Knowing the First Person of the Trinity in God's Life and Ours

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THE OTHER FORGOTTEN PERSON

There was a move a few decades ago in some groups to administer baptism in the name, not of the Trinity, but taking the few texts such as Acts 8:16 very literally, in the name of Jesus only. This is to neglect other texts, and also most of early church practice, which has even practised a threefold baptism (LaCugna 1993:131), three immersions, not simply in the threefold name. However, the modern move has highlighted the fact that Christocentrism, in itself a great and necessary virtue, has sometimes eclipsed the Persons and works of Father and Spirit. As Jungmann has remarked, today we tend to make God and Christ synonymous (Marsh 1994:139).

Until the Pentecostal revival, it was often said that the Spirit is the "forgotten Person" of the Trinity. But with it the work of the Spirit has regained recognition, perhaps even an over-emphasis; certainly parts of the Church can indeed justly be said to have experienced revival. However, although the Person and role of the Spirit has resumed what is approaching its rightful place and emphasis, this is far from true of the Father. The first Person is now the "forgotten Person"! Libraries contain but little specifically on the Father; one I visited contained but two works, but, interestingly, each was written by a person active in the Charismatic movement.

However, a problem lies in realising such a hope. Whereas the work of Christ in redemption is clear, and while, at least since the Pentecostal "revival", and the same pertains as regards the activity of the Spirit, albeit with doubt and discussion in several quarters, the work of the Father seems largely invisible. How can this be? It seems paradoxical in respect of the one who is described as the "first", the one that theology has described as the source of all, the one who Jesus himself acclaimed and worshipped. Neglect of the Father is hardly the attitude of Jesus himself; an imitation of Jesus, which is the key Christian ethic, must give the Father his rightful place in a Christian worldview and practice. Neither is neglect of the Father the attitude of Paul, despite his rejoicing in all that Jesus did for our salvation. Indeed, he writes,

> When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one (1 Cor 15:28).

Incidentally here, Paul writes of subjection to God, not the Father. This is actually one of the causes for the problem, for there often is an understandable confusion between the Person of the Father and God. Is the Father God alone? Pannenberg points out that the New Testament often refers to "God" when it means the Father (Olson 1990:180). Rather in 1 Corinthians 15:28 there is an affirmation of the Trinity, and that all three Persons together, in full harmony, are God.

This gives a second major reason for the neglect of the Father in Christian life and belief. On the one hand He is not prominent in the Bible, and on the other, the Fatherhood of God relates to another neglected aspect of belief, the Holy Trinity. Christian faith should be a vital relationship with all three Persons, and in fact be thoroughly Trinitarian; but is it? Karl Rahner has famously pointed out that most Christians are practical monotheists (Rahner 1970:10). The doctrine of the Trinity should be central! The focus and the heart of faith should be on the nature of the Godhead. If it is not, all other aspects of faith are out of focus. Here again, however, recent years have seen a revival of interest in the Trinity. Many writers, such as Cunningham (1998:19) and Thompson (1994:v), in fact note a recent revival of interest in the Trinity, although it would seem that this interest is largely restricted to theology, and concentrates on an understanding of the relationships of the Persons. Thompson (1994:v) attributes this as partly due to increased interest in Eastern Orthodox theology. What is still largely neglected is a realisation of the role of each distinct Person in Christian life and experience. Surely if this is better understood, it can only be of benefit? However, it is a feature of modern church life that the Trinity is largely unknown; the reasons for this are not hard to find. But are they really Christian?

Butin (2001:xiv) comments that the Trinity is actually as important to ordinary Christians as to academics; it is the bedrock of faith (Marsh 1994:163). "The health of a doctrine of the Trinity is a good indicator of the overall vigor of a theological system" (Sanders 2014:37). Torrance calls it the "ground and grammar of theology" (Holmes 2014:54). C S Lewis said it matters more than anything else in the world (McCall 2014:137). Indeed, not only should all theology reflect the Trinity (Marsh 1994:173), but "a Trinitarian stamp must have been left on the physical universe and on man" (Cousins 1970:484).

Incidentally here, the Trinity is a fundamental and essential aspect of Christianity, distinguishing it from other faiths, which may well have triads, but never a Trinity (Pond 2000:152). It is then fundamental to evangelism; C S Lewis said that one reason he believed was that the Trinity could never have been dreamed up, only revealed, so indicates real truth (Pond 2000:115). Letham (2004:375) cites Sinclair Ferguson's observation that at the crisis of his life, in the upper room before going to Gethsemane and the cross, Jesus spent much time speaking to the disciples about the Trinity.

Then the Bible does make descriptions of the activity of separate Persons; are they fictitious? Surely not. So can the works of the Father be seen as directly applicable to Christian faith, and especially on a day to day basis, as with the work of the other two Persons? Christian life and belief can only be enriched by appreciating these. How can a Christian relate specifically to the Father? As a spinoff from that will come a better appreciation of the Trinity. If nothing else, surely Christians must seek to understand God better, so they can worship more adequately and fully? A. W. Tozer did say that what first comes into our minds when we think of God is the most important thing about us. An immediate example of this is the fact that the Bible does use the term "Father": what does this say about God? Is it enriching that we worship one who is specifically a Father? Perhaps more important is that reference to God as the Father is consistently Biblical; sadly, Athanasius said that this is the only reason for the appellation (Thompson 1994:117).

Incidentally here, Mackey (1983:194) comments that a lack of appreciation of the work and experience of the Holy Spirit can be traced back to a lack of appreciation of the Trinity. This may well be the case, but the opposite also follows, for if there was a more vital knowledge of and experience of the Spirit, this would in itself generate a curiosity about the Trinity.

Practically, even if the portrayal of God as Father must be to some extent metaphorical, it can then give a pattern for human fatherhood, specifically in relation to children (Cunningham 1998:294). This in itself is an adequate reason for God's adoption of this metaphor. While Feuerbach thought that belief in the Father is a projection of a human ideal, really the opposite should be the case. Humphrey (2009:98) reminds us that Ephesians 3:14 tells us that all fatherhood is derived from the Father.

