

GENESIS 1:26, 27

THE MYSTERY OF THE TRIUNE GOD

“God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”¹

They come to your door in pairs. From the dark recess of a cheap briefcase, seemingly mandatory for the members of the cult, the pair will readily produce a copy of the King James Version of the Bible if you should challenge them in their practised presentation. In addition, they will have at least one other, decidedly inferior translation (known as the New World Translation) as well as other assorted printed material that they will claim to be necessary for accurate understanding of the written Word of God. If you permit them to do so, they will challenge you to produce even one instance of the occurrence of the word *trinity* in any translation of the Bible.

Don't allow yourself to be confused by their challenge. Because a word does not occur in a given translation of the Word of God is not evidence that the truth in question is absent from the teachings of the Word. For example, the word *rapture* will not be found in any translation of the Holy Scriptures, but the teaching is nevertheless valid since the truth is evident. The word *millennium* doesn't occur in the Scriptures, but its absence does not otherwise negate this comforting truth of Christ's reign on earth. *Natural depravity* and *eternal security* are self-evident and are clearly presented as God's truth, though the terms are not found in the Word He has given. Doctrine, the teachings of the Word of God, is but the truth of God that He has chosen to reveal in His written Word. The descriptive words employed to identify the focus of our conversation should never cause us consternation and confusion.

The *Trinity* (or more properly the *Triunity*) is sadly misunderstood and is therefore subject to misrepresentation. Consequently, the word lends itself to grave distortion. The nature of God is revealed and not assumed; no mortal could discover God through his own effort or considerations. God must reveal Himself to us. As God reveals Himself through His Word, we are amazed to meet one God, but in three expressions. We do not meet three gods; that is sheer paganism. However, we do meet God in three Persons, comprising the Godhead.

The passage under consideration does not conclusively teach the truth of the *Triunity*, for our understanding is retrospective. We have the advantage of looking back with knowledge and with understanding. Were we to have only this passage by itself we would no doubt draw some of the conclusions that others have drawn in times past. Looking back, the full revelation of God has been accomplished and we are able to see the nature of God in the degree He has chosen to reveal His nature to mankind.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

GOD'S METHOD OF REVELATION — In the Bible, the word *mystery* appears frequently, especially in the New Testament. A mystery, in theological terms, is not an enigma, a puzzle or something unknown that demands that it be ferreted out. A mystery is a truth which was at one time unknown or unrecognised, but which God has now revealed. Mankind can recognise a mystery following divine revelation; but without the teaching of God, it could not be otherwise imagined.

As the Word of God was written, the Spirit of God revealed in progressive fashion the nature of the Living God. Until the canon of Scripture was complete, man could not possibly grasp the full revelation of God. In fact, we will not fully know God until He has manifest Himself after we are changed into His likeness and are at last enabled to stand complete in Christ in the presence of the Father. Thus, the triune nature of God is a mystery. Clearly revealed throughout the New Testament, this truth is only hinted at under the Old Covenant. Knowledge of God's triune nature of is not a tricky discovery if we are conversant with the New Testament. To the saint knowledgeable of the New Testament, **GENESIS 1:26** speaks clearly of the triune Godhead. The truth would have been more difficult to comprehend at an earlier time in the history of the Faith.

Read again the words of **GENESIS 1:26 and 27**. "God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'

"So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them."

Throughout the account of the Creation provided in the first chapter of Genesis God is referred to as *elohim*. *Elohim* is a plural noun, but it is used as though it were singular. To this point in the chapter the pronouns have all been singular. *Elohim* appears in conjunction with singular verbs and the pronouns referring back to the word are singular. We accept that by this means, God at once emphasises that there is but one God alone though there is a plural dimension to His being. I acknowledge that this information is not sufficient definitively to declare the Trinity of God, but it does suggest this great doctrine from the first chapter.

Then, in **GENESIS 1:26** God says, "Let **us** make man in **our** image, after **our** likeness." This is one of the very few places where a singular pronoun does not occur. In **GENESIS 3:22** we will again witness the use of the plural pronoun as God speaks. There, He says "The man has now become like one of **us** in knowing good and evil." Whom does God address when He says "us," and to whom does He refer when he says "our?"

Some Bible teachers—but no Bible scholars—endeavour to teach that God spoke to angels in our text. However, such a view appears fatally flawed in light of **ISAIAH 40:14**.

"Whom did he consult,
and who made him understand?
Who taught him the path of justice,
and taught him knowledge,
or showed him the way of understanding?"

God would neither consult the angels nor invite them to enter into His grand work. He presents His Son as “a lamb . . . foreknown before the creation of the world” [1 PETER 1:20] and as the “Lamb that was slain” [REVELATION 13:8], therefore, God has no reason to invite the angels to share in that glorious work. In fact we are told that angels are ignorant of salvation since the angels long to look into matters concerning salvation [1 PETER 1:12]. Other individuals consider the wording superfluous, contending it is actually meaningless. Yet others have taught that God here addresses wisdom personified. They base this thought upon the words of Solomon in PROVERBS 8:22-31.

