

Questions for Trinitarians By Jason Dulle

Jesus said that ONLY His Father knew the day of the second coming, not the Son (Mark 13:32). What about the Spirit? Apparently he does not know because only the Father knows. Are there things that the Father knows that the Spirit does not? If so, in what sense can the persons of the Trinity be co-equal, and of the same essence? If the Son and Spirit are coequal, why is blasphemy against the Son forgivable but not against the Spirit (Luke 12:10)? Why does the Son not have any power other than that which the Father gives Him if indeed the Son is co-equal with the Father, and the Son continues to exist apart from the incarnation as the second omnipotent person in the Godhead (John 5:19, 30; 6:38)? The only logical answer that Trinitarians could offer is that God the Son, as He continues to exist apart from the incarnation, does have all power, but only in His incarnate state is God the Son limited, and in need of receiving power from the Father, because of His humanity. But such an explanation is no different in principle than the Oneness explanation that the Son is limited because of His humanity, but His deity is the deity of the Father, which continues to exist apart from the incarnation, unlimited.

Why, if Jesus was conceived by the person of the Holy Spirit is God the Father considered His father instead of the Spirit (Matthew 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35)? Is not the one who conceived you your father? If the Spirit accomplished the conception, then He alone should be the Father. If it is argued that the Father and Spirit conceived, then why does the Scripture not say such? It only says the Spirit conceived, and it only says that God the Father is Jesus' father. If it was the Spirit that overshadowed Mary to conceive in her womb, why wouldn't it be the Holy Spirit who was incarnated? Finally, if Jesus is the second person incarnate (God the Son) as Trinitarians claim, why was it not God the Son who conceived in Mary's womb, He Himself becoming incarnate? Is not the second person the logos who became flesh (John 1:1, 14)? Unless we identify the Spirit who caused the conception with the logos, the incarnation does not make sense; but to make such a connection is tantamount to a Oneness conception of God.

How could only the second person of the Trinity become a man, and not the other two persons in light of the Trinitarian doctrine of the perichoresis of persons? How can the Father and Spirit only indwell Jesus (as it is commonly stated), while the eternal Son is actually Jesus' essential deity? How can one separate the persons like that without confessing three gods, only one of which became incarnated, and the other two just tag along? If it was the eternal Son who became a man, and not the Father or Spirit, then why did Jesus not state this? Paul said Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Jesus said that those who saw Him saw the Father (obviously not the essence of the Father, for no man can see God's essence no matter if He is one or three persons). Never does He state that they were seeing the image of the incarnated eternal Son.. If Jesus is the 'second person' made flesh, then why didn't He ever say "he who has seen me has seen the Son"? Why not "he who has seen me has seen the Holy Spirit"? Why is it only the Father? If Jesus' deity is the eternal Son, in contradistinction to the Father and Spirit, why would Jesus say that they have seen the Father by seeing Him, rather than seeing the Son? Jesus indicated that to see Him was to see the person who sent Him [Father] (John 12:45).

It may not be exclusive proof that since Son only appears in Scripture after incarnation that it means "Son" is bound up in the incarnation, but the lack of "Son" anywhere else prior to the incarnation argues strongly against the position of an eternal Son. This argument, however, is bolstered by the fact that God is never called "God the Father" or "Father" (in the NT sense at least) until after the incarnation, apparently because He was not a father in the NT sense of the word until the incarnation (Heb 1:5). The Spirit is mentioned 240 times in the OT, and never once was it understood to refer to a distinct person from God, but rather to refer to a distinct aspect of God's person, or the nature of God Himself. "Spirit of the LORD" appears twenty-six times and never once indicates a distinct person from the LORD. Why is this if the Spirit is indeed a distinct person from YHWH?

Why, if there are internal relationships between three distinct persons in the Godhead, do we not read of love for or from the Spirit? Why is the Spirit absent from these key verses pertaining to relationships: Matthew 11:27; John 10:30; 14:10, 32; 16:3; 17:3, 21-22; I Cor 8:6; I Tim 2:5; 5:21; Acts 7:55; I John 1:3; Rev 3:5; 5:13; 7:10; 21:22; all salutations. How can it be that we can know the Father by knowing Jesus, but we cannot know Jesus (2nd person) by knowing the Father, if indeed there is a perichoresis of persons? (John 8:19; 14:7; II John) And why is it that the Spirit is not known by knowing Jesus?