At the same time, God's primary revelation to us is through his Son, thus in terms of his fatherhood; "God's relation to Israel is a revelation of the

nature of the Trinity" (Knight 1953:68). God has spoken to us by sonship (Heb 1:2), which implies the Father. This naturally suggests that the way in which a human relationship of father and son develops helps God to be understood. Coppedge (2007:9) points out that fatherhood is a universal experience, so becomes an object lesson to describe who God is and what he does. He then points out that the traditional approach of Aquinas should be reversed; rather we understand God in the light of the Trinity, and not *vice versa* (Coppedge 2007:19).

"Father" is obviously a term of relationship. I became a father when I had a son; before that I did not have that relationship. At least, perhaps I was a father, but in a different sense, because I had made a number of things; could I be said to be their father? Indeed it is in this last sense that most people think of the fatherhood of God; believing that he is father because he is creator. There are then three aspects to the Fatherhood of God; first he is father because of the relationship to the creation, second in relation to his Son Jesus, so in relation to the Trinity; how does God's Fatherhood relate to salvation? Then third, what is the relevance of God's Fatherhood in relationship to people? Each of these needs to be unpacked and qualified to understand what we mean when we speak of God as "Father".

It is then most significant that Israel was an adopted son of God. God says to Pharaoh through Moses to let his son go (Ex 4:22). Jesus saw his death as an "exodus" (Lk 9:31). Knight (1953:67) adds that Jewish writings on the Messiah equate "firstborn" and "beloved" (cf Hos 11:1). This is significant in the context of the Father's acclamation of Jesus at his baptism, "you are my beloved son". Edgar (2004:150) notes the link with Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42, which then couples Sonship with servanthood. In this case the servant of Isaiah 53 refers both to Israel and to Jesus. A further aspect here is that Israelite kings, especially David, were called God's sons. 2 Samuel 7:14 can refer to David, to Israel, and to the Church. This all means that it is justifiable to understand the nature of the first Person not just in the ontological relation to the second, but how it is revealed in his dealings with Israel and the Church. Incidentally, this means that Christians as adopted are a continuation of Israel (cf Rom 11:26). Of course, both Israel and the Church are adopted, while Jesus is unique (Knight 1953:69).

It must be added that a further significant reason for the neglect of the first Person is that due to movement in modern society, there is understandable reticence to speak of the Father; it seems to savour of unfashionable patriarchalism (Butin 2001:9,68). Some, such as LaCugna (1993:268), feel

that the doctrine of the Trinity has been used to justify the subordination of women (cf also Barrett 2010:221f). Especially when theology attributes creation to the Father; this seems to hark back to a belief that the mother was simply a garden to provide an environment for the seed of the father. This is one reason for the popularity of referring to such as "creator, redeemer and sustainer", although this is criticised (Cunningham 1998:73n41, cf Peters 1993:52). Soulen (2014:116) notes a few other ancient suggestions. Wainwright's belief is that this tends to Sabellianism (Thompson 1994:115). Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier are not names but functions (Quere 1985:5); Karkkainen (2004:230) points out that they are only valid *ad extra* (referring to God's action in the world), and that LaCugna observes that the need *ad intra* (God's inner being) is of relational terms.

Most significantly, that picture can spoil the emphasis on personal relationship and so God's love. It may be added here that the very act of creation, and then of salvation, is from an overflow of God's basic nature, which is love, predominantly of course in the immanent Trinity between the Persons; Moltmann suggests that the idea of the world is inherent in the Father's love for the Son (Molnar 2014:88). Torrance follows Athanasius and insists that it is "more godly and true to signify God from the Son and call him Father than to name him from his works alone and call him Unoriginate" (Molnar 2014:77). Likewise Barth who says that we cannot say anything higher about God than that he is Father, Son and Spirit, and so is love in himself; thus it refers to the inner nature of God, who he is, not just what he does (Molnar 2014:81). The picture of "Father" reflects what is the basic human experience, that of a home (Coppedge 2007:220). Then we experience fatherhood, but not really that of creation, which is appreciated with the mind but not existentially. Interestingly here, Coppedge (2007:255) points out that the early Church clearly distinguished God's roles as creator and Father. However, he then says that God became creator, but was always Father. This latter however does need qualification; while the second Person eternally related to the first, he only became Son at the incarnation. Molnar (2014:84) also points out that one of the issues for Greek thought was the belief that creation is eternal; modern science and thought of course sees evidence for a real beginning.

Most importantly, God becomes our Father in salvation. Moltmann (eg 1981:164) tries to keep this but avoid the stigma of the male image by speaking of the "motherly Father" (and fatherly Mother), noting some relevant Biblical images and the decision of the 675AD Council of Toledo that the Son came *de utero Patris*, "from the womb of the Father". It must

be noted that the Trinitarian language was developed to avoid problems, and that in fact, Trinitarian language may well help more egalitarian and participatory relationships (Butin 2001:11). Significantly, the heart of the problem is the names “Father” and “Son”, so leading to proposals which avoid sexual reference, but also just roles (Butin 2001:69). One example could be “Parent” and Christ, but this might produce a loss of the radicality of the incarnation.

It must be noted here that the Biblical reference to God is very definitely male, indeed more than the English translations really indicate. Mankowski (2001:37) gives the example of Psalm 119:137, where the English is readily non-gender specific, in contrast to the Hebrew. Nevertheless, he can insist that this is free from any notion of sexual generation (Mankowski 2001:39); this stands in stark contrast with the usual view of the times outside Israel. He explains that God’s fatherhood is an act of will, of decision, free from procreation.