‘The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of old;
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth,
before he had made the earth with its fields
or the first of the dust of the world.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned the sea its limit
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master workman,
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting the children of man.’”

Some teachers showing their ignorance insist that God here employs the language of majesty. There is, however, no other instance of God employing such pretentious language in the whole of the Word. Why, then, should we expect that in this one instance He would speak in an artificial manner? Others have speculated that this is simply the necessary agreement of number with the noun. This is not grammatically required when *elohim* appears elsewhere, either in this chapter or throughout the entire Old Testament.

How much simpler in light of the entirety of the Word to confess this as the initial teaching of the triune nature of the Living God! How much simpler to see that full revelation awaited the timing of God, but He has here graciously provided a glimpse of His very nature! Of course, if these words were all we possessed on the teaching we could not be certain. However, consider the teaching found in the whole of the Bible.

The Bible presents *Yahweh* as Creator, as you well know. As evidence that this is Bible teaching I point to but two instances in Isaiah’s prophecy.

“Thus says the LORD [*Yahweh*], your Redeemer,
who formed you in the womb:
I am the LORD [*Yahweh*], who made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who spread out the earth by myself”

[ISAIAH 44:24].

“To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.
Lift your eyes on high and see:
who created these?
He who brings out their hosts by number,
calling them all by name.
by the greatness of his might
and because he is strong in power
not one of them is missing”

[ISAIAH 40:25, 26].

Clearly, the LORD God is Creator, but the Son of God is also presented as Creator. The opening verses of John’s Gospel provide powerful witness to Christ’s creative work. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” [JOHN 1:1-5].

In a similar fashion, in COLOSSIANS 1:16, 17 the Apostle presents Jesus as Creator. “By [Christ] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Likewise, the Word of God also presents the Spirit of God as Creator. The Psalmist speaks of the Spirit’s creative work in PSALM 104:30.

“When you send forth Your Spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.”

In GENESIS 1:2 we witnessed the Spirit of God brooding over the nascent earth much as a mother eagle watches over her fledglings on the first flight. The evidence is overwhelming that God—Father, Son and Spirit alike—is presented as Creator ... and the Creator is God. The Word of God either presents three Gods or a Trinity. Since God is one [see DEUTERONOMY 6:4], the evidence points to a revelation of the Triune God.

No one doubts that God presents Himself as Father. “Do not labour for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal” [JOHN 6:27]. Thus, the testimony of the Word is that our heavenly Father is God. Jesus, likewise, is revealed as very God in Scripture. “To [the Jews] belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen” [ROMANS 9:5].

The Holy Spirit is also revealed as God. Listen to an account of an incident in the early days of the Jerusalem congregation when a couple thought they could lie to God. “A man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife’s knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet. But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.’ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it” [ACTS 5:1-5].

The full revelation of the doctrine of God’s triune nature awaited God’s timing. Similarly, interpretation of what is written requires that one consider the whole sweep of the Bible rather than building a doctrine upon one isolated verse. We encounter the Triune God throughout the pages of the New Testament and looking back to the Old Testament, we understand what was written. Therefore, the verses of the New Testament that present the Trinitarian truth become eminently reasonable in light of Scripture.

When Jesus was baptised, we witness the affirmation of heaven, an affirmation in which all three members of the Godhead were present. “The heavens were opened to him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’” [MATTHEW 3:16, 17].

This teaching of the triune nature of God explains the baptismal formula given in MATTHEW 28:19. We are taught to baptise those who come to faith “in the Name (singular) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

As Jesus was preparing to depart this earth, He prepared His disciples. An extended dissertation designed to assist the disciples during this transition period is presented in John’s Gospel. Listen to a portion of that discourse, noting in particular the presence of all three members of the triune Godhead and taking careful note of the comparison between all three. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.’ Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, ‘Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?’ Jesus answered him, ‘If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me’” [JOHN 14:16-24].

Paul, closing his second letter to the Corinthian church appended this Trinitarian benediction. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” [2 CORINTHIANS 13:14]. He assumes co-equality between each member of the Godhead.

We are driven to the conclusion that **GENESIS 1:26** fits with the whole of the Word. In this instance, we witness a pre-anthropologic conference of the Godhead. The Triune God is conferring with Himself. God confers with God within the Godhead as Father, Son and Holy Spirit discusses what should be done.

THE MEANING OF THE REVELATION — If we would understand what God is saying when He says man is created in His image and in His likeness, we must understand the triune nature of God. How is man in the likeness and image of God? I have treated this subject at greater length in a message delivered previously, but we must nevertheless reintroduce the issue for the sake of completeness in this message.

When God employs the word “create,” He uses it to signify the initiation of a major facet of His work of bringing into being. The word is used three times in this chapter. **GENESIS 1:1** speaks of the creation of the physical universe. **GENESIS 1:21** speaks of the creation of living creatures. **GENESIS 1:26, 27** speaks of the creation of man.