Jesus is often distinguished from God Himself (Mat 27:46; Lk 2:52; 18:19; Jn 8:40, 54; 14:1; 17:3; 20:17; Acts 2:22; 4:10; 7:55; 10:38; Rom 10:9; I Cor 8:4-6; Eph 1:3; Heb 1:9; I Pet 1:3), but we do not conclude from such distinctions that Jesus is not God, and neither should we conclude from such distinction terminology in the NT that Jesus' deity is a distinct person in the Godhead. Such distinctions are never between equal persons in a Trinity. Our only two options to understand such distinctions, then, is to conclude that Jesus is not God, or to conclude that such distinctions occur because of the incarnation (God's humanity). There is no need to postulate a "distinct persons of one essence" view of God because of the distinction terminology. While there are passages which seem to indicate that the Son preexisted the incarnation (John 17:5; Col 1:15-16; Heb 1:1-2), there are also verses which seem to indicate that we preexisted (Eph 1:3; II Tim 1:9; Tit 1:2; I Pet 1:20). If we would not conclude that we preexisted, why conclude that the Son preexisted as a distinct person in the Godhead?

If God is an eternal triunity of persons, each person being distinct from the others, and each capable of giving and receiving love one to another, then why, if man is made in God's image, do we not mirror our Maker? We may have distinct aspects to our person (body, soul, spirit), but these aspects are not distinct persons, each capable of thought and interaction with one another. There is no love between my spirit and soul, or body and spirit. We are a unified monad, and so is God. As our love must be directed outward, so does His love.

A Trinitarian's Struggle With the Oneness Doctrine By Jason Dulle

Question: Greetings in our Lord Jesus Christ. I am a (former?) Trinitarian who is struggling with the Oneness doctrine. The only thing that keeps me from fully accepting Oneness at this point is Christology. I have read many works, and all seem to be either Apollinarian or Nestorian, neither of which I can accept. Imagine, then, my joy when I found you defending- of all things- a Chalcedonian Christology on apostolicnet! I was ecstatic at first to find you putting a voice to my very objections to other oneness authors in your article "Jesus' Prayers" and "The dual nature of Christ," but my heart sank when I found nothing which properly explained these things against a Trinitarian argument. I am beginning to suspect that, since Christianity is unique in that our theology must originate (and does, historically) from a Christology, Chalcedonian Christology is necessarily Trinitarian, while Oneness must be Nestorian. Yet help me understand your position!

Trinitarian Chalcedonians have it easy, for Christ never prays to God the Son, who (according to their theology) was incarnate, while in Oneness he actually prays to the very person who is incarnate within him. The concept of indwelling seems to solve this, recognizing that persons, not natures, pray, but as you say, it in fact produces two persons. You say in your article on the subject that the union was in fact that "the word became flesh" rather than indwelled flesh, and that "Jesus and the father are functionally distinct, which accounts for the differences we read about in the NT." But then how can "God manifested in flesh" still pray to "God as Spirit" without making a mere show of prayer? It sounds like what you propose is Sabellian in the sense that it suggests as successive revelations or modes of God. Yet this still

wouldn't solve the problem of how Jesus could pray to the father, yet be the name of the F, S, and H G, for successive revelations obviously cannot pray to one another. Furthermore, if the word became flesh, rather than indwelt flesh, what of the classic Oneness statement that "the Father reveals himself in the Son?" and that "in him dwelled all the fullness bodily?"

Answer: Thank you for your email. I hope that I can be of help to you. To find a Christology that keeps Christ as one person, both fully God and fully man, I do not believe that we must resort to Trinitarianism. In fact, I think Trinitarianism is very shallow at this point. You shared your concern that you are being led to believe that one must be Trinitarian to have a Chalcedonian understanding, and the Oneness understanding is necessarily Nestorian. That one need not have a Nestorian view of Christ to have a Oneness Christology is evident from myself. I am a thoroughgoing Oneness believer, placing no distinctions of personality in the Godhead, and yet I can hold to a Chalcedonian Christology that unites Christ's two natures into one inseparable person. What makes my understanding opposed to the Trinitarian understanding is that they say the second Person became a man, while Oneness believers maintain that the uni-personal God, the Father, became a man, known to us as Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I do not believe it really matters if one is Oneness or Trinitarian when it comes to whether or not they confess a Nestorian understanding of Christ, or a Chalcedonian understanding. Nestorius (or at least those who follow the doctrine of Nestorianism in his day) confessed the Trinity, yet His understanding of Christ was lacking.

Just as an overview here, I want to boil down the real differences between Oneness and Trinity, for this is the major difference in our Christology. The fundamental difference between the Oneness concept of God, and the Trinitarian concept is where the Biblical distinctions are placed. Trinitarians place an eternal distinction in person-hood between the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Oneness maintains that there is no distinction of personality in the Godhead. The Scripture never distinguishes between the deity of the Son and the deity of the Father, but all distinctions are between God as He exists omnipresent and transcendent, and God as He exists as a genuine human being. The distinction is not in the Godhead, but in the humanity of Jesus Christ. There is a three-fold revelation of God to man, but not a tripersonality in the Godhead. Oneness believers and Trinitarians are similar in that 1. both believe in one God; 2. both believe that the Father, Son, and Spirit are God; 3. both confess that the Scripture makes a distinction between the Father, Son, and Spirit; 4. both believe that the Son of God died on the cross, and not the Father; both believe that Jesus was praying to the Father, and not to Himself.

