



A MINISTRY SCHOOL OF THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF THE UPPER MIDWEST

# The Trinity, the Gospel, and the Church's Great Co-Mission

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## I. Getting Our Bearings, Going Forward

“Deep in the Christian psyche today is the idea—a dangerous and mistaken idea—that the Trinity is a wart on our knowledge of God. It’s an irrelevance. And you can see it when you see Christians sharing their faith.... You expect to hear about the cross, about God’s grace, about forgiveness.... But I don’t expect them to be clear about *which* God they are talking about.... And I certainly don’t expect them to be clear on the Trinity—or even to bring up the [Trinity].... And so, across the West today, we rhapsodize over the beauty of the gospel but perhaps neglect the beauty of the God whose gospel it is.” ~Michael Reeves, *Overflow: How the Joy of the Trinity Inspires Our Mission*

The Trinity is the most practical and pastoral element of all Christian truth. For God is love *because* God is Trinity; the gospel is gloriously good news (beautiful and attractive) *because* God is Trinity; and the church’s mission—which is about going *out*, whether next door or across the globe—is rooted in the Trinity, inherent to the very life, nature, and heart of God.



## II. What Was God Doing Before He Created the World?

“Father...you have loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).

When Jesus calls the Father *his* Father, it's a descriptor of the Father's very nature and being, the most basic and important thing that could be said about him. The Father is the eternal lover of his eternally beloved—a Father who has forever lavished life-giving, self-giving love on his Son in the fellowship of the Spirit of divine love, such that the Trinity is an eternal communion of holy love, and of infinite loveliness.

Why is God love? *Because God is Trinity!*

“All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that ‘God is love.’ But they seem not to notice that the words ‘God is love’ have no real meaning unless God contains at least two persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, he was not love.” ~C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

The medieval monk Richard of St. Victor argued that if God were a single-person God, he could not be intrinsically loving. And if he were a two-person God, he might be loving, but in an exclusionary, imperfect way. When love is happy and healthy between two persons, they rejoice to share it—and so it is with God the holy Trinity. Being perfect/complete in love from all eternity, the Father and Son delighted to share their love and joy with and through the Spirit!

Triune love is inherently and eternally outgoing, other-focused, other-directed, and self-giving. God is love, and this is the love that God is!



### III. Why Does Our Triune God Create?

God the holy Trinity does not create out of loneliness, paucity, or a need to define himself with respect to his creation. Rather, the triune God creates out of fullness and plentitude, as a radiant overflow of his effulgent joy and goodness, a life-giving, cosmos-making explosion and expansion of original and originating love. In other words, God creates to spread and share his love, so that Jesus Christ might be the first among *many* sons and daughters of the Father (Rom. 8:29).

On the other hand, whether it be Marduk, Allah, or any other single-person god, love cannot be inherent or natural to them. Such a god might “love” himself/herself, but that so-called love would be fundamentally self-centered, selfishness at best, and utter narcissism at worst—that of private self-gratification. Any creative act by such a god, then, would not be a super-abundant overflow of self-giving, live-giving, freely given love, but rather an act of neediness and deficit, a desire to make servants and slavish subjects—to take, not to give. Lewis sees the *Devil* as the ultimate single-person god. So Screwtape says to Wormwood:

“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, 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.” ~C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

And creation is just the beginning of the spreading, outgoing mission of God’s triune love. This God is full, free, and altogether generous—the very opposite of Satan’s greedy, needy, insatiable selfishness and utter emptiness.



## IV. The Glory of God and His Gospel Shines in the Darkness

The goodness and generosity of God's creative love called forth the cosmos in all its primal splendor. And when we broke the world, God gave more to the world he so loved in the re-creative suffering of Christ's broken body.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.... [The Father] did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?... In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God [the Father] sent his only Son into the world, so that the world might live through him" (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 8:32; 1 John 4:9).

It is precisely the world in rebellion and revolt against God that he so fiercely loves, the world for which the Father gave his only-begotten Son, and for which the Son gave himself unto death, and it is this freely-given, self-giving love that marks children of the Father. "I make known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have love me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:26).

*Glory* means weighty and substantial, the heft and gravity of God's love on full display in Jesus Christ, who discloses and enacts God's glory as the very embodiment of it (Heb. 1:3). The Son is the radiance of God's glory, the light of the world, the splendor of the Father, and the shining out of God's luminous love.

The definitive act of Christ putting the God on show, the very hour of his glory is the cross, the death that bears much life (John 12:23-24). So the glory of God in Christ's mission to the world is like radiant light, shining out, giving life to our bodies, because the glory of God is self-giving and life-giving by nature—not grasping or taking, but generous and loving.

"Glory is found at the cross, when God was naked and bloody and mocked and shrieking in torment. No other god would want such glory. But here, revealed in Jesus Christ, is a God whose glory is found in giving out, in laying down his life to bear fruit. The triune God isn't about taking—he's about giving.... Mission is the outworking of God's very nature.... Jesus only does what the Father does, and whatever that is, he offer it to us.... Mission has already started because of who he is. And for us, all we have to do is join in.... He wants us to be collaborators, fellow participants in the diving life, sharing his loving, compassionate, outgoing life." ~Michael Reeves, *Overflow*

The gospel is supremely good news because God is Trinity!



- a. **Adoption:** The central aspect of the Christian life is that “forgiveness and becoming Christ-like flow from our participation in a relationship, from our becoming sons and daughters by adoption so as to share in the communion that the natural Son has with God the Father.”  
~Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*

Adoption is “the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher even than justification....

Adoption is higher, because of the richer relationship with God that it involves.” ~J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*

“There are innumerable other ways indeed in which God daily testifies his fatherly love towards us, but the mark of adoption is justly preferred to them all.” ~John Calvin, *Comm. John 17:23*.

- b. **Divine Gospel Joy:** “‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:9-10).

## V. **God's Abundance and Empty Alternatives to Gospel and Mission**

What are we left with if not God the holy Trinity? The options are indeed grim:

### a. **The Solitary God.**

The single-person god of Islam/the Qur'an:

“Say not ‘Trinity.’ Desist; it will be better for you: for God is one God. Glory be to him: (far exalted is he) above having a son.” ~*Surah*, 4.171.

“Say: ‘He, Allah, is one.... He begets not, nor is he begotten. And none is like him.’” ~*Surah*, 112.

Allah is fatherless, begetting none, solitary for all eternity—a different god than the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Allah is not a god of eternal interpersonal communion with another with whom he is one yet not the same.

The single-person god of the Gnostics:

Just as the physical was “excreted” from the spiritual, Eve comes out of Adam. So just as the existence of two realms (creation) is bad, the existence of two sexes is bad.



“Simon Peter said to them, ‘Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.” ~*Gospel of Thomas*, 114.

The solitary, single-god of the Gnostics is intolerant of the existence of anything else, such that this god prefers to hide both the physical and feminine away, or use them if possible for his own self-gratification. Christianity, on the other hand, was immensely attractive to women, who made up many of the early converts. For Christians decried abortion, refused to ignore the infidelity of husbands, supported widows, and welcomed daughters of Eve as valued fellow-workers in the gospel mission of the church.

**b. Antitheism and the Absence of God**

“I think it would be rather awful if it [God’s existence] were true. If there was a permanent, total, round-the-clock divine supervision and invigilation of everything you did, you would never have a waking or sleeping moment when you weren’t being watched and controlled and supervised by some celestial entity from the moment of your conception to the moment of your death...it would be like living in North Korea.”  
~Christopher Hitchens, Interview, May 2007.