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RECLAIMING ADOPTION

Missional Living Through the Rediscovery of Abba Father

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To my son Daniel, who through his three years of unrelenting suffering and his untimely death taught me not merely how to care for the weak and vulnerable, but how to care for others in and through my own weakness. Together, my son Daniel and I eagerly await our adoption as sons, that is, the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23).
-Dan Cruver

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"Jesus protects the fatherless and the widow. And Jesus isn't dead anymore. The Spirit of Christ is afoot in the churches of the Lord Jesus all over the world, pulling us into Jesus' mission for the orphan, the stranger, the marginalized. This book is part of that pull. The authors writing here are some of the most fearless thinkers and activists in the Christian orphan care movement. Read. Be empowered. And then join Jesus for the orphans of the world."

Russell D. Moore, Author of *Adopted for Life*

"There is no greater need in our day than theological clarity. We live in a pragmatic, hype-driven, emotionally manipulated spiritual landscape. We need the ancient wisdom of the Bible, not another business book or glory story from some cool church. Dan has brought us near to the heart of God, who by His Spirit cries out in our hearts, 'Abba, Father.' As you read this book, you will sense the need to embrace your own acceptance as God's adopted child."

Darrin Patrick, Author of *Church Planter*

"*Reclaiming Adoption* captures the heart and soul of what it means to be a child of God, walk as the feet of Jesus on this earth, and live for eternity with our loving Savior. Make no mistake, this isn't simply a book on adoption. It's about the reason we were created and how we are to spend the rest of our days loving others."

Tom Davis, Author of *Fields of the Fatherless*

"*Reclaiming Adoption* is the best kind of theological work: it sings and it sends! As I read, I wanted to praise the Triune God for his great love. Then I felt the urgency of the call to live that love among the world's orphans. Completely accessible, *Reclaiming Adoption* is thoroughly grounded in Scripture and flows from the great heart of the Church's

historic understanding of the Word. The authors have uncovered new depths and fresh passion in expressing how adoption clarifies the meaning of our union with Christ. *Reclaiming Adoption* expands our vision to the fuller glory of the whole narrative of Christ's work. Thus, this book can transform the worship, education, and mission of any church bold enough to explore its truth."

Gerrit Dawson, Author of *Called by a New Name*

"A stirring call to be involved in the ministry of adoption for Jesus' sake. Gospel-centered. Prophetic. Practical. *Reclaiming Adoption* addresses an issue that has transformed our church as much as any other."

J.D. Greear, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham, NC

"Many Christians today would not invest much time toward thinking about adopting an orphan. It is not unrelated that the doctrine of adoption is sadly one of the most overlooked doctrines amongst Christians today. It is into this void that *Reclaiming Adoption* speaks so powerfully and reclaims the central place that adoption must take in the thinking of any child of God. *Reclaiming Adoption* is a must read; it will tell your head who you are and move your heart to live in response."

Steve Chong, Director, Rice movement, Sydney, Australia

"I am grateful for the work that Dan has done to lift our eyes to the grand story of adoption. With spiritual insight and effective teaching, *Reclaiming Adoption* will help believers better understand our place with Christ and work in His kingdom."

Ed Stetzer, President, LifeWay Research

"I can't recall ever hearing about, much less reading, a book like this before. Simply put, this remarkable volume fills a much-needed gap in our understanding of what the Bible says both about God's adoption of us and our adoption of others. I highly recommend it."

Sam Storms, Author of *The Singing God: Discover the Joy of Being Enjoyed by God*

"If you want your church to be a church for the great commission and for the orphan, reading *Reclaiming Adoption* is where you need to start."

Matt Carter, Lead Pastor, The Austin Stone Community Church

"The wonderful good news of our adoption by God is such an important truth for Christians today. Too many of us live as slaves, distanced from God because we do not embrace him as our loving Father. As a result our obedience is reduced to mere duty instead of being animated by joy. How can we put this right? This book is a great place to start. Enriching theology and missional application are beautifully interwoven. The result is a book that will warm your heart and might just change your life."

Tim Chester, Author of *You Can Change* and *Total Church*

"*Reclaiming Adoption* consistently reminds the evangelical orphan care movement that it always must be the love of Christ that compels us. Any lesser motivation will ultimately run dry. It is the gospel alone that can carry us forward to 'defend the fatherless' through adoption, foster care, and orphan care across the globe."

