

The Character of the Triune Godhead

What we believe about God impacts our relationship with Him. Our understanding of God's character has some very practical theological implications, especially in the final stages of the great controversy. The understanding of the Triune Godhead is a foundational and essential doctrine that clarifies misconceptions about God's nature and character. This doctrine claims that the Godhead consists of three co-eternal divine persons who have lived in a mutually supportive and submissive love relationship for all eternity. If this claim is true then it speaks volumes about the Godhead's essential nature and about what God has had in mind for those whom He has created in His image.

Self-Sacrificing Love

If we want to understand what God is like, we need to study God's character. The most foundational character trait of God's government is self-sacrifice. We see this clearly in Philippians chapter two.

Philippians 2:3-8 Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in **lowliness of mind** let each **esteem other better than themselves**. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of **no reputation**, and took upon him the **form of a servant**, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, **he humbled himself**, and became **obedient unto death**, even the death of the cross.

We shouldn't expect God to require something of us that He Himself does not also demonstrate. And Jesus clearly demonstrated this character trait when He came as a Man on this earth and died a cruel death. The Father also demonstrated this attribute in giving the Son to this world.

We also see this character trait revealed in the way that Christ glorified the Father and sought to put the Father first before Himself. And the Father glorifies the Son and praises Him for what He has done in the plan of salvation and in the creation of the world. We see that in passages such as Hebrews chapter one.

Hebrews 1:8-12 But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows. And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail.

The Holy Spirit also reveals self-sacrifice. He does not speak of Himself, His total focus is revealing Christ and glorifying Him.

John 16:13,14 Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for **he shall not speak of himself**; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. **He shall glorify me**: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you.

This clearly shows the complete unity of the Godhead. The three Persons of the Deity have one purpose and act in common accord. We see in the Godhead mutual subjection of the members to one another.

But to have self-sacrifice there must be more than one. There never could be a time in which there was only one member of the Deity, because then self-sacrifice could not exist as a defining characteristic of God. By definition unselfishness involves the concern of others - there must be at least one other person in order to demonstrate unselfishness. Therefore, there must always have been more than one Person in the Godhead.

Closely connected with self-sacrifice is love. The Bible tells us that God is love.

1 John 4:8 He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.

And note that the verse does not say that God is loving, but that He is love. He is the definition of what love is. God is the originator of love: self-emptying, self-sacrificing love - what the Bible terms *agape* love.

Love is also by nature others-centered, which again rules out God as an absolute singularity at any point in eternity past. In order to love you must have someone to love. You cannot love and be alone. A minimum of two persons are necessary for love to exist. Since God is love, He cannot exist without someone else to love.

However, in order to experience selfless love (*agape*) three is the minimum number of persons necessary. This is because three constitutes a state in which each one enjoys both being the center of attention and deferring the center of attention. Three persons can experience giving love, receiving love, and expanding love to the level of third-party exclusion. The moment there are three, each recipient of love must also humbly yield love to the third party, and each one then occupies the position of the third party to the other two. Pure selfless *agape* love can now occur by virtue of the fact that each one must love and be loved with both an exclusive and a divided interest.

If all three members of the Godhead are distinct, individual persons, and they are each eternal, then this makes perfect sense. But if there is only one eternal being in the Godhead, no matter how far back in eternity you go when another being came into existence, there is still an infinity beyond which the first being was alone. This cannot be, for God is the complete expression of selfless love, and true love cannot exist alone. The triune Godhead is the most extraordinary example that love has always existed, and that all three members of the Godhead have always existed, because love is as eternal as God Himself, and God is love.

Thus, the concept of the triune Godhead is in perfect harmony with God's character of selfless love.

Rebellion

The human race was made in God's image and "according to" His "likeness" (Genesis 1:26.27). This means that the very core for what it means to be human is living in a loving, trusting, and submissive relationship to God and with our fellow human beings. In other words, we were created to love and live like the "heavenly trio"!

Satan has claimed that the only way to true happiness is to make self-gratification the major goal of life (see Isaiah 14:13-14; c.f. Ezekiel 28:12-16; Daniel 8:11; Zephaniah 2:15; Revelation 18:7). Since the fall of man, our natural inclination is to conduct ourselves according to Satan's principle of living all out for self in opposition to God's nature of self-emptying, others-centered love.

This conundrum is at the very heart of the great controversy between the two antagonistic principles that are contending for supremacy. When Satan rebelled in heaven he zeroed in on the principle of self-sacrificing love that is at the core of God's character and government. The fall of man brought the entire human race into this conflict, and Satan has claimed total dominion over the earth (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The only possible path for resolving this conflict is one in which the triune God demonstrates and applies that same self-emptying love that resides in His very being as an eternally loving God who is one in three.

Redemption

The goal of the plan of salvation is to restore God's image in the fallen race and to bring us back into harmony with the principle of others-centered love that has its source in the triune Godhead. To do this God has chosen to demonstrate His eternal self-sacrificing love in giving His own divine Son to come and be one with us to show us what godly love is all about. The Son's mission was to live and die in such a way that we could be forgiven, reconciled, and healed of the disease of sin.

Only One who is God in the fullest and highest sense can effectively show us what God is like (John 12:45; 14:7-11). No created god, semigod, or derived god would be sufficient to show humanity the truth about God. Since Jesus was fully one in nature and character with the Father, He could demonstrate what God is like. Only God can reveal God.

Further, only One who is fully divine and who by that divine nature was our Creator is of sufficient value and virtue to offer an effectually saving sacrifice for sin. No angelic sacrifice could satisfy the claims of God's perfect law. Only One who had the power to voluntarily lay down His life and take it again could undertake the work of atonement for the fallen human race. The only One who could effectively redeem and heal the world was none other than God Himself. And only a being who naturally possesses immortality can offer everlasting life to those who take advantage of the saving power of His atoning death.

Suppose that God the Father in eternity past formed the plan of redemption without the Son and then at some point birthed Him into existence to fulfill this plan. What would that say about God's motives? If God, knowing that there would eventually be a rebellion in the universe, generated another being to bear the cost for this rebellion, what would that say about God's character? According to this perspective, God is not portrayed as making any personal sacrifice and is instead depicted as an angry ogre who seeks to unleash His wrath on an innocent third party.

If the Son of God was morphed into existence to pay the price for the sins of humanity, then we have the odd situation of a greater God being dependent on a lesser God to demonstrate His love and satisfy His justice. If the Son of God's deity is considered to be only conferred or delegated, then it undermines the significance of Christ's humility in setting aside His divine attributes during His incarnation, as those attributes would not have been inherently His in the first place. If Jesus' divine life had been somehow generated by the Father, then the death of Jesus was like that of any other creature - He did not lay it

down of Himself, nor could He have taken it back up Himself as He said.

If, however, the sacrificial victim is both fully God and truly human, then the death of the God/man, Jesus, is not the death of a creature or derived deity, but it is also the death of God! Christ's innate deity, so bound up with and blended with His humanity, fully consented to His death as a sacrifice for sin. The deity of Christ fully shared in the mental anguish of the death of His humanity so that we can truthfully say that God died for us. And because of their profound unity of triune oneness in nature, the Father and the Holy Spirit were also profoundly present and in solidarity with Christ's atoning death. The deity of Christ is the full deity of the entire triune Godhead (Colossians 2:9). Thus the entire Godhead "was in Christ" and suffered His atoning death (2 Corinthians 5:18,29).

Restoration

The incarnation of the Son did not end God's communication of His love to the world. At the ascension of Christ, the Father and the Son dispatched the third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, to be Their unique, divine, yet earthly agent of conviction, conversion, comfort, and empowerment for those who respond to God's saving initiative in Christ. While Christ is no longer physically present with us to continue the work of restoring humanity back into His image of selfless love, this work continues within us through the ministry and person of the mighty agency of the Holy Spirit.

But in order to perfectly represent Jesus, the Holy Spirit must Himself be a divine person. In the same way that the Son perfectly represented the Father during His life here on earth (John 14:8-12), so the Holy Spirit perfectly represents the Son here on earth (John 15:26; 16:14,15). Only a being who is fully God could rightly represent the Father, and only a being who is fully God can represent the Son to the human race. Further, only a personal being can make the work of Christ a saving fact in the human heart.

