

Introduction to Trinitarian Theology, by Michael Morrison

I. Introduction: why we need this

A. Stating the topic

We say that we have a “Trinitarian theology.” However, most churches accept the doctrine of the Trinity, and their theology is at least somewhat Trinitarian, but we emphasize the Trinity more than most churches do. Sometimes we say that we have an Incarnational Trinitarian theology, or a Trinitarian Christ-centered theology. None of these are completely distinctive terms, but they do mention some of the emphases that we have.

We call our theology Trinitarian because the doctrine of the Trinity is not a side point, or just one of many other doctrines. We are trying to be more consistent with it, to let it be the organizing principle for other doctrines. Whether we are talking about sin or salvation or the church, we want to ask, how does the doctrine of the Trinity help us understand this particular doctrine? How is it connected with the nature of God, and of who God is in his innermost being?

We are trying to understand a little better some points about God’s relationship with humanity: his purpose in creating humanity, the way in which he saves us, and how we should respond to him. We believe that our theology is true to the Bible, and that it helps make sense of what we are doing on the earth and in the church. It helps tie different doctrines together.

B. Not trying to criticize others

In the process of explaining our theology, we find that our beliefs are sometimes a little different from other theological traditions, and in some points of doctrine, we conclude that those other Christians are mistaken. This does not mean that we think they are non-Christian, or that those people won’t be saved. We all make mistakes, and we have no doubt made a few of our own.

We all believe that we are saved through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – and it is good for us to have that in common with many other Christians around the world.

Thankfully, we are saved not by having absolutely perfect theology, but we are saved by Christ, by grace, by trusting in Jesus to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Other Christians are doing the best they can, and we are doing the best that we can, to understand the Bible, and to understand the meaning of life and how it all fits together. Our purpose here is not to criticize other people and other theologies, but simply to do the best

that we can in explaining what we believe, and how we think it is true to the Bible, and how we think it helps us understand what our life is all about.

C. A desire to understand as much as we can

This is what the early church called “faith seeking understanding.” We already understand some things about God, and we believe them, but we are convinced that this is something we’d like to know more about, and so we try to understand as much as we can. We have fallen in love with Jesus, and we’d like to learn more about who he is, and the relationship he has with us, and what he has in mind for our future.

We could also describe our goal as an act of worship: we want to praise God for who he is and what he has done and what he has promised to do in the future – and in order to praise God for these things, we need to understand what they are. The goal is to explain things as best as we can, based on the Bible and the way that God has revealed himself to us ultimately and personally in Jesus Christ.

D. Practical significance

We will not try to cover all the biblical or historical evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity. Other articles do that. What we would like to focus on here is the practical significance of the doctrine. At first, it seems like the doctrine of the Trinity is just information about God: God is three Persons in one Being. It’s about him. But what does that have to do with us? Does it make any difference to us here on earth?

Yes. That is because persons have relationships with one another, and relationships are important for all of us. God created us to have relationships similar to the relationships that exist for all eternity within the Triune God. The divine Persons in the Godhead have relationships, and persons here on earth have relationships, too, and there is supposed to be some similarity in the kind of relationships we have.

The Bible tells us that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Not that he has love, but that he IS love. That is descriptive of who he is and how he lives in eternity, how he interacts with other persons. Even before God created the universe, even before God created angelic beings, he was love. When God was the only thing there is, God was love—love among the Triune Persons.

Before God created anything, what would God be like? If there is only one person in God, there would be no one to love, because love means caring for and caring about someone else. But if God were somehow loving but alone, that would mean that God would be unable to fully be or express some of his internal nature. God would be deficient. The

statement that “God is love” would be meaningless before creation, if God were only one Person, because the love could not be expressed.

The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that even before God created anything, he could be love, because the Father loved the Son, and the Son loved the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit loves the Father, and so forth. There was love within the Triune God, even before anything had been created (John 17:24). The three Persons were distinguishable from one another, but united to one another in love. This is important for who God is, and it’s important for who we are, as well.

II. Centered on Jesus Christ

As mentioned above, we sometimes say that we have a Trinitarian, *Christ*-centered theology. Some people wonder, if all three Persons in the Godhead are fully divine, and *equal* in being divine, why should we center our theology on *one* of them in particular?

A. Jesus is fully divine

God is revealed to us *most clearly* in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is where God has chosen to make himself *visible* to us (Colossians 1:15). Jesus is the Word made flesh—God the Son become human. He has revealed himself in a way that we could see him, touch him, hear him and see how he lives. Jesus is the way that God has chosen to reveal himself to us.

