

## FOURTEEN THE DANCE OF GOD

*In 1938... I was suffering from splitting headaches; each sound hurt me like a blow. . . . I discovered the poem . . . called "Love" [by George Herbert] which I learnt by heart. Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache, I made myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines. I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that Christ himself came down and took possession of me. In my arguments about the insolubility of the problem of God I had never foreseen the possibility of that, of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God. —Simone Weil, Waiting for God*

I believe that Christianity makes the most sense out of our individual life stories and out of what we see in the world's history. In the last six chapters I have been arguing that the Christian understanding of where we came from, what's wrong with us, and how it can be fixed has greater power to explain what we see and experience than does any other competing account. It is time to draw together the various threads of the narrative we have been examining and view the story line of Christianity as a whole. The Bible has often been summed up as a drama in four acts - creation, fall, redemption and restoration.

### **The Divine Dance**

Christianity, alone among the world faiths, teaches that God is triune. The doctrine of the Trinity is that God is one being who exists eternally in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity means that God is, in essence, relational.

The gospel writer John describes the Son as living from all eternity in the "bosom of the Father" (John 1:18), an ancient metaphor for love and intimacy. Later in John's gospel, Jesus, the Son, describes the Spirit as living to "glorify" him (John 16:14). In turn, the Son glorifies the Father (17:4) and the Father, the Son (17:5). This has been going on for all eternity (17:5b).

What does the term "glorify" mean? To glorify something or someone is to praise, enjoy, and delight in them. When something is useful you are attracted to it for what it can bring you or do for you. But if it is beautiful, then you enjoy it simply for what it is. Just being in its presence is its own reward. To glorify someone is also to serve or defer to him or her. Instead of sacrificing their interests to make yourself happy, you sacrifice your interests to make them happy. Why? Your ultimate joy is to see them in joy.

What does it mean, then, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit glorify one another? If we think of it graphically, we could say that self-centeredness is to be stationary, static. In self-centeredness we demand that others orbit around us. We will do things and give affection to others, as long it helps us meet our personal goals and fulfills us.

The inner life of the triune God, however, is utterly different. The life of the Trinity is characterized not by self-centeredness but by mutually self-giving love. When we delight and serve someone else, we enter a dynamic orbit around him or her, we center on the interests and desires of the other. That creates dance, particularly if there are three persons, each of whom moves around the other two. So it is, the Bible tells us. Each of the divine persons centers upon the others. None demands that the others revolve around him. Each voluntarily circles the other two, pouring love, delight, and adoration into them. Each person of the Trinity loves, adores, defers to, and rejoices in the others. That creates a dynamic, pulsating dance of joy and love. The early leaders of the Greek church had a word for this—perichoresis. Notice our word "choreography" within it. It means literally to "dance or flow around."

*The Father . . . Son . . . and Holy Spirit glorify each other. . . . At the center of the universe, self-giving love is the dynamic currency of the Trinitarian life of God. The persons within God exalt, commune with, and defer to one another. . . . When early Greek Christians spoke of perichoresis in God they meant that each divine person harbors the others at the center of his being. In constant movement of overtone and acceptance each person envelops and encircles the others.'*

*In Christianity God is not an impersonal thing nor a static thing—not even just one person—but a dynamic pulsating activity, a life, a kind of drama, almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance. . . . [The] pattern of this three-personal life . . . the great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very center of reality.*

The doctrine of the Trinity overloads our mental circuits. Despite its cognitive difficulty, however, this astonishing, dynamic conception of the triune God is bristling with profound, wonderful, life-shaping, world-changing implications.

### **The Dance of Love**

If there is no God, then everything in and about us is the product of blind impersonal forces. The experience of love may feel significant, but evolutionary naturalists tell us that it is merely a biochemical state in the brain.

But what if there is a God? Does love fare any better? It depends on who you think God is. If God is unipersonal, then until God created other beings there was no love, since love is something that one person has for another. This means that a unipersonal God was power, sovereignty, and greatness from all eternity, but not love. Love then is not of the essence of God, nor is it at the heart of the universe. Power is primary.

However, if God is triune, then loving relationships in community are the "great fountain . . . at the center of reality." When people say, "God is love," I think they mean that love is extremely important, or that God really wants us to love. But in the Christian conception, God really has love as his essence. If he was just one person, he couldn't have been loving for all eternity. If he was only the impersonal all-soul of Eastern thought, he couldn't have been loving, for love is something persons do. Eastern religions believe the individual personality is an illusion, and therefore love is, too. Chesterton wrote, "For the Buddhist . . . personality is the fall of man, for the Christian it is the purpose of God, the whole point of his cosmic idea." It is the purpose of Gods because he is essentially, eternally, interpersonal love.

Ultimate reality is a community of persons who know and love one another. That is what the universe, God, history, and life is all about. If you favor money, power, and accomplishment over human relationships, you will dash yourself on the rocks of reality. When Jesus said you must lose yourself in service to find yourself (Mark 8:35), he was recounting what the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have been doing throughout eternity. You will, then, never get a sense of self by standing still, as it were, and making everything revolve around your needs and interests. Unless you are willing to experience the loss of options and the individual limitation that comes from being in committed relationships, you will remain out of touch with your own nature and the nature of things.

In many other places in this volume, I've traced out how impossible it is to stay fully human if you refuse the cost of forgiveness, the substitutional exchange of love, and the confinements of community. I quoted C. S. Lewis saying that the only place besides heaven that is free from the pain and suffering of relationships is hell.

Why is this? Because, according to the Bible, this world was not created by a God who is only an individual, nor is it the emanation of an impersonal force. It is not the product of power struggles between personal deities nor of random, violent, accidental natural forces. Christians reject these other

creation accounts, which refuse to give love primacy. We believe the world was made by a God who is a community of persons who have loved each other for all eternity. You were made for mutually self-giving, other-directed love. Self-centeredness destroys the fabric of what God has made.

### **The Dance of Creation**

Jonathan Edwards, in reflecting on the interior life of the triune God concluded that God is infinitely happy. Within God is a community of persons pouring glorifying, joyful love into one another. Think about this pattern in our own experience. Imagine there is someone you admire more than anyone else in the world. You would do anything for him or her. Now imagine you discover that this person feels exactly the same about you, and you enter into either a lifetime friendship or a romantic relationship and marriage. Sound like heaven? Yes, because it come from heaven—that is what God has known within himself but in depths and degrees that are infinite and unimaginable. That is why God is infinitely happy, because there is an "other-orientation" at the heart of his being, because he does not seek his own glory but the glory of others.

"But wait," you say. "On nearly every page of the Bible God calls us to glorify, praise, and serve him. How can you say he doesn't seek his own glory?" Yes, he does ask us to obey him unconditionally, to glorify, praise, and center our lives around Him. But now I hope, you finally see why he does that. He wants our joy! He has infinite happiness not through self-centeredness, but through self-giving, other-centered love. And the only way we, who have been created in his image, can have this same joy, is if we center our entire lives around him instead of ourselves.

Why would a God like this create a world of beings like us? On the basis of Biblical passages such as John 17:20-24, Jonathan Edwards reasoned it out. Historian George Marsden summarized Edwards's idea:

*Why would such an infinitely good, perfect, and eternal being create? . . . Here Edwards drew on the Christian Trinitarian conception of God as essentially interpersonal. . . The ultimate reason that God creates, said Edwards, is not to remedy some lack in God, but to extend that perfect internal communication of the triune God's goodness and love. . . God's joy and happiness and delight in divine perfections is expressed externally by communicating that happiness and delight to created beings. . . The universe is an explosion of God's glory. Perfect goodness, beauty, and love radiate from God and draw creatures to ever increasingly share in the Godhead's joy and delight. . . The ultimate end of creation, then, is union in love between God and loving creatures.*

God did not create us to get the cosmic, infinite joy of mutual love and glorification, but to share it. We were made to join in the dance. If we will center our lives on him, serving him not out of self-interest, but just for the sake of who he is, for the sake of his beauty and glory, we will enter the dance and share in the joy and love he lives in. We were designed, then, not just for belief in God in some general way, nor for a vague kind of inspiration or spirituality. We were made to center our lives upon him, to make the purpose and passion of our lives knowing, serving, delighting, and resembling him. This growth in happiness will go on eternally, increasing unimaginably (1 Corinthians 2:7-10).

This leads to a uniquely positive view of the material world! The world is not, as other creation accounts would have it' an illusion, the result of a battle among the gods, nor the accidental outcome natural forces. It was made in joy and therefore is good in and of itself. The universe is understood as a dance of beings united by energies binding yet distinct, like planets orbiting stars, like tides and seasons, "like atoms in a molecule, like the tones in a chord, like the living organisms on this earth, like the mother with the baby stirring in her body." The love of the inner life of the Trinity is written all through it. Creation is a dance!

