

The Let Us — Trinity

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 account is echoed again in Genesis 5:1–2:

“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.’”

Have you ever wondered what it means when the Bible says, “Let *us* make man in *our* image”? How would you describe that? What does it mean to be made in the image of God?

The answer is hidden in the *us*-ness of the passage. Before we can understand what it means to be made in the image of God, we need first to understand what that image actually is.

The Image of God: The Trinitarian Nature of God

The image of God is this: God is Father, God is Son, God is Holy Spirit. This is the Trinitarian nature of God — not a collection of gods, and not a solitary individual, but a communion, a unity of persons in relation. As Colin Gunton writes, the very uniqueness of God and the essence of His being is relational fellowship within Himself (*The One, the Three and the Many*, 215).

When one is drawn toward God, they find 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).

The communal, relational nature of God is how God is known. This Trinitarian nature is therefore a major part of what it means to be created in the image of God. God creates in His image: relational, communal, intimate love.

Relational Personhood

God is relational at His very core. “God is love” only makes sense within a relationship. You see this at the moment of creation itself. What did God say when He was about to make man? “Let *us* make man in *our* image.” The plural is not accidental. It reveals something essential about who God is.

Relationship and community, then, are not optional features of human existence — they are central to what we are. It is worth understanding, and it is worth pursuing.

It is worth pausing here on what the church actually is. The church is not primarily where we are held *accountable*. The church is where we are in *community*. And community takes real effort. It requires respect, the courage to make peace, mutual deference, and mutual submission. Paul puts it plainly in Galatians 5:13–14:

“*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.’*”

Practically, this means practicing healthy relationships — kindness, forgiveness, peacemaking, service. It means developing deep friendships through Sunday school, meeting during the week, small groups. It means investing in healthy families. If we do this, it will change and grow this community.

Love

At the core of the Trinitarian relational presence of God is a 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 the very love that is reciprocated within the eternal communion of the Holy Trinity (T. F. Torrance).

Self-Sacrifice

The nature of God’s love is one of self-sacrifice and giving. Self-surrender, then, is at the very heart of God, and at the very heart of all His attitudes and actions (E. Stanley Jones, *Victory Through Surrender*).

C. S. Lewis describes this self-giving nature of God with characteristic power:

“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 great mountain-top experiences of the spiritual life. Do you ever wonder why we always have to come off the mountain? Perhaps we are given those peaks precisely so that we have the capacity to descend. Perhaps the real life is not on the summits at all, but in the descent.

I say this with reference to Jesus. His life is marked by descent — from heaven, to humanity, to the grave. And what does that descent to the grave reveal?

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

Christ’s descent, His surrender, is not incidental. It is etched into the heart of the triune God. Revelation 13:8 speaks of “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.” The sacrificial surrender of Jesus is not merely something He did — it reveals who He is, and who God is.

Likewise, suffering in the way of surrender — passion, in the deepest sense of that word — is part of what it means to share in God’s heart. This is most evident in the surrender of our lives to God.

Think of the way we say to a guest, “Make yourself at home.” What do we actually mean by that? If they repainted a room, rearranged the furniture, or remodeled the kitchen, we would be horrified. What we really mean is: *you’re a guest here*. We do the same thing to Jesus. We invite Him to make Himself at home, but we treat Him as a visitor. Jesus is not a guest. He is to be the owner.

Mystery

The Trinitarian nature of God is a mystery. There is much we cannot know, but the mystery itself is a gift — it cultivates wonder, awe, and thoughtful reflection. Paul, writing about marriage in Ephesians 5, arrives at this astonishing transition in verses 31–32:

“*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.*”

How can God be three in one? Many metaphors have been offered over the centuries — water in its three states, a tree with root and trunk and branches, a candle’s wax and wick and flame, an egg, an apple. None of them fully holds. Every metaphor eventually breaks down, because the Trinity is not a puzzle waiting to be solved. It is a reality waiting to be wondered at.

