

# The Trinitarian Life of God, Part 2

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## INTRODUCTION

Last Thursday we talked about the Trinitarian life of God and how God is not a static reality, but a dynamic reality. Again, I mean very purposefully to speak of the “Trinitarian life of God” and not merely “the Trinity,” in order to keep before us that God Himself is not a doctrinal formula but a dynamic community. God is an eternal community of mutual delight, with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit enjoying one another from all eternity. We described *perichoresis*, which means interpenetration—an arresting and striking word, to be sure—the relationship that involves each Person of God fully entering the other, plunging deeply into the other, exploring and discovering, fully knowing and comprehending, and always delighting and rejoicing. And each Person is forever and always welcoming the other into Himself, providing hospitality for the others. The result of this entering and welcoming is an overflowing joy and delight in one another’s beauties, glories, excellencies and riches. This reality, as we said, this dynamic provides the pattern for how humanity is to relate to one another. Adam and Eve, in the garden, were naked and felt no shame because they were created to be completely vulnerable before one another, designed to always be exploring one another and delighting; and they were created to be explored, to be fully known and delighted in.

Because of the entrance of sin into the world, we do not relate to one another as we were meant to do, and we all know this from experience. We do not welcome others to fully explore and know us because we are fearful and suspicious of others. We don’t know what they’re going to do if they know us intimately. If someone else finds out this about me, they’ll surely reject me or recoil in horror at what I’ve done, what I’ve thought, what’s been done to me. So I need to cover it up, or package myself in a way that minimizes the damage. And the reverse is also true—we do not enter others’ realities, going out and working hard to explore others, to understand where they’ve been, what their hopes and fears are, why they’re hurting the way they are, why they’re having difficulty. Because of sin, we are all broken, and we manifest our brokenness by no longer entering and welcoming, no longer mimicking the Trinitarian life and love of God.

But there’s good news! There’s gospel! God has set about to fix what is broken, calling humanity to repent and turn from destruction and to enter God’s Kingdom under the gracious reign of King Jesus, who demonstrated for us how we are supposed to live. God, by His Spirit, has created a new people and calls us to enter a radically new existence, one in which we are caught up into the Trinitarian life of God, along with one another.

We are called to “repent.” The Greek word for this is, as many of you know, “metanoia,” which means to change one’s mind, to embrace new thought patterns, to expand the horizons of how you currently think and behave so that you can imagine new ways of enjoying God’s goodness and new ways of relating to others that mimic God’s own love. “Metanoia”—changing the way we conceive of living so that we truly inhabit God’s Kingdom and order our relationships as if inhabiting the Trinitarian love of God is really

real. We refuse to accept reality and relationships as they are configured by the world. That's true "metanoia"—seeing reality as God sees it, re-conceiving of our lives as re-configured by what Jesus has done. "Metanoia" sees that God has brought us into Himself and has united us to one another, so we're drawn out to inhabit God's Kingdom, along with others to whom we've been joined.

The opposite of "metanoia," of course, is "paranoia," where you close down and go down deeply into yourself, focused on your fears, on your hurts and how others have hurt you, fostering and feeding bitterness, seeking ways to get revenge, assuming the worst about others—that they're out to get you, that you need to earn their love and approval, that you need to control and manipulate in order to be accepted—and adopting survival strategies that rule out mimicking God's welcoming and entering.

The gospel is the call to repent and receive God's love—it is God's action of uniting us to Christ, drawing us into the Trinitarian love that God enjoys, Father, Son, and Spirit. And repentance and faith involves imagining and putting into practice new ways of life, new patterns of behavior that are shaped according to the Trinitarian life and love of God.

Well, today I want to expand just a bit on the notion that the Trinitarian life of God determines how we're supposed to live now that we are Christian. I will first take us on a quick jet tour through Scripture to demonstrate how this Trinitarian vision provides the context for so many things in the Bible. This dynamic is everywhere, once you open your eyes to it. I will then move to apply this Trinitarian vision to a number of dynamics that we find in our culture. My aim is to help us all to develop the skill of thinking Trinitarianly, seeing the relationality of God and God's intentions for us everywhere in Scripture, and developing the wisdom to discern how to let this shape our lives and relationships.