Jedd Medefind, President, Christian Alliance for Orphans

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One

ADOPTION OF THE PRODIGALS

Dan Cruver

One of my dreams is that when Christians hear the word *adoption*, they will think first about their adoption by God. I am far from alone in this dream. I share it with the co-authors of this book, with those who have attended *Together for Adoption* conferences, and with innumerable other Christians, beginning with the Apostle Paul.

The word *adoption* is rooted in an ancient Greco-Roman legal practice, and until Paul everyone understood it as referring to human adoption, what we might also call *horizontal* adoption. But Paul gave the concept a theological underpinning by grounding it in *vertical* adoption—God's adoption of sinners. Paul knew something that much of the Church today seems unaware of—if we learn to first think vertically about adoption, and only then horizontally, we will enjoy deeper communion with the triune God *and* experience greater missional engagement with the pain and suffering

of this world. That's what this book is about. We believe:

- the doctrine of adoption has been widely neglected within the Church historically;
- it remains neglected within much of the evangelical church today;
- a proper theological grounding of horizontal adoption *within* vertical adoption has profound implications for our understanding of both aspects, and therefore;
- to the extent we can recapture theological balance regarding adoption, the Church will be transformed and our witness to the world will be radically redefined.

Why is the theology of adoption so neglected? It's a matter of where Christians have put their attention. It is generally believed that the Church has created thousands of creeds and confessions, with more than 150 being created during the Reformation period alone. Yet in scouring almost 1,900 years of Church history, Philip Schaff found only six creeds that contain a section on theological adoption.

To be fair, there are some good reasons for this. The early Church was primarily concerned with defining and defending the doctrines of Christ and the Trinity. Similarly, the Reformation and post-Reformation Church focused largely on defending the doctrine of justification. We can be eternally glad and grateful these battles were resolutely fought and won. At the same time, the tight focus on a relatively small number of doctrines

unintentionally prevented the Church from developing thorough scriptural teaching on vertical adoption.

This is largely why Christians tend to interpret the word *adoption* first (and often only) in terms of adopting children. This is also why vertical adoption is not on the Christian community's radar to the extent it ought to be; why God's Fatherhood and our status as his beloved children are not a regular part of our vocabulary; and why the Church's missional engagement in the world is not informed and shaped—to the extent it can and should be—by Scripture's teaching on our adoption by God. Our prayer is that this book will contribute to changing all that, for God's glory and our good.

Our Prodigal Race

Few stories have the ability to pierce us as deeply as Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son from Luke 15:11-32 (I suggest you read the passage now unless you are already very familiar with it). In recent years, Tim Keller's teaching on this parable has served the Church well by rightly focusing our attention on the father and his relationship, not merely with the younger son, but also with the older son.[1] As Jesus makes clear at the start, this parable is about both sons, and both are estranged from their father.

The younger son manifests his estrangement by breaking the rules, and the older son manifests his by keeping them. The older son may have been "on mission" with the father *externally*—doing what he was "supposed" to do—but he certainly wasn't on mission with him *internally*. His heart was not aligned

missionally with the heart of the father. Once it became clear to him that the father dealt with his sons according to grace and not according to merit, his emotional capital and missional commitment evaporated. No longer was he capable of "serving" the father. Nor did he have any interest in aligning himself with the father's agenda of welcoming home lost sons. Thus, *both* sons are prodigals, neither one living in loving communion with the father.

Deep underneath the differing externals of these two sons' behaviors is the fact that both were "sons of disobedience" and "children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:2-3). But the beauty and wonder of the Parable of the Prodigal Son(s) is that it puts the father's love on display—a love that embraces the younger son with uninhibited joy (Luke 15:20) and goes out to entreat the older to come join the celebration (v. 28). In both cases, the father comes to the rebels to bring them into *his* joy, his *home*. This father loves prodigals.

We are the prodigals whom Jesus, the true and eternal Son, came to bring home. Some of us are more like the younger brother, and some the older. Look closely enough, however, and most of us from time to time can resemble either one.