To be sure, man is a moral, spiritual, rational being. Man is a spiritual being created to correspond to the Living God. Man is a moral being created to reflect the righteousness of God. Man is a rational being created to interact with the Creator. However, in an even more important sense, I see man corresponding to God in that man is a tripartite being. The words “image” and “likeness” are synonymous. In only two places are these two words used as complements to one another. The first of those places is here in our text where man is said to be in the “image” and the “likeness” of God [**GENESIS 1:26**]. In **GENESIS 5:3** Seth is said to be in the “likeness” and the “image” of Adam. How shall we understand this?

Man is body, soul and spirit. This is the clear teaching of **1 THESSALONIANS 5:23**. There, the Apostle prays, “May your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This understanding is supported by the Word of God in **HEBREWS 4:12**. The author notes that the Word is “sharper than any two-edged sword,” because of its power to pierce “to the division of soul and of spirit.” Consider that man possesses a body. **GENESIS 2:4-7** describes how “God *formed* man from the dust of the ground.” This is assuredly a reference to the body of man. **GENESIS 1:26** speaks of God *making* man, the purpose of this making being that man may rule over all creation. It would appear from these words that God here refers to giving man his soul. It speaks of that vital life force we would call intellect. **GENESIS 1:27** uses the word *create* as God speaks of giving the spirit. Three separate words speak of the tripartite nature of man, for man was *formed*, *made* and *created*.

What we cannot do, God does for us. God can distinguish soul and spirit. The spirit of unregenerate man is dead in that it is separate from God. There is no correspondence with the Living God; there is no sensitivity to God the Spirit. The soul of the natural man is just as eternal as the soul of the regenerate man. The difference is that the unregenerate soul is under eternal condemnation. Man possesses a body, and that body shall one day be resurrected reflecting an eternal quality to match the soul. The regenerate man will be resurrected to dwell eternally in the presence of God and the unregenerate man will be resurrected to be eternally separated from the presence of God. This truth is in accordance with the Word of God given through Daniel’s prophecy. “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” [**DANIEL 12:2**].

Mankind is hopeless if God does not intervene. Because man is created in the image of God and in his likeness, God must save the whole man. When any person accepts the death of Christ as a sacrifice for his own sin, and when that one expresses confidence in the resurrection of this same Christ, God makes provision for total salvation; He saves the soul, gives a new spirit and promises a new body.

Elihu is the young man who rebukes Job's comforters; he also rebukes Job! It seems almost as though this enigmatic young man speaks on behalf of God. Among the timeless truths that Elihu speaks is a particularly precious truth. Listen to Elihu.

“I sinned, and perverted what was right,
and it was not repaid to me.
He has redeemed my soul from going down to the pit,
and my life shall look upon the light.”

[JOB 33:27, 28]

The Psalmist also speaks of the redemption of the soul in **PSALM 49:8, 9, 15 (NASV)**.

“The redemption of his soul is costly,
And he should cease *trying* forever—
That he should live on eternally;
That he should not undergo decay...
God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol;
For He will receive me.”

Ezekiel informs us that “the soul who sins is the one who will die” [EZEKIEL 18:20]. The soul is eternal, and the death of the soul is an eternal death. Just so, the redemption of the soul is eternal. Just as God redeems the soul, so He is the One who gives a new spirit. God promises to place His own Spirit within those who are His people [EZEKIEL 36:26, 27]. God shall yet give us a new body, as Daniel testifies [DANIEL 12:1, 2]. Consider as well the tormented cry of Job which he spilled forth in his agony and grief.

“I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall see God;
whom I shall see for myself,
and my own eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!”

[JOB 19:25-27].

The revelation is that man, ruined by the Fall, requires complete regeneration. This is the apostolic message. “You have heard about [Christ] and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness God in true righteousness and holiness” [EPHESIANS 4:21-24].

Just so, we are taught, “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” [EPHESIANS 2:8-10].

THE MESSAGE OF THE REVELATION — The message of this divine revelation is ever so simple and yet so profound—the Creator must recreate us, must make us new. We must be made new in Him if we would ever hope to attain the intimacy for which we were created. His hand must restore us if we would know His peace or His power or His purity. We must be born from above, just as John states. “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” [JOHN 3:16]. Jesus had stated this truth beforehand when instructing Nicodemus. “Unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God” [JOHN 3:3].

God is even now calling out a people for Himself. The very purpose for Christ’s coming into this world was to die because of man’s sin—to provide a way for man to avoid the consequences of his rebellion and to have his rebel nature set aside that he might enter into union with and enjoy communion with the Creator. God the Father provides salvation. God the Son purchased salvation. God the Holy Spirit presents salvation. What is your response?

To any who struggle with this call, heed these words. As Peter begins his first letter to the early believers scattered throughout the world, he penned these words. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, as was necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” [1 PETER 1:3-9].

Our sincere prayer is that you will receive the gift of life so that your sins may be forgiven and so that you may be accepted into the Family of God. God’s promise to all who will receive it is, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9-13]. Believe and be saved. Amen.