

The Love of God

Man loves because God loves

If a man loves a woman, he will usually buy gifts for her as an indication of his love. The more wealthy the person, the more glamorous the gifts will be. Nebuchadnezzar, one of the kings of ancient Babylon (he ruled from about 605 to 561 BC.) is said by many to have made the hanging gardens of Babylon for his Median wife, Amytis. The gardens were so large and beautiful they have been classified as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.¹

A husband and wife are capable of a deep love relationship between each other, and are able to express a great love for their children. It should not surprise us to find in Scripture a revelation of a deep love relationship between the three persons of the Godhead. Mankind's capacity to love is only a reflection of God's practice of showing love.

Man is made in the image of God, albeit a very much corrupted image since the rebellion of Adam in the garden of Eden; hence, man's inability to love with a perfect love. God however, loves with a perfect love. Jesus reveals something of the Father's love for him when he said, "Father I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world." (John 17:24). We do not know what this glory is, we only know that it was given to Jesus before he left his Father's presence and came upon the earth to live and die for the salvation of sinners (17:5).

One thing we can be sure of in regard to this glory, it will impress upon the minds of all who see it the depth of the love of the Father for the Son. I will not see many of the beautiful sights of this world, but I do know that I will see Christ's glory and be amazed. Before looking more deeply at the love of the Father for the Son and of what the Father has done for the Son in his love for him, we will first look at how the Son shows his love for the Father.

The Son's love for the Father

I was once told as a young boy of how a senior army officer during World War Two commanded so much love and respect from his men that they would follow him wherever he led them, even to death if necessary. The men did not have much in the way of material possessions to offer, but they could show their love for their officer and for their country by their complete obedience to him - even in the most threatening and difficult circumstances.

When Jesus lived upon this earth, he was poor by earthly standards, however; that did not stop him from displaying his love for the Father. His poor circumstances enhanced his display of love for his Father. His love is shown through his actions. He said, "...I seek not to please myself but him who sent me." (John 5:30). He shows his love through what he says, "For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it."

(12:49). He also said "...I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. ... I always do what pleases him." (8:28-29). He shows his love through his actions, "...the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me..." (14:31). Even to the point of laying down his life (10:17-19).

It is quite evident from the above passages that the Son loves the Father very deeply. His whole life is a display of love for the Father.

The Father's love for the Son

It is impossible for the finite human mind to comprehend the pure love which the Father has for the Son. God is perfect, and his love is perfect. He does not act from the viewpoint of selfishness. The actions of the father are in part a reflection of his love for the Son. Of the Father's love we read, "The Father loves the Son and shows him all he does..." (John 5:20). Jesus told the unbelieving Jews, "My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me." (8:54). The love of the Father is reflected in the high honour and privilege which is given to the Son. "The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands." (John 3:35).

In explaining his love for the disciples, Jesus uses the love of the Father for his example, he says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love" (John 15:9).

The love of the Holy Spirit

If the actions of the Father are a reflection of his love for the Son, and the actions of the Son are a reflection of his love for the Father, then it is fairly safe to conclude that as the Holy Spirit is part of the Godhead, he too will have a nature which is perfect in love. His actions will reflect a deep love for the Father and the Son. So the relationship between the three persons of the Holy Trinity is one of perfect love. The Bible makes the simple but profound statement, "... God is love ..." (1 John 4:16).

It is not the work of the Holy Spirit to draw attention and honour to himself, nor is it part of his nature to do so. The Bible was written under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so we find that the Bible does not say a great deal about him. Jesus told his disciples, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears ... He will bring glory to me..." (John 16:13-14).

The covenant love of the Father for the Son

If a man truly loves a woman and wishes to share the rest of his life with her, he will marry her. In other words, he will enter into a covenant relationship with her. His love for her is not a shallow passing interest, a mere stirring of the emotions. It is a covenantal love. A love which unites to the other person in a lifetime commitment. When children are born into the world, it should not be primarily because the couple love children. Children should be the fruit of a covenantal love relationship.

Likewise, the Church is born of a covenantal love relationship between the three persons of the Holy Trinity. It could not be born without this covenantal love relationship.

¹ The link between Nebuchadnezzar and the gardens is not beyond dispute, some claim they were the work of the semilegendary Queen Sammu-ramat (Greek Semiramis, mother of the Assyrian king Adad-nirari III, who reigned from 810 to 783 BC). (Encyclopaedia Britannica, CD, 2004).

Let us consider for a moment what would have happened if the love of the Son for the Father was not perfect. If it was not a covenantal type of love. Should the Son have come to the day of suffering on the cross, prayed to the Father that the path of suffering be taken from him, then decide he would not take the path of suffering, the Church would not be saved. We would all be given up to the judgment which we deserve.

Thankfully, our spiritual birth is the fruit of a strong covenantal love of the Son for the Father. Jesus said, "...the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me." (John 14:31). It was primarily his love for the Father that took him to the cross.

We have already seen that the Father in His love for the Son has given him a gift before the creation of the world. The Father has also given him a further gift, that being the Church itself. Although Jesus has to be obedient to the Father, and go through much suffering in order to receive the gift. The Church is still nevertheless, a gift from the Father to the Son. Jesus said, "All that the Father gives to me will come to me; and whoever comes to me I will never drive away." (John 6:37).

