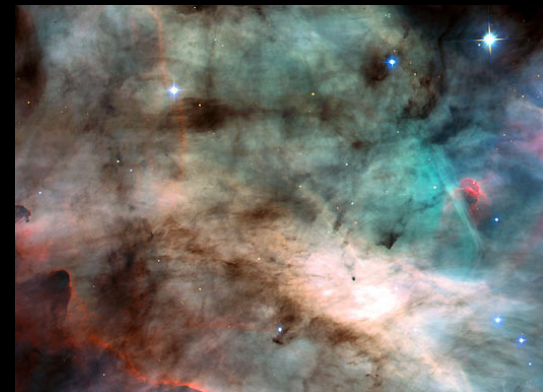


# The Trinity: Can Other Gods Be Personally Known?

Mako A. Nagasawa

# Starting Point: Pantheism

- Pantheism is the belief that 'God is everywhere'
  - i.e. We 'swim' in God, the universe is God



# Starting Point: Pantheism

- Pantheism means that God is in nature
  - Nature is 'red in tooth and claw'



# Starting Point: Pantheism

- Pantheism means that God is in nature
  - Nature is 'red in tooth and claw'
  - The universe is winding down to coldness and death



# Starting Point: Pantheism

- Pantheism means that God is in human evil
  - Human evil also reveals God
  - Ultimately the distinction between good and evil collapses



Dear Village Voice:

Each year, 100,000 girls are sold for sex in America — many through your website, Backpage.com.

Do you really want to provide a platform for predators who pay to rape girls?

Do the right thing. Your current screening is not enough. Close your "Adult" section until you can guarantee no girl is sold for sex on your site.

Sincerely,  
Polaris Project  
& Rebecca Project for Human Rights

\* Actual case: A 14-year-old girl in Missouri sued Backpage alleging it aided & abetted those who sold her for sex. See, N.A. vs. Village Voice Media Holdings.

# Starting Point: Pantheism

- In pantheism, is knowledge of God possible?
  - God is impersonal, therefore not loving
  - God is neither good nor evil, and makes the distinction impossible

# Response: A Transcendent God

- Transcendence is the belief that God is not in the creation and is separate from it
  - An attempt to separate God from nature and evil
  - Typically, God is a judge of creation
- New Problem: Is a transcendent God knowable?
  - How can this God communicate Godself or God's commands to us?
  - Is the distinction between 'good' and 'evil' meaningful? (is a passive lawgiver-judge morally legitimate?)

# Comparison of Transcendent Gods

- At Least Binitarian: Biblical Judaism
- Trinitarian: Christianity
- Unitarian: Islam, Unitarians



# Thought Experiment

- If God appeared to you in a fire, you would say, 'Look! God is here!'
- But is that all you would say?



# Thought Experiment

- If God appeared to you in a fire, you would say, 'Look! God is here!'
- But is that all you would say?
- 'God is not just here'



# Temple Judaism: God is at Least Binitarian

‘The cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.’ (1 Kings 8:10 – 11)



# Temple Judaism: God is at Least Binitarian

‘But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!’ (1 Kings 8:27)

God is both

- here, and
- beyond here



# Temple Judaism: God is at Least Binitarian

- The biblical God has an internal complexity which enables Him to be both
  - here (immanent, 'in this house')
  - beyond here (transcendent, 'highest heaven cannot contain You')
- If God appears in our space-time, He must be at least binitarian - it is logically required!

God  
Transcendent



God  
Immanent



# Temple Judaism: God is at Least Binitarian

- Social implications
  - *Hierarchical:*
    - A stationary appearance of God leads inevitably to a social hierarchy
    - 'Close' to God: priests, then other Israelites
    - 'Far' from God: Samaritans, Gentiles
  - *Attractional:*
    - Drawing people to a certain location

God  
Transcendent



God  
Immanent



# God is at Least Binitarian: *God Appearing to Particular People*

- But God always preferred flexibility, originally!
- The Lord in the garden (Gen.2)
- The angel of the Lord (Gen.18)
- God in the burning bush (Ex.3)
- God on Mt. Sinai (Ex.19)
- God in the Tabernacle (Ex.34)