In John 14:8, Philip asked Jesus: “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” Jesus responded in verse 9: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”

Jesus is not saying that God the Father is 5 foot 8 inches tall, with brown hair and Middle Eastern features. Rather, he is saying that in his most important respects (his character, purposes, heart, and mind), *God the Father is like Jesus Christ* in terms of the way he interacts with others. The compassion that Jesus had shows us what God is like. The zeal for righteousness, that’s what God is like. The willingness to sacrifice for others, God is like that, too. Jesus helps us see what God the Father is like – and the Holy Spirit is like that, too.

When Jesus became a flesh-and-blood human being, he was showing us in a tangible and visible way what the Triune God is like. The apostle Paul says, “The Son is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). Even though we cannot see God directly, Jesus shows us what he’s like, in a way that we *can* see and hear.

Colossians 2:9 says, “In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” Jesus is the summary that we are given of what we need to know about God. We can never know God completely – he is much bigger than our minds are capable of comprehending – but we are

able to have an accurate understanding of at least *some* things about God, because Jesus embodies all that any human being can know of God, and he came to reveal God to us. He does not reveal everything, but what he does reveal is accurate. John 1:18 says, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, *has made him known.*"

B. Jesus is fully human

All orthodox Christian theology includes the teaching that Jesus is fully human. That might seem obvious to many people – he was born as a baby, grew as a boy, and he died. As the Bible says, in John 1:14, "The Word *became flesh* and made his dwelling among us." He didn't just put on a costume that made him *look* human – no, he was a real human being. He ate ordinary food, breathed air like an ordinary person, his fingernails grew and he got thirsty and tired. When he scraped his knee, he bled, and when they crucified him, he died just like other people would have.

He was fully God and fully human – both at the same time. We have never seen that combination before, but with God, all things are possible, and so if that's what he did, then we have to make room in our theology for it. God can do one-of-a-kind things that aren't comparable to anything else. He is able to be in his own creation. The Incarnation of the Son of God is that unique kind of thing.

There are a number of reasons as to why a divine Person might want to become a human being. He came to communicate to us on a level we could understand; he came to die for us; he came to experience life as a human so that we could know for sure that he understood what it's like for us to be human. But just as Jesus shows us what God is like, he also shows us what *humanity* is really like. He is the perfect human.

C. Connecting human beings to God

Jesus has a unique role. He has been part of the circle of God's Triune life, and he's been part of the human circle of life, and because of that, he provides a unique connection between humanity and God. In a sense, he is a bridge between the two, a bridge God uses to bring us into the divine fellowship. Not that we are part of the Trinity, but in and through his humanity, we do share in God's life.

2 Peter 1:4 says, "He has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may *participate* in the divine nature." So in some way we participate in what God is. We are in the family of God, or the kingdom of God. We are in fellowship with God, in a *relationship* with God – and this is all made possible by Jesus.

1 Timothy 2:5 says, "There is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus." A mediator is a person in the middle – in this case, a person serving to connect humanity with God. God initiated this; he is the one who sent Jesus to earth to become a human being, and to be resurrected back into heaven to make this connection work. Jesus is the key link or connector between humanity and God.

The doctrine of the Trinity is important for this understanding. For our connection with God, for our future with God, it is essential that our mediator be fully God in his own right. No human being is good enough to *earn* a connection with God, who is infinitely far above us in power, glory, wisdom and righteousness. No created human being could rise up to God's level as Creator, but God is able to put himself at *our* level.

Jesus is perfect in righteousness and holiness, and yet one of us. He is the pathway by which other human beings are brought *into* the presence of the holy and perfect God. The doctrine of the Trinity says that Jesus is fully God, and the doctrine of the Incarnation says that Jesus became fully human, and he continues to be both divine and human, and with that combination, now we are ready to talk about a relationship between God and humanity.

III. Humanity in the image of God

A. Created in his image

Jesus shows us what God is like, and he also shows us what humanity is supposed to be like, and this implies that there is some important *similarity* between God and humans. This is not because humans are good enough to rise up to the level of God. No, it all comes from God as a gift given to us. He is the one who created us this way in the first place. We find it stated in the first chapter of the Bible:

God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." ²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

God did it, and he said it was good. Humanity was created "in the image of God," to somehow look like God and to represent God here on earth. Again, we are not supposed to think of skin color, hair color or the number of fingers on our hands. Those things are incidentals that only apply to creatures. What is important is that humanity should be like God in a *spiritual* sense, and we see that emphasis in Galatians 5:22, where the apostle Paul describes the results of the working of the Holy Spirit in us: "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Humans are supposed to be like God in *these* ways.

Now we can ask the Trinitarian question: In what way does the doctrine of the Trinity help us understand what humanity is? The answer is, that just as the Persons in the Trinity interact with one another in love, so also we as persons ought to interact with all other human persons *in love*. That's the first fruit of the Spirit, and the way that we were made to be like God. Love should be the basis for our lives and our societies.

Just as the Triune God is essentially relational, with the Persons defined in reference to one another, so humans are also essentially *relational*, and our identity as persons depends on our relationships with other people. "Who we are" depends on the relationships we have with others. No one is a solitary individual; the meaning of life is not in *self*-existence, but it is to be found in our relationships with each other, in the way we live and think about other people. We were created to be in right relationship with the Triune God and also to be in right relationship with each other in a way that mirrors Jesus' relationship with the Father and the Spirit.

B. Sin defaces the image

Genesis tells us that humans didn't want life on the terms that God had given them. They wanted to define their own life, doing their own thing, instead of having to do God's things. So instead of love, joy and peace, they choose selfishness, and they got strife and unhappiness.

What does the doctrine of the Trinity reveal about the nature of *sin*? How does it help us better understand what sin is? If good is defined as humanity being in the image of God, then sin is doing things that are unlike God. If God is a relational being, and humans were created to be in relationships of love, then sin is a disruption in our relationships – problems in our relationships with God, and problems in our relationships with one another.

As a practical matter, we have rules that describe what a good relationship is. In a good relationship, we don't lie to each other, we don't steal from one another, we don't dishonor or disrespect the other, and so forth. Avoiding these problems doesn't necessarily *create* a good relationship, but breaking these rules *hurts* our relationships. Rules do not exist for their own sake, but in order to serve something more important, and that is relationships based on love.

When humanity rejected God, we also rejected him as the source of the *love* that we need. We were created to be like God in that respect, but we went in a wrong direction.

C. God restores the image – in himself

The Old Testament doesn't say much more about the image of God, but the New Testament picks up the phrase "image of God" and applies it to Jesus Christ. We have already looked at

Colossians 1:15: "He is *the image of the invisible God.*" He is the image that Adam failed to be. He shows us in a *visible* way what God is like in the invisible, spiritual world.

Hebrews 1:3 tells us something similar: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and *the exact representation of his being.*" When we see Jesus, we see what the Father is like in relationship to Jesus. So we expect God to be like Jesus, in his compassion and mercy and love.

D. We are in the image of Christ

This concept becomes directly relevant to us when we see that the Bible talks about us being formed in the image of *Christ*. We can see this in 2 Corinthians 3:18: "We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed *into his likeness* with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." That is, we look more and more like him – and again, that's not talking about his physical shape, size and color – it's talking about the way he is spiritually, in relationship to the Father and the Spirit from all eternity.

- Galatians 4:19 talks about how "Christ is formed in you."
- Ephesians 4:13 talks about how "we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole *measure of the fullness of Christ.*"
- Colossians 3:10 says we "have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge *in the image of its Creator*" – and that is Jesus Christ.

Since Christ is the image of God, when we become more like Christ, we are being brought back toward the image of God that we are supposed to be. Right now, it is a spiritual transformation, a *mental* and ethical or relational transformation, and eventually, it will be a physical transformation as well, all based on God's original plan.

This concept is seen in a different way in Romans 5. In that chapter, Paul is comparing Adam with Jesus Christ. Verse 14 says that Adam was a type, or a model, "a pattern of the one to come." Just as the first Adam brought in sin and death, the second Adam brought in righteousness and life. Just as we shared in the results of the first Adam, so also we share in the benefits of the second Adam. Paul summarizes it in verses 18-19:

Just as one trespass [Adam's sin] resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act [that of Jesus] resulted in justification and life *for all people*. For just as through the disobedience of the one man [Adam] the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man [Jesus] the many will be made righteous.

All humanity was included in the results of the first Adam, and all humanity is included in the results of the second Adam, Jesus. It's not just a few people that God chose ahead of

time, and it's not just one particular nation, or one particular social class – God's plan is for everyone he has created. Jesus is Lord of all.

Adam messed it up, but Jesus did it right—and in Christ, all humanity has a fresh start on being “the image of God.” Jesus is the key to our transformation – not only is he the model that we copy, but he is also the engine that drives the whole process. He supplies the power and the direction.

IV. The covenant relationship

A. The covenant formula

Even though the Old Testament does not use the phrase “image of God” very often, it does talk about the relationship we have with God, and the term it uses for that most of the time is *covenant*. We can see the basic idea in Exodus 6:7: “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.” And we see it in

- Leviticus 26:12: “I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.”
- Jeremiah 7:23: “I will be your God and you will be my people.”
- Ezekiel 36:28: “You will be my people, and I will be your God.”

Old Testament scholars call this the “covenant formula.” It's found more than 20 times in the Bible. It is an adaptation of words that people in the ancient Middle East used for marriages, and adoptions, and for political treaties. In a marriage, it would go something like this: “I will be your husband, and you will be my wife.” In an adoption, it would be “I will be your father, and you will be my son.” In a political treaty, it would be adapted: “I will be your king and you will be my people.” It is declaring a relationship that the people intend to be permanent, a relationship that now defines who they are in relation to the other.

In the Law and in the Prophets, God repeatedly talks about covenants between God and humanity. He made covenants with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Aaron and David. In each covenant, he says, in effect, I have made with you a covenant relationship, and as you live according to it, then our relationship will be a good one. *The goal* is to have an ongoing relationship.

B. A new covenant promised

The people of Israel broke the covenant time and time again. Eventually through the prophets God promised that there would be a *new* covenant, made in the hearts of the people, and God's Spirit would be in them. This is not something that the people could achieve for themselves – it would be something that God would have to do *for* them. He would *give* them a new heart, a new Spirit.

- Jeremiah 31:33: "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."
- Ezekiel 36:26-27: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

In Isaiah 42:6, God promises to make his servant "to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles." The covenant relationship between God and humanity would be focused and embodied in one person – who we now know as Jesus Christ. The covenant that we have with God is found in him; he is the covenant for all the people; our connection to God depends 100 percent on him.

C. Relationship terms in the New Testament

The New Testament says that we have this new covenant in Christ. The Lord's Supper reminds us that we have a new covenant in the blood of Christ. But this is not the only relationship term in the New Testament. For example, it calls us children of God; we are *adopted* into the family of God.

- Romans 8:15 says, "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship."
- Ephesians 1:5 says, "He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ."

This means we become part of God's family, with rights and privileges that are part of being in the royal family. We are in a new social class.

Paul uses a different relationship term in 2 Corinthians 11:2: "I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him." This marriage concept is used in the book of Revelation, too: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7).

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a *bride* beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. *They will be his people*, and God himself will be with them *and be their God*." (Revelation 21:2-3)

Here the covenant formula is used again, this time in the context of a wedding. God will live with us, and we will live with him. We will be his children, adopted as siblings of Jesus Christ,

part of the royal family forever. Through Jesus, we are brought into fellowship with the Triune God, sharing in his status as Son.

Another way to describe this is “the kingdom of God.” That biblical phrase means being part of the universe in which life is lived in the way that God lives. We become part of the ruling family, with the privileges and responsibilities of that.

It means that eternal life is *not just living for a really long time* – it means that we live *with each other, and with God*, forever and ever. It is social, not solitary, because that is *the way that God made us to be*. We were made in his image, and he is social, and not solitary. The doctrine of the Trinity helps us understand who we are, what life is all about, and how God is bringing it about for us. The Triune God who began a good work in us is sure to finish the job, creating humanity to be a reflection of what God is: Persons in perfect community and harmony.

V. Salvation is more than a verdict

Understanding where we started, and where we will end up, can help us understand a little more about what *salvation* is. Some people think that salvation is just a matter of going to heaven when you die. But when it comes to salvation, there’s a lot more to it than just a change in location.

Some people think that salvation is just a matter of getting a favorable verdict on the day of judgment. There’s going to be a day of judgment, they warn, and everybody is guilty and deserves to be thrown into hell. But if you believe in Jesus, that guilty verdict will be changed to “innocent.” It is *true* that there will be a day of judgment, and that everyone is guilty of sin, and that Jesus allows us to escape the verdict we deserve, and he allows us to enter a heavenly paradise.

But doesn’t salvation have anything to do with life right now? Yes, it does. There’s more to salvation than just a change in our future verdict.

A. Restoring us to God’s image

Salvation means that we are rescued from *sin*, not just guilt, and we are rescued from the results of sin. It means that God’s original plan gets back on track – and the original plan is that we were made in the image of God and we were to live in that covenant relationship. It is a *spiritual* likeness that God wants us to have, and that can be summed up in the word *love*. We are to love God with everything we have, and we are love other people in the way that we love ourselves.

Just changing our location isn't going to restore us to being like God. Just changing the final verdict isn't going to make us the people we were meant to be. The goal in salvation is to change *us* – so that we are spiritually like God, so that we are his children in a way that mirrors Jesus' own sonship. That's the original plan, and God hasn't given up on it. He sent Jesus to show us the way and to be the way, for all humanity to be brought back into fellowship with the Triune God. The Father initiated the plan, the Son of God carried out key steps in the plan, and the Holy Spirit also has *an ongoing role* in the transformation, the change that we all need. We will briefly look at each of those.

B. The role of the Father

Some people describe the gospel as the Father setting the rules, and getting angry at us because we have broken the rules. He says that we deserve to die, but then the Son has compassion on us and volunteers to pay the penalty for us. So the Father pours out his anger on his Son, and then he says, "Justice has been done. Those sinners can come into my kingdom, because the penalty has been paid." We have an angry Father and a compassionate Son who is able to get his Father to change his mind.

Maybe that's the way it works in some human families, but that's not the way it works in the Triune God. It's not true to the Bible, and not true in any system of theology, whether it's Trinitarian or Calvinist or Catholic or Eastern Orthodox.