## **TRINITARIAN LIFE AS THE CONTEXT FOR SO MANY PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE**

Let's look briefly at some Scripture texts – again, this is far from exhaustive but is only suggestive. I had to cut out so much from this, sadly, including the entire portion on the Old Testament, which I feel is just tragic – but we'll just focus on some NT texts.

When God shows up on earth, in the Person of Jesus, what does He do? Have you ever noticed how often Jesus is having meals with people? Why is He doing this? You could say, "Well, that's just what they did back then. Meals are just the occasion for Jesus to teach people a lesson." Well, not really. Think about it this way. If God, the Son, from all eternity, is always going out to the Father and the Spirit to discover, and always welcoming the others within Himself to be known, then when He comes to earth, He's going to keep doing what He's always been doing. God doesn't change His pattern of behavior. He is an always discovering God, and an always being discovered God. If God, in the garden, delights to know Adam and Eve, very likely taking on a body and entering the garden, walking with them in the cool of the day, visiting with them, lingering with them and delighting to hear how they're enjoying one another and His beautiful creation, then when He shows up again in Jesus, this is exactly what He'll be doing.

When a Pharisee, afraid of what his colleagues will think of him, asks Jesus to meet in the middle of the night, does God show up? Of course he does! When God happens to be walking through a Samaritan town—a place where, according to the racial and ethnic rules of the day, He should not have been—and meets a woman with a shady reputation at the well—someone with whom He should not have been talking—what happens? Jesus opens

up conversation with her. In a sense, He can't help it. This is what God does. He wants to know and be known. This encounter, of course, leads to an outbreak of salvation among the enemies of the Jews. What's beautiful in John 4 is that even though v. 9 notes that Jews do not associate with Samaritans, when they invite Jesus to stay a few more days in the town there, Jesus, being the God of hospitality, takes up the invitation, even though this is an offense to the racial and social rules of His culture.

We see the same thing in Luke 15:1-2 "Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives/welcomes sinners and eats with them'."

Read the account in Luke 19 of Jesus' encounter with Zaccheus and note all the Trinitarian activity. Jesus, passing through Jericho, encounters Zaccheus and calls him by name and says, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." Part of the divine plan, Zaccheus, involves Me being welcomed by you—I must enjoy your hospitality. Zaccheus, Luke says, "came down and received Him gladly," which caused a response among the Jews who had witnessed all this. "When they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying 'He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner'." God enjoying hospitality, which is the very nature of God, is often an offense. I wonder how many of us would be offended... The presence of Jesus causes Trinitarian activity on the part of Zaccheus, who vows to give half of his possessions to the poor and to make amends with all those whom he has defrauded. When God shows up, people become givers and reconcilers.

In the wonderful story at the end of Luke, in chapter 24, when the two disciples were on the Road to Emmaus, Jesus joins them, conversing with them about all that has happened—Jesus' ministry and death, and now reports of His resurrection. Jesus' identity is hidden from them, until . . . when? Notice the Trinitarian activity:

And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He were going farther. But they urged Him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is getting toward evening, and the day is now nearly over." So He went in to stay with them. When He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight.

Jesus is invited in, so He enters and stays. And they recognize Him when He breaks the bread – Jesus is recognized in the meal, because that's the sort of thing God does when He enters our reality. He fully enters, receiving the invitation of broken people, and welcoming and receiving sinners.

Much the same thing happens, of course, when the Spirit is poured out at Pentecost in Acts 2. What is the result? Acts 2 closes with this summary:

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people and the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Why does Luke focus on the church having meals together!? What would we talk about as marks of a successful church? Increase in staff, new parking lot, more programs, a bigger sign, increased offering, new building, slick stationery. If you're an economically-oriented culture, you ask about the numbers—the bottom line. But if you're Trinitarian, you focus on the meals. When God shows up by His Spirit, people can't help but fellowship together, eating together, lingering with each other to mimic God's Trinitarian life, just as Jesus did when He was on earth.

