

The “Let Us” — The Trinity and the Image of God

Genesis 1:26–28

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The Creation of Humanity

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’” — Genesis 1:26–28

This passage echoes again in Genesis 5:

“This is the written account of Adam’s line. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them ‘man.’” — Genesis 5:1–2

Tonight we are doing theology — working through some thoughts carefully. Have you ever stopped at the phrase “Let *us* make man in our image”? Have you wondered what it means? What does it mean to be made in the image of God?

The answer is hidden in plain sight, right there in the “us” of the passage. Before we can understand what it means to be made in God’s image, we have to understand what that image *is*.

What Is the Image of God?

The image of God is the Trinity. God is Father, God is Son, God is Holy Spirit. This is not incidental to who God is — it is the very nature and essence of his being.

What does this teach us about God?

It teaches us that God is *relational*. The God of the Christian faith — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — is not a collection of gods, nor a solitary individual. He is a communion, a unity of persons in relation. As Colin Gunton writes, the Trinitarian nature of God is precisely this: “a unity of persons in relation” (*The One, the Three and the Many*, 215). When one is drawn toward God, one finds not solitariness — not “alone with the alone” — but, as Timothy George puts it, “the mystery of eternal love and relationship, a begetting without a beginning and an indwelling without an ending” (*Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?*, 80).

This is how God is known. The relational, communal nature of God is not a theological footnote; it is the central reality that shapes everything we mean when we say human beings are made in his image. God creates in his own image — relational, communal, and overflowing with intimate love.

Relational Personhood

God is relational. The familiar declaration that “God is love” only makes sense within a relationship. Love requires an object. It requires communion. And we see this at the very moment of humanity’s creation: “Let *us* make man in *our* image.” Community and relationship are not features added to human life after the fact — they are written into our nature from the beginning, because they are written into the nature of God.

This matters enormously for how we think about the church. The church is not primarily a place of *accountability*. The church is a place of *community*. And building that community takes real work — respect, peacemaking, the courage to stay in hard conversations, mutual deference, and mutual submission to one another. Paul puts it plainly:

“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” — Galatians 5:13–14

What does that look like in practice? It looks like healthy relationships built on kindness, forgiveness, peacemaking, and service. It looks like deep friendships cultivated in Sunday school, in small groups, and in time spent together through the week. It looks like healthy families — husbands and wives, mothers and fathers — taking seriously the image they reflect. If we do this, it will change and grow this community.

Love

At the core of the Trinitarian, relational presence of God is love — love that overflows from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. Wolfhart Pannenberg writes: “From all eternity the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, and the Spirit loves the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father. Each of the Trinitarian persons loves the other, the Father the Son, the Son the Father, the Spirit both in relationship” (*Systematic Theology*, I, 426).

The remarkable mystery of creation is that being made in the image of God means that God himself — Father, Son, and Spirit — invites us to share in that same love which is eternally reciprocated within the Holy Trinity. This is T. F. Torrance’s great insight: we are not merely observers of divine love. We are invited into it.

Self-Sacrifice

The nature of God’s love is one of self-sacrifice and giving. Self-surrender is at the very heart of who God is, and therefore at the very heart of all his attitudes and actions — a point E. Stanley Jones makes forcefully in *Victory Through Surrender*.

C. S. Lewis captures this with extraordinary beauty:

“For in self-giving, if anywhere, we touch a rhythm not only of all creation but of all being. For the Eternal Word also gives Himself in sacrifice; and that not only on Calvary... From before the foundation of the world He surrenders begotten Deity back to begetting Deity in obedience... From the highest to the lowest, self exists to be abdicated and, by that abdication, becomes more truly self, to be thereupon yet the more abdicated, and so forever... What is outside the system of self-giving is not earth, nor nature, nor ‘ordinary life,’ but simply and solely Hell.”

Consider the shape of Jesus’ life. It is a life marked by descent: from heaven, to humanity, to the grave. His descent to the grave shows us this:

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” — Romans 5:8

And this descent, this surrender, is not an interruption of who God is — it is a revelation of it. The book of Revelation tells us of “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). The sacrificial surrender of Jesus reaches back before time itself. It discloses the eternal nature of God.

And so suffering in the cause of surrender — what the tradition calls *passion* — is part of what it means to share God’s heart. This is most evident in the surrender of our own lives to God.

Think of what we mean when we say to a guest, “Make yourself at home.” We say it warmly, but what we really mean is: *you’re a guest here*. We don’t actually want them to repaint the rooms or rearrange the furniture. We treat Jesus the same way — welcoming him as a guest but keeping the keys ourselves. But Jesus is not meant to be a guest. He is meant to be the owner.

Mystery

The Trinitarian nature of God is a mystery, and there is much we cannot know. But the mystery itself is not a problem to be solved — it is an invitation to wonder, to awe, and to thoughtful reflection.

Paul, writing about marriage in Ephesians 5, lands on this:

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church.” — Ephesians 5:31–32

How can God be three in one? We reach for metaphors. Water in its three states: ice, liquid, steam. A tree with its root, trunk, and branches. A candle with its wax, wick, and flame. An egg with its shell, white, and yolk. An apple — peel, flesh, and core — each one hundred percent apple, all different, all one apple. A book with its author, its text, and the act of reading.

Each metaphor helps. Each one finally fails. And that failure is itself instructive.

The story is told that Augustine spent fifteen years working on his great treatise *On the Trinity*. Shortly after completing it, he was walking along the coast when he came upon a small boy who was filling a bucket with seawater and pouring it into a large hole in the sand. “Why are you doing that?” Augustine asked. “I am going to pour the sea into the hole,” the boy replied, in complete seriousness. “My dear boy,” Augustine said, “what an impossible thing to try to do. The sea is far too vast and your hole is far too small.” And as he walked on, Augustine realized with humility: that is exactly what he had been doing for fifteen years.