Trinitarian theology reminds us that Jesus is fully God. He is just like God the Father. He is just as angry as the Father is, and just as *loving* as the Father is. He didn't change the Father's mind about anything. Rather, he *reveals* the Father's mind – the Father wants us to be saved just as much as Jesus does. Let's look at a couple of scriptures that show that.

- John 3:16 says it well: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." God the Father loves humanity and he wants us to be saved, not to be condemned or punished.
- Romans 5:8: "God demonstrates *his own love* for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." God did not demonstrate his love for us by sending *somebody else* to die. It is only because Christ is God, that *his* death could demonstrate the love of God. They have equal love for us, equal compassion for us. The Triune God is in *full agreement* on our salvation. Father, Son and Spirit created us for a purpose, and they are working together to bring us to completion.

C. The role of the Son

Even though the Father initiated the plan, we often forget that, and usually think of Jesus as the Savior, the one who carried it out. He has the more visible role. How did Christ save us?

Christians usually think that we were saved by Jesus' death on the cross. That is an important part of the picture, but it is only *part* of the picture.

1. The first step in our salvation was the Incarnation, when Jesus was made a flesh-and-blood human being. He took our nature as his own. That is when he became the second Adam, the new *leader* of all humanity. Just as we were all guilty because of the sin of Adam, so also we are made righteous in the righteousness of Jesus, because Jesus came to give all humanity a new beginning (Romans 5). This is not a matter of genetics – it is a *spiritual* reality, that the Incarnation includes all of us in the salvation that Jesus brings. In himself, Jesus reconnects all humanity to God.
2. The next step in our salvation is that Jesus had to live a righteous life, without any sin – because if he sinned, then he would simply be like one of us, needing to be saved. He would not even be able to save himself, and not anyone else. He lived without sin – he had a perfect relationship with the Father and the Spirit and, as much as could be done from his side, with all humans. Since he is our Creator, he represented us, and we are allowed to share in his righteousness.
3. Third, Jesus had to *die* for us. The wages of sin is death, the Bible says, and death is the result we would *expect*, if we try to live independent from the creator and sustainer of the universe. Jesus, as a mortal human being, experienced death, the result of our sins. He took our sins upon himself, so that we might share in his righteousness. Since the Creator of all humanity became a human, he had an essential unity with all of us. As our Creator, he was able to accept responsibility and the consequences for all of our sins, and to die for the sins of all humanity.
4. Fourth, Jesus had to be resurrected. Romans 5:10 says that we are “saved by his life.” Jesus is able to save us from death because he has overcome death. He has been there, done that, and now he can do it for us, too.
5. Last, Jesus had to ascend into heaven as one of us, fully human, and be restored to complete fellowship with the Father and Spirit. The Bible says he ascended bodily into heaven, as a glorified human being, and he is now at the Father's right hand, which is a figure of speech meaning the most honored position. He is eternally, even now, our mediator, our intercessor, praying for us, and *transforming* us to become more like he is. By the Spirit he is sharing with us his regenerated and perfected humanity.

Our salvation is not complete with just the forgiveness of sins. We *need* that, but if that's all we got, we'd still have a big problem, because we all have a tendency to sin again, and we want to be *freed* from that tendency. Paul calls it a slavery to sin, and we want to be liberated from that slavery. So, by sending us his Spirit, all that Jesus had done for us on earth and completed for us in heaven is now being worked out in us. Jesus by his Spirit is continuing to work for our transformation.

We can rightly say that we are saved by the death of Jesus, but that is only part of the picture. A more complete statement is that we are saved by the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. If that's too much to say at one time, then just say that we are saved *by Jesus*. We are saved by who he is, and what he has done.

How did Jesus save us?

Let's focus on the death of Jesus for a few minutes, because it is an important part of the picture, and perhaps the most distinctive part of Christian theology. How can the death of Jesus do anything for our salvation?

One common explanation is that our sin requires a penalty, and Jesus serves as a substitute to pay the penalty on our behalf. This is called the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement, and it is so common that some people think that it's the only explanation. But there is a danger in this theory, and the Bible gives us other ways to explain it, as well.

1) Danger: a focus on punishment

First, the danger. A problem can arise if we focus on the "penalty" part of the theory, by suggesting that God had to *punish* Jesus for all the sins that we committed. This suggests that one Person in the Godhead is inflicting pain on another Person in the Godhead; this suggests separation rather than unity in the Triune God. This does not seem like a very righteous thing for God to do; we do not allow substitutions in our penal codes and systems of justice.

This theory acts as if the primary problem with sin is the punishment, as if the primary problem with crime is that our prisons are full. But this is focusing on the results, not the real problem. It focuses on the verdict, and it still leaves people with a problem: we all have a tendency to sin, and the death of Jesus does not address that problem. The problem is not just in the things that we do, but in the kind of people that we are.