All of us were created in the image of God so that we could participate in the communion of love between the Father and the Son (as we will explore at various points in this book), but we were cut off from that communion because of our sin and rebellion. We became an entire prodigal race, sons of disobedience and children of wrath. As a result, all of us have what C.S. Lewis calls a "longing

to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always only seen from the outside."[2]

The door that seems so impenetrable is the eternal communion of love between the Father and the Son. The story of the Bible is that God the Father sent his only true and eternal Son on a mission, and that mission was to bring many wayward and rebellious sons home to glory (Hebrews 2:10). *That* is the Story behind the story of the Prodigal Sons. That is the only story that gives our stories any meaning or significance.

The Story of Adoption

If we consider the Parable of the Prodigal Sons within the larger context of Scripture, we find that it is really the story of adoption—the adoption of humanity as a prodigal race (Genesis 3:6). Maybe you are thinking, *Jesus' parable in Luke 15 can't be about adoption. The two brothers were already the father's sons; they were just estranged. Adoption is for orphans, not sons.*

That would be a reasonable response, but a misguided one, because the logic starts from human adoption. It takes adoption as we understand it horizontally and tries to force the definition of vertical adoption into the same mold. Yes, the Apostle Paul borrowed the term *adoption* from the Greco-Roman horizontal practice, but he altered and expanded the word, filling it with rich redemptive-historical meaning. When Paul says *adoption*, he does *not* mean it the same way we usually do. We should not try to export the attributes

of human adoption to divine adoption, because that is not what Paul was intending to communicate. Instead, we should import into our view of human adoption Scripture's teaching that those who are outside the Father are without hope or home. Let us allow Scripture to remold our concept of adoption, so we can take on a God-centered view rather than a man-centered one.

Paul is the only writer in Scripture to employ the term *adoption*, and he does so in four separate passages.[3] Looking at each passage in turn transports us to four crucial events in the grand story of redemption. Together, these events reveal the adoption of sinners to be God's ultimate purpose. They also have the power to completely overhaul our understanding of adoption.

Before Time: Ephesians 1:4-5 In this passage, Paul states that God the Father "chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ." Thus, we see that God's first work of adoption happened even before he created the universe. God did this, Paul emphasizes, "in love." Before the first molecule was formed, God marked us out with incomparable care—he predestined us—for the great privilege of being his beloved children through adoption. Adoption was not a divine afterthought. It was in God's triune mind and heart before the first tick of human history's clock. Adoption therefore predates the universe itself. Only God and his triune love are "bigger" than adoption.

Israel: Romans 9:4 Here, Paul identifies adoption as

one of the great privileges Israel enjoyed as God's chosen people: "They are Israelites, and to them belong *the adoption*, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises." Scholars believe that Israel received adoption—that is, officially became God's *corporate* son—when God declared them a nation at Mt. Sinai, three months *after* he delivered them from Egypt. Thus, God redeemed them *before* he adopted them. He redeemed them *in order* to adopt them.

Of course, Israel repeatedly failed in its sonship by rejecting the Father's love, replaying the story of Adam's rebellion. God's mission to bring many wayward and rebellious sons home to glory seemed doomed. Yet through Israel, God's corporate son through adoption, the eternal and perfect Son would be sent to redeem humanity, thereby preserving God's perfect plan.

Jesus: Galatians 4:4-6 "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.*" Here, Paul identifies adoption as the grand purpose or objective of redemption, and he could not have written it more clearly: "…*so that* we might receive adoption"! Once again, adoption shows up at a watershed moment within the unfolding story of redemption. Just as God redeemed Israel in order that he might adopt them, so also has God redeemed us in order that he might adopt us! Redemption is not the end of God's work. Adoption as sons is.

New Heavens & New Earth: Romans 8:15,22-23 Finally, adoption is central to the *end* of redemption's

story. In verse 23, Paul writes, "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for *adoption as sons*, the redemption of our bodies." Paul identifies the glorification of our bodies as a final outward manifestation of our adoption. When the story of redemption reaches its intended goal, the Bible calls it "adoption." On that climactic day the heavens and the earth will be transformed into our Father's house. The renewed earth will become the place where we forever enjoy our Father's love as his sons and daughters. Paul's use of adoption in Romans 8 teaches us that missional living is not directionless living. Missional Christians daily fix their eyes on the climax of God's work of adoption—God's renewed heavens and earth.

So we see that Paul teaches that God does not merely redeem us—through adoption he brings us into the warmth, love, and gladness of his own family. Redemption was never intended to be God's "be-all and end-all" work of grace. God redeemed us *in his Son* so that he might love us and delight in us even as he loves and delights in his eternal Son. As we shall see, adoption is God's act of making room within his triune love for prodigals who are without hope, and providing them with homes in this world and the world to come. This is the story of adoption.

Now it is easier to see why the Parable of the Prodigal Sons is truly about adoption. From God's perspective, adoption is not essentially about orphans at all. It is essentially about estrangement. Adoption is about God taking into his home those who have rebelled

against him. All humanity is naturally estranged from God. We are all rebels, all disobedient sons, for we are all made in his image and created to worship him, yet we have rejected him—as did Adam, as did Israel. Adoption is about the reconciliation of the rebellious. Our confusion comes when we look at human adoption and end up focusing on the fact that a child needs parents. God focuses on the fact that a lost person needs saving.

As we shall see later in this book, the *ultimate* purpose of human adoption by Christians, therefore, is not to give orphans parents, as important as that is. It is to place them in a Christian home that they might be positioned to receive the gospel, so that within that family, the world might witness a representation of God taking in and genuinely loving the helpless, the hopeless, and the despised.

Adoption and Mission

Today, God seems to be awakening his people to the importance of Scripture's teaching on this subject. The authors of this book are convinced that such an awakening will strengthen the Church's involvement in God's mission in the world. When Christians rediscover God's extravagant love for and delight in them, they begin to live differently. They begin to live missionally. Our goal here is not to define or explain the mission of God in any detail. We want to further equip you for sustained, joyful engagement and participation *in* that mission. These first four chapters, therefore, explore the interwoven stories behind God's work of adoption in the world and its implications for Christian mission. The

chapters by Scotty Smith, Rick Phillips, Jason Kovacs, and John Piper then focus on various implications of adoption for missional living.

To live missionally means to live each waking moment in light of the gospel so that it increasingly affects every part of our lives for the glory of God's grace in our fallen world. Our hope for this book is that Scripture's teaching on adoption will better equip you to live daily in the good news of the gospel.

As believers, particularly in the West, it is easy for us to look at the decline of Christianity's cultural influence, the spread of a secular mindset, a volatile political climate globally, and our own internal struggles with sin, and conclude that the sky is falling. It's easy for us to look at the world and ourselves through the narrow lens of what's wrong with both, rather than through the wide-angle lens of what God has done, is doing, and will do in the world for his glory and our good. The narrow lens hinders Christian mission. The wide-angle mobilizes and serves it.

Making sure that we are looking at our world and ourselves through the proper lens is critical for Christian mission. I would contend that adoption is the proper lens through which to view the entire story of redemption.

Few things hinder action within the Christian life more than being unsure of God's love for us personally. Returning for a moment to the story of the prodigals, in *Children of the Living God*, Sinclair Ferguson sheds a particular kind of light on the prodigal son who left home. As he was returning to his father, the prodigal planned to say that he was no longer worthy to be called a son, which

was certainly true. Convinced that, in the depth of his rebellion and rejection of the father, he had lost all hope of receiving the father's love, he intended to offer himself as a slave, hoping merely to survive. Little does the prodigal know, however, that his father eagerly awaits his return.

Ferguson sees something in the prodigal's thinking that parallels how we as Christians often think of God and his fatherly love for us:

> Jesus was underlining the fact that—despite assumptions to the contrary—the reality of the love of God for us is often the last thing in the world to dawn upon us. As we fix our eyes upon ourselves, our past failures, our present guilt, it seems impossible to us that the Father could love us. Many Christians go through much of their life with the prodigal's suspicion. Their concentration is upon their sin and failure; all their thoughts are introspective.[5]

When the prodigal son says, "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants'" (Luke 15:18-19), he is thinking in terms of wages earned rather than extravagant love and grace received. It's as if he is thinking, "I ended up in the far country by squandering my father's wealth, so maybe I can *earn* my way back into his house."

When we as believers relate to God the Father as this prodigal son relates to his father, we are slow to return to

God after we sin. We don't anticipate—let alone expect—his fatherly embrace. And when we do return to him, we think of him primarily as our master and not our Father. As a result, real Christian joy is absent, passionate Christian living is lacking, and Christian mission is severely hindered.

Christians who doubt God's love for them will not mobilize for mission. Unless we know the Father delights in us even as he delights in Jesus, we will lack the emotional capital necessary to resist complacency and actively engage in missional living. The only people who can truly turn their eyes outward in mission are those who knowingly live within and enjoy the loving gaze of their heavenly Father.

I believe that a biblical understanding of God's Fatherhood will cause us to be better able to look outside ourselves in service to others. If we are not confident of his love, our eyes will turn inward, and our primary concerns will be *our* needs, *our* lack, *our* disappointment, rather than the needs of those around us. As a result, we'll be afraid to take risks or do the hard things even if they are necessary. Or we will do the externals of missional living as an attempt to earn God's acceptance or to keep him and our fellow-Christians off our backs. We will relate to him as if we are wage-earners rather than as his dearly beloved children, the ones in whom he delights.

The logic of wage-earning does not flow out of the of the gospel of grace. The gospel is joyful news because it speaks to us of the Father's love that has come to us freely in Jesus Christ.

Two

ADOPTION AND THE TRINITY

Dan Cruver

The Story behind both the Parable of the Prodigal Sons and our story of adoption is the story of the triune[4] God's mission in history to share his Trinitarian love with us as his adopted sons. Given that we live between the times—between our initial entrance into God's family (Galatians 4:4-5) and the consummation of our adoption at the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23)—we still battle daily with prodigal tendencies. Hardly a day goes by that we are not tempted merely to go on "mission" with the Father externally, doing what we are "supposed" to do, without being on mission with him internally. Like the prodigal sons in Luke 15, we are daily tempted to exchange the *love* of the Father for the *things* of the Father.

Our hearts all too often, as Tim Keller writes, long for "a successful career, love, material possessions, even family,"[6] instead of God. This is idolatry. An idol, Keller continues, "is anything more important to you than God,

anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give."[7] But as the elder brother in Luke 15 shows us, our obedience to God can be an idol when it is more important to us than our relationship with God. In other words, we can easily exchange our enjoyment of God internally for our obedience to God externally. Whatever form it takes, our idolatry is therefore a daily threat to Christian faith and action. Although our obedience to God is meant to flow out of our enjoyment of God, living by faith is a daily challenge for us because we enter this world loving the things of the Father rather than the Father himself. Therefore, in order to maintain faithful, long-term engagement in missional living, it is essential that we deepen our understanding and experience of the Trinity, as well as the communion of love that the members of the Trinity enjoy with each other.

We were made *by* and *for* the triune God. Consequently, as Cornelius Plantinga writes, all of us "long for wholeness, for fulfillment, and for the final good that believers call God," whether we realize it or not. But idolatry, Plantinga continues, "taps this vital spiritual force and draws off its energies to objects and processes that drain [us] instead of filling [us]. Accordingly, [we long] not for God but for transcendence, not for joy but only for pleasure—and sometimes for mere escape from pain."[8] This perversion of our longing for God can have its fingerprints all over our hearts as well as our missional engagement in the world. Idolatry is not a respecter of prodigals or of elder

brothers. With unbelievable ease, idolatry infects both religious and irreligious hearts.

This is why the story of our adoption is such good news. One way to look at adoption is to see it as God's work to free us from the insanity and duplicity of our idolatry. Ultimately, adoption gives us the very thing for which we were made—the triune God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As Augustine once prayed, "You made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its place of rest in You."[9] The only alternatives to finding our satisfaction in the triune God are for us to seek our main sense of identity, significance, and rest either in loose living or in what we do religiously (or missionally)—that is, what we do for the poor and marginalized, for those we consider less fortunate than ourselves.

The glory of our adoption by God is that it gives us the only object of affection (God) that provides rest, satisfies the longing heart, and makes the impoverished unimaginably rich, even in our soul's darkest nights. In other words, adoption gives our restless and fearful hearts the all-satisfying love of the triune God.

In grace *God* has moved outward in mission to bring us into his communion of love forever. You may not have thought about it this way, but God's missional movement into the world *is* his adoptive plan at work. As we enjoy and feed our souls upon the life-giving and perspective-altering truth of our adoption in Christ, we are empowered to do battle daily with our own heart-idolatry. How so, you ask?

