

# God in Three Persons—Knowing the Father

In the previous chapters we have discussed the way the Trinity is presented within the scriptures and the way the triune God comes to us. In none of our discussions have we even suggested proofs or rationalisations which may make the doctrine of the Trinity either understandable or acceptable. That omission is simply because we could never prove God. The moment we attempt to do so or, indeed, even from the moment when we try to explain why we cannot do so, we may have moved into a position where our own intellectual abilities are given a position that is too high for us. The scriptures insist that:

... my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. <sup>9</sup>For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isa. 55:8–9).

What is more, God is ‘incomparable’:

To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? (Isa. 40:18).

If there is to be knowledge of God it will only come as he chooses to reveal himself to us. This is not presented as a matter for discussion so much as a declaration that this is the way things are:

At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; <sup>26</sup>yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. <sup>27</sup>All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him’ (Matt. 11:25–27).

The context may be that of towns and cities rejecting Jesus and that he was just explaining that this was the Father’s choice, but it is more than that. Jesus not only knows that revelation comes from the Father who deliberately confounds human wisdom (see 1 Cor. 1:20–25), but he also says that if someone is to know the Father then he, the Son, must choose to reveal him. We can go further by noting that it is the Spirit who is to lead us into all the truth of the Father and the Son:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup>When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup>He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup>All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:12–15).

What must be stressed is that this is not ‘obscurantism’; ‘the practice of deliberately preventing the facts or full details of something from becoming known’. That might be done if someone wanted to gain a position of power over others. But the apostles took quite the opposite position. They could not deny their unique role in the history of redemption, but their aim was nothing less than their readers having the same experience of God as they themselves had:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—<sup>2</sup>this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life

that was with the Father and was revealed to us—<sup>3</sup> we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete (1 John 1:1–4).

The starting point is not intellectual but personal, meaning person with person, believer with Father and with Son, in complete, joy-full ‘fellowship’. This fellowship is the mutual participation one with another; it is ‘communion’, which can only be known in the *action* of union. While grammatically a noun, biblical κοινωνία (*koinōnia*) communion, fellowship, is essentially ‘the fellowship [*koinōnia*] of the Holy Spirit’ with the Father and the Son catching us up into ‘the divine nature’ so that we become, as creatures, fully one with each other and with God in his glory and excellence (see 2 Cor. 13:13; 2 Peter 1:3–5—‘being [κοινωνοι, *koinōnoi*] of the divine nature’). This fellowship is not a ‘thing’ to be examined but a reality in which we participate. Put simply, we know the Father! We may not be aware of the details surrounding that knowledge, nor even explain it those terms, but we do know the Father.

## THE FATHER IN ACTION

Always it is the Father with whom we have to do. We may understand that we have come to Christ, as indeed we have, but that is only because the Father has initiated the whole action and sustained it to the goal he has set. So Jesus put it: ‘No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me’ (John 6:44).

The parable of the Prodigal Son, though well known and often used to illustrate the gospel, actually has little to do with it.<sup>1</sup> The image of a ‘waiting father’<sup>2</sup> is certainly there, but that is not the full picture of God the Father which we have in the New Testament. Instead, we are presented with Jesus whose supreme task was to atone for the sin of the world and in that way to reveal the truth of the Father (John 1:18). In that way all the distortions of creation through human guilt are removed and corrupt and rebellious men and women restored to being worshipping children.

We see this in the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman, as described in John 4:1–42. There we see a woman who is brought to see Jesus as ‘Messiah’ (cf. John 20:31). First there is the (at that point) enigmatic promise of ‘living water’, then Jesus’ surprising awareness of her various marriage relationships, which leads her to ask the central question concerning worship of God: are the Jews or the Samaritans correct about where worship should take place? This is obviously the central question because Jesus continues:

You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:22–24).

The question of true worship is answered by the recognition that worship is both directed to the Father and that the Father ‘seeks’ the worshippers. ‘Seeks’ does not mean ‘wants’; it means the Father is in action to ensure that men and women do

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<sup>1</sup> The parable draws out the clear failure of the Jews to recognise their privilege and the fact that the gifts given were theirs as the ‘elder brother’ in the great family of God.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is used without reflection on the book by Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus* (James Clarke, London, 1960), which I have not read.

worship him and to further ensure that they do so ‘in spirit and truth’. What that phrase means might not be plain at this point in the gospel though it will become plain later. All that is plain at this point is that the woman is then shown overflowing with the fact that her evident shame is gone and she is now free to tell others of the one who has set her free from it. What is more, her fellow Samaritans come to a similar freedom (John 4:30–42; cf. 1:29).

If it is ‘the Father’ who seeks, then we may say that when men and women are found by him, they are found by the Father and so worship him as his children. If we are startled by such apparent arrogance, that God would want and actually cause such worship, it is because we have failed to see the simple delight of the Father in his children and his desire that such a delight be reciprocated. The goal of creation would then be the family of God in the home prepared for them:<sup>3</sup> ‘Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children’ (Rev. 21:7).<sup>4</sup>

Other questions arise when this delight is not evident, or even present, in the adopted children and we will deal with those later.