What has happened here is that people have let a legal metaphor, a figure of speech, become the controlling description of what God is doing. All our words are based on human experiences, and the meaning of our words depends on how they are used in human affairs. But our experiences are not the measure of what such words mean in the divine realm. When God uses courtroom terminology to describe sin and salvation, we should not let *our* concepts of legal procedure to be the final description of what God is doing. When we say that the penalty of sin is death, we should not think that "penalty" is an exact description of what is going on, as if God is obligated to inflict punishment for every transgression of his law.

"Consequence" would probably be a more appropriate term. The result of sin is death, even without God having to step in to inflict it. When Jesus died for us, he experienced the

consequence of our sin, the result of the way of life human beings chose, but God did not have to perform additional pain and suffering so that Jesus could pay the penalty we deserved. No, he suffered and died without any need for extra punishments coming from God.

God does pronounce a judgment on sin. He says, "If you sin, you're going to die." He does not say, "If you sin, I'm going to kill you." Death is a *natural* result of us turning our backs on the One who gave us life. God doesn't have to do anything extra to us in order for us to suffer from the results of sin and to die from the results of sin. We experience the judgment, the result he warned us about, without him having to do anything extra to punish us. Similarly, he didn't have to do anything extra to Jesus for Jesus to die for our sins. When God *did* intervene, he gave Jesus life instead of death.

That's what he does for us, too. God is angry about sin, but as Ezekiel says, he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (18:23, 32). Death does not serve his purpose. His goal is salvation, not punishment. The reason that he sent Jesus to us is so that we could *escape* the consequences of sin. He wants to *rescue* us, not punish us. We should not force God into our legal metaphor.

Trinitarian theologians accept the idea that Jesus' death was substitutionary, that Jesus died as a substitute for us. But we generally avoid the word "penal," because that word suggests that God the Father punished his one and only Son, and did something to increase his pain. It puts legal requirements and demands as putting requirements on what God has to do, as if law and punishment is the most important description of what good relationships ought to be. When we bring the doctrine of the Trinity into the picture, it helps us see that *punishment* is not the best way to think about it.

2) Biblical descriptions of salvation

If the Bible does not describe the death of Jesus as a punishment required by some law that God had to obey, how does it describe it? In several ways. Articles could be written about each one, but here we will give only a summary:

1. Jesus said that he would die as a ransom: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The word "ransom" suggests a payment that we might give to a kidnapper. Some people in the early church made elaborate theories of how Jesus paid a price to Satan, as if Satan had some legitimate claims over us. But they were making the mistake of letting a figure of speech turn into an exact description of what was going on.
2. We see a similar figure of speech in the word "redemption." That word describes people getting friends and relatives out of slavery. They bought them back; that is the original meaning of "redeem." Jesus bought us with a price, Paul says, but we should not think that anyone actually *received* that payment. It is a figure of speech.

The Old Testament says that God redeemed the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, but he did not pay anyone in order to do it. We should not let the figure of speech dictate to us what happened in spiritual reality.

3. The Bible describes Jesus as a sacrificial lamb. John the Baptist called him the “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). The apostle Paul says that “Christ our Passover has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7). But again, the picture is not exact. Passover lambs were not designed as payments for sin, but they were associated with escaping slavery and death.
4. Jesus is called “an offering and a sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2). In the Old Testament, there were a wide variety of sacrifices – some of animals, some of flour and oil, some for sin, some for purity rituals, some for thanksgiving, and so forth, and Jesus fulfilled the symbolism of all of them.
5. Jesus is our place of atonement. Romans 3:25 says, “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement.” Some translations say *propitiation*, and some say *expiation*, and scholars have argued about that for a long time. The Greek word meant one thing in a pagan context, and another thing in a Jewish context, but the Greek word is also the word used for the mercy seat on top of the ark of the covenant, the place where the high priest sprinkled blood on the day of atonement. So the NIV quoted above calls it the “sacrifice of atonement.” But the sacrifice was never done at the mercy seat; a better translation might be “the place of atonement,” without trying to be more precise than the word actually is. Jesus is the place, or the way that our sins are atoned, so there is nothing between us and God, so that we are restored to fellowship with God.
6. Reconciliation is a similar term; it refers to people who were once enemies or alienated, but are now on good terms with each other. Romans 5:10 says, “While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.” Colossians 1:20 says that “God was pleased...to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through [the Son’s] blood, shed on the cross.”
7. Justification is another important term. Some say it is the most important term of all, the one that makes sense out of all the others. Romans 5:9 says that we are “justified by his blood,” or by his death on the cross. Justification means to make something right. The word could be used for making a relationship right, or it could be used for making something legally right. In a trial, a person could either be found guilty – condemned – or found righteous (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:9). When the judge declared a person to be in the right, this was justification. This can be a helpful way of looking at salvation, but it misses out on the fact that God wants more from us than to be declared legally innocent – he also wants us to be in fellowship with him forever. Yes, we are guilty of a crime, but the solution is not just to let us out of jail, but it is to transform who we are, so that we are more like Christ.
8. In Colossians, Paul gives us another interesting way to look at the death of Jesus: “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them,

triumphing over them by the cross" (2:15). By his death on the cross, Jesus won a victory! He defeated spiritual powers that were fighting against us. Paul does not explain the logic in how that works, but he says that it does.