1 Corinthians 2:7-12 But we speak **the wisdom of God** in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. **But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.** For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so **the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.** Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but **the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.**

This passage plainly claims that we can know God only through the Spirit of God, who is now His authoritative representative on earth, the revelation of His love and saving power. If the Holy Spirit is representing both the divine Father and the divine Son here on earth, then it makes sense that the Holy Spirit must also be fully divine. The Holy Spirit is here said to reveal the deep things of God to us, and this must require that a being of the same essential nature of divine love can adequately communicate such love to a world destitute of a knowledge of God.

Throughout the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is described as a personal agent who is involved in the work of salvation. The Holy Spirit is the agent of regeneration, sanctification, and empowerment for Christian living. The Spirit is the one who draws people to God, convicts them of sin, and gives them new life in Christ. Without the personal nature of the Holy Spirit, the transformative work of salvation in a

person's life would be reduced to mere human effort, which would be insufficient to bring about the radical transformation necessary for salvation.

The Christian faith is a personal relationship with a personal God, and the Holy Spirit is an essential part of that relationship, enabling believers to experience God's presence and power in their lives. If the Holy Spirit were not a personal being, then Christian faith and worship would become reduced to a set of impersonal practices or abstract principles. Thus, the understanding of the Holy Spirit as a distinct person within the triune Godhead who is intimately involved in the work of salvation is vital for a living personal relationship with God.

Community

The distinctive quality of life within the Christian community is that of love.

John 13:35 By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

1 John 3:14 We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

Love is the essential feature that sets Jesus' followers apart from other human groups. It is not just any sort of affection that identifies Jesus' followers but the specific love that Jesus has for them that sets the standard for their love to one another.

John 13:34 A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

John 15:12,13 This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

This is the same love and fellowship that is shared between the three members of the Godhead. God's desire is that the same fellowship that exists within the triune Godhead would also be manifest among the members of the Christian community.

John 17:21-23 That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.

1 John 1:3 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

The divine love that creates Christian community manifests and extends the love that constitutes God's own life. Thus, the doctrine of the "heavenly trio" has something vital to contribute to our understanding of the importance and proper functioning of God's two key social institutions - the family and the church.

The essence of what makes the marriage institution work can be found in the mutually submissive love that unfolds within the family arena of the "heavenly trio". If we, like the Triune Godhead, would prioritize our partner's interests and practice self-sacrifice, the world would be a happier place. Furthermore, we would come to realize that studying the happiness of others is the key to discovering life's deepest and most satisfying joys.

The same is true in the church. If the very nature of existence flows forth from God's own social nature, then we can begin to see the privileges of being a member of a church community. The central dynamic of the Christian community not only resembles the essential dynamic of God's own life, but the church participates in God's love that flows from within the Godhead to the church. The church, along with the family, offers the most important opportunities for the practice and expression of mutually uplifting love.

Conclusion

The work of salvation is not that of subordinate or impersonal beings. Salvation is God's own work, and the full divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit affirms that this is true. If Christ is inferior to God by nature then God sent a subordinate to carry out the work of salvation. If the Holy Spirit is not a divine person, but merely an impersonal force or abstract representation, then it would be difficult to understand how God's love and grace could be communicated to us in such a personal and intimate way (see Romans 5:5; Galatians 4:6). But God loves us so much that God Himself has entered human history in the divine persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit, each fully representing the triune Godhead and manifesting the others-centered, self-sacrificing love that is the very nature of their being.

God's saving activity is a manifestation of the very nature of the triune Godhead. The plan of salvation that has existed in the mind of God for all eternity (see Romans 16:25; Ephesians 3:9,11; 2 Timothy 1:9) is an extension of His character. The plan of salvation manifests something that has always been true of God - love is the central characteristic of God's own being. And because love is by nature others-centered, God has always existed as Father, Son, and Spirit, as an everlasting community of love.

The doctrine of the Triune Godhead is not a minor issue or peripheral doctrine. It contains profound truths that form the heart of what makes Christianity unique. Our understanding of the greatest biblical notion, that God is love, is rooted in our insights into the "heavenly trio". Therefore, we cannot treat the concept of the Triune Godhead as a side issue. It is too foundational, essential, and biblical to the very nature of our understanding of God. The triune understanding of God has everything to do with the two fundamental institutions of society - the family and the church, as these institutions are to embody the love that radiates within the divine community itself. To the extent that the Christian community reflects this love, it provides the world the clearest manifestation of God's nature and character, and the clearest evidence of God's reality, evidence stronger than philosophical arguments could ever be.