In his prayer to his Father on the eve of his crucifixion; Jesus said, "For you granted him [Jesus] authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him." (17:2). Jesus also said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." (6:44). It is quite evident from these passages that every believer is a gift from the Father to the Son.

The everlasting covenant

Many Christians do not realise their salvation is based upon the love relationship between the three persons of the Godhead. Many simply see their salvation as being based upon the love of Christ for the Church, however, that love is only secondary to the first love which exists within the Godhead. Perhaps few also realise that their salvation is based upon an everlasting covenant which was entered into by the three persons of the Godhead before the foundation of the world. In regard to the everlasting covenant, we read, "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good..." (Heb. 13:20-21). Jesus is designated as the messenger of the covenant (Malachi 3:1).

The various covenants which God made, e.g. God's covenant with Abraham, could only be made because of a prior covenant which was made by the persons of the Godhead. In other words, there was a firm agreement that the Father would send the Son, that the Son would do all that the Father commanded him to do in order to save the Church, and that the Holy Spirit would bring about a conviction of sin, of righteousness (found in Christ), and of the judgment to come. He would also teach the Church, and give to it every gift necessary for its strengthening. He will also comfort, strengthen and uphold every believer until they meet Christ face to face.

There could be no certain favourable outcome for the Church if the three persons of the Godhead had not entered

into a firm agreement or covenant to do what was necessary on their part. Having first determined before the foundation of the world to save sinners with a plan that would not fail, God made a covenant with Abraham. Again, this is a covenant which will not fail. It is therefore a covenant which the faithful through the centuries have been thankful for. The priest Zechariah, was very thankful for the assurance which the covenant with Abraham gave. He said, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people... to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant." (Luke 1:68-72).

God's covenant with Abraham is dealt with more fully in another paper -see the web site. For the moment, let's consider the depth of love which the three persons of the holy trinity have for each other. They continually act in an attitude of love toward the other. They do not act without considering the gain that will be brought to the other. Nothing is done with purely the thought of self-gain. The Father gave the Son a gift of such magnitude and glory before the foundation of the world, it will convict all who see it of the depth of the love of the Father. The Father has sent the Son into the world to suffer and die, but not without giving him a gift as a reward, that gift being the Church itself. The Holy Spirit does not act from selfishness, but rather, he seeks to give glory to the Son. All of mankind stands condemned when confronted with the depth of love which exists within the holy trinity, for who of us continually acts from a motive of pure love?

Implications for man

Man is made in the image of God. Just this one fact has severe and profound implications for the whole of humanity, particularly:

- How we should live now
- The judgment to come

If man is made in the image of God, and as we have seen from the above, God is selfless in his actions, always giving thought to the other persons in the Godhead and seeking to honour and glorify the other, then it follows that man can not have a satisfactory life if he acts differently. Put simply, man must live a selfless life or face difficulties. Jesus gave some clear teaching on how man should live, and not surprisingly, it is in keeping with the above; he said. "... "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it." (Luke 9:23-24).

Someone came up to Jesus and said, "'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'" (Matt. 22:36-40). The command to love God is a command to do what God himself does as can be seen from the above. It is a command to be involved in a special love relationship. If we were not sinners, there would be no need for the command, it would come naturally.

The Westminster Catechism rejects the hedonistic or self-seeking model for life when it answers the question, "What is the chief and highest end of man?" with: "Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever." The focus of attention is to be away from self to God.

Some make the terrible mistake of focussing much of their attention on themselves. They engage in pleasure seeking activities, even when they carry risks of terrible destruction. For instance they:

- Take illegal drugs in pursuit of pleasure.
- Engage in illicit sex (commit fornication and adultery).
- Rob and murder.
- Put self ahead of others.
- Pursue pleasure and deny God.

It is interesting to note that many self-seeking activities are very destructive. Drug taking is a case in point. When a person takes illegal drugs, he has no thought for another person's pleasure. His activity is very selfish. He brings pleasure to himself, and to himself alone, with little thought as to how his changed behaviour will adversely effect others. Many bring great harm and even death to themselves through this selfish activity.

Conversely, those who seek to bring pleasure and comfort to others usually find fulfilment and joy in what they are doing. Whatever personal problems they have usually diminish in the midst of their valuable work.

The Apostle Paul had sore eyes (Galatians 4:15), but he pressed on with the work. Paul endured hardship after God told him, "... 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' ..." (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul endured many hardships (2 Corinthians 11:24-28). He testified to the Corinthians, "... we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything." (2 Corinthians 6:9-10). He discovered the joy of living for Christ and not for self.

The great judgment of God

The character and behaviour of God not only has implications as to how man is to live, his character also has implications as to how man will be judged.

If God is perfect in every way including morally, then it follows that he will judge with a perfect standard, anything less would be a denial of his true character. The perfect standard by which God will judge the world is Jesus Christ. The Bible says, "... God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, ..." (Romans 2:16).