There are limits to what we can know.

But the Trinity is not merely a puzzle. It is a gift — a gift that causes wonder. One of the most important things to faith is the capacity for wonder: at the sky, at flowers, at creation, at other people. And one of the great consequences of failing to live in mystery is that we no longer see the Christian life as an adventure. We begin to see it as a duty — a chore, a list of dos and don’ts, a management program. We lose the sense that we are caught up in something far larger than ourselves.

Consider Communion. We don't come to the table because we have fully explained what happens there. We come because there is something happening there that exceeds explanation — and we experience it. The same is true of the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and the hope of heaven. These are not puzzles to be solved but mysteries to be inhabited.

Here is as close as we can come: God is the God from whom all things come to be. He is the one God through whom all things are set rightly in order. And he is the God into whom all things are coming to their fitting conclusion and perfection. God is *there* — in the heavens, directing all things toward his end. God is *here* — beside me, walking with me, holding me, laughing with me. And God is *in here* — giving me courage and comfort, insight and conviction, growing in me something more beautiful than any object in the created universe. God there, God here, God in here. That is the mystery, and in all of it, God is one.

Our salvation, our creation, our very substance comes *from* the Father, *through* the Son, *by* the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity in Salvation

We experience God as Father — the one who loves fallen humanity and, in that love, sends his Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. *Thank you, Father, for the gift you give.*

We know God as Son — the one who both embodies and executes the atoning, redemptive plan to save us. *Thank you, Jesus, for dying on the cross.*

We know God as Holy Spirit — the one who applies the benefits of redemption both now and into eternity, who realizes and consummates God's saving work in us. *Thank you, Spirit, for making it real.*

There are not three Gods, but one, who does it all: sends, saves, and completes. The Father, moved with love toward fallen humanity, sends the Son. The Son assumes human nature, suffers, dies, and is raised to redeem humanity. The Holy Spirit provides the means by which recipients of this good news can receive it and walk in it. The Father loves those who have fallen. The Son redeems those who have been loved. The Holy Spirit calls and teaches those who have been redeemed.

Unity and Diversity: The One and the Many

Within the Trinity there is unity, but also irreducible diversity. John Zizioulas describes the Trinity as “a reality of communion in which each particular is affirmed as unique and

irreplaceable by the others.” The persons of the Trinity delight in the *otherness* of one another. There is no extinction of personhood within the Godhead — and the consequence of this, for us, is significant. Colin Gunton writes: “If persons are, like the persons of the Trinity and by virtue of their creation in the image of the triune God, concrete and particular, then their particularity too is central to their being. It is not an unfortunate accident but our glory that we are other: each unique and different.”

Your uniqueness is not a problem to be ironed out. It is part of the image you bear.

Mutual Indwelling

Edwin Hui describes the mutual indwelling of the Trinity this way: “The three persons of the Trinity [are] ‘being in one another’ — drawn to the other, contained in the other, interpenetrating each other by drawing life from and pouring life to each other — as the communion of love.”

And the astonishing promise of the gospel is that this mutual indwelling reaches into our own salvation. Paul writes in Galatians 2:20:

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

To be a believer in Christ is to have the glorified Christ living in actual presence, possession, and power within you.

Sadhu Sundar Singh offers a powerful image of what this looks like. “The blacksmith places iron in a red-hot coal fire. Soon the iron turns red and begins to glow like the coals, so you can truly say that the iron is in the fire and the fire is in the iron. Yet we know that the iron is not the fire and the fire is not the iron. When the iron is glowing, the blacksmith can bend it into any shape he desires, but it still remains iron. Likewise, we still retain our personality when we allow ourselves to be penetrated by Christ.”

Human life as defined by sin is like a bent iron rod. It is the indwelling of God — the fire of God’s Spirit filling the metal from within — that slowly conforms it to the shape of God’s purposes and will.

Sending

The Trinitarian nature of God is also a nature of *sending*. Jürgen Moltmann describes the Trinitarian circle not as a closed circle — a symbol of isolation — but as an open circle, making itself open to humanity, to the world, and to time.

This sending nature of God is seen in the Father who sends the Son, in the Father and Son who send the Spirit, and in the Father, Son, and Spirit who send the church into the world. As Paul Stevens writes, “Mission is the sending of God from first to last... Mission is God’s own going forth — truly an *ekstasis* of God. He is Sender, Sent, and Sending.” The mission of the church, Stevens continues, is “not a human activity undertaken out of obligation to the Great Commission or even simple gratitude. It is God’s own mission in which we have been included. It is what God is doing to bless all the nations through the resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit. Mission work itself is not motivated by the need of the world but by the sending God who calls and empowers. It is for his mission and in his mission that the whole people of God gains an apostolic — a sent-out — status.”

The Image We Are Called to Reflect

This, then, is the image of God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — characterized by:

Rationality. Love. Self-sacrifice. Mystery. Unity and diversity. Mutual indwelling. And sending.

The extraordinary claim of Genesis 1 is that this is the image humanity was made to bear. And it shapes everything — our families, our church, and our understanding of what sin has done to us.

Sin is a distortion, a shattering of that image. To not trust God. To grasp at being God ourselves. To insist on defining good and evil on our own terms. The result? Adam and Eve hide — from God and from each other. The relationships that were meant to reflect the communion of the Trinity fracture and collapse.

The family — husband and wife, parent and child — is meant to be an image of God. The church is meant to be an image of God. Both are called to reflect, in their communal life together, what the Trinity is: relational, loving, self-giving, marked by mystery and wonder, diverse in personhood yet united in purpose, indwelling one another and sent into the world.

This is a high calling. But it is not a burden we carry alone. It is a life we are invited into — from the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit.