

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbet-01.php

THE TRINITY: THE SECRET TO JOYFUL CHRISTIANITY

FINLAYSON MEMORIAL LECTURE, 2013

MICHAEL REEVES

WALES EVANGELICAL SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, BRYNTIRION HOUSE, BRIDGEND CF31 4DX
mikereeves@west.org.uk

The Trinity as the secret to joyful Christianity? It hardly seems likely. Deep within the Christian psyche today seems to be the notion that the Trinity is an awkward and odd irrelevance, a wart on our knowledge of God. And so, when it comes to sharing our faith, we speak of God's offer of salvation, we speak of God's free grace, but we try not to let on that the God we are speaking of is a Trinity. We wax lyrical about the beauty of the gospel, but not so much about the beauty of the God whose gospel it is.

This should not be. It is the Trinity before all things that makes Christianity good. The Trinity is the source of everything that is good in the gospel. Without the Trinity, we have no good news. How so? Naturally we don't warm to the thought of 'God', and why should we? There's nothing particularly attractive about the idea of 'God' *per se*. If he can get us heaven, very well he can deliver a good deal; but we are not interested in God *himself*. But with the triune God we have a God of captivating beauty and loveliness.

THE FATHER'S LOVE

In John 20:31, the great summary of his Gospel's purpose, John speaks of Jesus as the Son of God. God has a Son; he is a Father. But what does it mean that God is a Father? The name itself is significant and, of course, not all names mean something. My dog is called Max, but that doesn't really tell you anything about him. The name doesn't tell you what he is or what he's like. But—if I can make the jump—the Father is called Father because he *is* a Father. And a father is a person who gives life, who begets children. That insight is like a stick of dynamite in all our thoughts about God, for if, before all things, God was eternally a Father, then this God is an inherently outgoing, life-giving God. He did not give life for the first time when he decided to create; from eternity he has been life-giving.

This is unpacked for us in 1 John 4:7-8:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Have you ever known someone so magnetically kind and gracious, so warm and generous of spirit that just a little time spent with them affects how you think, feel and behave? Their very presence makes you better, even if only for a while, when you are with them. I know people like that, and they seem to be little pictures of how God is, according to John. This God, he says, is love in such a profound and potent way that you simply cannot know him without yourself becoming loving.

This is precisely what it means for God to be Father. For when John writes ‘God is love’ at the end of verse 8, he is clearly referring to the Father. His very next words, in verse 9, state, ‘This is how God showed his love among us: *He sent his one and only Son.*’ The God who is love *is* the Father who sends his Son. To be the Father, then, *means* to love, to give out life, to beget the Son. Before anything else, for all eternity, this God was loving, giving life to and delighting in his Son.

Seeing this, many theologians have liked to compare the Father to a fountain, ever bursting out with life and love. The Puritan theologian John Owen, for example, in *Communion with God*, circles around fountain imagery throughout his first section on the Father. Jesus Christ, is ‘the beam, the stream,’ he says, ‘yet by him we are led to the fountain, the sun of eternal love itself’, ... ‘the free fountain and spring of all ... in the bosom of the Father’.¹ The Father is eternally characterised by pouring out love on his Son, by his Spirit.

Only of this God can you say ‘God is love’. Only if this God is God can you say that love really is at the heartbeat, the centre of all reality. If this God is not God, love is an optional extra, a side dish.

What we see is that this God’s innermost being is an outgoing, loving, life-giving being. The triune God is an *ecstatic* God: he is not a God who hoards his life, but one who gives it away, as he would show in that supreme moment of his self-revelation on the cross. The Father finds his very identity in giving his life and being to the Son; and the Son images his Father in sharing his life with us through the Spirit.

All this is to say that the very nature of the triune God is at complete odds with the nature of other gods. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis captured well the difference between the devil (who is the definitive needy and solitary god) and the living God of ecstatic, self-giving, overflowing love. Screwtape, a senior demon, writes:

One must face the fact that all the talk about His love for men, and His service being perfect freedom, is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda,

¹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen. Volume 2: Communion with God*, ed. by W.H. Goold (1862; rpt London: Banner of Truth, 1965), pp. 23, 32.

but an appalling truth. He really *does* want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself—creatures, whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His own, not because He has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to His. We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons. We want to suck in, He wants to give out. We are empty and would be filled; He is full and flows over.²

FROM HEAV'NLY HARMONY

One way to see the beauty and significance of all this is in music. Christianity has always had a special love affair with music; the Scriptures are shot through with music, as is life in the church. John Dryden, the seventeenth-century poet, tried to explain why it should be so in his 'A Song for St. Cecilia's Day' (Saint Cecilia is the patron saint of church music):

From Harmony, from heav'nly Harmony
 This universal frame began.
 When Nature underneath a heap
 Of jarring Atomes lay,
 And cou'd not heave her head,
 The tuneful Voice was heard from high,
 'Arise, ye more than dead!'
 Then cold, and hot, and moist, and dry,
 In order to their stations leap,
 And Musick's pow'r obey.
 From Harmony, from heav'nly Harmony
 This universal frame began:
 From Harmony to Harmony
 Through all the compass of the Notes it ran,
 The Diapason^a closing full in man.³
 ^a octave

Dryden's words find echoes throughout the Christian world: C. S. Lewis had the Christ-like figure of Aslan sing Narnia into existence in *The Magician's Nephew*; his friend, J. R. R. Tolkien, imagined the creation of the cosmos as a musical event in *The Silmarillion*; and in the eighteenth century, George Frideric Handel set Dryden's ode to music so you can actu-

² C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Glasgow: Collins, 1942), pp. 45-6.

³ *The Works of John Dryden. Volume 3: Poems 1685-1692*, ed. by E. Miner and V.A. Dearing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 201-4.

ally hear melodically how, after a dramatic silence and void that reminds one of Genesis 1, the overflowing joy of the heavenly harmony bursts out.

It is from the heavenly harmony of Father, Son, and Spirit that this universal frame of the cosmos—and all created harmony—comes. To hear a tuneful harmony can be one of the most intoxicatingly beautiful experiences. And no wonder: as in heaven, so on earth. The Father, Son, and Spirit have always been in delicious harmony, and thus they create a world where harmonies—distinct beings, persons or notes working in unity—are good, mirroring the very being of the triune God.

The eternal harmony of the Father, Son, and Spirit provides the logic for a world in which everything was created to exist in cheerful conviviality, and which still, despite the discord of sin and evil, is so essentially harmonious.

And such thoughts have inspired many a Christian musician. Johann Sebastian Bach, for instance, was deeply committed to the idea that the human musician could echo and sound out the cosmic harmony of the divine musician; the orderliness, the minor and the major keys, the shadows and the lights in the music all resonating the structure of the great symphony that is creation. In writing such music, Bach quite deliberately sought to provide fuel for both mind and heart, challenging the intellect and stirring the affections, for the ultimate reality that stands behind music is not only fascinating, but unutterably beautiful.

Bach's younger contemporary, Jonathan Edwards, was an ardent lover of music. One of his favourite words was 'harmony'. Declaring that the Father, Son, and Spirit constitute 'the supreme harmony of all', he believed, like Bach, that when we sing together in harmony (as he often did with his family) we do something that reflects God's own beauty.

The best, most beautiful, and most perfect way that we have of expressing a sweet concord of mind to each other, is by music. When I would form in my mind an idea of a society in the highest degree happy, I think of them as expressing their love, their joy, and the inward concord and harmony and spiritual beauty of their souls by sweetly singing to each other.⁴

There is the deepest and most alluring beauty to be found in the heavenly harmony of the Trinity. Karl Barth said 'the triunity of God is the secret of His beauty'.⁵ Of course. In the lively harmony of the three persons, the radiant love, the overflowing goodness of this God there is a

⁴ *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 26 vols. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1957-2008), vol. 13, pp. 329, 331.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, 4 vols in 13 parts (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), II/1, p. 661.

beauty entirely at odds with the self-serving monotony of single-person gods such as Screwtape described. And because this God has poured out his love and life, we can also say 'the triunity of God is the source of *all* beauty'.

