

## Biblical Servanthood is Established by the Trinity

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In *Seeds of Change: Six Plants That Transformed Mankind*, Henry Hobhouse writes that the six most influential plants in man's history are sugar cane, tea, cotton, potato, and the cinchona plant.<sup>1</sup> The first five of these seem quite reasonable since we use them practically everyday. Their inherent significance is obvious to us.

However, the last plant on his list, the cinchona tree, might cause some people to question Hobhouse's judgment. Despite the fact that millions of people still use it daily to safeguard their lives, the typical person in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is actually quite unaware of the cinchona tree's importance.

Native to South America, the *Cinchona calisaya* tree grows on the foothills of the Andes Mountain range far above the Amazonian jungle it helped man to cultivate.<sup>2</sup> Bitter in taste and highly toxic in large doses, the bark of the cinchona tree was a major factor in shaping our world.<sup>3</sup>

The cinchona plant was the catalyst that formed the modern geo-political and economic landscapes around the world. It made colonization and exploration of the Americas and Africa possible and allowed international trade to flourish in every corner of the globe. More importantly, it has single-handedly enhanced the welfare and lives of millions of people.<sup>4</sup>

Just how did this plant accomplish all of this? The cinchona contains a special alkaloid substance used to make medicine for one of the deadliest diseases known to man. The alkaloid, known as quinine, worked as an inhibitor to the

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Hobhouse *Seeds of Change: Six Plants That Transformed Mankind*, Shoemaker & Hoard 2005, New York, NY, page 1.

<sup>2</sup> Fiammetta Rocco, *Quinine, Malaria and the Quest for a Cure That Changed the World*, xvii Harper Collins 2003, New York, NY, introduction.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Hobhouse *Seeds of Change: Six Plants That Transformed Mankind*, Shoemaker & Hoard 2005, New York, NY, pages 37-52.

<sup>4</sup> Fiammetta Rocco, *Quinine, Malaria and the Quest for a Cure That Changed the World*, xvii Harper Collins 2003, New York, NY, introduction.

malarial parasite's effects on the human body, dramatically increasing the survival rate for malaria.<sup>5</sup>

Before the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Malaria was responsible for millions of deaths every year.<sup>6</sup> The World Health Organization estimates one person still dies of malaria every 15 seconds.<sup>7</sup> Caused by a parasite transmitted by mosquitoes, Malaria induces severe fevers, chills, and severe vomiting as it infests and destroys its victim's blood cells.<sup>8</sup> Quinine not only subdued the symptoms of malaria, it completely repressed the virus. Malaria infested jungles became plantations that supplied the world with coffee, sugar, tobacco and other important consumer as well as industrial products many of which are on Hobson's list.

The cinchona's relative unanimity despite its significance draws some comparison to another subject that greatly impacts Biblical Servanthood: the Doctrine of the Trinity. Even though it has had a far greater influence on mankind than cinchona bark, The Trinity's inherent mystery and seemingly illogical concept frequently relegate it to only to the theology classroom. We mistakenly find very little application for it in everyday life.

Regardless of our ability to easily discern its impact, there is something so inherently powerful about the Trinity, which makes it more than just another subject in seminary. A clear understanding of the Trinity can literally change lives and open new worlds into Christian service. The Triune nature of God gives meaning to everything Christians do both in and out of church.

Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck explains the essentiality of the Trinity to the Christian life in his book *The Doctrine of God*, "the doctrine of the Trinity is of the utmost importance for practical religion...The doctrine of the Trinity is the sum and substance of the Christian faith, the root of all dogmas, the essence of the new covenant."<sup>9</sup> The Triune nature of God is the foundation of true Biblical Servanthood. Our relationship with God is one with a loving Father, not a cruel dictator, because of the Trinity. The relational aspect of God, found within himself, is the basis from which both the motivation and power to biblically serve others originates.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* defines the construct of God as "There are three Persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and

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<sup>5</sup> Ron Dagni, *Chemical & Engineering News, The Top Pharmaceuticals That Changed The World* Vol. 83, Issue 25 (6/20/05).

<sup>6</sup> Center for Disease Control, <http://www.cdc.gov/malaria/facts.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Fiammetta Rocco, *Quinine, Malaria and the Quest for a Cure That Changed the World*, Harper Collins 2003, New York, NY, page 23.

<sup>8</sup> Center for Disease Control, <http://www.cdc.gov/malaria/facts.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, Banner of Truth, 2003, page 333.

these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.”<sup>10</sup> The God of the Bible is not a cadre of multiple gods but rather one God comprised of three distinct substances (see Deut. 6:4 and Isa. 44:6).