The Bible uses a few additional figures of speech, but the point is clear, that there are several ways to look at it, and we should use all of these ways.

Trinitarian theology says that the meaning of human life is to be found in relationships, and relationships cannot be put into precise formulas. But we can state some basic facts about it. First, Jesus became a real human, and he was mortal. Even if the Jews and the Romans didn't kill him, he had a mortal body that would eventually get old and he would die. He was part of the Godhead, but he became part of humanity, and he accepted all of the negative consequences of that. Why did he do it? Out of love. God loved us so much that he sent his only Son to die for us, and the Son loved us so much that he did it.

So Jesus has connected the world of heaven and earth, divine and human. In his death, Jesus demonstrated that he was a real human, completely in union with humanity. He completed his identification with us, sharing in everything that it means to be human. By doing that, he reversed the curse that was against us (Genesis 3:19; Galatians 3:13). He was able, on behalf of all humanity, to suffer the consequences of sin, and yet since he was personally without any sin, death did not have a legitimate claim on him. He had to be resurrected, and as the new Adam, the new head of humanity, he sets the pattern for what will happen to all of us, and that's resurrection – not just a life that lasts forever, but a life that is in fellowship with the Triune God.

D. Role of the Spirit in our salvation

The Father sent the Son to save us, and the Son did his work. Does that mean that there's nothing left to do until the Last Judgment? Certainly not! Trinitarian theology reminds us that we should expect the Spirit to have an important role in our salvation.

Shortly before Jesus died, he told his disciples:

It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.... When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.... He will tell you what is yet to come. (John 16:7, 13-14)

So, even though Jesus completed *his* earthly job, part of the work must be completed after Jesus goes away – and that work is done by the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter, who is sent by Jesus. What does the Holy Spirit do in our salvation? We don't need to present a complete theology of the Spirit here, but let's mention a few points:

1. The Spirit gives us new birth. In John 3, Jesus told Nicodemus, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water *and the Spirit*.... You must be born again" (verses 5, 7). We need a *new start in life*, and in one sense, Jesus gave all humanity that when he became "the second Adam." But for individuals, this is done by the Holy Spirit.
2. The Spirit helps us realize that we *are* born again, that we are children of God. Romans 8:15 says, "The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"
3. The Spirit also enables us to understand the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul writes, "The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit." Unbelievers might understand what the words of Scripture mean, but people don't accept those words as *true* without the Spirit leading them. The Spirit helps us see truth about God and truth about ourselves, and helps us continue growing in the truth. As John 16 says, the Spirit teaches us and guides into the truth. No one has all the truth *yet*, so this is still a work in progress.
4. The Holy Spirit *sanctifies* us, or sets us apart for God's use. 2 Thessalonians 2:13 supports this: "God chose you as firstfruits to be *saved* through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth."
5. The Spirit gives us power over sin. "If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but *if by the Spirit* you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:13). As the Spirit leads us, helps us understand, and gives us strength, we are to stop doing bad things and start doing more godly things. This does not mean that we stop all sin (even though we wish we could), but that our basic orientation in life is now toward the good. Christian life and good behavior are part of the process of sanctification. The Spirit sets us apart for God's use, and God wants to use us for good.
6. The Spirit produces results in our lives: love, joy, peace, and other good qualities. These are the results God wants to see in us. This is a transformation in our attitudes as well as our actions – we are being changed from the inside out.

More could be said on each of these points – and more points could be added. Our main purpose here is just to make the larger point that the Spirit has a vital role in our salvation – we cannot be saved without the work of the Spirit in our lives. Salvation is a Trinitarian work, involving the Father, Son, and Spirit working in harmony to bring us to the kind of persons we are supposed to be.

VI. How do we respond?

We have seen some of the ways that God is working in our lives: He is restoring in us the divine image, so that we are living representatives of who he is and what he is like. It is a *spiritual* image, started when God said, "Let *us* make mankind in our image, in our

likeness." We were made to be like God, and since Jesus is the perfect image of God, we are being conformed into *his* image, changed so that we are more like he is. The Spirit is doing that work in us, producing in us the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, and other attitudes and actions that help us have better relationships. This is part of the ongoing work of salvation that God is doing within us.