SLAVES OR SONS?

With the Triune God we have a beautiful God. Yet there is another reason why the Trinity is the secret to joyful Christianity: with the Triune God we have a far sweeter salvation than any other god offers. The nature of God radically affects the shape of the salvation he would offer. If God is just a solitary individual who has decided he wants a creation to rule over, then salvation is simply about becoming a law-abiding citizen under his kingship. But if God is a Father, loving his Son by his Spirit, then the gospel is something sweeter. Salvation is about becoming the Spirit-anointed sons of God. More than just forgiven, more than righteous: adopted.

The eternally beloved Son comes to us to share with us the very love that the Father has always lavished on him. He comes to share with us and bring us into the life that is his, that we might be brought before the Most High, not just as forgiven sinners, but as dearly beloved children sharing by the Spirit the Son's own 'Abba!' cry. The Father's eternal love for the Son now encompasses us.

John's gospel is shot through with this. When the Word comes to us from God, becoming flesh, his light driving away the darkness, what salvation does he bring? John 1:12: 'to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.'

The Word, the Son is presented to us, John 1:18, as being eternally 'in the bosom [or lap] of the Father'. Jesus declares that his desire is that believers might be with him there (John 17:24). It's something modeled for us at the last supper, in John 13:23. 'One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table in the bosom of Jesus.' Yes, Jesus has been eternally in the bosom of the Father, and the 'Beloved Disciple' is now in the bosom of Jesus. This is why Jesus can say to the Father in John 17:23, 'you have loved them even as you have loved me', for he shares with us that intimate 'Abba' cry, and gives us his own Comforter, the Spirit, to be our Comforter as well. He shares with us all that he has. His own life.

If God were not a Father, he could never give us the right to be his children. If he did not enjoy eternal fellowship with his Son, one has to wonder if he has any fellowship to share with us, or if he even knows what fellowship looks like. If, for example, the Son was a creature and had not eternally been 'in the bosom of the Father', knowing him and being loved by him, then what sort of relationship with the Father could he share with

us? If the Son himself had never been close to the Father, how could he bring us close?

If God were a single person—if God had no Son—salvation would look entirely different. He might allow us to live under his rule and protection, but at an infinite distance—approached, perhaps, through intermediaries. He might even offer forgiveness, but he would not offer closeness. He simply couldn't do it. Added to this, since by definition he would not be eternally loving, would he deal with the price of sin himself and offer that forgiveness for free? It is most unlikely. Distant hirelings we would remain, never to hear the Son's golden words to his Father, 'you have loved them even as you have loved me' (John 17:23). Created to be slaves, we would be saved to be slaves.

But the gospel of this God gives us such intimacy and confidence before him. We are beloved children of the Most High! No other God could bring us so close and have us so loved; no other God could so win our hearts. With this God we can say with all sincerity, 'Our Father', knowing that we pray, as John Calvin put it, as it were 'through the mouth of Jesus'.⁶ The Most High delights to hear us as his very children. How this enables a hearty prayer life! Prayer becomes inviting; a delightful privilege.

The Reformer Martin Luther knew well how much the Fatherhood of God changes the shape of salvation and all our thoughts about God. As a monk, his mind was filled with the knowledge that God is righteous and hates sin, but he failed to see any further into who God is. He could not see what God's righteousness is and *why* he hates sin. The result, he said, was that, 'I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God'.⁷ Not knowing God as a kind and willing Father, a God who brings us close, Luther found he could not love him. He and his fellow monks transferred their affections to Mary and various other saints; it was them they would love and to them they would pray.