Well, there is so much more to talk about. Why is it that in the lists of sins in the New Testament, gossip and slander are listed right alongside of adultery and sexual immorality—the biggies? Because God is serious about unity among His people who are supposed to relate to one another according to God's own inter-relationships. Among the seven things that God hates in Proverbs 6 is the one who stirs up dissension among brothers.

Why is it that in the list of requirements for elders in 1 Timothy 3, one of the requirements is "being hospitable?" Who cares about that!? How many of our churches are actually concerned to ask potential pastors if they are hospitable people? But to God this is a measure of godliness, the skill of welcoming strangers and turning them into friends, which makes sense if you're thinking Trinitarianly.

Well, again, I'm leaving out so much, but this is just to show that God's Trinitarian life is foundational and formative for so much of what is going on in the biblical drama. It is how we are to think about God—God is not static, stoic, standing there with His arms folded waiting for people to get their act together. God seeks out others, as an overflow of the love He enjoys as Father, Son, and Spirit. And God's Trinitarian life sets the pattern for how we are to enjoy God and one another. We are to be like God, going out to one another, discovering and being discovered, laboring long to listen and to understand what another is saying, refusing to do harm. We are to be like God, plotting, planning and scheming to do good to one another, strategizing to creatively imagine how to be agents of God's amazing grace in one another's lives.

## **THE TRINITARIAN LIFE OF GOD AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE**

I want to now take up this notion of the Trinitarian life of God and look through it as a lens. Let's think about our wider culture and about the dynamics that are up and running in our world. We've already said that the Trinitarian life of God is to be the dynamic that shapes our lives, our relationships, and our communities. We are supposed to orient our lives and our patterns of relating according to God's own life. The problem we face—the obstacle to doing this—is that we find that there are many other dynamics, patterns of life and habits of mind, in our world that work on us to form our characters and shape the way we think of ourselves and one another. And some of these are subtly destructive and foster anti-Trinitarian ways of life. They're not necessarily wrong or sin, but if we are not shrewd and discerning people, we can end up being squeezed into the world's mold, rather than being shaped according to the life that God enjoys. Again, there are so many things that we could talk about, but let this just be suggestive for how you analyze culture in light of who God is.

## The Trinitarian Life of God and Shopping

Let's talk first about shopping. We often talk about consumer culture or how our culture has turned us into consumers, but what is involved with that? It's not that shopping, as an activity, is bad or sin, but we need to recognize that shopping involves a set of practices and habits of mind. Shopping is character-forming. Shopping has become so everywhere-present in our world that it has come to shape us, determining how we think about ourselves and others. The dynamic that I'm talking about here is the impulse whereby we evaluate and then make a purchase. If our needs and wants aren't satisfied, if our expectations aren't met, then we take the product back. No harm done, we get a new one, and we're off to be satisfied with our purchase, until the product wears out and perhaps we'll just get a new one or buy something else. We have the right to be satisfied with the product that we've chosen, and we know this because one of the essential convictions in the consumer gospel is that "the customer is always right." Satisfaction is guaranteed!

The problem here is that we have come to think about everything and everyone in this way, especially relationships. The ultimate value is my satisfaction. Just as I'll shop where my satisfaction is guaranteed, I will form friendships and even look for a life partner where my satisfaction is guaranteed. After all, it's my right!

But think about how this becomes an obstacle to mimicking the Trinitarian life of God. Life is unpredictable and so are friendships. I may be called upon to play a role in a friendship that is very difficult, that I didn't anticipate, and that is anything but satisfying. A friend may have a desperate need for someone to help walk through the valley of the shadow of death. If I am out for my satisfaction, how will I respond? If I'm Trinitarian, I can't just take that friendship back and get a new one! But if I'm a shopper, what'll I do? I'll give subtle hints and send messages that I've taken that friendship back to return it. I won't be available, I'll be busy...

A genuine friendship is one of the richest experiences we can possibly have as humans—the wonder of mutual sharing and delighting can hardly be captured with words. But friendships are forged when we commit to another person no matter what we find and no matter what we're called upon to bear.

