

# In the Image of God: The Holy Trinity and Human Relationships

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Edited for readers whose first language is not English

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## Introduction

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Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Gen 1:26, 27).

Human beings are created “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27). Therefore, in order to know ourselves, we must first know God. Knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves are closely related. If we are to know *who we are* as human beings, we must first know *who God is*.

## God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit

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Like Jews and Muslims, Christians believe in “one” God (Deut 6:4).<sup>1</sup> Unlike Judaism and Islam, however, Christianity teaches that God has revealed himself in the New Testament as *three* distinct “persons.” Jesus commanded his disciples to baptize in the “Name of the *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19). In his “blessing” or “benediction” to the Church at Corinth, the apostle Paul invokes the love of the *Father*, the grace of the Lord

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<sup>1</sup> NIV footnote: This verse can be translated several ways: “The Lord our God is one Lord” or “The Lord is our God, the Lord is one” or “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.”

*Jesus Christ* and the fellowship of the *Holy Spirit* (see 2 Cor 13:14). Because God has revealed himself in the New Testament as *Father, Son* and *Holy Spirit*, Christians believe in “one God in three persons.”

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### God is love.

Love requires *another*: one to give it and *another* to receive it. Thus, God cannot be only one person.

God is *three* Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, united as “one” in a fellowship of “love.”

The *fellowship* among the Persons of the Trinity is marked by:

equality

interdependence

cooperation

unity of will & purpose

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According to the New Testament, God is “love” (1 John 4:8, 16). “Love” is not merely a word that “describes” God. Rather, God *is* love! God’s “being” or “nature” *is* “love.” Just as we are humans by “nature,” God is “love” by nature!

Whatever we may say about God, we must begin with the sacred truth that “God is love.” Love is a term of *relationship*, for love requires *another*.<sup>2</sup> There can be no love without at least one person to give love and *another* person to receive love. In the Holy Trinity, the Father *loves* the Son from all eternity; the Son *loves* the Father from all eternity; the Holy Spirit *loves* the Father and Son from all eternity. We can even say that the Holy Spirit is the eternal “bond of love” between the Father and the Son.<sup>3</sup>

The relationship among the persons of the Trinity is characterised by equality of personhood, *interdependence* (not independence), cooperation (not competition), unity of will and purpose, and mutual giving and receiving.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the relationship among the divine persons is so close and intimate that they are said to “mutually indwell” one another.<sup>5</sup> The Father, Son and Spirit “encircle” one

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<sup>2</sup> Migliore, D.L. 2004. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, p. 77). “Otherness” is the presupposition of love; it is the essential ingredient in love. Because love requires another, God cannot eternally exist in isolation and aloneness; thus, God cannot be one Person. In order to be *eternally* love, God must *eternally* exist in fellowship or communion of divine *Persons*. God does not “become” love when he creates human beings; God *is* “love” from all eternity.

<sup>3</sup> The description of the Holy Spirit as the “bond of love” is useful so long as we remember that the Spirit is a “person.” The Spirit is not an impersonal “force” or “power”; rather, the Holy Spirit is a fully divine *Person*, equal with the Father and Son. The Holy Spirit is fully God, the third *Person* of the Trinity.

<sup>4</sup> For a few scriptural examples of the mutual sharing of knowledge, power, authority and judgement, as well as the mutual giving and receiving of the Triune God, see Matt 11:27; John 5:20, 22; 10:29; 12:49; 13:3; 14:26; 15:10; 16:15

<sup>5</sup> The theological term for the “mutual indwelling” of the Persons of the Trinity is *perichoresis* (Greek) or *coinherence* (Latin). The doctrine of the “mutual indwelling” of the Persons of the Holy Trinity guards against the heresy of “tri-theism,” that is, a doctrine of three “gods.” The Holy Trinity

another in a divine “dance” of love. They “make room” for each other in mutual hospitality.<sup>6</sup>



**The Divine Dance  
of Love**

Because the Holy Trinity is a fellowship, or “communion,” of divine love, the “persons” of the Holy Trinity are not separate, independent “individuals.” Rather, they are *persons-in-relationship*. There can be no Father without the Son; there can be no Son without the Father. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit have their identities in *relationship* to one another, a relationship whose nature is “love.” Therefore, we can sum up the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity by saying that “God” is *three* divine persons, who are eternally and inseparably united in a fellowship of “love.” Because “love” binds them together in unity and fellowship, we can say that God is “one.”

