The Trinity in Nature

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"…for the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead;…" Romans 1:20

The heavens certainly declare the glory of God as both Paul and the Psalmist say (19:1), but what else can we learn about God through His creation?

A lesson from logic is that a creator is always greater than his creation. The greater creates the lesser. Working back from that we can deduce from what we see in creation, man and the Cosmos, that God is omniscient and omnipotent by the size and complexity of the Universe. We also can deduce that the interaction of natural forces to accommodate life in this world displays His wisdom. From the nature of man as preeminent among all life on Earth we can deduce that God is greater in His attributes than we are in our attributes of character, intellect, emotion and will. This is a form of reverse engineering to arrive at a concept of God without the advantage of His self-revelation in scripture. The amazing size, complexity and beauty of creation tell us that an intelligent designer is responsible for it. It is man's moral nature and conscience that tells him he is accountable to that creator. It is this natural revelation to which Paul in Romans 1 says all men will be accountable.

It is the written revelation of God that tells us of His Triune nature. The Trinity was progressively revealed from Genesis to Revelation. It is so extensively documented that a person has to choose to deny it. It is self-evident in scripture. It is also a very complex concept that we will never fully understand for the very simple reason that we are finite and God is infinite. Therefore the gap between His nature and our intellectual capacity to understand Him will not be bridged. We will always be in awe of Him.

In hindsight, with God's written revelation of His nature we can see His Triunity represented in His creation. Though we cannot understand the divine Trinity we can apprehend it. We can grasp it in generalities. We can say many things about what the Trinity is, and we can say things about what the Trinity is not. But we cannot explain the mysteries of the Triunity of God. Those natural representations of God's Triunity, however, we can understand. And this is what we will do.

What the Trinity Is – and Is Not

The Athanasian Creed is a concise statement of what the Trinity is and is not. Written in the Fourth century after a series of controversies over the deity of Christ and the nature of the Trinity, it set forth a series of statements intended to guide Christians to a balanced and biblical concept of what the Godhead is, and is not. To think of the Trinity within the boundaries set forth in the creed will

forestall error. The creed makes the following statement;

“We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the persons, nor dividing the substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal.” (Underlining mine)

If you are familiar with the theology of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, and various Oneness groups you will recognize that they drew their theology outside the lines described in the creed.

The creed says we are not to “confound [confuse] the persons.” That means we are not to say Jesus is the Father, or vice versa. This error is committed by the Jesus Only movement which we find in the United Pentecostal Church and various Apostolic denominations. In the history of heresy it is called modalism, and conveys the idea that God is at one time in the mode of the Father, at another He is in the mode of the Holy Spirit and at another the Son. But in this oneness theology God is not simultaneously all three Persons of the Trinity. This is heresy. Some evangelicals have fallen for this misunderstanding. More on this later.

The creed also says we are not to “divide the substance.” What God is comprises His “substance,” the nature or essence of deity. God is One and is not divisible. Here is where the Mormons depart. They define God as one in purpose but three in persons. Certainly God is one in purpose but He is much more One than that. He is one thing, one essence. The Mormons have created a tritheism, a coalition of gods, allied in purpose but not in essence.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses depict the Trinity of Christendom as “three Gods and yet but one God” (The Trinity – Divine Mystery or Pagan Myth, page 2). The Society’s writers know the historic definition of the Trinity but purposely mis-define it so they can more easily refute it. They want the people they proselyte to understand the Trinity as three gods in one god because it is so easy to refute. Again, that is specifically rejected in the Athanasian Creed.

Analogies- Good and Bad

An analogy draws from the natural order, or something commonly understood to convey an idea that is more difficult to grasp. Here is where God’s Triune nature reflected in His creation can assist us. It must be remembered that God is infinite and His creation is finite, therefore every analogy will fail at some point to properly represent God. Analogies should be used to present one or more aspects of the three in one but cannot be carried much farther without distorting a truth about God.

The Bad

In our examination of the occurrence of threeness within oneness in nature we must avoid those

clear examples that depart from the boundaries defined in the Athanasian Creed. The examples must not be divisible into three parts or we convey the idea of tritheism. Nor can the example be a solitary one that operates in different modes or we convey the idea of modalism. The following are analogies that have been used by Christians in the past to explain the Trinity but they fail to do so.

Water – This substance comes in three forms, liquid, vapor, and solid. The problem with this analogy is that water is in one of these states at a time. Thus the analogy actually teaches a form of modalism. Modalism as applied to the Trinity says that God is the Father at one time (liquid), the Son at another time (solid), or the Spirit (vapor) at another time. However, having said that, there is a scientific aspect of this analogy that does fit the Trinity. More on that later.

Father/Son/Husband – This common analogy also fails the Triunity test. The person who fills these three roles is one person. The Athanasian Creed specifically denies that the Son is the Father, or vice versa. God is three Persons in the one God, not one Person in different roles or relationships. Hence, this analogy also teaches the modalism concept.

The Egg – The three elements of the egg are the yolk, the egg white and the shell. This analogy has been around for a very long time but it too presents problems. The egg can be divided into its three component parts. It is divisible and God is not. Hence, this analogy teaches tritheism, or three gods, who are one in some lesser sense.