## **Losing the Dance**

The story of the Bible begins with the dance of creation, but in Genesis 3 we read of the Fall. God tells Adam and Eve that they must not eat of one tree on penalty of death. But what would be so bad about eating of this tree? No answer is forthcoming. However, if we comply with God's directions only when it fits in with our goals and interests, then we are trying to get God to orbit around us. God becomes means to an end, not an end in himself. God, then, is saying to humanity something like, "Obey me about the tree just because you love me. Just for my sake."

And we failed. We became stationary, self-centered. And according to Genesis 3, when our relationship with God unraveled, all our other relationships disintegrated as well. Self-centeredness creates psychological alienation. Nothing makes us more miserable than self-absorption, the endless, unsmiling concentration on our needs, wants, treatment, ego, and record. In addition, self-centeredness leads to social disintegration. It is at the root of the breakdown in relationships between nations, races and classes, and individuals. Finally, in some mysterious way, humanity's refusal to serve God has led to our alienation from the natural world as well.

We lost the dance. The dance of joyful, mutually self-giving relationships is impossible in a world in which everyone is stationary, trying to get everything else to orbit around them.

However, God does not leave us there. The Son of God was born into the world to begin a new humanity, a new community of people who could lose their self-centeredness, begin a God-centered life, and as a result, slowly but surely have all other relationships put right as well. Paul calls Jesus "the last Adam." As the first Adam was tested in the Garden of Eden, the last Adam (Jesus) was tested in the Garden of Gethsemane. The first Adam knew that he would live if he obeyed God about the tree. But he didn't. The last Adam was also tested by what Paul called a "tree," the Cross. Jesus knew that he would be crushed if he obeyed his Father. And he still did.

Why did Jesus die for us? What was Jesus getting out of it? Remember, he already had a community of joy, glory, and love. He didn't need us. So what benefit did he derive from this? Not a thing. And that means that when he came into the world and died on the cross to deal with our sins, he was circling and serving us. "I have given them the glory that you gave me" (John 17). He began to do with us what he had been doing with the Father and the Spirit from all eternity. He centers upon us, loving us without benefit to himself.

## **Returning to the Dance**

If the beauty of what Jesus did moves you, that is the first step toward getting out of your own self-centeredness and fear into a trust relationship with him. When Jesus died for you he was, as it were, inviting you into the dance. He invites you to begin centering everything in your life on him, even as he has given himself for you.

If you respond to him, all your relationships will begin to heal. As I noted in Chapter 9, sin is centering Your identity on anything but God. We give ourselves only to relationships and pursuits that build us up and bolster our efforts at self-justification and self-creation. But this also leads us to disdain and look down on those who do not have the same accomplishments or identity-markers.

However, when we discern Jesus moving toward us and encircling us with an infinite, self-giving love, we are invited to put our lives on a whole new foundation. We can make him the new center of our lives and stop trying to be our own Savior and Lord. We can accept both his challenge to recognize ourselves as sinners in need of his salvation, and his renewing love as the new basis of our identity. Then we don't need to prove ourselves to others. We won't need to use others to bolster our fragile sense of pride and self-worth. And we will be enabled to move out toward others as Jesus has moved toward us.

*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. When he was crucified he "did that in the wild weather of his outlying provinces which He had done at home in glory and gladness" from before the foundation of the world. . . . From the highest to the lowest self exists to be abdicated and, by that abdication, it becomes more truly self, to be thereupon yet the more abdicated, and so forever. This is not a . . . law which we can escape. . . What is outside the system of self-giving is . . . simply and solely Hell . . . that fierce imprisonment in the self. . . Self-giving is absolute reality.*

### **The Future of the Dance**

How, then, will the story of human history end? At the end of the final book of the Bible, we see the very opposite what other religions predict. We do not see the illusion of the world melt away nor do we see spiritual souls escaping the Physical world into heaven. Rather, we see heaven descending into our world to unite with it and purify it of all its brokenness and imperfection. It will be a "new heavens and new earth." The prophet Isaiah depicts this as a new Garden of Eden, in which there is again absolute harmony of humanity with nature and the end, injury, disease, and death, along with the end of all racial animosity and war. There will be no more poor, slaves, criminals or broken-hearted mourners.

