

A Glimpse at the Trinity and Crucifixion

The greatest reality in all the cosmos is the existence of God. And the most important event in all history is the crucifixion of Christ. We should try to think deeply about these, and perhaps—even if it's only speculative—make an effort to see how they may be related. A huge literature on these topics already exists but mostly it's repetitive. There's very little that's new, and what's new may not be true. Let's explore these two topics. We will discover something necessary to our faith.

In the theology of the Hebrew Scriptures, God appears to be monotheistic (Deuteronomy 6:4, for example). Close reading of certain passages however suggests otherwise. For just one example: **“And now the Sovereign Lord has sent Me, with his Spirit”** (Isaiah 48:16c); here we can easily identify three persons who are deity. The New Testament more fully reveals that God is a unity in essence yet exists as three distinct “Persons.” (I use “person” here in an analogical sense; only humans are persons. There is, unfortunately, no better word in English to use.) The three Persons share one soul, one will, yet each is a center of self-consciousness. The Bible is thus tritheistic.

To defeat heretical ideas that bubbled up in the early Church, the Nicene creed was formulated. The bishops declared that the Son is “eternally generated” by the Father, and that the Holy Spirit “proceeds” from the Father and from the Son. (The Eastern Church rejects the “from the Son” phrase.) This doctrine has endured for almost two millennia and is universally held by evangelicals today. But is it true? Does it matter?

The “generated” word does not mean or imply procreation.* The Son is of the same “substance” (the word the bishops used; not good because it implies materiality), or the same essence as the Father, that is, fully God in the sense that I am the same substance or essence as my father, although I'm obviously distinct from him. Unfortunately, the begotten or generated words are misunderstood by many to mean that the Son “came into existence” from the Father, that is, derived from the Father. And that is not true. These words also cause the enormous misunderstanding that the Son is subordinate to the Father, that there's a hierarchy within the Godhead. Or even dependence on the Father! These ideas are not true either. The three Persons are co-equal and co-eternal. There's nothing in the Son that He could not be the Father or the Holy Spirit, and there's nothing in the Holy Spirit that He could not be the Son or the Father; and the same holds for the Father. In my mind, it's best to ignore the unfortunate phraseology of the Nicene creed. The terms, “Father” and “Son” are possibly used to denote the intimacy of the relationship, the unity of essence; certainly not to suggest reproduction.

The Trinity should be understood as an eternally self-existent unity of three distinct “persons” who mutually share true or perfect love. The three Persons have one will, so the three are united in the works of God (the “doctrine of inseparable operations”) such as creation and redemption. Now, let's discuss true love, because “God is love.”

* John 3:16 uses the word, *monogenes*, the meaning of which is disputed. The KJV and NASB translate this Greek word as “only begotten,” a term that supports “eternally generated” in the Nicene creed. Most English translations say, “only Son,” or “one and only Son,” omitting the “begotten” word. Some modern expositors claim that *monogenes* means “unique.” In the Bible, we see that God has taken Adam as His son, an adopted son; also the Nation of Israel is said to be God's “son.” The royal descendents of David are God's adopted sons also, including David's ultimate son, Jesus. And believers in Jesus are God's adopted sons. It seems best to understand that, to avoid confusion, John may have deliberately intended *monogenes* to refer to the one eternal Son, the Son of God, deity, rather than the many adopted human sons. Or, as some expositors now believe, it's Jesus, the Messiah/King that the verse refers to.

True love can be characterized as a selfless, self-sacrificing reciprocal sharing of life with another, and it is a non-possessive love. It seeks the good of the one who is loved. It not only gains nothing in return, it sacrifices self in the act of love. This love is mutual in that the beloved in the same way loves the lover. It is non-possessive in the sense that the lover unselfishly desires the beloved also to experience love from a third person and to love that third person. (Love between two persons is possessive, that is, it demands exclusivity, which denies each person the joy of loving and being loved by yet another person; possessive love is selfish love and therefore is not true love.) Thus, the Trinity is and always has existed, and *necessarily* so, as three “Persons” united in will, in thought, and in true love. God is good, and true love expresses His goodness.

The physical cosmos that God created is “very good,” reflecting God’s own goodness. Yet . . . something is wrong. God had to create light because there was pre-existing darkness. Darkness means evil. And God only separated the light from the dark, He didn’t obliterate the dark. And in this beautiful garden that God planted, there’s a certain tree from which the new beloved human creatures must not eat. Dreadful consequences would result from eating of it. And in this very good creation there’s a Serpent, a very wicked supernatural being. This world that God created is a dangerous place. In God’s goodness, He created it thus. What’s going on?

