23-29). Paul could well have said to the Lord as He spelled out what awaited him if he accepted the call, that if this is what being called and chosen means, count me out! But he didn’t. He thought he was honoured to suffer for Christ but he had to opt in and make that choice himself. In the final analysis, God did not force him, though He knew the measure of the man and that he would accept even an option like this because, for all his failings, Saul of Tarsus genuinely and deeply loved God.

God will also not do for us what we can perfectly well do for ourselves. He is not there to be switched on and off like a tap when we feel that we need Him. If we want a job there’s no percentage in sitting around, praying and then waiting on the Lord to find us one. Prayer is a must but it must be backed with effort when we can make it. Many Christian believers, usually of a more charismatic/evangelical disposition, seem to think it shows a lack of faith and trust if they don’t make a witness of their dependence on the Lord. Let a couple of stories make the point. The first is fictional but the second, sadly, is true.

There was a flood and the waters were rising higher all the time. One of these ‘charismatic’ Christians climbed into his bedroom. Just then a rowing boat came passed and told him to hop in. “It’s OK,” said the man, “the Lord will look after me. You go and help some others!” “Suit yourself,” said the oarsman and off he went. The waters continued to rise and the man had to climb on to his roof. Just then a helicopter came by and the crew told him to climb aboard. “I’m OK,” said the man again, “the Lord is looking after me. Go and rescue others.” So off they flew. Later the man drowned and on arriving at the Gates of Heaven he saw the Lord and painfully asked Him why, after all the trust he put in the care of the Lord, didn’t He help him. Sadly the Lord looked at him and replied. “Well I sent you a rowing boat and a helicopter, what more did you expect me to do?”

The second story happened to my wife, Barbara, and myself. We were attending an all-day conference on Creation and one of the speakers and officials was a lovely, dear old spinster lady. She had been diagnosed with some form of cancer but she believed in Divine healing and had refused an operation, preferring to let the Lord heal her. She’d been told that she would probably be dead in less than a year if she refused and yet here she was, about fifteen months later and apparently doing very well. The spokesman who told us her story gave us all a ‘knowing look’ and said that we know who has the power to heal, don’t we? And most of the evangelically-minded audience gave a knowing, comforting laugh of deep spiritual understanding from the inside. She died about three months later. The doctors had only been wrong about the timing, which is notoriously difficult anyway, but they

could have used their skills to save her - their God-given skills - but she wanted a miracle where none was called for. God can perform miracles but He is equally able to work through other means He has created, so why look for the miraculous when it is not required?

Presumptuous claims for God

So we must be careful to understand something of the Nature of God and not make claims for Him which are presumptuous and unsustainable. I had a friend, a colleague, who taught English. He was raised as a Roman Catholic but then was an unbeliever. I used to give him a lift to school and we'd talk. He told me that as a boy of about eight he'd caught TB and been sent away from his family to an isolation hospital for two years. On returning home and going to school, one of the nuns welcomed him back and asked him, "Did you give a prayer of thanks to Jesus for His love and for making you better?" Pete said to me. "I saw through that one quite

easily and sussed it out even at 10 years old. If Jesus loved me enough to make me better, why didn't He love me enough to stop me getting sick in the first place?" Pete had a valid question but he had sussed out nothing. We have to be very careful how we explain God, even to tiny minds, for the wrong notions can breed hostility and ultimately unbelief.

Grasping the correct understanding

There are answers to Pete's question, not easy answers but there are no answers at all if we discount the reality of the story of Creation and the Fall in Genesis and fail to get a clear perspective on the revealed Nature of God. With a wrong view, we'll get a distorted image. Peter told us '*always [to be] prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks [us] for a reason for the hope that is in [us]*'. (1 Pe 3:15). The defence, however, must not be a flight of fancy which is unsustainable and ultimately can do more harm than good for the cause of Christ.

Task

Part of the purpose of hymns is teaching (Col. 3:16). Therefore it is important to be aware of the messages being sent out by what we are singing. Examine critically, both for and against as you feel so moved, the words of the hymns:

- a) 'Jesus is able' (bear in mind that this is a popular chorus amongst young people at camps and youth weekends),
- b) 'I come to the Garden alone' (this is written as a perspective by Mary Magdalene on resurrection morning when she first met the risen Christ),
- c) 'I serve a risen Saviour' (He lives).

(Be aware that it is the words, not the tunes, we are asking you to assess. The tunes are, in fact, very engaging in all three cases!)

(The words of these three hymns are printed on the next page to help you.)

Jesus is able

Jesus is able to do anything.
He'll make you happy, make you sing;
He'll lift you up when you are down
If you let Him. He'll pick you up and turn your
whole life around.

He healed the lame man by the road one day,
He healed the leper washed his sins away,
And He is able to heal you too
If He knocks, let Him in and see what He can do.

My God is wonderful; He's big and strong.
He will protect you all the day long.
He'll take your life and make it whole
In your body, and mind, and spirit and your heart
and soul.

I know God loves me, I saw Him run
Even though a sinner, He sent His Son.
Just like the prodigal I saw the light.
God ran to me, and hugged me, and now every-
thing's all right.

Do you know Jesus?
Do you know His grace?
Have you ever met Him face to face?
Have you allowed Him to set you free,
With His numberless blessings available to you and
me?

I come to the Garden alone

I come to the Garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear,
Falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.

*And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share
As we tarry there,
None other has ever known.*

He speaks and the sound of His voice
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing;
And the melody
That He gave to me,
Within my heart is ringing.

I'd stay in the Garden with Him
Though the night around me be falling,
But He bids me go;
Through the voice of woe,
His voice to me is calling.

I serve a risen Saviour

I serve a risen Saviour,
He's in the world today;
I know that He is listening,
Whatever men may say;
I see His hand of mercy,
I hear His voice of cheer,
And just the time I need Him
He's always near.

*He lives (He lives), He lives (He lives)
Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and talks with me
Along life's narrow way.
He lives (He lives) He lives (He lives)
Salvation to impart!
You ask me why I know He lives?
He lives within my heart.*

In all the world around me
I see His loving care.
And though my heart grows weary
I never will despair;
I know that He is leading,
Through all the stormy blast,
The day of His appearing
Will come at last.

Rejoice, rejoice, O Christian,
Lift up your voice and sing
Eternal hallelujahs
To Jesus Christ the King!
The Hope of all who seek Him,
The Help of all who find.
None other is so loving,
So good and kind.