

Sharing in the Holy Spirit: Genesis

1:1-2:4

Psalms 8

Matthew 28:16-20

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

by [David L. Beck](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

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It is getting harder, in the modern translations of the Genesis stories, to extract what Christians have traditionally assumed were references to the three persons of the Trinity. What was clearly translated as "the spirit of God" in the King James Version is "a strong wind from God" in the New Revised Standard Version. If the third person is no longer obvious, neither is the second. Only by the evangelist John's inspiration could the word that God spoke in creating various aspects of the universe be understood as the second person who would be incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.

Standing by itself, the creation story reveals only the Creator. While it may be possible to work from the idea of God making humankind in the image of God back to the Trinity, it requires the assumption that there is some threefold characteristic to us, either in our constitution or relationship to one another as male and female.

There is something suspect about our desire to apply what scripture reveals of God to the Bible's first mention of God. It may be better to let the Genesis story say what it says without added meanings. In other words, all we know of God at the beginning comes from that act of creation out of which the universe came into being. God is revealed as acting carefully, lovingly, to bring forth the world and humankind. We

are led to see the world as good, men and women as good and other creatures as good because this is how the Creator saw them. That is a great deal to learn from the first verses of the Bible without adding more.

Similarly, the ending of Matthew is powerful even without its emphasis on the triune formula in which baptism is to be administered. It is Matthew's unique testimony to the risen Jesus as the Redeemer who now declares that God has given him all authority necessary for the redemption of the earth. Disciples are to be made of all nations, disciples through whom the divine work of redemption will continue. As disciples do their work and live their lives, Jesus promises to be present with them even to the end of the age.

The commission to baptize includes the indication that baptism is to be done in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Yet many now understand this to be a formula derived from Christian worship and read back into the Matthean resurrection account.

Rather than insisting that scripture make the doctrine of the Trinity explicit, perhaps we should allow the Trinity to remain implicit and affirm it out of our own experience, our own living with God. The best help I ever received in understanding how the idea of the Trinity may evolve from our Christian development rather than be imposed as an abstract formula came from two four-year-olds (one of them my own) with whom I spent a winter's afternoon 18 years ago while their mothers were shopping. Somehow they decided that they were going to explain to me what they knew of the divine. They did it with such sincerity and enthusiasm that I still remember what they said.

I needed to know, they advised me, that first there was God and God loves us. Long, long ago God made everything. God is everywhere and sees everything but you can't see God. On the other hand, they said, you can see Jesus or at least pictures of Jesus because he was down here where we are. Jesus is simply wonderful and loves us very much, children as much as grown-ups. If you can't see Jesus right now, it is because he is in heaven, but he stays in touch with us so well he might as well still be here. A lot of the time it seems as if he is.

As they talked, however, they did not talk about God alone or Jesus alone, but of "God and Jesus." Together "God and Jesus" were a wonderful divine partnership who made the world a wonderful and beautiful place to be.

From their perspective, nothing was missing. They had digested what was taught about God in the creation story and what was taught about Jesus in the Gospels. Had I shared with them the two parts of Paul's benediction, the blessing or prayer with which he ended 2 Corinthians, they would have understood it. After saying "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ," I would need to explain the word grace as "a wonderful gift from Jesus that leaves you very happy," and they would have been able to connect with that. I would not have to say a thing about "the love of God" because they already believed that God loved them; that part of the prayer simply repeats something they already knew and believed.

What they would not understand, however, would be the last part: "the communion of the Holy Spirit" or "the sharing in the Holy Spirit" (NRSV alternate reading). It takes an adult self-consciousness—the experience of an adult living and trying to believe but knowing doubt, trying to do the right thing but knowing failure, trying to be confident but sensing despair—to also know that there is a part of God that helps us through those obstacles, a part which is different from God's love or Christ's gift of salvation.

Sharing in that part of God leaves us able to say, with the conviction of Paul, that "nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." God is revealed as a loving Creator, a compassionate Savior and a mysterious presence allowing us to overcome what we could not on our own. This is the Trinity. It is the last thing to be said about God, after we have lived and grown and struggled. Then we discover that it was the Spirit that allowed us to cry, "Abba, Father" in the first place and to perceive God's saving love in Jesus Christ.