

**BEYOND PERSONALITY:
C. S. Lewis on God as Tri-Personal**

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[This article is adapted from Dr. Williams's recent book *Deeper Magic: The Theology behind the Writings of C. S. Lewis* (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2016), and is used by permission.]

ABSTRACT

C. S. Lewis makes two contributions to our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. First, he gives us a concept of “concrete transcendence.” God’s transcendence for Lewis is the very opposite of abstraction or nebulosity, but rather it describes Him as the Father of all Facthood, a Being more solid, more real, and more “minutely articulated” than the physical reality we know with our senses. Second, he helps us see how the doctrine of the Trinity is about the way in which this minutely articulate Being is personal. Part of the reality that He is more real than we are, not less, is the way in which He is more personal than we are, not less. He is beyond Reason but not contrary to Reason; He is beyond Reason in a way that makes sense to Reason.

INTRODUCION

One of the most difficult concepts of Christian theology is the doctrine of the Trinity.¹

¹ See the standard treatments in the relevant chapters of Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) and Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), and chapter 1 of my *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Nashville: Broadman, 1994), as well as the sections of *Credo: Meditations on the Nicene Creed* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2007) that deal with the relation of the Father and the Son. The classical treatment is that of Edward Bickersteth, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace, 1971). See also the recent

Trying to get one's head around how God can be one and three at the same time has occasioned many headaches in the last two millennia of church history. Fortunately, we have one of the best explainers of difficult ideas in C. S. Lewis. Lewis's exposition of the Trinity is a model of clarity and profundity.

The word *trinity* blends the roots *tri*, three, and *unity*, one, to express the belief that God is one Being who exists in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Historic Christians do not confess God as triune out of love of either paradox or perversity; rather, they try to be faithful to the data of Scripture. How does that lead to their confession of the Trinity? The whole reason Christianity exists as something distinct from Judaism is that certain first-century Jews found themselves compelled to worship the man Jesus as God by everything they had experienced about who He was and what He did and said and how He had related to them, confirmed by the way in which they came to see Him as the fulfillment of Old-Testament prophecy. And He simultaneously made claims to deity Himself (at least by implication) and spoke of God as His Father. So the Father is God and the Son is God—but compromising their fierce Jewish monotheism was simply not an option for those early disciples of Jesus. In trying honestly to record and account for the data of their experience of Christ without making such a compromise, their leaders wrote a New Testament that presents as true (and non-contradictory) the following set of propositions:

1. The Father is God.
2. The Son is God.
3. The Spirit is God.
4. Father, Son, and Spirit are not just different names for the same person but rather three discrete Persons.
5. Yet there is only one God, not three.

That the Father is God hardly needs to be demonstrated; the early Christians took that as a given. Deity is attributed to the Son in many ways and in many places: One of the clearest is the prologue to John's Gospel, which affirms that the Word was in the beginning with God and was

symposium edited by Timothy George, *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

God (Jn 1:1). Deity was attributed by Jesus to Himself in many sayings, most radically the claim that “Before Abraham was, I AM” (Jn 8:58), where in effect He actually applies to Himself the Tetragrammaton, the Old-Testament name of God. When Annanias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit, Peter said they had not lied to men, but to God (Acts 5:4). So all three are said to be God, but they cannot be simply differing names for the same Person because the Father speaks *about* the Son at His baptism, as the Spirit descends *upon* him (Matt 4:3), and both the Father and the Son are said to *send* the Spirit (Jn 14:26). Jesus explicitly distinguishes that sending from His being with the disciples Himself.

All this is of course a very cursory summary of the biblical data. Our purpose here is not to establish that data but to examine C. S. Lewis’s way of dealing with it. All these statements must then somehow be maintained without any compromise to Jewish monotheism. The earliest Christians did not feel they could sacrifice any of these truths and be faithful to what God had done in their midst, so they were forced to begin the process of developing the concept of the Trinity in order to be able to affirm them all without compromise or contradiction.

It is important to note that the doctrine is not in fact contradictory. It would be contradictory if it maintained simultaneously that (A) there is one God and that (B) there are three Gods; but that is not what it says. It maintains that there is one God, and only one . . . who is tri-personal. It is difficult for us to imagine a singular tri-personal Being because in our sensory experience we normally find a one-to-one correspondence between one being (for example, the one inhabiting my very singular body) and one person (me). When we do not, there is something very wrong: Multiple Personality Disorder. Diversity of person in finite human beings compromises their integration, their unity as singular individual beings. But for God, this is not so: His particular richness of being demands something more.

