

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY “GOD IS LOVE?”

Rev. Dr. Martin M. Davis (Ph.D.) ©2015 rev 7.15

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Edited for readers whose first language is not English

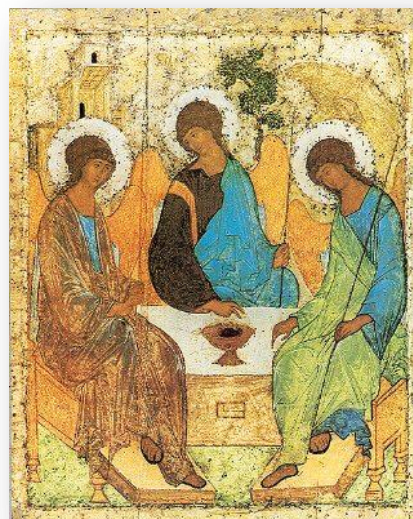
In one of the most beloved passages in the Bible, the apostle Paul writes about godly love. Paul says:

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.—1 Corinthians 13:4-7

For Paul, “love” (Greek, *agape*) is patient and kind; it does not demand its own way. Love is not self-seeking. It is not self-centred; it is other-centred. In other words, love does not turn inward toward self; love turns outward toward another. For Paul, “love” is *interpersonal*. In other words, “love” involves two or more “persons.” “Love” requires one person to give it *and* another person to receive it. Love is patient and kind with the other; love does not demand its own way but yields to the needs of the other. Love is not irritable with the other; love keeps no record of the other’s wrongs. As Paul shows, love is never selfish; love reaches out to serve another.

GOD IS LOVE

Paul’s description of “godly love” (*agape*) teaches us much about God. According to the New Testament, “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). Since love requires at least one person to give it and another person to receive it, then God must be more than one person! This reasoning is supported by the New Testament, where we learn that God is “Father,” “Son” and “Holy Spirit” (see Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14). The Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity teaches that “God” is *three* divine persons, who are eternally united in a fellowship or “communion” of love.



Christians worship “One God”
in three divine Persons—
Father, Son and Holy Spirit

God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit— three divine persons united in a loving fellowship of mutual giving and receiving.

In the New Testament, we learn that God is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—three divine “persons,” who are each fully and equally “God.” Father, Son and Holy Spirit are united in a fellowship of love. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are “one God” because they joyfully give to one another and freely receive from one another all that they are. God is a fellowship of “giving” and “receiving.” Each person of the Holy Trinity gives all he has to the others, while receiving from the others all

they have. The Father loves the Son and gives the Son all he has; the Son loves the Father and gives the Father all he has. The Holy Spirit unites the Father and Son together in love. The Holy Spirit is the “bond of love” between the Father and the Son. Therefore, the “one God” revealed in the New Testament is Father, Son and Holy Spirit—three divine persons united in a loving fellowship of mutual giving and receiving.

Of course, the word “person” can be confusing. In Europe and North America, a “person” is an “individual,” one who is independent and can exist completely alone, even separated or divided from others. However, we must never think of the persons of the Holy Trinity as being alone, independent, divided or separated. Father, Son and Holy Spirit can never exist alone or apart from one another. There can be no Father without the Son; there can be no Son without the Father. The Holy Spirit unites Father and Son in the bond of love. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are united so closely in love that they “indwell” one another in a fellowship of mutual giving and receiving. In their intimate fellowship of shared love, the three persons of the Holy Trinity are “one God.”



**Father, Son and Holy Spirit
indwell one another in love.**

CREATION: AN ACT OF GRACE

To say, “God is love” means that God is not selfish. God does not keep his love to himself; God gives his love away because it is the nature of love to reach out to another. God’s love flows “outward” to create *others* (you and me!) to bring into relationship with himself. God created the world because God is love—and love always wants to be shared.



Creation is an act of grace born of God's love.

Therefore, to say that “God is love” means that creation is an act of grace! Because God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit—three divine persons united in a fellowship of love—God is not alone or lonely. The Father always has the Son to love, and the Son always has the Father to love. The Holy Spirit unites the Father and

Son in love. Because God is not alone or lonely, God does not need human beings to keep him company. God did not create us because he needs us; God created us because he wants us to be with him always. This is the “secret” of our lives; this is why we were born! We were born to share forever in the joyous life and love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