That changed when he began to see that God is a fatherly God who shares, who gives to us his righteousness, glory, and wisdom. Looking

⁶ This wording is Karl Barth's (*Prayer* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002], p. 14). Barth has in mind Calvin's Genevan Catechism, Q.252; for translations of the 1541 French and 1545 Latin versions, respectively, see T.F. Torrance (ed.), *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke & Co, 1959), p. 44; J.K.S. Reid (ed.), *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Library of Christian Classics, 22; London: SCM Press, 1959), p. 122.

⁷ *Luther's Works*, Volume 34: *Career of the Reformer*, IV, ed. by L.W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 336-7.

back later in life he reflected that, as a monk, he had not actually been worshipping the right God, for it is 'not enough', he then said, to know God as the creator and judge. Only when God is known as a loving Father is he known aright.

For although the whole world has most carefully sought to understand the nature, mind and activity of God, it has had no success in this whatever. But... God Himself has revealed and disclosed the deepest profundity of his fatherly heart, His sheer inexpressible love.⁸

Through sending his Son to bring us back to himself, God has revealed himself to be inexpressibly loving and supremely fatherly. What Luther found was that, not only does that give great assurance and joy—it also wins our hearts to him, for 'we may look into His fatherly heart and sense how boundlessly He loves us. That would warm our hearts, setting them aglow with thankfulness'.⁹ In the salvation of this God we see a God we can really love.

LIVING IN GOD'S LOVE

Luther's discovery says so much about the nature of this God. With this God of eternal relationship, of eternal, mutual delight, Christianity is *meant* to be joyful. For with this God, the Christian life is about so much more than 'getting heaven'. The Spirit is about drawing us into the divine life. The Father has eternally delighted in the Son through the Spirit, and the Son in the Father; the Spirit's work in giving us new life, then, is nothing less than bringing us to share in their mutual delight.

That's the new life of the Christian: my new life began when the Spirit first opened my eyes and won my heart to Christ. Then, for the first time, I began to enjoy and love Christ as the Father has always done. And through Christ, for the first time, I began to enjoy and love the Father as the Son has always done. That was how it started, and that is how the new life goes on: by revealing the beauty, love, glory and kindness of Christ to me, the Spirit kindles in me an ever deeper and more sincere love for God. As he stirs me to think ever more on Christ, he makes me more and more God-like: less self-obsessed and more Christ-obsessed.

Through the giving of the Spirit, God shares with us—and catches us up into—the life that is his. The Father has eternally known and loved his great Son, and through the Spirit he opens our eyes that we too might know him, and so he wins our hearts that we too might love him. Our

⁸ Luther's *Large Catechism* (Saint Louis, MO.: Concordia, 1978), p. 77.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

love for the Son, then, is an echo and an extension of the Father's eternal love. In other words, through the Spirit the Father allows us to share in the enjoyment of what most delights him: his Son. It was his overwhelming love for the Son that inspired him to create us in the first place, and all so that we might share in that highest pleasure of his.

This, in fact, is the heartbeat of what it means to be godly, to be like this God. It is why Jesus says, 'If God were your Father, you would love me' (John 8:42). The Father's very identity consists in his love for the Son, and so when we love the Son we reflect what is most characteristic about the Father. It is the prime reason the Spirit is given. John Owen wrote that '...therein consists the principal part of our renovation into his image. Nothing renders us so like unto God as our love unto Jesus Christ...'.¹⁰ In our love and enjoyment of the Son we are like the Father; in our love and enjoyment of the Father we are like the Son. That is the happy life the Spirit calls us to.

Who, knowing this, could ever prefer the 'cleaner', leaner idea of a single-person God? For, strip down God and make him lean and you must strip down his salvation and make it mean. Instead of a life bursting with love, joy, and fellowship, all you will be left with is the watery gruel of religion. Instead of a loving Father, a distant potentate; instead of fellowship, a contract. No security in the beloved Son, no heart-change, no joy in God could that spirit bring.

Far, far from theological clutter, God's being Father, Son, and Spirit is just what makes the Christian life beautiful. Now wouldn't people rail less at the existence of God if they heard clearly that we believe in *this* God?

¹⁰ Owen, *Works*, vol. 1 *The Glory of Christ*, p. 146.