### In the Image of God

As we said above, to know ourselves, we must first know God. The Christian belief that God is a “communion” or “fellowship” of equal persons who co-exist in a relationship of love sheds much light on the biblical teaching that human beings are created “in the image of God.” Because God is “one-being-in-relationship,” he has created humans to have their “being” in *relationship*.

The primary relationship for which human beings are created is their relationship with God. Out of the over-flow of Trinitarian love, God created human beings to enjoy abundant and eternal *life* by sharing in the mutual love and fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup> The secondary relationship for which human beings are created is their relationship with neighbour.<sup>8</sup> God did not create humans as solitary “individuals,” who are meant to live in isolation from one another. Rather, God created them as “male and female,” in such a way that *they need each other* to be human. In the beginning God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Gen 2:18). In the biblical tradition, it is not man (Adam) alone who reflects the image of God, but “man *and* woman” *together* (Adam *and* Eve) who reflect the image of God. “So God created mankind *in his own image*, in the image of God he created them; *male and female* he created them (Gen 1:27).

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is not three “gods”; rather, the Holy Trinity is “one God” *in* “three Persons,” who mutually “indwell” one another in loving fellowship.

<sup>6</sup> Migliore, 79.

<sup>7</sup> Jesus said: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Jesus also said: “Now this is eternal life: *that they know you*, the only true God [Father], and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

<sup>8</sup> This view is supported by Christ’s great commandment to love God and neighbour (Matthew 22:37-40).

After God made a suitable “helper” for the man, the Bible tells us:

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh (Gen 2:24).



The Hebrew word the writer Moses uses for “one” flesh (referring to man and woman united in marriage) is the same word he uses to say that God is “one” (Deut 6:4). As a created “image” of the equality, unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity, *man and woman united in the*

*covenant of marriage* reflect the “image of God.” To find an “image” or “pattern” of the Trinity in creation, we need look no further than man and woman united in covenant marriage under God.

Man and woman united in the covenant of marriage are “one” flesh.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, united in eternal love, are “one” God.

As a created “image” of the equality, unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity, *man and woman united in the covenant of marriage* reflect the “image of God.”

## Wider Implications



**Family: a community of mutual giving and receiving**

Because we are created “in the image of God,” we can learn much about God’s design for human relationships by reflecting upon the relationships among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The equality, *interdependence*, cooperation and mutual giving and receiving among the persons of the Trinity provide a model, or “pattern,” for human relationships—whether marriage and family, community, clan, tribe,

nation or even economic and political

relationships. Wherever community life is consciously patterned after the mutual giving and receiving in love among the persons of the Trinity, there is the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus.

Mutual *giving* and *receiving* on the part of all adult members of the community is important. A Trinitarian view of community implies both equality in *sharing* of resources, as well as equality of responsibility in contributing to the needs of the community. A model of community based on Trinitarian relationships includes both the equal and fair distribution of benefits, as well as the equal and fair distribution of the duties and responsibilities that support and maintain the community. Community in the image of God requires both mutual *giving and receiving*.

It would be unwise, however, to think that the doctrine of the Trinity can be applied indiscriminately to all human relationships. For example, in regard to political-economic systems, we cannot dogmatically assert that Marxism is superior to capitalism (or vice versa) solely by an appeal to the doctrine of the Trinity. Marxism supports equality, uniformity and sameness among the masses at the cost of individuality and personal liberty. Capitalism may facilitate individual (private) gain at the expense of the greater community. Neither system adequately reflects the mutual giving and receiving, reciprocity, cooperation, interdependence and unity of will and purpose of the Holy Trinity.