Oneness (O) believers and Trinitarians (T) differ in that 1. T believe that the one God consists of three eternal persons while O believes that the one God is one person; 2. T believe that the second person of the Trinity became incarnated while O believes that the Father, who is one person, became incarnated as the Son of God; 3. T believe that the Son is eternal while O believes that the Son did not exist until the incarnation, because the term refers to God as He exists as a man, and not as He exists in His essential deity; 4. T sees the Biblical distinctions between the Father and the Son to be a distinction in both personality and flesh while O believes that all distinctions are a result of the relationship of the Spirit of God to the incarnate God-man. As it pertains to Christology, then, the difference between Trinitarians (T) and Oneness (O) believers is that they say it was the second person of the Trinity, not the Father, who became man, while we maintain that the one God, known as the Father, became man. Jesus' testimony that the Father was in Him (John 10:38; 14:10-11; 17:21), and that those who saw Him saw the Father (John 14:7-11). Jesus is the express image of the Father's person (Hebrew 1:3). Trinitarians have a hard time explaining these verses because they maintain that the second person became flesh. If that is the case, and the Father is not embodied, why did Jesus always say the Father was in Him, and never say the second person was in Him? This is the only difference between O Christology and T Christology. Other than this difference, I am in complete agreement with the Chalcedonian definition.

I agree with you that every theology proper must grow out of a particular Christology. The Greek Apologists, particularly Justin, used their understanding of the Logos, and ran with it. This led them to propose distinct beings in the Godhead, even saying that the Logos was created, as did the Arians after them. The understanding was refined over the next 150 years, but ultimately the creeds of 325 and 381 developed the Trinitarian understanding from their understanding of Christ. Although this is true, it is also equally true that their understanding of the Trinity shaped their understanding of Christology. There was much confusion as to the nature of Christ, which was not settled until Chalcedon. If the early church's Christology was so central to the doctrine of the Trinity, Chalcedon should have preceded the other two great councils. That it did not, and looking at the heated battles that ensued from 381 to 451, makes it evident that there was no uniform Christology that did, nor could instruct the development of the Trinity. We must confess that both grew together to some extent. The doctrine of the Trinity, however, was much more dependent on Greek philosophy for its development, while Christology was based much more on the testimony of Scripture. The Trinity, although it used Scriptures for support, grew out of the Greek understanding of the impassability and immutability of God, mixed with the doctrine of the logos. The understanding of Christ's person, although informed by Greek philosophical concepts, was much more dependent on the Biblical data for its development and exposition.

Concerning your comment that the incarnation seems to makes two persons, I would say that it does not. What it does do is give God a new existence that He never experienced before. In the incarnation, when God became a man, He did not cease existing as Spirit only which is omnipresent. Even T must confess that God the Son did not cease to be omnipresent when being incarnated. If God the Son could be omnipresent as Spirit, and limited in the incarnation simultaneously, without being two persons, why can't the Father become a man, and yet still exist apart from flesh, and not be two persons? This isn't a hard concept to grapple with. You pointed out that the O difficulty arises in explaining why, if the God in Jesus is the Father, does Jesus pray to the Father. If Jesus is the Father, why pray to the Father? I believe the answer has to do with the kenosis (Philippians 2:6-11), when God willingly set aside the exercise of the divine prerogatives to take up a human existence, operating within the confines of an ordinary man. The deity of the Father was in Jesus, but latent in Him. In the incarnation, Jesus is distinct from the Father, not in His deity, but in His humanity. In the incarnation, Jesus must be spoken of as being distinct from the Father, because the Father is God apart from a human existence, while Jesus is God in a human existence.

You then asked, "But then how can 'God manifested in flesh' still pray to 'God as Spirit without making a mere show of prayer?" I don't claim to have a perfect answer, as nobody would, including Trinitarians. They need to wrestle with the reason God the Son would pray to God the Father if both are co-equal. What need does God the Son have of prayer? One only prays to their superior, and one they need dependence on. Trinitarians answer this by claiming a functional subordination in the incarnation. I agree with such an explanation. Jesus, because He was a man, needed to pray. It was not deity praying to deity, but the Son of God, a genuine human being, praying to God as He exists outside of a human existence. Although this is difficult for us to comprehend, it must be understood in light of God's kenosis (Philippians 2:6-11). God willing limited the exercise of His divine abilities in order to experience all that we experience as limited human beings. In this capacity, although ontologically Jesus was God, functionally He was a man dependent on the Holy Spirit.

I do not advocate Sabellianism in the least sense. There are no successive revelations of God, and neither is Jesus Christ only a temporary existence of God. The incarnation is permanent. Jesus, in His flesh, is in heaven right now right alongside of the Father. You are right in pointing out the error of Sabellianism. Successive modes could not pray to one another.