The apostle Paul refers to the fact of Christ's future coming to judge mankind in his exhortation to Timothy to press on with his work. He says, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season;" (2 Timothy 4:1-2).

If mankind is going to be judged by a perfect standard,

then it follows that if he is to be saved from condemnation at the judgment, then it must be by a perfect means. That means - as we have seen earlier - is by Jesus Christ.

The substitutionary atonement

This all brings us to the substitutionary atonement. Because man is a sinner before God, he can not save himself as he could never meet God's perfect standard. One who is perfect before God must do that work for him. That person is Jesus Christ.

There are two primary works which Christ successfully completed for the salvation of sinners, they are:

- He lived a life of perfect righteousness/obedience before the Father.
- He bore the penalty for sin by his suffering and death on the cross.

Those who place their faith in Christ are saved completely by a means which meets God's perfect demands.

- ▶ The sins of the believer are put to the account of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- ▶ The righteousness of Christ is put to the account of the believer (Romans 3:21-22, 5:17).

The substitutionary atonement simply refers to Christ being our substitute in the above two areas. It is a work of God which saves the sinner completely, meeting the demands of a holy and righteous God.

The holy trinity defended

The doctrine of the holy trinity sometimes comes under attack from those who do not understand it. As can be seen from above, the trinity makes sense. God is not a lonely hermit type of god who lives in the outer reaches of space with no interest in relationships. Quite the contrary, he is a personal God who enjoys a perfect relationship with the other persons in the trinity. It is understandable that he also has a good relationship with those who come to him through Christ. When that relationship is weak, it is because of the wayward actions of his children, not because he has himself become cold and indifferent in his relationship with his children.

The holy trinity

Deuteronomy 6:4 "Here, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." This passage informs us that God is not three separate gods having three separate and conflicting wills and three separate substances. All three persons of the Godhead are of the same divine substance, and are united in will and purpose. All three have the same divine attributes:

- Omnipotent (all powerful)
- Omniscient (infinite in knowledge)
- Omnipresent (God is present everywhere at all times)

God is the maker of all things:

The bible begins with, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1). It also says, "The earth

is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;" (Psalm 24:1). All three persons of the Godhead were involved in creation. The Father and the Son brought all things into being (John 1:3). The role of the Holy Spirit seems to be that of moulding and shaping the creation. The Bible says, "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." (Gen. 1:2). When we come to the creation of man, it is quite clear that more than one person in the Godhead is involved because of the use of the plural 'us' and 'our'.

"Then God said, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, ..." (Gen. 1:26). See also Gen. 3:22. The plural is also used with regard to God confusing the verbal communication between men "Come, let us go down and confuse their language..." (Gen. 11:7).

The divinity of Christ

When Christ came to earth and was born of the virgin Mary, he was not half God and half man. He was 100% God and 100% man. When he took on human flesh, he set aside his divine powers; he humbled himself (Philippians 2:6-8).

The Bible calls him 'God'. "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.'" (Isaiah 40:3).

Referring to John the Baptist and the above passage, Matthew says, "This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" (Matt. 3:3). Another passage says:

"Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. ... Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty - he is the King of glory. Selah" (Psalm 24:7, 10). Jesus, Lord Almighty, King of glory suffered and died "None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." (1 Cor. 2:8).

Jesus is declared to be God, "But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the sceptre of your kingdom.'" (Heb. 1:8). He is worshipped as God. "... when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'" (Heb. 1:6).

Jesus said, "'I and the Father are one.' Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, 'I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?' 'We are not stoning you for any of these,' replied the Jews, 'but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.'" (John 10:30-33).

The divinity of Christ is revealed in the fact that he shared in the creation of all things. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." (John 1:1-3).

In another passage we read, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him." (Colossians 1:15-16).

See also Is. 9:6, 40:3, 9, Matt. 1:23, 8:29, 22:43, 44, 28:17, Mark 5:6, John 1:18, 5:17-23, 12:45, 20:28, Phil. 2:6-7, Titus 2:13.

The divinity of the Holy Spirit

Christians are to be baptised in the name of the Holy Spirit, as well as in the names of the Father and the Son. "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," (Matt. 28:19).

The Holy Spirit is a person, not simply a force, He guides the prayers of the saints. "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will." (Rom. 8:26-27).

The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, indicating divine authority. "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." (Matt. 4:1).

The divinity of the Father

We have seen earlier that the Father is senior in rank to the Son. The Son obeys the Father and receives gifts from the Father, therefore the Father must be divine. The Son is begotten of the Father, that is begotten and not made. Some might ask at this point, "How can the Son be co-eternal with the Father if He is begotten of the Father?" I believe this problem is best answered with the theory of relativity in mind. According to the theory, time and gravity are connected, the greater the gravity, the faster the passage of time. An atomic clock on earth will run faster than an atomic clock in space. And, according to the theory, time itself was created. God is not subject to time, since He is the creator of it, He transcends time. Since the Son was begotten of the Father before the beginning of time, there was no time in which the Son did not exist. He is the great "I am". "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58).

Finally, this paper would not be complete without reference to Jesus' prayer for the disciples and all true believers. He said to his loving Father, "I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them." (John 17:26).

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