Moreover, even the “values” that derive from a Trinitarian framework cannot be applied indiscriminately. For example, when confronted by evil, cooperation must give way to resistance. In contrast to worldly political systems and governments, Christian community is realised and enabled by the Holy Spirit. Apart from the community-creating power of the Spirit, differences within social groups, including the Church, easily give way to division rather than unity.

Because the God in whose image we are created is a fellowship or communion of love, Christians are called to embody a new *community* in which there is a fair sharing of the earth’s resources, and where relationships of power and domination are replaced by relationships of mutual respect and service among equals. Understanding the Holy Trinity as a community of love among equals “lays the foundation for a society of brothers and sisters, of equals, in which dialogue and consensus are the basic constituents of living together in both the world and the Church.”<sup>9</sup> The doctrine of the Holy Trinity, wherein God is understood to be a communion of persons constituted by relations of equality, cooperation, and mutual giving and receiving, provides the framework for a Christian view of economics, ethics, politics, and sociology.

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<sup>9</sup> Boff, L. 1988. *Trinity and Society*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, pp. 118-20). In Migliore, p. 80.

Because God's life is in an eternal "community" of mutual giving and receiving, human life created in the image of God is intended to be lived in communities of mutual giving and receiving.<sup>10</sup> The Christian hope for peace,



justice and freedom among peoples of diverse cultures, ethnic groups and races is in keeping with the "logic" of the doctrine of the Trinity, with its assertion of community, equality, freedom and harmony among the persons of the Godhead. The Christian

confession of God as Holy Trinity supports the values of sharing, mutual giving and receiving, cooperation, unity, justice and peace in the midst of diversity and difference. Thus, the Christian confession of the Holy Trinity challenges the inequality of "totalitarianism," where individual freedom and rights are suppressed, as well as "individualism," where the self-interest of the individual undermines the interests of the wider community. To be sure, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity undermines all forms of social inequality—whether elitism, racism, sexism, classism or tribalism.<sup>11</sup>

### Leadership and Submission in the Body of Christ

As already noted, the Holy Trinity is Father, Son and Holy Spirit: three equal, divine persons, who eternally exist in a fellowship of love. The relationship among the persons of the Trinity is characterized by mutual giving and receiving, cooperation, interdependence and harmony of will and purpose. While each divine person is fully and equally God, however, each person has his own specific function (i.e., "task," "job") in creation, redemption and the final fulfilment of all things. In other words, each divine person has a different "mission" to carry out in the divine plan of salvation. The different functions or "missions" of the persons of the Trinity provide a "model" or "pattern" that shapes our understanding of "leading" and "following" in the Church.

The New Testament teaches that the Father *sends* the Son for the salvation of the whole world (John 3:16; 2 Cor 5:19). Here we see two different tasks or "missions" between the Father and Son: "sending" and "being sent." The Father *sends* his Son into the world; the Son *obeys* the Father by taking the form of a "servant"; that is, the Son becomes a human being for our salvation (see Phil 2:5-8).

<sup>10</sup> Migliore, p. 80. The importance of family, clan and tribe in African and Asian cultures clearly reflects the "community" aspect of humanity's creation in the "image of God."

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. We must add that the doctrine of the Trinity also undermines the "caste system" of India.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus, the Son of God, was *obedient* to the Father. Jesus came only to do his *Father's* will (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38). On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed, "(Father), not my will but your will be done" (Luke 22:42). To ordinary human thinking, Jesus' obedience to the Father may seem to make him inferior to the Father. Yet Jesus Christ is *not* inferior to the Father in any way, for he is the *Second Person* of the Holy Trinity, the Eternal Word of God, who became flesh and made his dwelling among us (John 1:1-3, 14). Jesus' submission to the Father's will does not diminish him in any way. Although he is obedient to the Father, he remains *fully* and *equally* God. In the eternal Son's relation to the Father, we see that "sending" and being "sent" are equally important. As theologian Donald Fairbairn argues, "God the Father who initiates and gives the love within the Trinity is not more important ... than God the Son who receives that love and responds through obedience to his Father."<sup>12</sup> Giving and receiving, "sending" and being "sent," leading and following, acting and responding are *all* part of the divine dance of love among the three persons of the Holy Trinity.



**Not my will, but your will be done**

Jesus' faithful obedience to the Father provides a Trinitarian pattern or model for the different kinds of service in the Church (1 Cor 12:5). The Holy Spirit has distributed a variety of spiritual gifts among the members of the Body Christ. Because all the gifts of the Spirit are needed for the proper functioning of the Body, one member of the Church cannot claim to be more important than another. Those who hold positions of leadership are *not* more important than those who follow. As we have seen in Jesus' relationship to his Father, *following is as important as leading*. Those who *follow* reflect Jesus' example of submission to the Father's will; those who *lead* reflect the example of the loving Father who gives all he has to the Son. Because our human relationships are meant to reflect the relationships among the persons of the Trinity, "receiving, following, and obeying are just as important as initiating, leading and loving."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Fairbairn, D. *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* Fairbairn wisely illustrates this point by referring to Jesus' example of washing the disciples' feet. Church leaders must remember that leadership in the Body of Christ is a position of *service*, not an opportunity to "lord it over" others. For more on this point, see my article entitled, "The Servant-Heart of God," at [www.asiafricaministries.org](http://www.asiafricaministries.org).

## Unity and Diversity

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The doctrine of the Trinity teaches that the God of the Christian faith is “one being” in “three persons”—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—*each fully and equally God*. As three divine persons, eternally and inseparably united in the communion of love, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit share a common “being,” or “nature.” At the same time, they are distinct or “diverse” as divine persons. In other words, the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father and the Father and Son are not the Holy Spirit. While each person is *fully and equally* God, they are distinct from one another (that is, they are NOT the same person). Because God is both “one” *and* “three,” the Holy Trinity is a fellowship of both *unity and diversity*.

The unity (“one-ness”) and diversity (“three-ness”) of the Holy Trinity have many implications for human relationships. The unity and diversity of man and woman united in the covenant of marriage reflect the image of God. Likewise, the Church reflects the unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity. The universal Church is a holy “body” composed of many “parts” or “members”—diverse ethnic and economic groups, cultures, nationalities and



**The Church: Unity and Diversity**  
*One body, many members*

and races, united under a single “Head,” Jesus Christ, and equipped for service through the diversity of spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4-31; cf. Romans 12:3-8). This multi-ethnic, multi-cultural diversity is expressed in a *variety* of praise styles, musical forms and other worship practices. Tribal, ethnic and cultural differences in worship styles and practices

should be *encouraged and celebrated* throughout the Church, not only as a participation in the

freedom of the Gospel, but also as an expression of the unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity. Any attempt to impose a particular liturgical style or form of worship upon the diversity of congregations and parishes of the worldwide Church reduces the Trinitarian principles of unity and diversity to monotonous conformity.

## Conclusion

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Humanity’s creation “in the image of God” has innumerable implications for relationships, whether familial, tribal, economic, political or ecclesial (“church”). The doctrine of the Trinity provides a theological frame to support a view of human beings as “persons-in-relation.” The doctrine of the Trinity undermines both the radical individualism of Western culture and the collectivism of eastern (oriental) culture. Because we are created in the image of the God who eternally has his “being-in-relationship,” to be *fully and truly human*

is to live and move and have our “being” in relationships—whether family, clan, tribe, community or church. As disciples of Jesus Christ and *diverse* members of his Body, the Church is called to reflect and enact the values that are implicit in a Trinitarian view of God. These values include mutual sharing, giving and receiving, cooperation, equality, interdependence, mutual respect and honour, unity of purpose and the pursuit of peace and harmony among the diverse peoples of the world.

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