

The 'Shyness' of God

Self-centeredness is cured by looking deeply within the life of the Trinity.

By John Ortberg | posted 2/16/01 When the son of God was on earth, one argument that broke out often among his followers was "Who's the greatest?" In our day, this line is most closely associated with Muhammad Ali, who once told a flight attendant that he refused to wear a seat belt because he was Superman and "Superman don't need no seat belt." Her response: "Superman don't need no airplane."

This is the original temptation ("You shall be as God"), and it continues to infect both families and small groups, congregations and denominations. Whenever we insist on our own way, take credit for a group's accomplishment, or walk away hurt because we weren't consulted, we're struggling with this form of self-centeredness and self-glorification.

By way of contrast, think about life within the Trinity. How do Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other? Are there lots of arguments over who's the most omniscient, the most omnipresent, or the oldest?

In that absence there is a lesson.

Love's 'Shyness'

Dale Bruner, in an essay on the Trinity, begins with the person of the Holy Spirit:

One of the most surprising discoveries in my own study of the doctrine and experience of the Spirit in the New Testament is what I can only call the shyness of the Spirit ...

What I mean here is not the shyness of timidity (cf. 2 Tim. 1:7) but the shyness of deference, the shyness of a concentrated attention on another; it is not the shyness (which we often experience) of self-centeredness, but the shyness of an other-centeredness.

It is, in short, the shyness of love. Bruner points out the ministry of the Spirit in the Gospel of John, a ministry constantly to draw attention not to himself but to the Son—the Spirit comes in the Son's name, bears witness to the Son, glorifies the Son (cf. John 14:26; 16:13).

The ministry of the Spirit could be pictured, Bruner says, by my drawing a stick figure (representing Jesus) on a blackboard. Then, to express what the Spirit does, I stand behind the blackboard, reach around with one hand, and point with a single finger to the image of Jesus: "Look at him, listen to him, learn from him, follow him, worship him, be devoted to him, serve him, love him, be preoccupied with him."

This is what Bruner calls the shyness of the Holy Spirit.

But when we look at the Son, oddly enough we see that he didn't walk around saying, "I am the greatest." He said, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing" (John 8:54). He said he came not to be served but to serve. He submitted to the Spirit, who Mark tells us "drove him into the wilderness." He told the Father in his climactic struggle, "not my will, but yours be done." Jesus, too, has this same "shyness."

Then there is the Father. Twice in the synoptic Gospels we hear the voice of the Father: once at baptism and again at the Transfiguration.

Both times his words are a variation of this message: This is my priceless Son. I am deeply pleased with him. Listen to him!

It is worth noticing, Bruner writes, that this voice does not say, "Listen to me too, after listening to him; don't forget that I'm here too; don't be taken up with my Son."

Because "God the Father is shy, too. The whole blessed Trinity is shy. Each member of the Trinity points faithfully and selflessly to the other in a gracious circle."

I was raised in some ways to think of God as a proud, almost arrogant being who could get away with his pride because he was God. The doctrine of the Trinity tells me it is not so. God exists as Father, Son, and Spirit in a community of greater humility, servanthood, mutual submission, and delight than you and I can imagine. Three and yet One. Oneness is God's signature.

The whole blessed Trinity is "shy."

Sacrificial Trinity

It's not just in relation to one another but in relation to us that God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—shows forth a stunning humility. For example, what cost does God pay for us to have fellowship with him?

The Son says, "I will leave heaven to come to earth." This is something more than leaving a really nice location (like southern California) for a less desirable one (Chicago). In some way we don't fully understand, the Son freely chooses to leave the perfect oneness he has known for all eternity, to become like human beings in their brokenness and aloneness, to die on a cross, and to experience what Luther called "godforsakenness": "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But it's not just the Son who pays a price. The Father says, "I will offer my Son whom I love beyond words. I will see him be broken and rejected and killed. I, who have known only perfect oneness with him through eternity, will take on the anguish of estrangement. I will know the broken heart of a father."

And the Holy Spirit pays a price as well. The Spirit says, "I will be poured out on earth, and in mostly silent, invisible ways I will offer to lead and guide; never exalting myself, always pointing to the Son." To a large extent, the Spirit's promptings will be ignored or even denied. The Spirit will be quenched on Earth. The Spirit, to use New Testament language, will be grieved. The Spirit had never known grief through all eternity, but he will be grieved now, day after day, century after century. The Spirit says, "This price I will pay so that any who will might enter our fellowship."

Of course, comprehensive information about the inner life of the Trinity is beyond our grasp. Attributing to Trinity human kinds of emotions—like all our language for God—involves analogies at best. Still, there is a biblical sense in which God is anguished by the unbelief of his people, such as the wonderful reversal in Hosea 11: After a wrenching description of Israel's faithlessness and deserved

judgment, the Lord says, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?"

What if the Trinity is true?

Occasionally Christians—even those who have been in the faith for many years—wonder why the doctrine of the Trinity matters all that much. Dallas Willard writes,

The advantage of believing in the Trinity is not that we get an A from God for giving the right answer. Remember, to believe something is to act as if it is so. To believe that two plus two equals four is to behave accordingly when trying to find out how many apples or dollars are in the house. The advantage of believing it is not that we can pass tests in arithmetic; it is that we can deal much more successfully with reality.

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that at the core of reality lies not an isolated self but a community of humble love. So self-serving and disunity are not just wrong but doomed. To paraphrase G.K. Chesterton, this reality is like the law of gravity—we can never break it, we can only break ourselves against it.

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