Augustine spent fifteen years writing his great treatise on the Trinity. Shortly after he completed it, the story goes, he was walking along the coast when he came upon a boy who was repeatedly filling a small bucket with seawater and pouring it into a large hole he had dug in the sand. “Why are you doing that?” Augustine asked. “I am going to pour the sea into the hole,” the boy replied in all 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, he realized — that is exactly what he had been doing. There are limits to what we can know.

One of the consequences of failing to live within mystery is that we no longer experience the Christian life as an adventure. We begin to see it as a duty, a chore, a list of dos and don’ts. But wonder changes everything.

Here is as close as we can come to a description of the mystery: God is the God from whom all things come to be. He is the one God through whom all things are put rightly in order. He is the one God into whom all things are coming to their fitting conclusion and perfection. That is the Trinity.

God is everywhere — there in the heavens, directing all things toward His end, sending all things upon us. God is here, next to me, walking beside me, holding me at times, laughing with me at times, laughing at me at times. And God is here, in me, giving me courage and comfort, giving insight and conviction, growing in me a creation more beautiful than anything else in the created universe. God there. God here. God in here.

A God who sends. A God who is sent. A God who resides in power. The kingdom of heaven that comes, and is near, and is within. In all things, God is one. Our salvation, our creation, our very substance comes *from* the Father, *through* the Son, *by* the Holy Spirit.

Trinity in Salvation

We experience God as the Father, who gives us salvation by offering to send His Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. And we say: *Thank you, Father, for the gift you give.*

We know God revealed as the Son, who both embodies and executes the atoning, redemptive plan to save us. And we say: *Thank you, Jesus, for dying on the cross.*

And we know God revealed as the Holy Spirit, who applies the benefits of redemption both now and into all of eternity — the one by whom God’s saving work is realized and consummated.

There are not three Gods, but one, who does it all: sends, saves, and completes. The Father is moved with love toward fallen humanity to send the Son. The Son assumes human nature, suffers, dies, and is resurrected to redeem humanity. The Holy Spirit provides the means by which the recipients of this good news can receive it and live 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 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 reality of this communion is a delighting in the *otherness* of each member. There is no extinction of personhood within the Trinity. And because God delights in the otherness of the persons within Himself, God delights in the otherness of persons He has made. 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.”

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.”

The remarkable promise is that this mutual indwelling is extended 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.

Sadhu Sundar Singh offers a powerful image for what this mutual indwelling 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 that you can truly say 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.”

This image describes how we are changed. Human life as distorted by sin is like an iron rod that has been bent. It is from the indwelling of God — the fire of God’s Spirit — that the metal is slowly filled with that fire and moved into the shape of God’s purposes and will.

Sending

The very Trinitarian nature of God is one of sending. Jürgen Moltmann describes the Trinitarian circle not as a closed circle — which is a symbol of isolation — but as an open circle, open to humanity, open to the world, and open 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.” Stevens continues: the mission of the church “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 — sent-out — status.”

The Image in Us: Family and Church

This, then, is the image of God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — and it is marked by these qualities: relationality, love, self-sacrifice, mystery, unity and diversity, mutual indwelling, and sending.

Now consider: what is the family supposed to look like? The same. Relational, loving, self-giving, marked by appropriate mystery and wonder, united yet diverse, deeply interpersonal, and oriented outward in sending. Sin is a distortion — a shattering — of this image. Not to trust God, to attempt to be as God, to define our own good and evil, to hide from God and from each other as Adam and Eve hid in the garden: these are the fracture lines along which the image breaks.

And what is the church supposed to look like? The same image, again: relational, loving, self-giving, wonder-filled, unified in diversity, mutually indwelling one another by the Spirit, and sent into the world.

The Trinity is not merely a doctrine to be affirmed. It is the shape of the life we are called to live — in our families, in this congregation, and in the world. We were made in this image. By grace, we are being restored to it.