God  
Transcendent



God  
Immanent



# God is at Least Binitarian: *God Speaking to Particular People*

- ‘The word of the Lord came to...’
  - Abraham (Gen.15:1, 4)
  - Samuel (1 Sam.15:10)
  - Nathan (2 Sam.7:4)
  - Gad (2 Sam.24:11)
  - Solomon (1 Ki.6:11)
  - Jehu (1 Ki.16:1)
  - Isaiah (Isa.38:4)
  - Jeremiah (Jer.1:2)
  - Ezekiel (Ezk.1:3)
  - Hosea (Hos.1:1)
  - Jonah (Jon.1:1)

God  
Transcendent



God's  
Word





# God is at Least Binitarian:

## *God Speaking to Particular People*

- For God to speak to someone requires the same binitarian logic:
  - He must be both *in* His word
  - And also *not only in* His word
- Required that God be at least binitarian:
  - Being seen
  - Being heard

God  
Transcendent



God in His  
Word



# God is at Least Binitarian: Is 'Jewish Monotheism' Trinitarian?

God  
Transcendent

Spirit

God  
Immanent



# God is at Least Binitarian: *God Speaking to Particular People*

- ‘In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God’
  - John 1:1 – 2

God  
Transcendent



God in His  
Word



# From a Binitarian to a Trinitarian Understanding of God

- ‘The Word became flesh and ‘tabernacled’ among us’
  - John 1:14; ‘flesh’ is the corrupted human nature
- To heal human nature in himself
  - At Jesus’ baptism: Father, Spirit, Son