C. S. Lewis makes two important contributions to our understanding of the Trinity: First, he roots the doctrine in a concept of God’s transcendence that is concrete rather than abstract. That is, we understand that God is above our thoughts not by being more vague or mystical than we can understand but by being something more solid, particular, and *definite* than we can get our heads around. Second, Lewis helps us see that this “concrete” definiteness applies specifically to the way in which God is personal.

CONCRETE TRANSCENDENCE

First we must examine Lewis's way of expressing God's transcendence as "concreteness." God's transcendence is a hard concept for modern people to grasp. He is not just a larger being than we are, who happens to exist as another part of reality; He is the ground of *all* being, the source of reality, as Lewis puts it, "the basic, original, self-existent Fact which exists in its own right." This means He is "a God outside of Nature, a transcendent and supernatural God."² Modern people tend to translate the idea that God is not a physical thing in the universe, that He is a Spirit, into the notion that He is somehow too vague, abstract, and mysterious to pin down. Lewis brilliantly takes the idea in the completely opposite direction.

Transcendent means "standing above"; it refers to something existing above, i.e., independently of the cause-and-effect nexus of the material world. God interacts with the physical world, but He is not enmeshed in it and does not depend on it as we do. *Transcendent* means standing above; it does not mean vague or abstract. So Lewis stresses that the God of the Bible is a God who "has purposes and performs particular actions, who does one thing and not another, a concrete, choosing, commanding, prohibiting God with a determinate character."³ "If God is the ultimate source of all concrete, individual things, then God Himself must be concrete, and individual in the highest degree."⁴

In fact, Lewis wants so badly to combat the modern tendency to associate transcendent being with abstraction that he boldly calls God "concrete." If God is a spirit, the word *concrete* cannot be meant literally in its normal meaning of "tangible." But Lewis wants us to think of God as *more* solid than physical reality, as something at the opposite pole from nebulous. He conveys this idea effectively in his portrait of Heaven in *The Great Divorce*, where the grass pierces the feet of the spirits from the Gray Town and raindrops would go through them like machine-gun bullets.⁵ God is the source of *that* reality, and the closer one gets to Him the more solid and definite everything becomes. If we take "concrete" metaphorically, then, it is one of Lewis's more brilliant descriptions of God as the One who is ultimately *real*. There is nothing nebulous about Him; He has a definite what-ness. "He is 'absolute being'—or rather *the* Absolute Being—in the sense that He alone exists in His own right. But there are things which God is not. In that sense He has

² C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: MacMillan, 1947), 30-31.

³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: MacMillan, 1946), 28.

a determinate character. Thus He is righteous, not a-moral; creative, not inert.”⁶ One of the clearest statements is the following:

God is basic Fact or Actuality, the source of all other facthood. At all costs therefore He must not be thought of as a featureless generality. If He exists at all, He is the most concrete thing there is, the most individual, “organized and minutely articulated.” He is unspeakable not by being indefinite but by being too definite for the unavoidable vagueness of language.⁷

To combine the solidity of a Being who exists necessarily and eternally and is the Source of all other existence with the definiteness of a God who is personal and holy and active taxes our imaginations and our understanding; but this is the God the Bible presents to us. It is this God and no other whom the early Christians accepted as the Father of Jesus Christ, with whom they so closely identified Jesus that they felt compelled to worship Him. This God has all the absoluteness a philosopher could desire, yet He is not the god of the philosophers but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the God of Creation and Sinai, of the Cross and the Resurrection. He is what He is, and we must simply adjust to that uncompromising Reality, as Jill realizes at her first encounter with Aslan. “And as Jill gazed at [Aslan’s] motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience.”⁸ Not absolute *or* personal, not infinite *or* individual, not transcendent *or* dynamic: This is not the god we might have imagined but the unconditioned Reality that simply is and who is serenely and supremely both.

He is Bacchus, Venus, Ceres all rolled into one. . . . On the other hand, Yahweh is clearly *not* a nature-god. He does not die and come to life each year as a true corn-king should. He may give wine and fertility, but must not be worshipped with bacchanalian or aphrodisiac rites. He is not the soul of Nature nor of any part of Nature. He inhabits eternity; He dwells in the high and holy place; heaven is His throne, not his vehicle; earth

⁶ Lewis, *Miracles*, 90.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (1953; New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 20.

is His footstool, not His vesture.⁹

All of this truth about God, this definite transcendence, is why we can say that “We trust not because ‘a God’ exists, but because *this* God exists.”¹⁰ We must be prepared for facets of His existence that are beyond our comprehension, and in ways which are not only definite and particular but even highly articulated. And one of them is the precise, Trinitarian way in which He is personal.

