

God's Triune Existence

The Relationship between Nature and Person

Have considered both nature and person components of a personal being, we now consider the relationship that exists between these components. For a human being there is one nature component and one person component. In the case of God, the divine being, there is one nature component and three person components. How then do we relate the nature and person components of a personal being? They are distinct entities and yet they are not separated from each other. They are somehow "joined" or "united" together. Perhaps one way to aid in our understanding is to use diagrams to help us visualize the relationship.

For human beings, when we diagram the relationship between the person and the nature, there is a one-to-one relationship of person to nature. The same is apparently true for angel beings. Each human being and each angel being is composed of a single person united to a single nature.

The following diagram illustrates this person-nature relation using the man Adam and the angel Gabriel as examples. We associate the kind of the being with the nature. And since the person gives individuality to the nature, we associate the name of the being with the person.

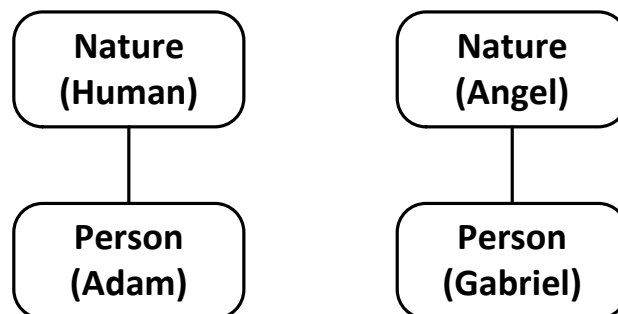


Figure 1: The Relationship between Nature and Person

The "Nature" box represents those aspects of the being provided by the nature. The "Person" box does the same for those aspects provided by the person. The line joining the two boxes indicates that the person *is giving individuality to* the nature. Adam, as a human being, can do anything that his human nature permits. Gabriel, as an angel being, can in a similar way do anything his angel nature permits. Angel beings have come into

existence through direct creation by God of both nature and person. Human beings, other than Adam and Eve whom God directly created, have come into existence differently. The parents, through procreation, produce the nature and God, through direct creation, produces the person.¹

Persons and Nature in the Godhead

Having seen the relationship between person and nature in beings where there is a one-to-one relationship, we now turn to the relationship as it exists in the Godhead. In God's case the relationship is three-to-one.

A diagram of the relationships sustained among the persons of the Godhead with their divine nature must show a three-to-one relationship of persons to nature. It is important to recognize that this diagram represents a logical view of the being of God. It is not intended to represent the "physical" aspects of God's being. The divine being, the Godhead, consists of three distinct persons joined to a single divine nature to which each person gives independent individuality. The three persons separately give individuality to that one nature. As noted before, the "three" refers to the number of persons in the Godhead and the "one" refers to the number of natures in the Godhead. The following diagram illustrates this relationship.

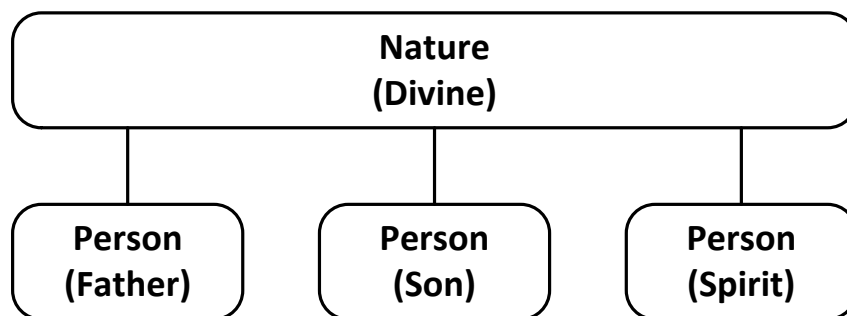


Figure 2: The One Divine Nature and Three Distinct Persons

Again, the entire diagram represents the being of God. The box labeled "Nature" represents the one, divine nature individualized by the three persons of the Godhead. The three boxes labeled "Person" represent the three, distinct persons who, as members of the Godhead, share equally that one divine nature but do so independently. The lines connecting the three,

¹ This is a creationist (vs. traducianists) view. There is an assumption here that human parents produce the human nature component to which God "adds" the person component endowing it with life to make a living human being. Consider Merritt and Merritt, *When Does Human Life Begin?* 2010, Crystal Clear Books. See also Heb 9:12 ("fathers of our flesh" vs. "Father of spirits").

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distinct persons to the one, shared nature indicate that each person separately individualizes that divine nature. As we will see when we consider God's ontological existence, attributes and abilities associated with the divine nature are shared fully and equally among the three persons. Furthermore, attributes and abilities associated with the persons are not shared but are held simultaneously and equally but individually by each of the three persons.

In some sense this is the same representation that we find in the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In this formula the three persons are identified and the divine nature is represented by the word *name*. This one name equally belongs to each of the three persons. Regarding this formula B. B. Warfield wrote, "These three, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, each stand in some clear sense over against the others in distinct personality: these three, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, all unite in some profound sense in the common participation of the one Name."²

While this diagram as a representation of the Trinity is in one way new, in another way it is not new. It is simply a transformation of the triangular diagram often used to depict the Trinity (see below). In that diagram each person (the three small triangles), Father, Son, and Spirit, "is" God or divine (the circle). At the same time each person "is not" either of the other persons. In the diagram above the idea that each person is God is represented by the lines connecting the three persons to the nature and the idea that each person is not the other persons is shown by the independent boxes representing the three persons. However, the above diagram (as opposed to the one below) may help us better recognize the distinction between the person and nature components of God's being, and thus better understand the Trinity itself. It will also help us later to see how the Son's human nature, received at the time of the Incarnation, relates to the person of the Son and to the Godhead as a whole.