The Trinity: Preexistent Authors of Adoption

> 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!" (Galatians 4:4-6)

By referring to all three Persons of the Trinity, Galatians 4:4-6 opens a window for us into the core of ultimate reality. Here we see the Son being sent into the world and the Spirit being sent into our hearts. Neither the Son nor the Spirit are created beings; they existed as eternal members of the Trinity prior to their sending. What stands behind the mission of God, therefore, and what moves it forward in the world, is that essential reality which underlies everything: the communion of love that is the Holy Trinity.

There was never a moment when the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit did not exist. There was never an *eternity* when they did not exist—eternity past, eternity present, and eternity future did not, cannot, and will not exist without them. Not only did all three Persons of the Trinity preexist the sending of the Son and the Spirit, they preexist and transcend time itself. They are, after all, the very foundation of the universe and the intelligent reason for its existence. Without them, nothing else ever could or would exist. God's perfectly enjoyed and

unbroken communion of love existed forever before anything was made!

So, as wonderful as the story of our adoption is, it is the Story of the Trinity behind it that gives God's work of adoption its ultimate meaning, beauty, and significance. As John Piper has said, "Adoption is bigger than the universe." How is that true? Because the eternal communion of our triune God is behind, beneath, beside, and above the universe and is the ultimate reason and cause for our adoption. Three quotations from George MacDonald shed light on the significance of this glorious reality:

> The secret of the whole story of humanity is the love between the Father and the Son. That is at the root of it all. Upon the love between the Son and the Father hangs the whole universe.[10]

> The love of God is the creating and redeeming, the forming and satisfying power of the universe . . . It is the safety of the great whole. It is the home-atmosphere of all life.[11]

> The whole of the universe was nothing to Jesus without his Father. The day will come when the whole universe will be nothing to us without the Father, but with the Father an endless glory of delight.[12]

Before the beginning[13] was the eternal communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and in the beginning,

this triune God—the one true God, eternally existing in three equally divine Persons in communion—created the heavens and the earth. That is the Story behind the story of creation, the story of adoption, and the story of God's gracious mission in the world.

The Trinity: A Necessarily Triune Author

We should not be able to talk about adoption without also talking about this triune God's mission. Adoption is ultimately about relationship, and the relationship that transcends and is the foundation of all others is the relationship(s) that the Persons of the Trinity have eternally enjoyed with each other. Our God has always been and always will be a communion of Persons. Reciprocal love has flowed and will forever flow between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If that reciprocal love ceased for even a moment, God would cease to be God and the gospel would immediately turn into unimaginably bad news for all of creation.

We naturally think of beings as individual, not triune. But Scripture reveals God to be three Persons, not one. Theologians have wrestled with this concept for centuries.[14] Richard of St. Victor, a Scottish theologian of the 12th century, wrote an important philosophical work on the Trinity titled *De Trinitate* (or *On the Trinity*). He combined the teaching found in two passages of Scripture to reach a compelling conclusion. 1) First John 4:8 tells us that God is love. 2) First Corinthians 13 tells us that love never turns in upon itself, but always turns

out upon other persons. 3) Therefore, God could not possibly be love if he were only one person.

A god who existed in all eternity past as one person would be a god eternally turned in upon himself. Such a being could not be love because by its nature love turns outward.

Scripture teaches that God is a communion of Persons and has never been a solitary individual. The one triune God has always enjoyed perfect loving communion and joy as three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For all of eternity the Father has loved the Son, the Son has loved the Father, and the Spirit has been the personal bond of that communion. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have eternally been and will forever be a communion of Persons.