While there is really little doubt that it is essential that the key beliefs of the faith, such as the full deity of Christ and the unity of God are to be maintained, the Fatherhood of God remains a second level doctrine, only held because of others. However, as Hilary of Poitiers (300?-368) declared (*de Trinitate1.17*), “the very center of a saving faith” is “not merely in God, but in God as Father” (Humphrey 2009:81). As we look at the first Person of the Trinity, who he is and what he does, my prayer is that the words of the apostle John might indeed be true of us:

> I write to you, children, because you know the Father (1 Jn 2:13).

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

I was always more interested in the sciences than the arts subjects. At school, I naturally went in that direction, taking Maths, Physics and Chemistry at "A" level. Why not biology? It was definitely fascinating to learn how living things worked, but I could never remember all the terms!

The word "science" means "knowing". I particularly enjoyed the practical side of the sciences, and learnt far more from that than from books. Not surprisingly; we learn from experience. Not that books are inessential, far from it! We cannot learn everything from our own experience, but benefit from the experience of those who have gone before, and recorded what they discovered. This does lead us to a third source of knowledge after books and experience, and it is this that has been most productive in science. God has given us minds, and we can use them to deduce facts, or rather suggest theories, about aspects of reality that we have not, or cannot, experience directly. We form hypotheses, and then try to test whether they are true.

Our knowledge of the Father then has these same three sources. Firstly, as for all Christians, what the Bible tells us is vital. This is especially true for those, who like me, do not believe that the Bible is just from the experience and belief of those in the past, but is inspired directly from God. Then secondly, our own experience must also be vital, always bearing in mind that it can never be totally reliable. Then thirdly, what we believe can be seen to make sense, and produce hypotheses about the Father, which hopefully add to real knowledge.

It is here that there is a difficulty, for the Biblical material pertaining to both the understanding of the Trinity, and, relating to that, the Father, is not very great, and at the same time often not clear. This means that especially the doctrine of the Trinity is dependent heavily on logic rather than being clearly Biblical. Mackey (1983:153) comments that the starting point for Augustine's theology is then the Nicene definition. Of course, the material that led to this was originally the Bible, but it does mean that much Trinitarian theology is distanced from what should be the primary source.

It hardly needs to be said that our knowledge of God must be restricted, and far from being either complete or adequate. Firstly we are speaking of God, and human beings can never understand what that means, let alone what it means that such a being can be called "Father". Then not only is our knowledge fundamentally limited, but the Father has chosen to hide himself, and reveal much less than he in fact could. He maintains a high level of secrecy, and a fundamental separation. We must just be grateful for all that he has chosen to reveal, and all that we can deduce about him.

My interest in science had to flow in a practical direction. I could never seek to acquire knowledge for its own sake, but for its application. My Maths was "Applied", not "Pure". In fact without the application, I soon lost both interest and understanding. The same is true of theology. I used to emphasise to my students that there is a big difference between "knowing" and "knowing about". If our knowledge about the Father is to grow, it must lead to a growing relationship to him, and this in turn should result in positive effects in our lives. This will be in our relating to the Father, but then, in obedience to him, in our relation to others; after all, we can be children of the one Father.

Biblical material

Just as with the Trinity, there is little persuasive reason to believe in the Fatherhood of God apart from Biblical revelation. Neither the Trinity or the Fatherhood of God can be deduced from logic and reason; investigation of the Father must then start with the Bible. Then neither of those is either clear or prominent! For many people, this immediately raises doubt about the validity of the doctrine, and so its relevance. Although in past centuries the Bible was viewed as absolutely authoritative, this has ceased to be the case. Certainly the development of ideas into the Enlightenment was not a good situation; here even God became of secondary concern, let alone any refinement of belief such as the Trinity. Schleiermacher even relegated the doctrine of the Trinity to an appendix in his theology. Such a lack of emphasis is common, even in Hodge's *Systematic Theology* (Letham 2004:272), or in J I Packer's *Knowing God* (Letham 2004:408). Letham (2004:410) points out how few hymns are actually Trinitarian, while being remarkably devout. It has been seen as something essential to belief, but irrelevant. Kant said that it is irrelevant whether we worship three gods or ten, for "it is impossible to extract from this difference any different rules for practical living" (Erickson 2000:70). Olson (1990:183) does observe some rediscovery of

the Trinity in the attempt of Lessing and Hegel to renew the doctrine by idealist philosophy. This path did lead to Barth's reaction, and his suggestion of a Trinitarian basis in revelation. However, despite these attempts, the Bible must remain foundational for the doctrine of the Trinity, and therefore also of the Father. The two are naturally looked at together. Coppedge (2007:34,305) observes that the Trinity is foundational to the New Testament, reference to it starting and completing most of the books. The experience of Fatherhood completely changed the perspective of how God relates to the world. We can approach God not so much as sovereign Lord, which of course he is, but rather emphasising belonging to him as children.

It is, incidentally, interesting that the rediscovery of the authority of the Bible at the time of the Reformation did not produce a revival of interest in the Trinity (Mackey 1983:190). However, this is largely because there is little direct reference to the Trinity in the Bible. In any case, it focussed its attention on the work of Christ, the second Person. Sanders (2010:40f) also suggests that it has been hard for people to see a connection with salvation, which has naturally been of major concern. This is a major misunderstanding; here as in all other areas, the Trinity is foundational (cf Sanders 2010:70f). It is also interesting that the growth in the experience of the Spirit which started with the emergence of Pentecostalism, although it stimulated study of the Bible, was only secondarily relevant for the knowledge of the Father. It is actually not surprising that there is in any case little Biblical reference to the work of the Father, as he acts mainly through the agency of the other two Persons.

There is indeed very little indication in the Old Testament of any action specific to the Father, with a mere five texts (Deuteronomy 32:6, Isaiah 63:16, 64:8, Malachi 1:6, 2:10). These call God "Father", so recognising fatherly qualities in him, but there are no Trinitarian implications. Fatherhood is a metaphor, never a name, which would for Jews be seen as lacking reverence (Marsh 1994:29). It must however be observed that plurality in God is not foreign to the Old Testament (Thompson 1994:10); the fact that this is in the context of absolute monotheism immediately underlies a Trinitarianism which implies both monotheism and some form of plurality. Letham (2004:27) points out that the name "Father" usually refers to the covenant relation with Israel, and therefore to God's free choice.

More surprisingly, the situation is not really that different in the pages of the New. There are almost no references in the gospels to the action of the

Father. Although Jesus constantly refers to him, there is almost nothing attributed to him. So although in the three synoptic gospels there are many references to the Father, there is almost nothing pertaining to specific activity in the world. Where there is some, it is of two sorts. Firstly there are a few texts indicating the provision of the Father, such as his care for the birds (Matthew 6:26); "yet your heavenly Father feeds them". Here it does not need to be reference to specific action, but to the fact that the way that the world operates results in food for the birds. Secondly, while there are several indications of the Father's knowledge of what is happening, and of his response to this, this can well pertain to God's general knowledge of the world. Such rewards can also readily be understood as eschatological, so not in this time.

Apart from these, there was the revelation to Peter of the fact that Jesus is the Christ (Matt 16:17), the Son of God; this is naturally understood of revelation through the Spirit. Then there is the fact of prayer, such as the Lord's prayer (Matt 6:9), or the hearing by the Father of those agreeing together (Matt 18:19). In both cases, those who pray are specifically identified as disciples; Jesus specifically indicated, in his prayer to the Father (Matt 11:27), that nobody could know the Father except through the Son. It might just be noted here that the text most significant to the "prosperity gospel" (Mk 11:24) does not specifically mention the Father at all.

The only exceptions to this absence from the world would seem to be at the baptism of Jesus (Lk 3:22), at the Transfiguration (Lk 9:35), and at the time of the visit by some Greeks (Jn 12:28), where there was a voice from heaven. Significantly, the message of the voice was the same on all three occasions, identifying Jesus as the Son. This is of course consistent with the function of the Father in the creation, designating identity and relationships.

All in all, it is hardly surprising that none of my basic theology texts even lists the category of "Father"! Essentially, there is no direct action on the world by the Father; all is actually that by the Son and Spirit. In an older book, Bickersteth (c1956:39f) comprehensively catalogues the actions and natures of the Father and Son, but then comments that most of the references listed of the Father would actually be of the Son. To give one example, the appearance to Moses of God at the burning bush (Ex 3) was probably, as other Old Testament theophanies, and just as the theophany to Paul on the Damascus road, that of the second Person and not the first (Humphrey 2009:83). After all, they are call narratives. The implication of

this was that the name revealed to Moses was not that of the Father, but of the Son. Indeed, Paul's favourite title for Christ was "Lord", which goes back to that point (Ex 6:3). The name revealed to Moses was of course "I am that I am", which is then claimed by Jesus on a number of occasions (eg Jn 8:58), and recognised as a claim to divinity (eg Jn 18:6). Thus Humphrey (2009:81) says that "the LORD of the Old Testament is the Son incarnate". Indeed, she then asks, "what if the major actions of the New Testament are to reveal and indeed to *give* us a proper Father (as well as the Holy Spirit)". There is then a distinction to be made between the titles given to the first two Persons, where in general the first is referred to as "God", the second as "Lord" (eg Rom 1:7). Perhaps a distinction can be made between the first which is rather an ontological term, and the second which is relational.

Why is the first Person "Father"?

Until the coming of Jesus, referring to God as Father was rare, and certainly was not connected to the fundamental nature of fatherhood, that of procreation (Edgar 2004:137). In the Old Testament, calling God the "father" implied rather the qualities of a father, care, provision, authority; it is a metaphor (Marsh 1994:29). This idiom was in fact not uncommon; two of the disciples of Jesus, James and John, were called "sons of thunder" (Mk 3:17).

When Jesus came, he strikingly changed that emphasis, now making reference to his heavenly Father the main description of who God is. Even at the age of twelve, at his *bar mitzvah*, he claimed particular knowledge of his Father, and, importantly, of the role that he had in serving him. Was this still a reference only to the qualities of the first Person, or was the meaning more as we connect with the word "father"?

It would certainly seem that the latter was what Jesus intended to convey. Toon (in Letham 2004:36) says that it is then a personal name, not a simile or metaphor. Right at the start of his ministry came his baptism, which served to identify him. From the cloud came the words, "this is my beloved Son" (Matt 3:17). Incidentally here this was an identification, not a start, of Sonship, which was at conception (Edgar 2004:128). Surely this means more than the common Hebrew idiom of likeness. Humphrey (2009:96) bemoans the fact that many people, including ministers, see only this meaning, and therefore say it is just a metaphor and so expendable.

Then at the beginning of the gospels comes the Christmas story, and of the origin of a vitally new way of thinking of God. The term "Father" gains a second meaning (Thompson 1994:115). Why is the first Person Father? Essentially, because of the Christmas story, and a key feature of it, the virgin birth. The absence of a human father indicates God as the Father of Jesus (Edgar 2004:128). This is a stupendous claim, and it is quite understandable that some cannot accept this; this is not only due to the biological "impossibility", but that there is, apart from the gospels, little reference to it elsewhere. Incidentally here, the explanation of the means of the incarnation was that it was through, not the Father, but the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:20, Lk 1:33); as is normal, the Father acts through the Spirit. It must however be noted that although there are no other direct statements, there are a number of implications of it such as Matthew 13:55, where it might have been expected that Joseph would have been mentioned. The other fundamental reason is the fact that Jesus consistently referred to his Father, even from the cross.

Indeed, even a very quick look at the Bible reveals the fact that the vast majority of references to the Father are found on the New Testament, and most of those refer to his relationship to Jesus. The Father is predominantly understood as the Father of the Son; this is Paul's understanding (Edgar 2004:56). For Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocians, "Father" does not denote the essence of God, but the relation to the Son (Letham 2004:160). This immediately brings in the Trinity, for this is the Christian understanding of that relationship, then enlarged by the further relationship of the Holy Spirit to Father and Son. This is then the primary meaning, but of course must be qualified; McGrath (1997:240) refers to Mary Hayter, and her recognition that fatherhood is a suitable model for God, as is motherhood; but insists emphatically there is no sexuality. Grenz (2001:190f) insists that on the basis of the "image" reference (Gen 1:27), sexuality must be an aspect of God; indeed for people, it is the primary identifier. However, sexual identity means far more than procreation; it affects entire personalities; as such it can be applicable to God. Interestingly, Barth also saw sexuality in the Genesis narrative, however his stress falls on the face-to-face relationship (Blocher 1984:81).

Indeed, as it primarily means relating to God, it was only with Jesus, as the Son of God, that the Fatherhood of God became prominent. With this focus in John's gospel, there are more references, but almost all are of Jesus' relation to God. The Father works, but through the Son and the sending of the Spirit, very prominent in John 14-16. The Father has given

all into the hands of the Son (Jn 3:35); Jesus emphasises that seeing him is seeing the Father (Jn 14:9). We see the Father in Jesus, who is the image of God (*charactēr* Heb 1:3, *eikōn* Col 1:15). When referring to John 17, Hilary of Poitiers stressed that Jesus sought to make God known specifically as Father; "the revelation is not of the Father manifested as God, but of God manifested as the Father" (Torrance 1996:139). Then if Jesus had such a vital appreciation of the Father, that should mean that Christians, as adopted children, should have as well. But this is not the case.

Nevertheless, a striking aspect of the New Testament account is that people can now call God their Father. While before Jesus the Jews rarely did so, Christians realised that in their salvation, they were children of God.

Indeed, the wonder of the faith is that we are adopted into the life of the Trinity, then sharing in its eternal life. God is called an "adopting Father" in Exodus (Ex 6:6-8, 4:23) (Quere 1985:5). Just as creation flowed from the love in the Trinity, so the aim of the Christian life is to "participate in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit" (Peters 1993:122). This expresses a theology of relationship (LaCugna 1993:22). The book of Hebrews (Heb 12:7f) in particular emphasises that becoming children of God then leads immediately to the discipline of their Father; which is for good, in the development of that relationship.

Holmes (2014:29) highlights what became an issue in the early centuries; does "Fatherhood" refer to the substance or activity of the first Person? If the former, then the Son is different; this then can imply being less. But if the latter, the Son is a creation. However, what was not appreciated at the time is that although the latter, the Son is not the one created, we are. Jesus calls him "Father" in anticipation of the achievement of human salvation.

On the one hand, this is because Christianity is not primarily a belief system, nor a lifestyle, but essentially a relationship of union with Christ. We share in his sonship, and so in the relation to the first Person as Father. Again incidentally, this sonship is by the action of the Spirit (Jn 3:5-8). Then on the other, because of that, the first person becomes a father to those who believe; the picture that Jesus gave of the new birth is more than just a picture.

Salvation is not just a matter of sins forgiven, amazing that it is, but the gift of eternal life. The Spirit bonds us to the life, death and resurrection of

Jesus, so that we can be saved in union with him. The early Church Father Irenaeus is helpful, for he saw the process of salvation in terms of what is called “recapitulation”. In our union with the life of Christ, we die to sin in him, and then rise with him into newness of life. We will then likewise share in his glorification. And in that union, we become children of the Father.

What then is significant is that God revealed himself, through Jesus, as Father, and that, moreover, in a person’s coming to Jesus in faith and accepting salvation through what he did on the cross, he or she is then adopted into the family of God by adoption (Rom 8:15, Gal 4:5). Thereby the family of God increased and exhibited its oneness by the harmony that God intended, which should be characteristic of the Christian life. Emphatically, that oneness is due to being related, organically, to the one God (Eph 4:4f).

This then gives rise to a further issue, for if the first Person becomes father of Christians, who is the mother? Any new life requires two parents. The obvious answer here is that of Augustine, that she is the Church, the body of Christ. A person is decidedly changed, enlarged by the new birth, and then the Church feeds and nurtures the new baby to maturity. Thus despite the attractiveness of the metaphor, the Church does not become the bride of Christ; it is the bride! Indeed, it is the new Jerusalem which is the bride (Rev 21:2).

Monotheism

The information that the Bible gives which leads to belief in the Father and then of the Trinity is not only from fairly direct statements, but of other factors which contribute to the ideas. One of these is monotheism, the oneness of God.

In the world of the Bible, there was, at least nominally, awareness and reference to deity, but this was invariably of a multitude of gods and other spiritual forces. The ethos was of polytheism. In contrast, as is often pointed out, the distinctive of Israel’s faith was its unswerving monotheism. The *Shema*, Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear O Israel, the LORD our God is one Lord” is often seen as the basic creed. This belief was strengthened by the pronouncements of the prophets, but more especially by its history. The disaster of the exile was interpreted as due to idolatry of various kinds. By the time of Jesus that belief was firmly entrenched, and underpinned their resistance to Greek and Roman rule. It must however be

added here that some do observe that the concept of plurality in the Godhead was not totally foreign to Jewish belief (Wainwright 1962:37).

It was into that context that Jesus came with his claim of divinity, emphatically beside that of the Father. Naturally the monotheism of the Jews could not just be abandoned, neither could it be reinterpreted as tritheism. It was this that underlay the doctrine of Trinity. The early Church was emphatically monotheistic; Edgar (2004:300) believes that the affirmation of 1 Corinthians 8:6 "For us there is but one God" is a conscious reflection of the *Shema*.

In fact, this oneness, relating to the one God, follows from the fact that God is Father. As is obvious, a person only has one father, and the Church as the body of Christ likewise can only have one Father. By its very nature there can only be one father to a person. While creation, or manufacture, can be by many people, it is not so for fatherhood. Thus if God were characterised as creator, this does not totally exclude the possibility of others, even in the making of a single person. If there could be two or more creators, then they could both contribute to any object, or person. Of course, people cannot actually create anything substantial, despite our looseness of language.