² B.B Warfield in ISBE article "Trinity"

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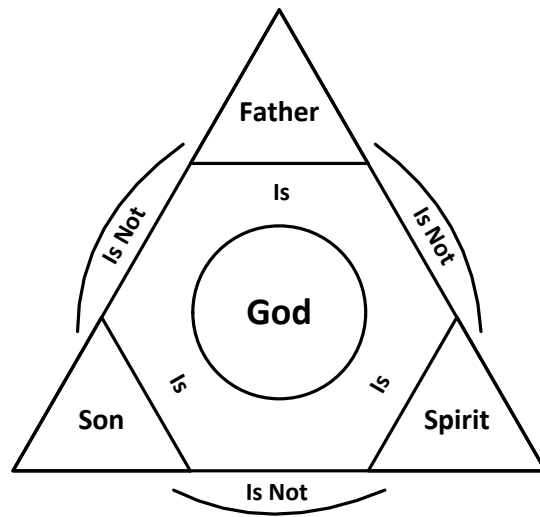


Figure 3: An Early Representation of the Trinity

In both diagrams I have designated the persons as Father, Son, and Spirit rather than as First, Second, and Third. These are *vocational*, versus *ontological*, designations which are familiar and more personal than the corresponding *numeric* designations which are sometimes used to refer to the members of the Godhead. Furthermore, the use of numeric designations could imply a priority or hierarchy among the three persons where no such hierarchy exists. Later, as we consider God vocational existence, we will have more to say about these vocational designations (Father, Son, and Spirit). If there are eternal, ontological designations for the three persons, names by which the members have always known each other, God has not chosen to reveal them to us. We will simply refer to the three persons using the designations Father, Son, and Spirit.

These two diagrams represent the Godhead. By that we mean that the Godhead consists of the one tri-personal, divine being. As such the Godhead is holy. There is no other being like this. Taken together the three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, along with their divine nature, which they equally share, comprise the Godhead, the being God.

A Clarification Regarding the Word *Person*

Before moving on to demonstrate that Scripture provides the basis for thinking that God is triune in the sense presented here, a clarification may be helpful. This clarification involves the use of the term *person*. As noted before, in the sense being used here, this is not a term found in Scripture.

However, this usage does represent a biblical concept. It is, like the word *trinity*, being used theologically.

As being used here, this term designates the person component of a personal being. In the case of the God, each member of the Godhead is a person. In the case of human beings, each one is a person. Thus, an important question regards how this person concept is used of God as opposed to humans (or angels). As suggested earlier, it seems that there is no difference in the person component for all personal beings. For such beings, we might say that a-person-is-a-person. What drives such a conclusion?

The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct persons. There is no reason to believe that within the Godhead there is any difference in these three *person* components of the divine being.³ However, even though God is a personal being, so too are angels and humans. That being the case, are there are different "kinds" of person components among any of these "kinds" of personal beings? Certainly, this is possible. In asking this question we are attempting to consider whether the "person" component of the persons individualizing the divine nature are different than that of a "person" component individualizing a human or an angel nature. The first impulse is to say that these persons are obviously different. A "divine-person" must be different than a "human-person." And, for that matter, a "human-person" must be different than an "angel-person." But perhaps that is not the case. After all, as was already noted, we human beings were created in the image of the divine being. How close the image is to the original is not clear.

It may well be the case that there is only one kind of person component. There is, to me, a persuasive argument that can be made for at least considering that a-person-is-a-person with the critical distinction of the personal being resulting from the nature as individualized by that person rather than the person individualizing that nature. And recall Berkhof's statement cited earlier. "We should not say that man is personal, while God is super-personal ..., for what is super-personal is not personal."⁴ A reason for undertaking this consideration relates to the Hypostatic Union. The incarnate Son, seen in his humanity, is referred to as "the last Adam" as opposed to "the first man Adam" (1Cor 15:45). Was the person of this last Adam like the person of the first Adam? From the standpoint of his humanity is the Son really like us? Or is he in his humanity really "super-human" as compared to the first Adam? What kind of substitute was the Son in his humanity? Was he really like us?

³ Some may argue that begetting of the Son and procession of the Spirit do indicate a difference. However, I do not agree with an eternal begetting of the Son or with an eternal procession of the Spirit.

⁴ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 84.

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I think the writer of the book of Hebrews believed he was. Referring to the Son becoming like a human being he wrote, "we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb 2:9). His becoming like us was required in order for him to bring salvation. Making the point even more forcefully, the writer of Hebrews continued.

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Heb 2:14-18)

And later, referring to "Jesus, the Son of God" as "a great high priest," the author of Hebrews wrote, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). It seems that in his humanity this one, sent by his Father, became a human being just like we are human beings. He was truly a second Adam.

Going forward the assumption will be that a-person-is-a-person.⁵ Obviously, such a conclusion has implications as we consider what God is like, particularly as we see aspects of his being by looking at his "human being" image.

⁵ If a-person-is-a-person is not the case, I do not think that materially alters conclusions contained herein. From Scripture we see many parallels that exist in God's activity as a person and man's activity as a person. God acts, we act; God thinks, we think; God determines, we determine; God communicates; we communicate; etc.