So, given its monotheism, how can the Christian faith claim that God actually consists of three distinct people? How can there be diversity in unity? To answer this it may help to explain the significance of using the word ‘person’ when applied to God. God comprises a Trinity because, within the unity of God, there is a threefold diversity of personhood.

All three of the individuals that comprise the Godhead are the same in substance, equal in power and glory, yet distinct in their role. Theologian Herman Bavinck explains that the word person, when used in the context of the Trinity, indicates the existence within God’s divine essence of a threefold distinction.

Undeniably the Bible clearly identifies these three persons as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in verses like Corinthians 13:14. John Calvin points to Christ’s own teaching on baptism as prime proof of a single God comprised of three persons.<sup>11</sup>

Despite their unity of essence, each member of the Trinity distinguishes themselves by their works and relation to man. The Father created the world and planned salvation, the Son came to earth and carried out redemption, and the Holy Spirit works to change us by applying regeneration and sanctification. Therefore, while the role remains different for each person of the Trinity, they share the same nature and attributes.

Each person of the Trinity is fully God, possessing all of the attributes assigned to God (holiness, omnipotence, omnipresence, veracity, etc.). All of these divine traits are then equally present within all of persons of the Trinity. A single person of the Trinity is not more of God than the other two members.

The whole undivided essence of God belongs equally to each the three persons. This means that the divine essence is not divided among the three persons, but is wholly with all its perfection in each one of the persons, so that they have a numerical unity of essence.<sup>12</sup>

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not each one-third of God. Each person contains within themselves all that God is. The divine nature allows God

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<sup>10</sup> *Westminster Shorter Catechism* Question 6, Answer 6.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of The Christian Religion I.XIII.16.* Westminster Press, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Erdmans 1996, Grand Rapids, MI., page 88.

to exist in ways our human nature is not only incapable of, but unable to fully understand as well. Our essence cannot exist within multiple people because we possess humanity, not divinity.

The ability to, as Berkhof states, “subsist wholly and indivisibly in more than one person”<sup>13</sup> is strictly a trait of God’s divinity. This supernatural ability allows God to both maintain unity and diversity within himself: Diversity as each member has a distinctive role as part of God’s overall will and purpose; Unity as each member works to complement and serve the others as part of one divine essence.

Fundamentally, the triune nature of God inherently means the ability to have, as well as desire, relationships. A relationship is the interaction and mutual interest that can only exist between two or more parties. The threefold nature of God essentially implies that a relationship must exist between each member of the Godhead.

### **The Relationship God**

Many things can bring people into relationships: hate, love, mutual interest, etc. Normally, a relationship is fraught with differences between members. In most cases people in a relationship have more disparities than they have things actually in common. In fact we can be in a relationship that may even be a bad or argumentative one. This, however, would not describe the connection we see within the Trinitarian Godhead.

Since the members are equally God, the bond between them is in complete and total harmony. The persons within the Godhead flawlessly relate to one another because while they are divinely unified into one essence. That kind of perfect unification can only happen if it consists of unwavering mutual love.

But how can we be certain that this kind of love characterizes the relationship between the members of the Trinity? The Bible clearly states that God is the very definition of love and love exists in God. “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:10). If God is love as the apostle John states, then God cannot, by his very nature, exist as an unknown isolated being. John does not say God knows love but rather He *is* love.

The fact God is love demands that he must be in a relationship within His own self. How else can someone be love as opposed to just knowing about it? The very nature of love presupposes a relationship between persons. Therefore, God has to be a relationship and the most important relationship God is in is with himself, in the Trinity. Therefore, the Trinity is relational!

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. page 88.

Amongst the Trinity, love is central to its nature and prominent among its members. Jesus himself testified to this intra-Trinitarian relationship, “For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing” (John 5:20). An important clue to understanding God’s relationship within himself is that it is based on a divine, complete, and eternal relational love.

The Trinity means that God is capable of loving relationships. A God that is love is not only a person who can be known (otherwise a relationship is impossible), but that he can personally know others as well. Of course, we must be careful to make a distinction when applying the word “person” to God. When we typically think of a person our mind usually pictures a human being with all the capabilities and limitations. However, God is the perfect picture of personhood in a way we will never understand – until glory. As Wayne Grudem explains, “This tri-personal form of being is far beyond our ability to comprehend. It is a kind of existence far different from anything we have experienced, and far removed from anything else in the universe.”<sup>14</sup> God’s capacity to love and to have relationships far exceeds, by any stretch of the imagination, our ability to do and have the same. What does it mean to us that God is both a person and personal? What then is the significance of God being able to be in relationships?