God  
Transcendent

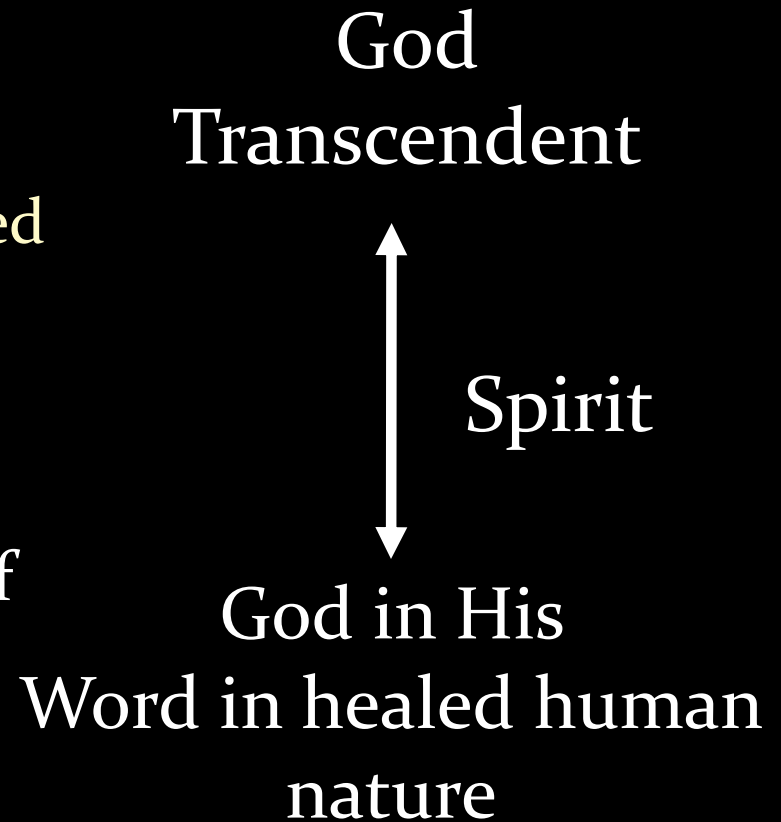
Spirit

God in His  
Word in flesh



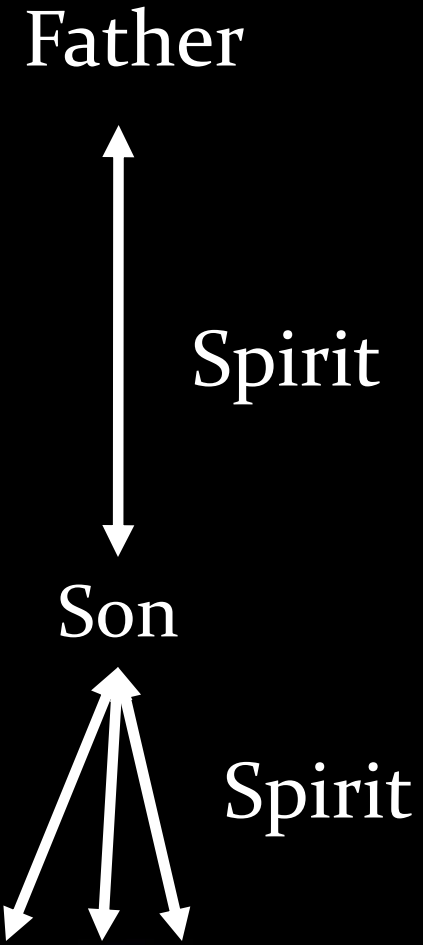
# From a Binitarian to a Trinitarian Understanding of God

- ‘The Word became flesh and ‘tabernacled’ among us’
  - John 1:14; ‘flesh’ is the corrupted human nature
- To heal human nature in himself and then share himself with us
- Jesus breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’
  - John 20:21



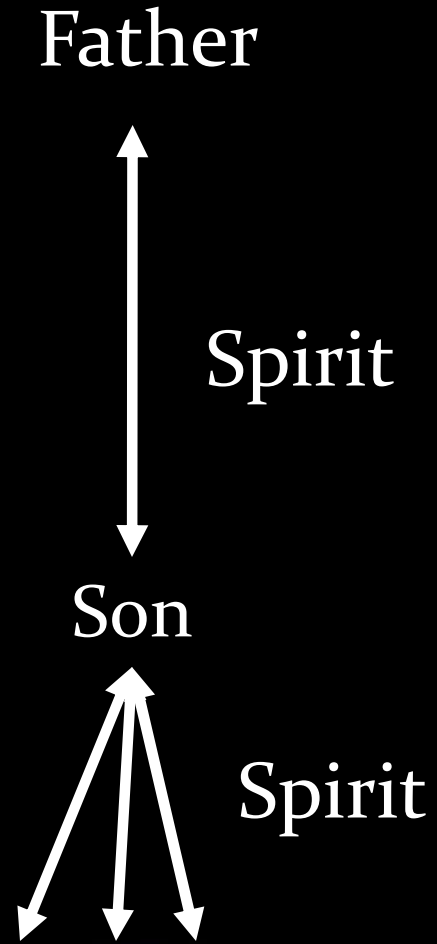
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# From a Binitarian to a Trinitarian Understanding of God

- This God can
  - become one with us (by the Spirit)
  - by becoming one of us (in the Son)
  - and yet be wholly other than us (in the Father)



# From a Binitarian to a Trinitarian Understanding of God

'No one comes to the

FATHER

but by the

SON'

(John 14:6)