## The Trinitarian life of God and Marriage

The shopping impulse is most deadly when it comes to marriage. The wonder of marriage is that it is the God-given arena for the practice of *perichoresis* in its most intense form. The prospect of discovering and delighting in another person, and of being discovered by and being delighted in by another person is probably the most tantalizing and wonderful thing in human experience. That's why most of you want to be married at some point! It is what we all long for, it's how we're made and designed. It meets our deepest needs and it truly is sublimely satisfying.

But it is also fraught with peril, which is why marriage begins by making a public covenant. You make promises to each other before a bunch of witnesses who are not there to see how pretty you can be when you spend 4 hours doing your hair, or to witness you wearing a \$1,000 dress for one day. They are there to hear you make promises so that they can keep you accountable when life puts pressure on you to break them.

You see, when you set out on this life-long quest of mutual discovery, you don't know what you're going to find, which is precisely what is so tantalizing! But for those who are nurtured in a shopping culture, this leads to crushing fear. Because if you are a product, you can't predict how your mate is going to respond when they find out you may be a defective product. What is she going to say when I tell her that . . . ? How is he going to react when he finds out that . . . ?

I get these questions a lot from students. "You know, this happened to me a few years ago, will I not be able to enjoy a relationship . . . ?" "I did this last summer. Should I tell someone that I'm going to marry about it?" "Will God still . . . ? We are fearful of being discovered.

For some of you, you will enter a marriage with someone who is your dream mate, and your marriage will begin wonderfully. But then you will begin to discover your mate, and you may find out things that reside deep within that person that are unspeakably painful. One that you love bears scars or deep wounds, painful experiences that humans were not made to have to deal with or sort out. Perhaps these scars have been ignored or covered over but you begin to see that they are the reason for unexplained reactions to certain situations. They have not been revealed earlier because there is the fear that, "when my wife/husband finds out, I'll be rejected . . ." And the temptation will be great to recoil in horror or to reject the one to whom you have made promises.

How do you react? What will you do? This is the danger for many of us in being raised in this culture that trains us in the way of the shopper. "Well, I've had some good use out of this product and now have found it deficient. It is indeed very sad, but it just isn't working out. It's too bad, but I feel that it's for the best."

But how do we respond if we are trained *perichoretically*? If we see that the Trinitarian life of God determines everything, shapes the way we see life and relationships. We'll see that the way forward toward blessing is to continue through the hurt and pain in *perichoretic* patterns of life. In marriage we made promises that no matter what we discover in another, we will delight, we will enter fully into it and we will love. We will lay down our lives for another. We will say, "I didn't know up front that I would be called upon to bear this particular burden, to be part of this particular process of redemption in another's life, but that's why I made promises."

Humans were not designed to be known and loved, and then cast aside or turned back in for someone else. The pain that comes from divorce is simply inexpressible, and sadly, many churches have failed to be places of welcome and rest for those who have been hurt by divorce. Churches are to be havens of hospitality for broken people, without trying to sort out who is to blame. But in many ways, churches become shoppers, selecting the right kind of people to be members, rather than looking to welcome and warmly receive those who are in need, or who are broken. Remembering that they themselves are broken and in need of the grace of God.

### **The Trinitarian Life of God and Pornography**

If Trinitarian shaped life involves knowing others in order to delight and welcoming others in to be known by them, then pornography is a perversion of this. It is the pursuit of knowing another in order to plunder and to use. And it isn't really even knowing another—it is knowing another person as you want them to be, not for who they really are. It is

gazing upon another to derive pleasure, but there is no covenant of commitment to that person. It is treating another person as completely without value. We become plunderers of another, not those who treasure another. There is no mutual interchange and discovery, but only discovery with the aim of using another person for one's own pleasure. Because this is a violation of God's own relationality, it is ultimately unfulfilling.

What is frightening and destructive, what is insidious about pornography is that it is a dynamic that shapes us as people—it is character-forming. It is a set of habits and involves patterns of behavior. It trains a person to conduct relationships that are extremely unhealthy and completely selfish. It forms you into a person who grabs for realities hidden deep within another person to which you have no right—either physical or emotional.

If we are Trinitarian, we will refuse to let that dynamic shape us. We will refuse to plunder another person, but will treat others with dignity and honor, and we will militantly avoid becoming people shaped by the destructive practices of pornography. It isn't true that "no harm is done"—you shape yourself to be the kind of person who is a source of destruction in God's Kingdom.