In *Understanding the Trinity*, Pastor Alister McGrath explains the importance of a personal God, “The fundamental point behind the idea of a personal God is this: God is able to enter into a personal relationship with us.”<sup>15</sup> The relationship within the Godhead is the foundation and the reason we can have relationship with God himself. The threefold nature of God shows us that He has the ability personally to relate us. In other words, God is not some distant, unapproachable, uncaring figure. God is capable of having real meaningful relationships with man. As T.F. Torrance states:

It means that God is not limited by our feeble capacities or incapacities, but that in his grace and outgoing love he graciously condescends to enter into fellowship with us, to communicate himself to us, in such a way as to be received and known by us.<sup>16</sup>

God can and does enter into a relationship with his creation because first he is actually capable of such an act. Secondly, He has passed on that ability to those who bear his image - mankind. As made in his image, God has given us the ability to be like him in that we can have relationship with him. Humans are only

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<sup>14</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan 1995, Grand Rapids, MI., page 254.

<sup>15</sup> Alister McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity*, Zondervan 1988, Grand Rapids, MI., page 82.

<sup>16</sup> T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, T & T Clark 1996, New York NY, page 4.

personal because God, whose image they bear, is. Our ability to have personal relationships is a result of God's ability to be personal.

However, God is capable of having far deeper and more meaningful relationships that we cannot even begin to fathom. As Louis Berkhof states, "The original form of personality is not in man but in God.... what appears as imperfect in man exists in infinite proportion in God."<sup>17</sup> God's relationship within himself is the origin for his relationship with us. This love based intra-Trinitarian connection means then that God's relationship with us is also characterized by that same love.

But if we humans are naturally, as the Bible states, fallen and undeserving of fellowship with God because of sin, then why would God love us in the first place? God loves because of his goodness and not because of ours. God's love for us is a consequence of His goodness. J.I. Packer states in *Knowing God*, "Of this goodness God's love is the supreme and most glorious manifestation."<sup>18</sup> God because he is relational has created a people to be his to manifest his own glory and gladness. To that end, the Trinity acts in self-sacrificing love to accomplish their shared will. God also deals lovingly with his people because ultimately they will be united him as adopted sons.

However, how can we know for sure that God really loves us? Assurance that God loves us is found in the fact that he sent his son, the second member of the Trinity, to die for us so that we may have a relationship with himself. As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 5:8 "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." The Father loves us so much he was willing to sacrifice the Son for us.

The incarnation of Christ was the single greatest proof that God loves us and desires a relationship with us. It also shows how personal God is willing to be. It manifests that God is love! "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10). Therefore, here we see the proof of God's love for you and me. It is in the second Person of the Trinity.

God reaches into our world, through His goodness, to establish a relationship based on the characteristic that defines his innermost relationships, love. To prove and secure it, he sends his own son to suffer, die, and pay the cost of elect man's sin.

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<sup>17</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, page 84.

<sup>18</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Intervarsity Press 1973, Downer's Grove IL., page 123.

We have a God that was willing to send his beloved Son to condescend to our level because of his love towards his people (John 3:16). There upon the very world he created, the Son of God was to endure humiliation and pain at the hands of man in order to die on a cross and bear the wrath of God on behalf of those same men. The covenant of grace allowed God's own to enter a relationship with the loving Triune God.

## **The Trinity and Serving Others**

In the early part of the 1600's, Jesuit Priests who lived, worked, and proselytized among the native tribes began to experiment with the potential medicinal effects of the cinchona bark. Despite being bitter and fetid in taste, it was important to South American tribesmen who used it as muscle relaxant to combat shivering caused by exposure to the cold, damp Andean weather.

In 1631, a Jesuit elder boarded a ship off the coast of Peru bound for Rome. He had heard horror stories of the 1623 Papal election in Rome when 44 of the 45 electing cardinals became sick with Roman Fever. Ten of them along with hundreds of their attendants died suffering greatly from the shivers of the fever. He brought with him a pouch containing the medicinal powder made from the bark of the cinchona tree. So, it was that when he arrived in Rome several months later, he set in motion a chain of events that would transform world history.

We now stand on the cusp of our own discovery that will further transform Christian service. God exists as a Trinitarian entity that is chiefly characterized by communal and indwelling love. The threefold nature of God signifies that he can enter into relationships and that he can be personal. God establishes a relationship with us because of his goodness and not ours. This bond is comprised of the same love that exists within the Trinity and God demonstrated through the Gospel. The Trinity sets the stage for God to reach out to enter into a relationship with man.