But a time is coming when we will be transformed into God's image in additional ways, too. Romans 6:5 says, "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a *resurrection* like his." Our physical nature will be changed, and we will share in the glory of Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul describes the resurrection, and he says in verse 49, "just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man [Adam], so shall we bear the *likeness* of the man from heaven [Jesus]." We will have the image of Christ in a more glorious way.

1 John 3:1-2 gives us a similar picture:

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we *are* children of God, and what we *will be* has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

We will be like he is; we will be even more fully made in his image.

All humanity has been created in the image of God, made for this purpose. We are already his children, already "in his image" in one sense, but there is more to come. As we are transformed into his image in this life in the way we live and think, we will be transformed *more completely* into his image when we are resurrected into glory and given immortality and incorruptibility. This is the wonderful future God has prepared for us.

What conclusion does John draw from this wonderful promise? He says it in the very next verse: "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (verse 3). When we want to be like God is, then we want to be *like him in our thoughts and actions*. The glory that God has designed for us is that we should be like he is.

There's a lot more to eternal life than just living forever. A never-ending life of suffering would *not* be good, and that is not what God wants us to have. Rather, he wants us to have a never-ending life of love and joy, of good relationships – relationships with millions and billions of other people who *help* one another and *love* one another. The good news of the gospel, the good news of the Bible, the good news of salvation, is that not only do we live forever, but that we will live *with God*. That's the best part: God wants us to live with him. We can see this in the last book of the Bible, Revelation 21:1-4:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.... I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

God will live with us, and we will live with him. We will be his children, adopted as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, part of the royal family forever. We are *already* his children. We already have a relationship with the Father, Son and Spirit.

How can our vision of *future* life affect the way we live now? Here’s another thought that many Christians struggle with: If salvation is by grace, why does the New Testament have so many commands about what we are supposed to do? Is it grace for how we get in, but works *after* we get in? No.

It is because God is not just giving us existence that lasts forever – he is giving us life of a certain *quality*, life that is based on love rather than selfishness and competition. That’s the kind of life we will enjoy in eternity, and that’s the kind of life that is *good*, not just in the future but also right now. When the New Testament gives us commands, it is *describing* for us the kind of life that God is giving us, the life of the age to come. Grace says: I am giving you a never-ending life of joy. The commands say: This is what it looks like. This is the way that will help you have joy and express love.

In a parable, we might say that God is at the gateway to his kingdom, and he invites us in. You are welcome to come in, he says, where there is no more pain or sorrow, or lying or cheating or selfishness. Some people may say, “I would like to have ‘no more pain,’ but can’t I keep my selfishness?” God replies, “No, they are two sides of the same coin. Selfishness causes pain. If you go through this gate, I will scrub all the selfishness out of you, so that you don’t cause pain either for yourself or for anyone else.” It’s possible that some people will be so in love with their selfishness that they will refuse to go in.

We do not want to be in love with our selfishness. Rather, we need to see selfishness as one of our enemies, an attitude that can rob us of joy and peace. It is part of the sin that so easily besets us – it is an enemy that keeps us in slavery – it is an enemy we need to be liberated from. It is an enemy that Christ has already defeated on the cross, and he wants us to share in that victory, and it is done through the Holy Spirit living in us.

A Trinitarian understanding of our purpose in life helps us see the purpose of salvation, and the purpose of the commands we see in the Bible. Once we see where we are going, it is easier to see how God is bringing us there. Love is central to the whole picture, because love

is the life of the Father, Son and Spirit, and we are participating in the divine nature, sharing in the life and love of the Triune God.

As images of God, we want our life to be characteristic of *the age to come*, patterned after the life that God himself has. We are images of God and representatives of God, and we should want to live in the way that he does, the way that we will all live in eternity. This life is representative of God himself, a fulfillment of the image that we are supposed to be. In the age to come, we will forever be images of God, children of God, completely and perfectly.

VII. Conclusion

The doctrine of the Trinity has enriched our understanding of many other doctrines, and we will continue to learn more about it as we grow in grace and knowledge. It makes sense that God's nature is reflected in everything that God does, and that means it affects all other doctrines, because our doctrines are based on what God is doing in the people he has created.

We see God's *love* throughout the story, from before creation and in the cross of Christ, and on into eternity in the future. We see the Father, Son and Spirit in creation, in salvation, and in eternity. God wants to live with us, and us to live with him, in love, forever and ever. In his love and grace, he has *given* this to us – and in our love for him, we enjoy learning about it. But we know that this is only the beginning of our understanding.

In 1 Corinthians 13:12, the apostle Paul says that now, "we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." We have knowledge, but our knowledge is *partial*, and we look forward to learning more. We rejoice that God knows us fully, and we can be confident that he will continue to draw us toward himself, so that on some future day, we will see him face to face and know him fully, sharing in his life and love forever and ever.



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