### **The Trinitarian life of God and Facebook**

The alternative dynamic is represented by Facebook. If pornography involves knowing another person for who you want them to be, then Facebook is wanting to be known, not for who you really are, but for who you want others think you are. It is a form of selling yourself, marketing yourself. It represents a desire to reveal, not the real me, but the imagined me—the me that I want others to think is real. I'm not saying that Facebook's a bad thing, or sin, just that we need to be aware that it involves a dynamic that shapes you in certain ways that you may not have anticipated.

Let me ask you this—all you Facebook users, and I are one—have you ever done this—you're having a wonderful time with friends, doing something very unique, having loads of fun. And you're NOT thinking, "man, isn't this great!? This is just the best time! This is truly fun, what a blast!?"

You're thinking, "Man, this is so great, I gotta get a picture of this and put it on my Facebook!" You're not enjoying life for what it is, truly enjoying your friends and the wonderful relationships God has given you—you're living life and having fun so that you can make others think you're enjoying life and having fun! You start living with reference to others' opinions of you!!

So you get really unique flair and say that you're listening to really obscure indie bands that no one else has ever heard of, because "yeah, you're just really into 'em, you know..."

I'm not saying that you should stop using Facebook, and please don't send me any flair - I can't figure out how to use that feature...

Have fun with it, but just make sure you see it for what it is, for the relational dynamics that it invites you to develop, and make sure that you're cultivating the skill of genuinely being known and genuinely getting to know another person.

## **The Trinitarian Life of God and Busy-ness at Cedarville University**

It is easy to get overwhelmed at Cedarville with the seemingly endless possibilities for relationships and involvement. This is indeed an exciting place to be! But this means that we must be vigilant. There is the danger of spreading ourselves so thin and being involved in so many things that we fail to develop lasting and deeply committed relationships.

And there's also the danger of taking on the shopping impulse here with regard to relationships. Since there are so many options, it is easy to move on from certain friends that are becoming difficult and begin new ones that offer, seemingly anyway, fewer troubles. We need to learn to sit long with relationships and truly bear one another's burdens.

This is not easy when we are shaped according to modern communicative technologies that prevent rich conversation. I had this happen to me this summer – Sarah and I were sitting enjoying a wonderful conversation on our porch, but I found that after 20 minutes I couldn't sit still! I needed a hit! “Did someone just add me as a friend?” “I need to check my email!” “I know there's something I need to be doing . . . what's next!?”

We're frantic and so harried and in such a hurry that we don't leave ourselves with time to invest in others, to be available to sit and listen. To labor long to draw out the deepnesses of others. I see this all the time with students – we'll be sitting having coffee and they're getting a call on their cell phone, or returning a text, having 2 or 3 conversations at once—and this is considered normal!! Turn that thing off, or leave it behind. I've started to leave my cell phone in my car and not take it with me everywhere. It's wonderful, you're actually free to have good conversation without being interrupted.

## **The Trinitarian Life of God and Cultural and Generational Shifts at Cedarville**

It is no secret that Cedarville University is a contested culture right now. At this place and in this community, things have changed dramatically over the last few decades, and the change has been wonderful for many, uncomfortable for some. There are new buildings, new people, new faculty, new programs, and for some, students grow stranger and more distant every year. How do you respond when a community undergoes changes, when it is no longer predictable?

I will not elaborate—I don't think that I have to—but I'll just say that there have been some very destructive responses that do not have their origin in the Trinitarian life of God, but elsewhere. But if we seek to truly mimic the Trinitarian life of God, we will work hard to understand one another; we will labor long to see to it that we've treated one another's words with care; we will seek to know and understand, never seeking to do harm but plotting, planning, and scheming to do good to one another, knowing that the more we truly know one another, and the more we are truly known, the more that we will enjoy the life of God who is an eternal community of mutual delight.

We say that we are a Christ-centered learning community. That doesn't have to involve intellectual properties alone, as if all we do here is transfer knowledge. It can also involve being a community that strategizes together to come up with creative ways to truly mimic the life that God enjoys as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.