The Good

In Romans 1:20 above Paul says that the things created clearly show God's nature. Surely in nature there are good analogies to the concept of Triunity, threeness within oneness, and the good news is there are good examples. Christians should become familiar with them so our explanations of the Trinity are not defeated by our analogies.

The Universe – Clearly the biggest example, in every sense of the word, is the Universe itself. The Universe is comprised of Time and Space and Matter. None of these elements can be separated from the others without destroying the whole. Only in our minds can we separate the elements. If you have a good imagination think of what the result would be if you deleted one of those three elements from the other two. Likewise the threeness of the Universe is not divisible into its component parts and presents a good analogy of the Triunity of God.

Each of the three elements comprising the Universe, Time, Space and Matter are also triune in their composition.

Time – Every one of us is living out the three elements of time, past, present, and future. Again, these three elements are only divisible within our minds. We can conceive of the future and recall the past, but we cannot tangibly relate to them. Only the present is tangibly real to us. But the present is simply the future passing through to join the past. We cannot separate these three elements and have only one or two left. That is because time is a result of the existence of space

and matter in motion. Time is linear and always moving in one direction, hence there will always be a future and a past. At least until time is no more as the Bible says.

Space – Every child in school learns the concept of space being composed of length, depth, and width. To arrive at the volume of space in a box you multiply the length times the width times the depth. Again, the three elements of this analogy can be thought of separately but they cannot actually be separated and still have space. So it is with the Trinity. The term space could correspond to the word Trinity in the analogy and each of the Persons of the Trinity would correspond to one of the three elements of space. This analogy has been used many times by the author when presenting the concept of the Trinity to Jehovah's Witnesses. It is explained that all the space in a room can be contained in the length from one wall to the opposite wall. Also, all the space in the room can be contained in the width from one side to another. And likewise with the depth. However, the three elements of space in the room cannot actually be carried out separately. They are an indivisible whole.

Matter – The three elements of matter are energy, motion and substance (or phenomenon). How they combine determines what kind of substance it will become. Energy is necessarily in motion by it nature but that motion varies in speed, and wavelength. This variation produces different varieties of substance. Some are hard and some soft, etc. But there is no substance, or matter, that does not also include energy and motion. It is indivisible, hence it is triune in nature.

The Sun – This analogy to the Trinity is the best at describing the unity of the three Persons in their individual roles as Father, Son and Spirit. Strictly speaking we cannot see that star in the sky we call the Sun. What we see is the light shining from it. Neither do we see the heat it generates but we do feel it. All three elements, the star, the light and heat are indivisible. No element can be subtracted without destroying the whole. The Sun could burn out and no longer produce light and heat but it would also no longer be triune in the way it is now.

In the analogy …

the star corresponds to the Father;

The Father is unseen as Jesus said, "Not that any man hath seen the Father…" (John 6:46), and "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (John 1:18).

the light corresponds to the Son of God;

Jesus radiates the glory of God. He said, "I am the light of the world…" (John 8:12), and "…is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). As the radiating light of the Father Jesus is "…the brightness of his glory,.." (Hebrews 1:3). Just as seeing the light from the star we call the Sun is the same as seeing the Sun, so Jesus tells us that to see Him is the same as seeing His Father;

“…he that hath seen me hath seen the Father…” (John 14:9). Just as the daylight shows us our way so too Jesus is our light so that we do not walk in darkness (John 8:12).

the heat corresponds to the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is unseen as is the Father. However, we can sense the work of the Spirit in our lives. As Jesus said, the Spirit is like the wind that blows where it wishes and we hear the sound but we don’t see it (John 3:8). The light of the Sun heats up whatever it touches. So, too, the Spirit, Who is sent by the Son of God, warms and comforts those whom He touches. His work of conviction and teaching are unseen but certainly comforting as we know that the Father is working His will in our lives.

Triple Point of Water – To return to the analogy of water there is in chemistry what is called the triple point of water wherein all three elements of liquid, solid, and vapor coexist simultaneously in the same space. It has been likened to what is going on under an ice skater’s skate. The pressure and motion are causing a change in the ice to liquid, and if there is sufficient pressure, then to vapor. To quote Wikipedia, “In physics, the triple point of a substance is the temperature and pressure at which three phases (gas, liquid, and solid) of that substance may coexist in thermodynamic equilibrium.” If you are interested you can read more on your own. Needless to say this is highly technical and difficult to understand or explain. It is not practical as an illustration of the Trinity.

Conclusion

If as Jehovah’s Witnesses say, God is unitary, and not triune, then why did He create His universe and so much in it in triune form? Or, as the Mormons say there are three gods who are one in purpose then why did this god create so many indivisible triunities within his creation? Or, what about the Oneness modalists, can they explain why there are simultaneously three elements within one throughout creation?

If either group were correct then creation would be confusing to those of us who read that “the heavens declare the glory of God” and “…the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.”

The Universe is a dull reflection of its Creator, but a reflection nevertheless.

By David Henke