Father

Spirit

Son

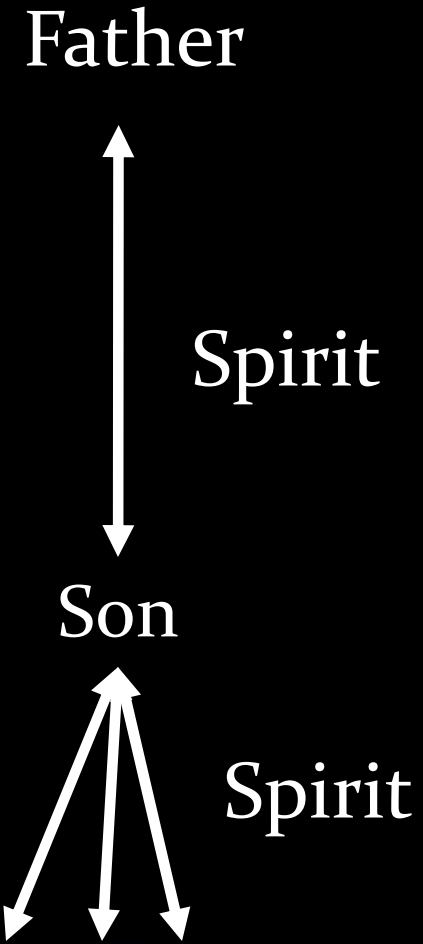
Spirit





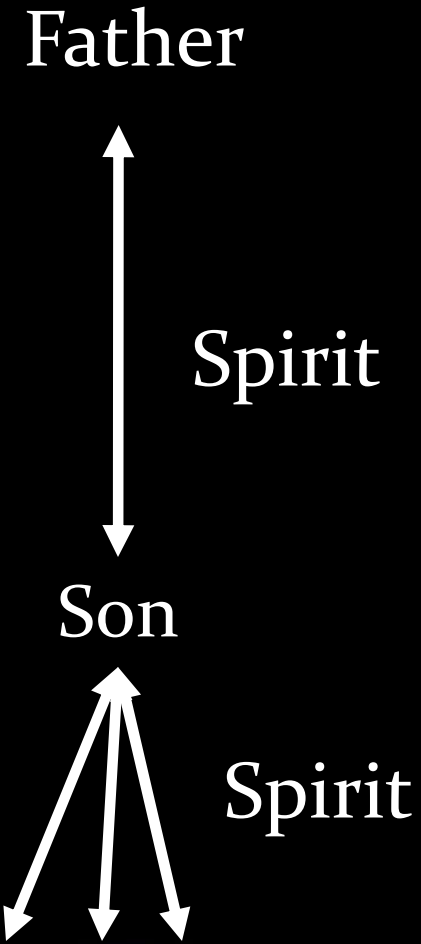
# From a Binitarian to a Trinitarian Understanding of God

'No one comes to the  
TRANSCENDENT GOD  
but by the  
IMMANENT GOD'  
(John 14:6)



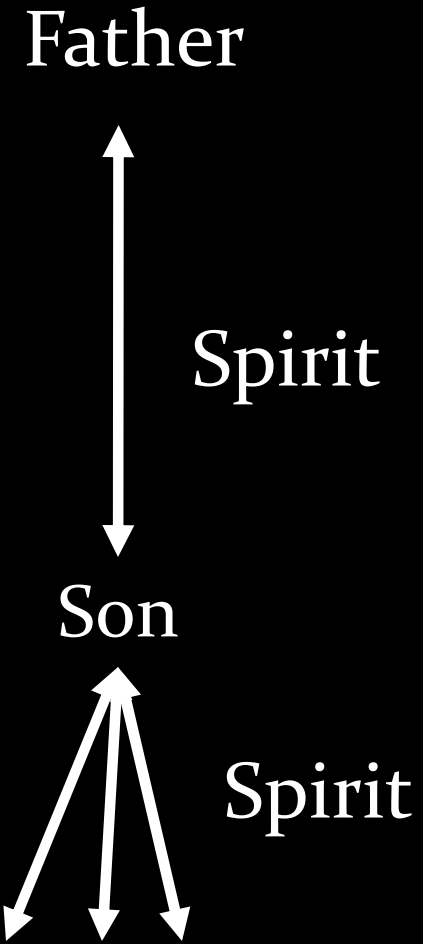
# From a Binitarian to a Trinitarian Understanding of God

- Personal knowledge of God:
  - God desires personal, intimate relationship with you
  - God reveals Himself through Himself
  - God dwells not in a building but in us, by cleansing our human nature through our personal reception of Him



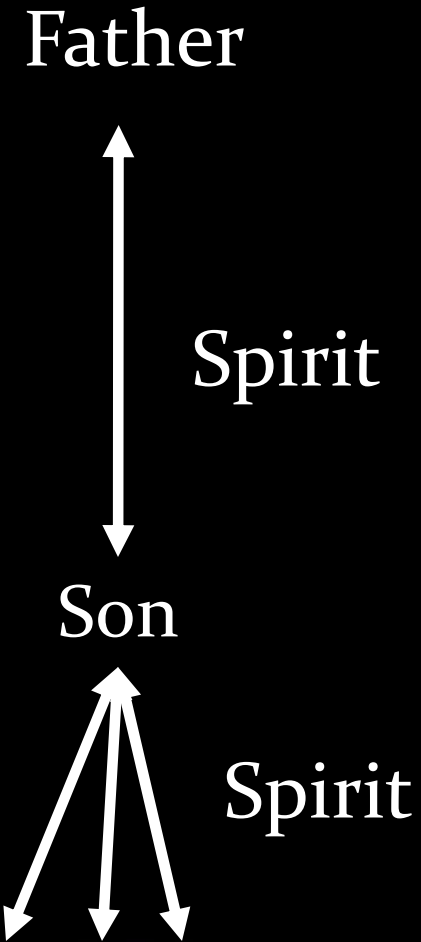
# From a Binitarian to a Trinitarian Understanding of God

