

How the Holy Spirit Functions within the Trinity

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One of the great struggles that the Apostles and early Church Fathers faced was how explain the relationships between God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit, given the very warm and familiar way that Jesus spoke about his Father as the God who had sent him; and similarly, the way that Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as his collaborator also sent by the Father.

This was all the more challenging since the Apostles were originally all monotheistic Jews, which meant they had no framework available to them within Judaism, to describe the familiarity with which Jesus spoke. The Judaist position was framed around what is known as *The Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4-5– "*Hear O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*"

This formula seemingly excluded the possibility of a plurality with God – hence the descriptor of monotheism – the oneness of God. However, there is signs of plurality even at the beginning of Genesis 1:26:

'Elohim' – Hebrew word for God is plural

"Then God (*Elohim*) said, Let *us* make man in *our* image." (Gen 1:26)

Further, there are two Hebrew words that can be translated as 'one':

Yachad – an absolute unity; a singular or numerical 'only one';

Abraham offered his only (*yachad*) son, Isaac. (Gen 22:2 & 12)

This is never used to describe the "oneness" of God.

Echad – a compound or collective unity; i.e. one crowd, one nation.

Adam and Eve – "...they will become one (*echad*) flesh." (Gen 2:24)

"*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one (echad).*" (Deut 6:4)

Based on the Hebrew text, and coming from Jesus' context, we can now understand that God, *Yahweh*, is a compound or plural unity, which allows room for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit formulation that Jesus continually spoke out of – this was his frame of reference.

1. The Relationship Between Father, Son, and Spirit

We touched on this briefly a number of weeks ago, while indivisible each member is distinguishable from the other by the different roles they fulfil, and the biblical record illustrates that we can envisage them in this way:

- **Father as Initiator** – we can justifiably think of the Father in this way because that's what fathers do. Acts 1:7; Gal 1:15; Eph 1:3-6; 3:14; Jam 1:17-18

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—

Eph 1:3-6

- **Son as Mediator** – the one Mediator between God and men

Eph 3:17; 1Tim 2:5-6; 1Pet 17-21; Rev 13:8

⁵ For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time.

1Tim 2:5-6

- **Holy Spirit as Actuator** – the one who convicts us of sin, and actuates the love that draws us into the Trinitarian life of fellowship with God, and ultimately, perfecting us into the image of Jesus Christ in our resurrection.

Matt 12:28; Jn 16:7-15; Eph 2:18; 3:16;

Rom 5:5

⁷ But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. ¹³ But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. ¹⁵ All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you."

(Jn 16:7, 13-15)

2. The Father's Two Hands – The Son and the Spirit

Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons (c.177-202), as a young man was a disciple of Polycarp, making him only one generation removed from the Apostle John.

Irenaeus came to the emphatic conviction that creation was the work of the triune God. He used his 'two hands of God' metaphor to provide him with a way of emphasising that it is the one and only God that we encounter in the Bible who has revealed himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He enabled him to show how God the Father mediates absolutely everything through his Son and his Spirit in relation to both creation and humanity.

This analogy also underpins his understanding of God's purpose for creation, which incorporates God's mission of intentional growth and development of humanity, from its beginnings in the Garden of Eden, toward the eschatological perfection of the image and likeness of God within humanity in the consummation of the resurrection.

Irenaeus outlined the practical interactions of God's agenda for humanity in this way: The Father, in his good pleasure commands the Son; who is the true image of God, who then works and fashions in creation; and then the Spirit nourishes and gives increase, and slowly but surely man makes progress and is ultimately conformed to perfection in the resurrection.

By continually emphasising the 'two hands of God', he was able to locate both Word and Spirit in their own proper work: the eternal *Word* became incarnate in man, in Jesus Christ, which was miraculously achieved by the *Spirit*. And it is the *Spirit* who actualises the relation between this particular man and all other men and women, in every time and place.

However, there is an inherent creative tension between the objective truth of God's Word, most clearly heard through the gospel of Jesus the Son of God, and the subjective ministry of the Holy Spirit who is the One who applies the Word in our hearts that leads us into all truth. Let's delve into this a little more:

a) The Ministry of the Son

From an objective or external perspective, it is the gospel message of saving grace made possible through the incarnation, life and ministry, death and resurrection, of God's Son, Jesus Christ, that brings faith and salvation. We refer to this as the objective fact of the historical work of Christ on behalf of all who are willing to respond to Father God's invitation to enter again into a saving relationship of grace with him through faith in his Son's reconciling ministry.

² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you...³ that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures... (1Cor 15:2-4)

b) The Ministry of the Spirit

The other side of this creative tension is the subjective or internal reception within our hearts and minds, made real to us by the Holy Spirit who brings faith-creating conviction of the reality of Jesus Christ's death in our place, producing repentance of our sin of self-sufficiency, acceptance of his forgiveness, and commitment to walk with him in faith, love, and humility.

⁵ ...He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (Tit 3:5-7)

¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his

image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

(2Cor 3:17-18)

So, the Gospel, which was in the heart of God before creation, and now for us, stands, firstly, on the objective historical fact of the Son's incarnation, life, death and resurrection, which healed the breach of broken relationship with God; and secondly, on the subjective faith-producing ministry of the Holy Spirit within our hearts and minds, making it internally real, believable, and liveable through his grace.