Think of it this way: God was eternally a closed circle of loving communion (as in an exclusive circle), perfectly satisfied and happy in his triune Being. Even during Jesus' days on earth as the incarnate Son of God, he clearly enjoyed a uniquely close relationship with the Father that everyone else was outside of. In this, we see something of the miraculous and gracious nature of redemption. This fact alone, as theologian Kevin Vanhoozer writes, hints at the striking reality of the gospel which "concerns the triune God's self-communication for the purpose of enlarging the circle of communion. The gospel proclaims a new possibility, namely, that of becoming a 'communicant' in the life of God."[15]

The gospel *begins* with the incomparable good news that when the eternally existing God "predestined us for

adoption through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:5), God was an impenetrable closed circle of loving communion. No one could get in and no one wanted to get out. Amazingly, God made the pre-temporal decision to adopt us when all that existed was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (as if somehow—God forbid! —the Trinity was at a relational disadvantage before that decision was made). Not only did God choose to adopt us before the creation of man but he did so *within* the eternal love ever flowing between the Father and the Son and *within* the all-satisfying communion of the Holy Spirit who is the eternal personal bond of the Father/Son's love (2 Corinthians 13:14). When God made the pre-temporal decision to adopt us, he only knew an infinite relational advantage. Improving upon the communion of love which the triune God eternally enjoyed was an absolute impossibility. It *really* doesn't get better than that. If it could, God would not have been God. But the Trinitarian relationships, which each member enjoyed, were *infinitely beyond the smallest possible degree of improvement*.

This is the astonishing reality with which the gospel's good news begins. As Scottish theologian T.F. Torrance has written, "In his outgoing Love God the Father wills us to coexist appropriately with him as his dear children, and through the presence of his Spirit to share in the Communion of his own eternal Life and Love."[16] What Torrance is saying here can seem too good to be true. But, according to the gospel, it is truer than the air we breathe, truer than gravity, truer than time.

The good news of the gospel is that God's gracious

provision of adoption, irrespective of our grievous demerit, is the activity by which he enlarges the circle of communion that has eternally existed between the three Persons of the Trinity! The joyful news of the gospel is that God the Father brings us to share in the loving communion that he forever enjoys with his eternal and natural Son *through the work* of his eternal and natural Son in our place and in our stead. Through adoption God graciously brings us to participate in the reciprocal love that ever flows between the Father and his Son. Not only is this the very heart of adoption; it is also the very heart of the gospel.

The Trinity: Glad in Community and Glad to Create Community

If God did not need to create man, why did he do it? As we have seen, the creation of man was the free, kind, gracious, intentional overflow of the triune God's joy and love in order to increase the circle of communion and make his glory known. Theologian Douglas Kelly writes, "God sovereignly created the world and placed mankind, his image-bearers, in it, so that they might know him in a community of love, shared life, and obedience."[17] God created us so that we might share in the Trinity's communion to the praise of the glory of his triune grace—for no other reason than that he wanted us to share in it (Ephesians 1:6).

Consider how the creation of mankind is different from that of everything else. Sometime after God's pre-temporal decision to adopt us (Ephesians 1:5), he created the heavens and the earth and, on the sixth day of creation,

he made man in his own image (Genesis 1:1, 26-27). The creation week reached its climax when God formed the first man, Adam, from the dust of the ground. God had said, "Let there be" each day of the creation week, but when he created man, he did not say, "Let there be." Instead, God said, "Let us make man in our own image" (Genesis 1:26). When he created man, God's *modus operandi* changed. Something very personal happened when he formed man from the dust of the ground.

Adam and Eve, in contrast to all else God had created, were made in the image of the triune God, in the image of the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This means man was not created as a solitary being. Because God is a communion of eternal Persons, and we were made in his triune image, it is clear that we were created to live in communion with other persons—with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and with other human beings. This is central to what it means to be created in the image of God and therefore central to what it means to be on mission with God.[18]

A Theology of Discomfort in a Community of Joy

It is crucial at this point that we understand that our participation in the communion of the Trinity will not move us away from the pain and tragedy of our world. Through adoption we *do* participate daily in the mutual knowing of the Father and the Son. But our participation in God's triune love does not negate our participation in the suffering that the mission of God involves.

In his book, *The Monkey and the Fish: Liquid Leadership for Third Culture Leaders,* Dave Gibbons, a leading missional thinker, provides some insight into the relationship between missional living and what he calls a theology of discomfort.