DIVINE ATTRIBUTES: A TRINITARIAN VIEW

To say that God is “love” requires us to think differently about many traditional ideas about God. Theologians use the word *attributes* to describe the characteristics of God. In other words, “attributes” describe what God is like. Over the centuries, however, the “attributes” of God have been seen more and more through the eyes of the philosopher, rather than through the eyes of the prophet or apostle. As a result, human reason (not biblical revelation) has become the basis for knowledge of God. In many textbooks on theology, a philosophical “lens” is laid over Holy Scripture, so that God is viewed philosophically as much as biblically. God is described philosophically as “infinite,” “immutable,” “impassible,” “omnipotent,” “omnipresent,” and “omniscient.” The problem with this view of God is that it is abstract, distant and impersonal. It is based on human ideas about God, rather than on God’s self-revelation in the New Testament as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If we are to describe God according to the way God reveals himself in the New Testament, then we must

view God through the eyes of the prophets and apostles, not through the clouded eyes of the philosopher.

To understand the God revealed in the New Testament, we *must begin with Jesus*, the Son of God. Jesus is the “revelation” of God. Jesus shows us what God is like, because only Jesus knows the Father (Matthew 11:27). By beginning with Jesus, we know God personally, not philosophically. A doctrine of God that begins with Jesus brings the personal “attributes” of God to the forefront. When God is understood personally, rather than philosophically, personal qualities such as “love” and “mercy” take priority over abstract philosophical concepts such as “immutability” (“unchanging”) and “impassibility” (“not able to suffer”). “Mercy,” for example, is a personal quality or “attribute” of God. “Mercy” is the expression in the history of sinful humanity of God’s eternal nature as “love.”



Mercy is a personal attribute of God.

The “attributes” of God derived from philosophy do not accurately reflect the biblical description of God. For example, divine “omnipotence” (“all-power”) is view by the philosopher as “strength,” “force” and the ability to coerce another in order to achieve a particular goal. We cannot understand God’s “power,” however, if we follow the way of the philosopher, who merely extends human ideas of power to an infinite degree and describes God as “all-powerful.” A biblical view of divine “omnipotence” reveals that God does *not* accomplish his saving purpose for creation with raw, naked “power.” From the beginning of his ministry, when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by Satan, the Son of God refused to fulfil his mission by the use of worldly power. Jesus even taught his disciples against the worldly use of power (Matthew 20:25, 26). The “power” of the loving God who fulfils his plan of salvation through the lowliness of a manger and the humility of a cross is very different from ordinary human ideas about “power.”

**God is good, loving,
compassionate,
gracious, tender,
merciful, patient,
faithful and always
forgiving.**

As noted above, to say that God is “love,” as revealed in the giving of the Son (John 3:16) and the sending of the Spirit (John 14:16, 17; 15:6), demands that the classic attributes of God be reformulated in *personal* rather than

philosophical terms. For example, we must not think of divine “immutability” in philosophical terms as “un-change-able-ness,” where God is thought to be distant, remote and unconcerned with human suffering. Instead, we must reformulate the philosophical attribute of divine immutability in *personal* terms as God’s unfailing *faithfulness* and *commitment* to his good plan for creation and his steadfast determination to bring it to completion. Likewise, we must reformulate the philosophical attribute of divine “impassibility” (not able to suffer) in view of Bethlehem and Calvary, for the entire life of the Son of God was a bearing of the cross on behalf of humanity. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must reformulate the troublesome and much misunderstood idea of divine “wrath,” not in terms of divine anger, penalty and punishment, but in terms of God’s loving purpose to resist anything that stands in the way of his good plan for creation.

CONCLUSION

To say that “God is love” means that God is not “one-person” who exists alone in eternity. Rather, God is *three* divine persons, who exist as “one,” in an eternal fellowship of mutual self-giving and receiving. To say that “God is love” means that God’s basic orientation is outward, “toward” and “for” the *other*. To say that “God is love” means that creation is an act of *grace*, wherein the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have made us in order to bring us into the Trinitarian fellowship of divine life and love. To say that “God is love” is to reformulate philosophical ideas about God in favour of the self-giving, suffering God revealed in the manger and the cross. Finally, to say that “God is love” means that all God’s way toward us are ways of love, for God can do no other than be true to his nature as loving Father, as revealed in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Points to Remember:

- God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit—three divine persons eternally united in a loving fellowship of mutual giving and receiving.
- Father, Son and Holy Spirit eternally “indwell” one another in an intimate fellowship of love. Therefore, the persons of the Holy Trinity cannot be divided or separated.
- Creation is an act of grace. God created the world to love it.
- The attributes of God are personal, not philosophical. Knowledge of God is revealed personally in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God.
- All God’s ways toward us are ways of love.

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