It must of course be added here that although one child can only have a single father, one father can have multiple children. It is therefore necessary for the absolute uniqueness of the Son of God to be stressed, as indeed John does (Jn 1:18). It must also be stressed that adoption does not make us divine (*theosis*); the confession of Athanasius was not to full deity.

The Father as a Person

It is very natural for us to think of God primarily in terms of power, and perhaps as an influence. In this case it is probable that the idea of God as personal does not come readily to mind. In the epic "Star Wars", they asked that "the Force be with you", and it is questionable whether this includes the idea of personality, or indeed of any limitation. After all, the idea of a person naturally suggests not so much power but rather the opposite, of limitation. It is really beyond questioning that God is powerful, and even all-powerful; the question is whether God is also personal, and if so, how this is understood.

I quite often work on electricity, and when I do so, I am always very careful to turn off the mains; I am well aware of the power lurking in the system. However, although there is tremendous power, it only affects us if we touch it; we must relate to it. It is the same with God, the Almighty, or all powerful. The main term used in the New Testament is that of "Lord" (*kurios*, which was the chosen translation of the name of God in the Greek translation of the Old Testament). This word however does carry with it the sense of relationship, as well as that of power. A lord is not just someone who possesses power, but power that affects others. It is not like that of electricity, or even like that of a virus, for those powers act indiscriminately, without reference to who or what is affected. A lord can choose, can decide; he or she is a person. Referring to God as "Father" naturally implies personality, which must suggest relationship. Incidentally here, this immediately introduces the aspect of gender, and thus of maleness, and in particular of its closeness (Grenz 2001:200,1).

In the New Testament, God is spoken of in the same way, as Lord, but it remarkably adds the name that Jesus used, that God is his Father. When we refer to God as "Father", again the idea of power must come to mind, but now the aspect of relationship must become more prominent. Although fathers may be quite distant and uninvolved with their children, and even cold towards their wives, the basic nuance must be of relationship.

The word "Lord" also suggests a further implication, that of individuality. Particularly in the world-view at the time of the Bible, power was concentrated in one person. Although Israel went into the promised land without a king, the pressures from outside eventually prompted the need for concentration of power in one person for the sake of efficiency.

It was these two nuances of a person which were dominant for a very long time. The classic definition of a person was given by Boethius (c480 – 524 AD) who defined a person as "the individual substance of a rational nature". It was by this idea that God was described as a Person. The question is then whether such a definition does apply to God.

The Father in heaven

A link with the creation also suggests that God is not himself a part of the world, but is distinct from it; rather he belongs to a different reality, which the Bible calls "heaven". A pantheism which identifies God and the world denigrates God and leaves the question of their origin unresolved. The Father does not link directly to the physical, but to the conceptual and

spiritual; we worship in "spirit and truth" and so not in any sense with the material. There is no idolatry. This point must however not be overstated; God does link with the material, as in the incarnation, and we use the material, as in the communion service. However he maintains essential transcendence.

In the practice of the day, a person was commonly identified by the name of his father, or by the place where he came from. I do say "he", as a woman was identified by her husband. Thus Paul was described as from Tarsus, and Jesus from Nazareth. Jesus was called son of Joseph (Jn 6:42), as it was supposed he was, and, significantly, "son of man". Hence, when Jesus taught us to pray, we are told to address our Father in heaven. This of course does not imply that there is any other god from whom he needs be distinguished, but there are certainly many other things and people in whom people put their trust. Of course, the Father could not be identified by his father, unlike the Greek and Roman gods who were children of others.

As part of this, because heaven, and therefore God, are so different from us, they can be totally good and holy. It is notable that the "Lord's prayer" that Jesus taught continues, "May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"; heaven is the place where the will of God is done completely, where there is nothing contrary to him at all. That is in stark contrast to the earth. This indicates, *inter alia*, the freedom in the world that enables the possibility of sin.

However, this then does indicate that one intention that God had in creation was to bring heaven, its attitudes and values, to the earth. If the Father is the father of Christians, he is, by his agent, present on the earth, which should then be able to increasingly reflect his nature and attitudes.

Then the identifying of the Father as "in heaven" should indicate that our ultimate trust is not in anyone or anything on the earth. It may not be immediately obvious on a day-to-day basis, but this world is not permanent, so any trust in any aspect of it will ultimately fail. Whereas the word "Father" naturally implies the event of procreation, it is because God did intervene into time with the sending of his Son.

Indeed, the location of the Father in heaven is an indication and reminder that the Father is transcendent, apart from us. We have no real appreciation or experience of heaven, except a very few times when it was "opened" for people to see it (eg Acts 7:55), or even enter it (eg 2 Cor 12:2). It is

generally beyond our experience, but heaven is part of a spiritual reality, distinct from the physical and material world.

In his transcendence, the Father then has no interaction with the creation; God only acts through the Son and the Spirit. However, as with other aspects of God, the Father limits himself in his dealings with the world, especially for salvation. Hence he limits his transcendence, so does relate more fully with us. In John 14:23, in his final discourse before going to the cross, Jesus amazingly says, “if anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come and make our dwelling with him”. The passage is in the context of the sending of the Holy Spirit to empower Christians and the Church after the death and ascension of Jesus. He will come to dwell with them!

The hidden Father

One of the amazing features of the Biblical story is that God appears to, and interacts with, people. The Old Testament is replete with this, and of course the New Testament is centred upon the fact of incarnation, that God does not just interact with us, but that he actually came, and that many people could directly experience “Emmanuel”, God with us. Then that experience of God continued after the ascension, but then in the coming of the Holy Spirit, so that people can experience the presence of God on a daily basis. Perhaps the experience of the Spirit is much more revelation than interaction, as prayer to the Spirit is rare; however, the reality of the experience of God through him is striking. In a variety of ways, therefore, God is not simply believed in, but “knowing about” has become “knowing”.