And in the New Testament, we find these mysterious verses that pique our curiosity and demand more than passing thought: **“I will . . . that they behold my glory . . . for you loved Me before the foundation of the world (John 17:24); “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4); “grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time” (2 Timothy 1:9); “the hope of eternal life, which God . . . promised before the beginning of time” (Titus 1:2); and “Christ . . . chosen before the creation of the world” (1 Peter 1:19).** The unique person of Jesus pre-existed creation; He was ordained to mediate God’s goodness to certain ones who were, before creation even occurred, also ordained to receive eternal life, God’s own life. This would mean that the physical cosmos that we know was created for this purpose: It was to be (is) the place for a necessary plot to unfold, a story that is God’s way of dealing with that pre-existent and enduring darkness. By creating, God moved the spiritual battle to this realm of time and space. The conflict involves the Son of God, the incarnate Messiah Jesus, and it trenchantly involves us.

The cross of Christ, as almost all Christians believe, was an atoning sacrifice on our behalf. Christ Jesus died the death we deserve because of our sins. But we must ask, *Why a crucifixion death?* If death of the incarnate Son was necessary, why not a quick and easy death? Why such an agonizing, hideously cruel, tortured death as crucifixion? Why did Jesus have to suffer having the skin and muscle ripped off his body (Roman “scourging”) and then hang shamefully naked in public, bloody, and in exceedingly great total body pain? Why *that*?

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Let’s try to put all this together. In God’s goodness, He desires His beloved human creatures to join Him in eternal fellowship. In transcendent love and in divine humility and selflessness, He opens His own nature to creatures made in His image to enjoy Him and His love, joy, peace and blessedness. But evil exists. It necessarily exists because God is good, and “good” is meaningless without its corresponding opposite. Evil not just in the abstract but embodied, that is, personified. So for good to be truly good and so to prevail, evil must be overcome, vanquished forever. And so infinite justice will be fulfilled. To do that, good also must be embodied, personified.

So God created a world in which evil would have to be expressed, even though the expression thereof would necessarily entail ghastly suffering and misery and injustice and pain on the part of God's beloved human creatures. God had to allow evil to manifest itself in order to defeat it. On a long leash, that wicked Serpent was (is) allowed to wreak chaos and mayhem, evil and death and suffering. Humanity has been subjected to thousands of years of horrific suffering and misery in this dangerous place called earth.

Job suffered horribly although he was righteous. He didn't deserve such suffering. Yet in faith, he looked to God as His *goel*, his kinsman-redeemer, to vindicate him. A *goel* must pay a price, that is, must sacrifice something of himself, to redeem the victim. I see Job, although historical, as symbol of humanity, representing humanity's desperate plight of having to live in a dangerous world, dominated by a wicked Serpent. We are not righteous, OK, but we too must suffer in the hope of future vindication mediated by a *goel*, a unique Person able to pay the infinitely great price needed.

In the Person of the Son (although all three Persons were inextricably joined) God took upon Himself the suffering and pain that humanity has to experience by submitting to something as ghastly as crucifixion. Yes, the death of Christ fulfilled justice, it enabled reconciliation, it provided for forgiveness of sins, but more importantly, it defeated that proud, power-lusting, hate-filled Serpent. The Serpent doesn't love. Only God does. Only love—God's kind of transcendent love that selflessly, sacrificially seeks to bless the sinful and unlovely—is able to defeat evil. Why? Because love is God's goodness manifest in a physical world.

Jesus, the embodiment of God, of God's goodness, in transcendent love identified with a humanity tyrannized all thru history by cosmic evil. As the 1st Adam, He suffered the pain of humiliation, hatred, injustice and sin, and real, agonizing pain. We must now in love identify with the Son, submitting to His authority as the 2nd Adam, and so be delivered from the evil that fully surrounds and seeks to control us.

God necessarily exists eternally as a Trinity. God is love, and His love is (indeed, can only be) manifest as three Persons bonded intimately as a unity. Because of this kind of love, a love that must be shared and experienced, God invites us to join Him in His relationship of love. We don't become deity. But God miraculously glorifies us to make us able to be in His ineffable presence. What qualifies us for this wonderful destiny? Our love for the horribly crucified One, the God who Himself experienced the suffering and pain that His beloved humanity endures, thus forever linking together love and justice.

Dear reader: If you profess to be following the Messiah Jesus, you're here to fulfill what God came to earth to do, *viz.*, defeat evil by expressing love, thereby manifesting God's goodness. We declare that we are taking the side of good in this dangerous, evil-saturated place by selflessly, sacrificially, extending God's radical kind of love to others.

Ignore what exists in America today as pop Christianity, which seems to worship a god called Comfort. The call of the Gospel is to imitate Jesus. That means knowing Jesus, loving Jesus, willfully striving to be like Him and serving Him as He commanded. The risks are great, yes. Will it necessitate self-sacrifice? Yes. Pain? Suffering? Death? Yes, that too. But the consequences of refusing to do that are dire. The reward for doing that, in contrast, is eternal intimate fellowship in union with the selflessly loving, triune God. Let's therefore commit to being full-time faithful.