## THE HOLY FATHER

P. T. Forsyth wrote:

We put too little into fatherhood then if we treat it simply as boundless, patient, waiting, willing love. It is more than the love which accepts either beneficence . . . as repentance, or repentance as atonement, and eagerly cuts confession short thus—‘Let us say no more about it. Pray do not mention it. Let bygones be bygones.’ Forgiveness, fatherhood, *for the race*, does not mean, with all its simplicity, just a clean page and a fresh start and a sympathetic allowance for things. God does not forgive ‘everything considered’. To understand all is not to forgive all. That is mere literary ethics, not the moralist’s, certainly not the Christian theologian’s. There was more fatherhood in the cross (where holiness met guilt) than in the prodigal’s father (where love met shame). There was more fatherhood for our souls in the desertion of the cross than in that which melts our hearts in the prodigal’s embrace. It is not a father’s sensitive love only that we have wounded, but His holy law. Man is not a mere runaway, but a rebel; not a pitiful coward, but a bold and bitter mutineer.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore knowing the Father cannot involve us in anything less than a total transformation. The delight of which we spoke is not its cause but its result. Psalm 40:1–4 demonstrates this.

I waited patiently for the LORD;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
<sup>2</sup> He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog,  
and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.  
<sup>3</sup> He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.  
Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD.  
<sup>4</sup> Happy are those who make the LORD their trust,  
who do not turn to the proud,  
to those who go astray after false gods.

What David’s deliverance was we do not know, but the New Testament does describe *our* dilemma. Forsyth’s language: ‘It is not a father’s sensitive love only that we have

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<sup>3</sup> See the chapter (the study of April 2009), ‘God in Three Persons: Blessed Harmony’, at <http://www.newcreation.org.au/studies/pastorstudies/nswmonthly.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Lit. ‘. . . he will be my son’.

<sup>5</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1987, p. 9, emphasis his.

wounded, but His holy law. Man is not a mere runaway, but a rebel; not a pitiful coward, but a bold and bitter mutineer' is also repeated in his words: 'And as a race we are not even stray sheep, or wandering prodigals merely; we are rebels taken with weapons in our hands'.<sup>6</sup> The tendency may be to feel some pity for fallen humanity, as if we were the victims of our own sad misunderstanding; if only we had not misunderstood the purpose of the Law of God we would not have broken it. But we do not misunderstand it at all. Humanity is vicious in its guilt. Sympathy for fallen humanity fails to take into account that they do not want sympathy. The rebellious son hates his father.

Adam was created for Sonship. That was his high dignity but, and in collusion with his wife, he treated that dignity as contemptible. Eve may well have been deceived, but not Adam (1 Tim. 2:14). We should not see his fear in the garden as the cry of a frightened child, but as the fear which comes from the immediate experience of 'the wrath' (Rom. 1:18; 5:9). The suggestion that Adam may have believed the promise of Genesis 3:15 and so found a measure of peace is ludicrous. What Adam needed was the full force of judgement and Genesis 3:15 declares that. Until the serpent is crushed, Adam and those in him can know nothing but the full outworking of death (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23; 1 Cor. 15:22). Until a great transformation occurs, Adam, humanity, will never see God as Father, unless of course that vision is reduced and distorted and God's fatherhood is seen through fallen human fatherhood.

That someone may love and respect their human father is good, and we see that as an evidence of God's goodness in not handing men and women over to the full flowering of their evil. But their respect and love for human fatherhood does not somehow lead to respect and love for 'the father from whom every fatherhood in heaven and earth is named' (Eph. 3:15). Human fathers, even the best, are sinners 'with weapons in our hands' and our children would be horrified if they were (when they are!) forced to confront that. On the other hand, human fathers at their worst are evidence that the counterfeit father has humanity in his distorting grip (John 8:44; Heb. 2:14; etc.) and will rest at nothing till he has made them into *his* image.

If the holy Father (John 17:11) has determined to have a restored creation he must do it by a work of such dimensions that the judgement of evil totally purges the human rebel of his rebellion. Anything less would be weakness and unholiness. Any love that allows a rebel son to persist in his rebellion is mere sentimentality. Thus, 1 John 4:7–10:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup> God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

'Atoning sacrifice' is also 'propitiation', 'the removal of wrath by the offering of a gift'.<sup>7</sup> This indicates the reason an atoning sacrifice is required. 'God is angry with the wicked every day' (Ps. 7:11, AV). Leon Morris says:

Now if there is such a divine hostility to evil it is obvious that something must be done about it if man, sinner as he is, is ever to be accepted before God. Sometimes Scripture directs attention to the cause of the hostility and speaks of sin as remitted or purged. But sometimes also it points us to the hostility itself, and speaks of its removal in terms of propitiation . . . Denny says: 'If the propitiatory death of Jesus is eliminated from the love of God, it might be