This is not in itself experience of the Father. He remains hidden, technically “transcendent” or separate from us and our experience. Peters (1993:174) believes that “The symbol of the Father communicates the sense of the beyond, the eternal and ineffable abyss”; he contrasts this with the symbol of the Son, who, he feels, communicates a sense of the intimate. On the other hand, Coppedge (2007:300) suggests that God’s Fatherhood implies immanence; at the same time it prevents an over-emphasis on sovereignty; he interacts, but does not just impose.

God’s transcendence is reflected in the Bible. “For you, O LORD, are the Most High over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods” (Ps 97:9). He is different from us: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts

than your thoughts." (Is 55:8-9, cf Num 23:19). There is "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph 4:6). Likewise, he is eternal (Rev 22:13, Ps 93:2, 90:4, 2 Pet 3:8). These naturally mean that he is hidden from us. Nevertheless, this does not mean deism, a belief that God does not interact with the world, as transcendence is balanced by God's immanence, or presence. Of course these are actually opposite, and incompatible; most religions opt for one or the other; Marsh (1994:21) says that Judaism therefore stresses the transcendent. It is the fact that God is Trinity which means that both attributes can be held together.

The early Karl Barth, reacting vehemently to the theological views of his day, emphasised the transcendence of God, that he is absolutely different from the world, and only what he chooses to reveal can be known of him; "he is the hidden one" (Erickson 1998:340). Barth rejected the ideas of natural theology, that something of the nature of God may be deduced from the world. "He is separated from us by an infinite qualitative distinction". As Calvin said, "God, to keep us sober, speaks sparingly of his essence" (Sanders 2014:41). Erickson (1998:342) helpfully illustrates this, such as by noting it is like a vertical dimension to those only aware of a surface. Certainly it is not normal to perceive or recognise a spiritual dimension. What a Trinitarian model reveals is that despite the gifts of the second and third Persons, the transcendence of God is not compromised.

It is apparent that there is a difference between the experiences of the Trinitarian Persons. They are not experienced in the same way at all; and it would seem that while the experience of the Spirit is ongoing, that of the second Person was temporary, but the first Person is not experienced at all. Tertullian had appreciated that the Father remains transcendent, invisible, so God acting and being seen only in the Son; he is the visible deity (Mackey 1983:126).

This does have to be qualified slightly, insofar as there were just a couple of times when the Father was experienced. Firstly there was the voice of the Father at Jesus' baptism and at the transfiguration. This latter is actually viewed as particular evidence of the reality of faith in 2 Peter 1:18f; it is not just ideas, but is an experienced reality. There was also a voice from heaven when some Greeks came seeking Jesus (Jn 12:28); Jesus said this was for the sake of the hearers. In these few cases, the voice was all that there was, with no other experience. In fact, these are the only evidence for the Father; our reason for belief in him primarily rests on the words of Jesus.

The transcendence of the Father is actually more complete than the Bible appears to indicate at a quick reading. Despite the common assumption to the contrary, references to God in the Old Testament need not be of the Father, but are rather of the Son. Thus, for example, the appearance to Moses in the bush (Ex 3) may be understood to be of the Son, and the name that he gave, "I am", was his name, as indeed claimed by Jesus on a number of occasions. This of course does not deny the possibility that some of the words and appearances were of the Father, but it would not seem likely. Just as creation was enacted by the second Person, so likewise ongoing dealings with that creation.

Of course, before the coming of Jesus, there was no definite reason for belief in a Father as such. The handful of references to a divine Father are readily understood as the qualities of a father, not as existential reality. Indeed, in the milieu of the day, God was emphatically seen, at least officially, as one and one only. There was no hint of any plurality in God. At the same time, there was little experience, in any personal sense, of the third Person, the Spirit.

The conclusion must be that if Jesus was correct in his constant referring to his Father, this Father remains hidden from us, not experienced, and it would seem, not directly active in the world. Just as the traditional appropriation of creation to the Father is a theological fiction, so is his ongoing action. What is done can readily be seen as done by the Son. This is actually an aspect of God's *kenōsis* (emptying); he does not trumpet his presence, although of course what he has done is a sufficient testimony to him.

Nevertheless, the statement of the Father's separation does need a bit of qualification. Jesus did urge prayer to the Father, even if it would seem that in general it was actually to himself. He did indicate that the Father provides food for people (Jn 6:32). However, the reference is to "true" bread, contrasting with the manna; as he explains, he is referring to himself (Jn 6:35). The reference is not to daily provision but to the incarnation. The next few verses there have to do with those the Father gives (Jn 6:37, 44). This section is particularly relevant to the debate over predestination; it has to do with God's overall plan, rather than affairs of this life.

Of course, this does not mean that the other Persons are visible! The Son is ascended, and the Spirit's work is easily missed. In fact, it is the work of the Father in the organisation of the world that is perhaps most visible, and

so gives the most evidence to the world of the fact that God is. Otto (1992:508) points out that Jews have felt no need for arguments for God, since "he is clearly perceived in the things that are made" (Rom 1:20); for them the world's existence is sufficient. Of course they do not accept the revelation of the deity of the Son, and neither do they accept the evidence of the action of the Spirit; these are the other two pillars of Christian assurance.

Kenōsis of the Father

The separation, transcendence, of the Father, means that he has in fact limited himself. In order for any other existence to be possible, it was necessary for God to limit himself to enable the existence of an entity outside of himself, and in order to give it a measure of freedom. "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction" is a fundamental maxim; an act of doing affects the doer. This is true for God as well; God changes! The well-known passage in Philippians 2, in particular, highlights the self-limitation of the Son, and Moltmann (1993:102) then speaks of the *kenōsis* of the Spirit. In the *perichōrēsis* of the Persons, this is also experienced by the Father. However, it may be suggested that there is also an aspect of *kenōsis* particular to the Father, which would then of course be shared with the other Persons. Whereas he could lay down the pattern of the world in a total and complete way, he has limited this, which allows a measure of indeterminacy. Moltmann (1993:80) points out that the very act of creation is a further limitation, as God chose just one of the possibilities. In any case, he limited his absolute divinity insofar as there is a Son and Spirit (Cunningham 1998:295); such a statement must be seen in the light of the total harmony of the Persons.