- Social implications:
  - *Egalitarian*, not hierarchical:
    - Everyone has access to God through the new humanity of the Son
  - *Missional*, not attractional to a fixed location:
    - Jesus' new humanity is for all humanity



# From a Binitarian to a Trinitarian Understanding of God

- Intellectually grounded:
  - The resurrection of Jesus is the historical proof of the Trinitarian God
  - Must be evaluated like a jury evaluates historical claims in court
    - testimonies, reliability of witnesses, material evidence, motive and psychological factors, etc.
    - not a repeatable lab experiment



# Islam, Unitarians:

## The Unitarian Understanding of God

- No internal complexity within God
  - Can this God reveal Himself?
  - Is this God personally knowable?

God  
Transcendent



# Islam, Unitarians: The Unitarian Understanding of God

- Can this God overcome his own transcendence?

- See Dr. Nabeel Qureshi's response to a Muslim

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M7ePlmgVxA>)

God  
Transcendent



# Islam, Unitarians: The Unitarian Understanding of God

- Is this self-defeating?
  - How can God speak to any being if He cannot localize His self-disclosure?
    - God spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Sura 28:10)
    - To the angel Gabriel, who gave the Qur'an to Mohammed
  - Does Islam require a binitarian (at least) unity, not a unitarian oneness (tawhid)?

God  
Transcendent



# Islam, Unitarians: The Unitarian Understanding of God

- Is this self-defeating?
  - How can we *know* God is strictly unitarian if *we cannot know anything about God's nature personally?*