This all follows from what we know about creation as a dance. The Trinity virtually "rejoiced" the world into being. Out of delight God created a universe of beings to step into his joy, and the new-made stars sang of it. Even now creation continually tells of God's glory and looks to him, it "shouts for joy and sings" (Psalms 65:12-13). God moves toward his world in care and love. He is committed to every part of his creation, loving it and upholding it. And though sin and evil have marred the world, so it is just a shadow of its true self, at the end of time, nature will be restored to its full glory and we with it.

"Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). The whole world will be healed as it is drawn into the fullness of God's glory. Evil will be destroyed and all the potentialities in creation, latent until that moment, will explode into fullness and beauty. Compared to what we will be then, we are now mere vegetables. Even the trees will sing and make music before the face of the returning King, who, by His presence, always turns mourning into dancing.

Because creation was made in the image of a God who is equally one and many, the human race will finally be reunited and yet our racial and cultural diversity will remain intact in the and world. The human race finally lives together in peace and interdependence. Glory to God in the highest goes with peace on earth.

### **The Christian Life**

How do we respond to this? When we look at the whole scope of this story line, we see clearly that Christianity is not only about getting one's individual sins forgiven so we can go to heaven. That is an important means of God's salvation, but not the final end or purpose of it. The purpose of Jesus's coming is to put the whole world right, to renew and restore the creation, not to escape it. It is not just to bring personal forgiveness and peace, but also justice and shalom to the world. God created both body and soul, and the resurrection of Jesus shows that he is going to redeem both body and soul. The work of the Spirit of God is not only to save souls but to care and cultivate the face of the earth, the material world.

It is hard to overemphasize the uniqueness of this vision. Outside of the Bible, no other major religious faith holds out any hope or even interest in the restoration of perfect shalom, justice and wholeness in this material world. Vinoth Ramachandra, a Sri Lankan Christian writer, can see this very clearly. All other religions, he says, offers salvation as some form of liberation from ordinary humanness. Salvation is seen as escape from the shackles of individuality and physical embodiment into some kind of transcendent spiritual existence.

*[Biblical] salvation lies not in an escape from this world but in the transformation of this world. . . . You will not find hope for the world in any of the religious systems or philosophies of humankind. . . . The Biblical vision is unique. That is why when some say there is salvation in other faiths too, I ask them— "What salvation are you talking about?" No faith holds out a promise of eternal salvation for the world—the ordinary world—that the cross and resurrection of Jesus do.*

What does it mean, then, to become part of God's work in the world? What does it mean to live a Christian life? One way to answer that question is to look back into the life of the Trinity and the original creation. God made us to ever increasingly share in his own joy and delight in the same way he has joy and delight within himself. We share his joy first as we give him glory (worshipping and serving him rather than ourselves); second, as we honor and serve the dignity of other human beings made in the image of God's glory; and third, as we cherish his derivative glory in the world of nature, which also reflects it. We glorify and enjoy him only as we worship him, serve the human community, and care for the created environment.

Another way to look at the Christian life, however, is to see it from the perspective of the final restoration. The world and our hearts are broken. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection was an infinitely costly rescue operation to restore justice to the oppressed and marginalized, physical wholeness to the diseased and dying, community to the isolated and lonely, and spiritual joy and connection to those alienated from God. To be a Christian today is to be part of that same operation, with the expectation of suffering and hardship *and* the joyful assurance of eventual success.

The story of the gospel makes sense of moral obligation and our belief in the reality of justice, so Christians do to restorative and redistributed justice wherever they can. The story of the gospel makes sense of our indelible religiousness, so Christians do evangelism pointing the way to forgiveness and reconciliation with God through Jesus. The gospel makes sense of our profoundly relational character, so Christians work sacrificially to strengthen human communities around them as well as the Christian community, the church. The gospel story also makes sense of our delight in the presence of beauty, so Christians become stewards of the material world, from those who cultivate the natural creation through science and gardening to those who give themselves to artistic endeavors, all knowing why these things are necessary for human flourishing. The skies and trees "sing" of the glory of God, and by caring for them and celebrating them we free their voices to praise him and delight us. In short, the Christian life means not only building up the community through encouraging people to faith in Christ, but building up the human community through justice and service.

Christians, then, are the true "revolutionaries" who work for justice and truth, and we labor in expectation of a perfect world in which:

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things is passed away. (Revelation 21:4)

And when we get there, we will say, I've come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I've been looking for all my life, though I never knew it! And it will by no means be the end of our story. In fact, as C. S. Lewis put it, all the adventures we have ever had will end up being only "the cover and the title page." Finally we will begin "Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before."