> The soul of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment leans into difficult people and their complexities. It's to be the essence of who we are as Christians. In fact, unity of mind and generosity of spirit in the midst of diversity is the distinguishing mark of true Christian community.
>
> It's a bold, radical endeavor: to love our neighbor. But it's the endeavor God has called us to. It's where the gospel becomes real. It really speaks to the power of Jesus if we can work through our discomfort and overcome the barriers we too easily let divide us.
>
> This concept, this theology of discomfort, can be seen throughout the Scriptures, both in the Old and New Testaments. So much so it makes me realize how often we can know what is right but practice what is merely expedient.
>
> Throughout the Old Testament we hear that we are to radically love outsiders, widows, and orphans, to act as a voice for the voiceless, and to be a father to the fatherless. In Corinthians we see God saying he focuses on the weak of this world to speak to the mighty. In John 14, Jesus explains to the disciples that obeying him and loving the "least of these" in society give us deep understanding about him and his ways.[19]

A theology of discomfort and its relationship to missional living is ultimately grounded in the example of the Father sending his Son into the world (Galatians 4:4-6). T.F. Torrance writes:

> Through the *coming* of Jesus Christ into the world as the only begotten Son loved by the Father, the Love which flows eternally between the Father and the Son in the Holy Trinity has moved outward to bear upon us in history and *is made known to us above all in the sacrificial love of Jesus in laying down his life for us* (emphasis mine).[20]

When the eternal Son of God became man, he ushered his infinite, flawless communion with the Father into the depths of our sin, pain, and suffering (see Mark 14:36), not impersonally but in a profoundly personal manner. Jesus' communion with the Father and the Spirit did not detach or distance him from the brokenness of our world. To the contrary, it thrust him into the darkest depths of our fallen world in order that he might heal and deliver us through his death, burial, and resurrection.

At what point did the Father declare, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"? It was just before the Spirit led Jesus "into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew 3:17-4:1). The Trinitarian enjoyment of communion did not lead Jesus away from suffering but into it. According to T.F. Torrance,

> [W]e learn from [Jesus'] incarnate self-revelation

> that God does not will to exist for himself alone and does not wish to be without us, but has in his eternal purpose of love freely created a universe, within which he has placed human beings made after his own image and likeness in order that he may share his love with them and enable them to enjoy his divine fellowship.[21]

No suffering for Jesus, no enjoyment of divine fellowship for us. Jesus' redemptive achievement in our place and on our behalf, then, is why "obeying him and loving the 'least of these' in society give us deep understanding about him and his ways."[22]

In his wonderfully mysterious wisdom God leads us into suffering as we participate in the Trinity's communion of love, but he also makes our experience of that suffering the occasion for our deepest enjoyment of his love. How is this possible? *Because to share in the sufferings of Jesus* (Philippians 3:10) *is to share in the goal of his suffering*: the enjoyment of his divine fellowship. As we participate in the mission of God, our suffering never happens in isolation from Jesus. Believers who are on mission always suffer in union with Jesus.

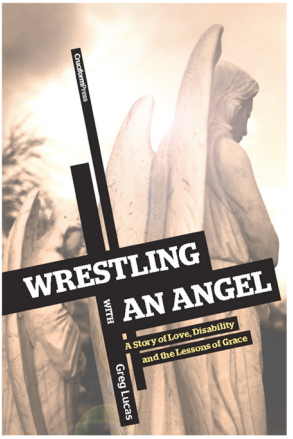
Mission in the Context of Divine Community

Scripture's teaching on the Trinity calls us to find our rest in the Trinity's communion of love, not in the predictable, fleeting stories of our own making. When all we can see are our own self-written, self-directed

stories, shot through with idolatry and brokenness, we will reject the rigors of true missional engagement. But as we daily rediscover that in Christ we are the Father's beloved children, with whom he is well pleased, we can faithfully obey the Father and love the least of these.

> To know this God, who both condescends to share all that we are and makes us share in all that he is in Jesus Christ, is to be lifted up in his Spirit to share in God's own self-knowing and self-loving until we are enabled to apprehend him in some real measure in himself beyond anything that we are capable of in ourselves. It is to be lifted out of ourselves, as it were, into God, until we know him and love him and enjoy him in his eternal Reality as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in such a way that the Trinity enters into the fundamental fabric of our thinking of him and constitutes the basic grammar of our worship and knowledge of the One God...[23]

Let us take Torrance's point one logical step further. As the wonders of our relationship with and in the Trinity, through Christ, come to form the "basic grammar" of our worship and knowledge of God, they will also come to form the basic grammar of our participation in his mission.



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