God  
Transcendent





# Islam, Unitarians: The Unitarian Understanding of God

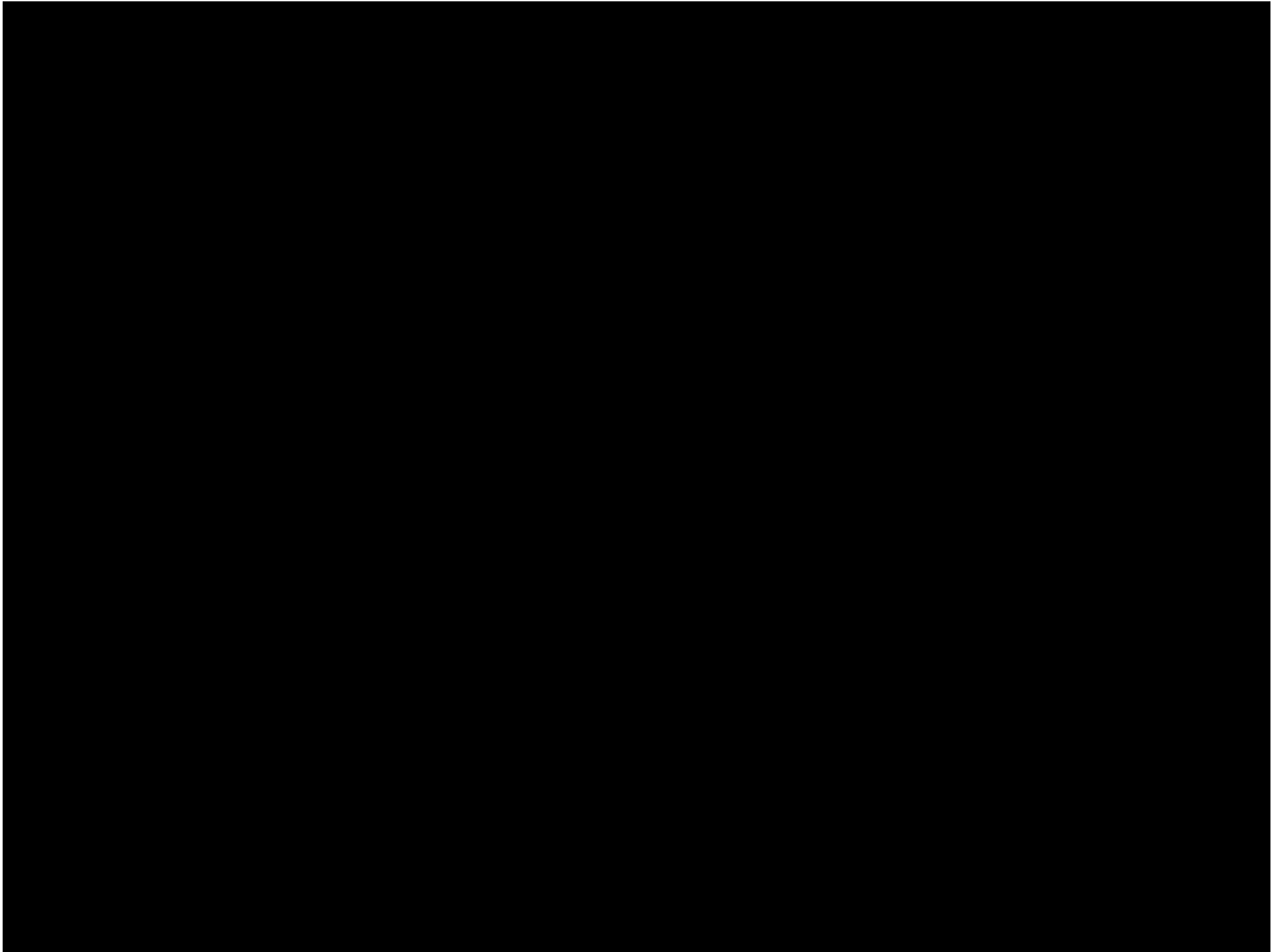
- Is this self-defeating?
  - At best, one would have to say that God has not *yet* revealed Himself to us, that we know about
  - But what if God has revealed Himself elsewhere?

God  
Transcendent



# Questions for Discussion

1. Can you know God personally if God is Unitarian? Binitarian? Trinitarian? How?
2. Is the function of the Trinity logical?
3. What biblical evidence is there for God not being satisfied by living in the Tabernacle and Temple?
4. What historical evidence is there for Jesus and his resurrection? For Jesus bestowing his Spirit to his followers?



# Appendix A: To Anti-Trinitarians

- Critics of the Nicene Creed argue against
  - Jesus' divinity
  - God as a Trinity
- Argument: Biblical texts maintain a difference between YHWH and a human Messiah
  - Messiah *represents* YHWH but *is not* YHWH Himself
    - E.g. Psalm 110:1 cannot be YHWH speaking to YHWH; etc.
  - Hebraic idioms allow for *functional* identity without *ontological* identity (which was a Hellenistic concern?)
    - E.g. 'My Lord and my God' (Jn.20:28) refers to the God imaged by Jesus, represented by Jesus, not Jesus himself

# Appendix A: To Anti-Trinitarians

- Argument: The earliest Christian writers use varied language to denote Jesus
  - Justin Martyr
    - 'logos Christology'
    - indicates a separation between God and His Word
  - Etc.

# Appendix A: To Anti-Trinitarians

- 'Biblical unitarians' assert
  - God in the Old Testament is 'unitarian'
  - Messiah is a human merely representing God functionally
- But in the Old Testament, God
  - Is NOT 'unitarian'
  - Is at least 'binitarian' if not already 'trinitarian'

# Appendix A: To Anti-Trinitarians

- Early Christian writers saw *the Son of God*, not the Father...
  - In the Old Testament theophanies
    - Justin Martyr of Rome, *First Apology*, 63
    - Tertullian of Carthage, *Against Praxeas*, 14
    - Clement of Alexandria, *Against the Judaizers* (Fragment 3):  
“Solomon, the son of David, understood that the construction of the true temple... concerned already the flesh which the Son and Lord of David was destined to build...”
  - As accompanying Israel and embodied by Israel because they received ‘the word of God’
    - Irenaeus of Lyons, *Fragment 53*
    - Melito of Sardis, *On the Passover*, 60, 69, 96

# Appendix A: To Anti-Trinitarians

- Early church: How does God unite Himself with us?
  - Salvation involves union with God (e.g. 2 Pet.1:4; Jn.14:6 – 21, etc.), thus ‘the unassumed is the unhealed’
  - Heresies about Jesus’ identity elicited widespread rejection in the church
    - Gnosticism denied Jesus’ humanity
      - Irenaeus of Lyons (130 – 200 AD) refuted this by arguing from the logic of atonement theology, not Scripture alone
    - Arianism denied Jesus’ divinity
      - Athanasius (297 – 373 AD) refuted this by arguing from the logic of atonement theology, not Scripture alone
    - If there is no union between human and divine natures in Jesus, there is no union with God for us, and therefore no salvation



# Appendix A: To Anti-Trinitarians

- Early church: How does God reveal Himself personally to us?
  - If God does not reveal Himself personally through the divine-human natures of Jesus, then
    - We have no knowledge of God
    - We have no experience of God
    - God has not, cannot overcome His own transcendence
    - God and His will remain unknown and unknowable

# Appendix A: To Anti-Trinitarians

- Early church: How does God reveal Himself personally to us?
  - ‘According to Christian theology, the transcendent God, who cannot be approached or seen in essence or being, becomes immanent primarily in the God-man Jesus the Christ, who is the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity... In Catholic theology, Christ and the Holy Spirit immanently reveal themselves; God the Father only reveals himself immanently vicariously through the Son and Spirit...’
    - Wikipedia, ‘Immanence’  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanence#Catholicism\\_and\\_Eastern\\_Christianity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanence#Catholicism_and_Eastern_Christianity)

# Appendix A: To Anti-Trinitarians

- Early church: Ontology followed function
  - Ontological claims about Jesus' two natures were inevitable because of the function Jesus served
  - Ontological claims about God's Triune nature were inevitable because of the function each Person served
    - God's activity in the Old Testament involved both transcendence and immanence (YHWH is not unitarian)
    - God's singular name as Father, Son, Spirit (Mt.28:20) repeated as a baptismal formula, patterned after Jesus' own baptism, which was trinitarian
  - Ontological claims about God and Jesus were made *against* Hellenistic categories and even language

# Appendix A: To Anti-Trinitarians

- What was/is logically central:
  - Christian doctrine of the Atonement as union with God
  - Christian epistemology as Realist (real knowing of God)
- The doctrine of the Trinity, and the Nicene Creed, are built on logic needed to bridge functional points

# Appendix B: Friedrich Schleiermacher, Father of Liberal Theology

- Christian faith and Romanticism (1800 – 1850), stressing feeling, sentiment, experience
- Stressed the human sense of absolute dependence:
  - “The feeling of absolute dependence, accordingly, is not to be explained as an awareness of the world’s existence but only as an awareness of the existence of God, as the absolute undivided unity.”

*(Christian Faith, p.132)*



# Appendix B: Friedrich Schleiermacher, Father of Liberal Theology

- Argued that the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Holy Spirit “are independent of the doctrine of the Trinity”

*(Christian Faith, p.741)*



# Appendix B: Friedrich Schleiermacher, Father of Liberal Theology

- But the doctrine of the Trinity is needed to support
  - Our very existence
    - Upheld by God's word and Spirit (Col.1:17; Gen.1)
    - Origin of "the feeling of dependence"?
  - Any knowledge of God
    - Why would we be aware of God being an undivided unity?



# Appendix C: 'Divine Simplicity'

- Refers to divine attributes or characteristics, such as goodness or love; meant to guard against the idea that God is a composite of various attributes
  - 'God *is* love' not 'God is made up various pieces, one of which is love'
- Internal complexity of *divine Persons* is perfectly compatible with simplicity of *divine characteristics*
  - In fact, 'God is love' can only be true if God were made up of divine Persons who eternally love one another (Father and Son in the Spirit)