The open theists commonly assert that far from compromising God's power, their stand rather enhances it (Boyd 2001:147). A fixed, so known future, effectively limits God. On the contrary, self-limitation enables a real gain for God, enabling relationships with free agents that would otherwise not have been possible (Pinnock 2002:216). Again, an open future means that God is open to being affected by it, while opening to relationships involves being affected by them. In fact, God is so great that he is able to cope with the uncertainty generated by the freedom of others. The point is also made that he would have been limited if he could not have created free agents; indeed, although there are things that God cannot do, such as sin or die, these are in fact negations of limitation.

These experiences of self-limitation naturally relate to the nature and activities of the Persons, and then result in suffering particular to each Person. Moltmann (1993:69), as many others, reacts to the traditional view of the impassibility of God, tracing it to the incarnation. This relates to the Son, and it might be added that the reason for his suffering is not just entry into a world of suffering, sharing in it, but because suffering is a result ultimately of sin, he suffers because of that sin. The Father, however, also suffers, but not directly from the incarnation. Rather, as the giver of order and interaction, he suffers when these are compromised.

Indeed, it must be that suffering is inherent in fatherhood, just because fatherhood implies limitation. The very fact of another life impinges on a father. For human fathers, there is suddenly a great restriction in freedom, great demands on resources of time and money, just because the family has been enlarged. Then the demands of a new baby become even greater as the child grows, and use up even more resources, affecting the life of a father more and more. Then there will be even more suffering as the child becomes independent and does things that the father just does not approve of. Certainly it is the sin of the child that causes a large part of the distress of the father. Of course, much of this does not actually apply to the Father, especially as the Son was the perfect Son. The Father could testify that he was well-pleased by his Son (Lk 3:22).

However, another cause of the pain experienced by earthly fathers does apply to God. Eventually, when the child grows up there comes a time when he or she becomes really independent, and for many it is the time when they leave home. It was certainly a pain to the Father when Jesus left heaven and took flesh; and of course the real suffering came later.

Perhaps it must then be added that in all the experience of the child and the effect on the parents, there do come many compensations. What father can fail to feel pride and joy at the accomplishments of his child! In the midst of this comes what must be a really great joy, when the child brings home an intended spouse to meet the parents. And then comes the gift of grandchildren, bringing, as has been said, a renewed joy of parenthood, but without much of the pain and responsibility! Is this not part of the reason why the Father sent the Son, for in what he did came his bride, and the enlargement of God’s family?

The Father who relates

Several years ago we were given a dog, a most beautiful and much admired Swiss Shepherd, which has attached itself strongly to me. It was such a prime specimen that we thought we might breed and so prolong its line, and so we got ourselves a bitch, and indeed got a gorgeous litter of pure white, almost identical puppies, one of which was taken by my daughter, and is also a prime specimen. However, we cannot bring father and son together; in the ways of male dogs, they just do not agree!

The fatherhood of a male dog is simply an event, and does not have an ongoing effect; there is no continuing relationship. Regrettably the same is true for quite a lot of human fathers; they procreate children and have little or nothing to do with them thereafter.

Some have seen the Fatherhood of God in similar ways. The Father maintains transcendence, and so separation from the world. He established the laws that govern it, but does not act in it. There have been some who have carried this to the extent of what is called "Deism", extreme separation. Indeed, there is certainly an aspect of this in Christianity, with the Father acting through the second and third Persons, so not directly himself. In particular, many have felt that the Father is totally impassible, so not being affected by the world at all, and in particular, not suffering.

However, this is not a reflection of the Biblical record, where although there are only a few instances where the Father is described as acting, there are nevertheless some. One obvious example is at the baptism of Jesus.

Indeed, the nature of the Father would seem not to be that of an absent, uninvolved Deity, but one who is also immanent, and maintains an active relationship with the world and those in it. In particular, he has established a covenant or agreement with people. Just as his action in creation was the making of the plan which underlies its actions and functioning, so he has established a covenant with people in terms of which he acts for them, and has given the laws and procedures by which they live. The Old Testament records how this was established, and worked out over the centuries. The experiences of exile are attributed to the judgement of God on his chosen people, as they had rejected the covenant.

This of course does indicate that God is affected by the actions of his people. He is not fully impassible. Indeed, God is then seen to be not simply one who gives and provides, but also one who receives. Although

it is obviously impossible to actually give God anything, the covenant also indicates that people give to him. Not only do they give him obedience and service, but even the more tangible things of sacrifice.

In this case, the Father is seen to have a two-way relationship with creation and with people. On the one hand he gives in a number of ways, but on the other he also receives. In this, the relationship with the Son is also imaged. The Son receives his divinity and God empowers what he does, but then the Son also gives to the Father. Several, such as Mühlen (in Bracken 1979:47) describe the divine nature in terms of giving, so, for example, that of the Father is seen in that he gave his Son, and that of the Son in that he gave himself for our salvation. However, although this is a welcome observation, it is usually felt that it needs supplementing with the traditional thought that the divinity of the Son is only as received from the Father. Is this so? Then to this, can it not be that the divinity of the Father also is received from the Son? Then the formula does need to be extended to include the Spirit, who then both gives and receives from both Father and Son.

It is this giving and receiving that then characterises the new divine life of the Christian. We receive grace, but we also give. Then each of the divine Persons is affected by us, and in particular each can be grieved by disobedience and refusal. If a person then does not receive the offer of grace, and respond to God, how can there be the bestowal of divinity? This requires the giving to God, as well as receipt; otherwise there is no divine life. It must be observed here that in a Christian attitude of humility in response to grace, there will also be the willingness to accept; any refusal is self-assertion (cf Acts 13:46).