From the basis of the Trinity's perfect harmony, unity, and love, God reached out to enter into a relationship, through His Son, with his created image bearers. He has passed his ability to have relationships with us so that we primarily may enter fellowship with Him.

This inheritance of personality, however, also enables us to establish loving and service-oriented relationships with one another. The Trinity not only makes Biblical Servanthood possible, it also defines how it should be carried out.

As we have already discovered, the Trinity is intensely infused with a mutual love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God reached into our world and brought fallen, sinful man into a loving relationship with himself. He did so by

sending the Son, Jesus Christ, to be the sacrificial lamb to die for elect man's sin. What Christ purchased for us was not just a neutralizing effect of penalty of sin, but even more gloriously he brought us into a relationship with God as adopted sons. As Paul writes:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God (Gal. 4:4-7).

If we are heirs to God, then are we not also brought into the loving relationship of the Trinity? This inclusion is not as equals but as heirs to everything God has given and will give the son. We may forever have access to the love and joy that exists within the Trinity. God through his love planned our salvation, the Son through love purchased our salvation, and the Spirit through love applies our salvation. The end result is that we may be heirs to that same love.

As we come into a relationship with a personal God through Christ's blood, we also come into union with the rest of God's people. Christ brought us not only individually to him but he also created a people bound together through his blood (Eph 2:18-22).

Pastor John Stott writes, "Thus the very purpose of his (Christ) self-giving on the cross was not just to save individuals, and so perpetuate their loneliness, but to create a new community whose members would belong to him, love one another, and eagerly serve the world."<sup>19</sup> Christ himself prayed to the Father that God's people may be one even as he was one with the Trinity, "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one" (John 17:10b).

Given this union between the Triune God and his people, the relationship within the Trinity becomes the foundation and model for our relationships with others. "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:11-12). Love is basis for both God's relationship within himself and with us.

The Trinity not only enables us to enter into relationships, but at the same time also provides the foundation values for which they are to be based on. For example Paul writes in Ephesians 5:2, "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Here we see that

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<sup>19</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, Intervarsity Press 2006, Downer's Grove IL., page 249.

our reason for serving and loving others is based on the Son's work and the Father's acceptance. Paul states that by having Christ because of his sacrifice and love for us is to inform us of how to live with others. May God's relationship with us transform ours relationship with others. "The vital union of Christians with Christ also demands our unity."<sup>20</sup>

## **The Trinity and Biblical Servanthood**

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Now that we are unified together in that Trinitarian love, then our interactions with others must likewise be based on the same principle. Being made in the image of a triune God, who is the very source of love, means that we have been given the ability to having loving relationships with others.

May we see in the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, how their relationships are expressed, and may we learn from this something better about how our relationships and work ought to be lived out, for our good and for the glory of his great and triune name.<sup>21</sup>

The diverse unity of the Trinity implies the existence of a unified diversity within it. The three members who comprise the Trinity are distinct in their personhood yet singular in substance, equal in power and glory. Despite the differing roles Trinitarian members assume, each still maintains the unity of their shared essence. Paul writes of the Church:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness ( Rom. 12:4-8).

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<sup>20</sup> Edmund Clowney, *The Church*, Intervarsity Press 1995, Downer's Grove IL., page 80.

<sup>21</sup> Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit*,. Crossway 2005 Chicago, IL., page 22.

Our relationships and Christian service itself should therefore mirror both the unity and diversity we find in the Trinity. Each of us has various talents, experiences, backgrounds, and opportunities, yet we are to act in unison.

It is through, not despite, our diversity that we love and serve others in order to magnify the gospel for the glory of God and to the benefit of others. "The gifts of the Spirit do differ, but they never divide, for they enable the church to function as an organism, the body of Christ... Organic unity requires diversity of function (1 Cor. 12)."<sup>22</sup> We are to especially live this way within the church, since as Christians the Holy Spirit unifies us in God through Christ. Members of the church both local and universal must treat one another, despite any other difference we may have, as part of the same body. "We are driven to consider not only what the Lord calls us to *do* together, but also what he calls us to *be* together."<sup>23</sup>

Like the Trinity, we are to be diversely unified by our love for each other that stems from the love God has for us. The fact that the Trinitarian members are each equally God has some tremendous implications for Biblical Servanthood. It means that our Christian service will be different in look and method yet it is unified in purpose. What the Trinity leads to will change our service and us for eternity.

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<sup>22</sup> Edmund Clowney, *The Church*, page 81.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, page 79.