BEYOND PERSONALITY

One of the attributes which God manifests in His definite, concrete transcendence is His Personality. Lewis puts it this way: “Christian theology does not believe God to be a person. It believes Him to be such that in Him a trinity of persons is consistent with a unity of deity.”¹¹ What the doctrine of the Trinity tries to do then is to capture the richness of God’s definite, concrete, transcendent, personal existence: He is a singular unity of being containing a plurality of personhood.

We ourselves are personal beings—the only fully personal ones we know by direct experience. Some of the higher animals approach the borders of personality, but we *are* persons. Well, God is something more personal than we are, not less. Lewis tried to capture that idea by calling the section of *Mere Christianity* that deals with the Trinity “Beyond Personality.” This was a good move. He understood that the doctrine of the Trinity is not about abstruseness for its own sake but is meaningful for us because it is about the *way* in which God is personal: He is *more* personal than we are, not less, and in the manner specified as Father, Son, and Spirit by the way He is revealed to us in Scripture. Lewis’s emphasis on God’s dynamic individuality and concreteness comes into play here, focused in God as the spring from which personality flows as fulfilled in love and community, which all have their source in His very inmost nature. Lewis points out that implication in a connection noted by many:

⁹ Lewis, *Miracles*, 119.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, “On Obstinacy in Belief,” *The World’s Last Night and other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960), 25.

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, “The Poison of Subjectivism,” *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 79.

People are fond of repeating the Christian statement that “God is love.” But they seem not to notice that the words “God is love” have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love.¹²

Christians have found many analogies to the Trinity in nature, and none of them is perfect. Mind, emotion, and will as three faculties existing in one person, for example, are aspects of human personality, not actually distinct persons. Lewis makes good use of an analogy from geometry: “In God’s dimension, so to speak, you find a being who is three Persons while remaining one Being, just as a cube is six squares while remaining one cube.”¹³ He develops the geometrical analogy in terms provided by Edwin Abbott’s brilliant little allegory *Flatland*. In that book the inhabitants of a two-dimensional world try to understand three dimensions, with limited success that reminds us of our own limitations in understanding the spiritual world. So Lewis notes:

[God] contains “persons” (three of them) while remaining one God, as a cube combines six squares while remaining one solid body. We cannot comprehend such a structure any more than the Flatlanders could comprehend a cube. But we can at least comprehend our incomprehension, and see that if there is something beyond personality it ought to be incomprehensible in that sort of way.¹⁴

Lewis elaborates: “Flatlanders, attempting to imagine a cube, would either imagine the six squares coinciding, and thus destroy their distinctness, or imagine them set out side by side, and thus destroy the unity. Our difficulties about the Trinity are of much the same kind.”¹⁵ Thus the Trinity is beyond reason but not contrary to reason, because it is beyond it in just the way we would expect if God encompasses higher dimensions of personality than we do. We cannot fully understand it, but we can understand our lack of understanding, not just as a random intellectual stumbling block but as something that makes sense, as the kind of difficulty we would expect if God is indeed God,

¹² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1943), 151.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁴ Lewis, *Miracles*, 87.

¹⁵ Lewis, “Poison,” 79-80.

and we are not.

CONCLUSION

Lewis's exposition of the Trinity has two strengths. First, it helps us see how something that initially looks contradictory can upon further reflection be seen simply as hard to imagine but still intelligible. Second, it helps us see that the Trinity is about the profound way in which God is personal and relational: Relationality is actually at the heart of His nature. By contemplating this mystery, we can more easily believe that, in spite of being infinitely higher than we are, this God actually wants to relate to us. Trinitarian theology reminds us that God is higher than we are not by being more abstract but by being *personal* on a higher level. "Wouldn't [Aslan] know without being asked?" said Polly, tempted to make God's omniscience compromise His ability to relate. "I've no doubt he would," said the Horse (still with his mouth full). "But I've a sort of idea he likes to be asked."¹⁶ Relationship is the point. This is the kind of God of whom such a thing would be true.

So the doctrine of the Trinity rightly understood is a powerful antidote to the temptation to construct an abstract Absolute to protect ourselves against the God who is really there, a process Lewis described so well:

An "impersonal" God?—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth, and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband—that is quite another matter.¹⁷

Yes. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is quite another matter indeed.

¹⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (1955; New York: HarperCollins, 1983), 178.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Miracles*, 96.

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