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<sup>6</sup> *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1993, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Leon Morris, 'Propitiation' in *New Bible Dictionary*, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, London, 1962, p. 986.

unfair to say that the love of God is robbed of all meaning, but it is certainly robbed of its apostolic meaning'. The writers of the New Testament know nothing of a love which does not react in the very strongest fashion against every form of sin'.<sup>8</sup>

He continues by quoting Heinrich Vogel:

... whoever thinks he can smile at God's wrath will never praise him eternally for his grace,<sup>9</sup>

and in the same place he also quotes Forsyth:

[The Love of God, for instance, has been removed from its New Testament setting. It has been treated as the mere superlative of romantic love.] It has been detached from the idea of propitiation with which the Apostles identify it (I John iv.10), and regarded as an infinite dilation of human affection (where the real revelation is held to be). Judgment is viewed but as a device of the Father instead of a constituent of His Fatherhood as holy. Little wonder then that love has gone thin in the expansion, and lost power. It has ceased in the process to be understood as Holy Love.

Holiness deals not only with the sin but also with the sinner. Statements such as, 'God hates sin but loves the sinner', are at best very weak representations and at worst terrible distortions of God's holy love.

Holy love must first kill the sinner. Anything less than that and the sinner will still be alive in and to his sin. Adam, humanity, must die. Otherwise God's holy law, the expression of his own being, will remain contradicted and God's conscience will remain unsatisfied. God cannot deny himself. That was the reason for Adam's fear. He hid before the God who would not and could not ever deny himself.

## THE REVELATION OF THE HOLY FATHER

Karl Barth was once asked:

'Sir, don't you think that God has revealed himself in other religions and not only in Christianity?' [to which he replied]: 'No, God has not revealed himself in any religion, including Christianity. He has revealed himself in his Son.'<sup>10</sup>

'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). But if we see the Son, we see the one whom the Father did not withhold but rather 'gave up' for all of us (Rom. 8:32; cf. 4:25). The Son is the one 'given' to be the propitiation for our sins. Seen any other way, he will not be seen as the Son of the Holy Father, but perhaps only as a moralising do-gooder.

If the Father's intention is the worship of his children, then it will only be as those children are purged of their rebellion and drawn into his holy love. Their knowledge of God as Father is totally dependent on his action to deal with their guilt. This is, of course, the point of Jeremiah's promise in 31:31-34 (see Hebrews 8:8-12):

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup>It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: *I will put my law within*

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<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Tyndale Press, London, 1965, p. 210.

<sup>9</sup> *Apostolic Preaching*, p. 210, n. 2. The Forsyth quote is from *The Justification of God* (NCPI edition, Blackwood, 1988, pp. 85f.).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.cqod.com/> (21.10.2010).

*them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*  
<sup>34</sup>No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for *they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

## KNOWING HOLY FATHER: KNOWING HOLY LOVE

When John wrote that 'our fellowship is with the Father' he did so because he knew that he and the readers are 'children of God' (1 John 1:3; 3:1). Far from hostility, being 'God-haters' (Rom. 1:30) and 'hating one another' (Titus 3:3), there is now the flow of love among us (1 John 4:7, 'let us go on loving one another'; cf 1 Thess. 4:9–10).<sup>11</sup> This is not hard to understand since 'love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God'. What love is this that so transforms us? The answer is the love revealed in the atonement:

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice [*propitiation*] for our sins (1 John 4:9–10).

Romans 5:5–8 puts it:

and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

<sup>6</sup>For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

We must note that none of this came to us as command, but as established fact. What God also did was fill us with his Spirit, so that 'we cry, "Abba! Father!"' (Rom. 8:15), thus demonstrating our new identity as children of God. The Spirit has brought the love of God into us, but that love was no mere emotion but the effective love which 'destroyed' fallen Adam in us (Rom. 6:6). That is justification. The total judgment of humanity, its being put to death on the cross, so that we might have our consciences purged as completely as God's conscience is satisfied. Nothing less! Holy love from the Holy Father has come to the now holy/sanctified children.

## KNOWING THE FATHER

We must finally address the question: why is it that this may all seem so strange to us? The 'strangeness' is only seeming, however, because the Father remains the Father quite irrespective of our perceptions, and his love remains holy love quite irrespective of our *sense* of guilt and failure. In other words, this who God is and what God has done!

The only valid response to such a proclamation is to believe it. We can freely admit that for many a knowledge of God as Father may seem foreign, at least as far as the language that is used is concerned. But where there is faith, his gift, then there has

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<sup>11</sup> See the statement of Tertullian (c. 200 AD): 'Look,' they say, 'how they love one another' (for they themselves hate one another); 'and how they are ready to die for each other' (for they themselves are readier to kill each other). *Apology* 39.7. (<http://wiki.answers.com/>)

been a completely transforming work in us. We must confess, sadly, that often there has been an inadequate proclamation of the truth, and there may be many reasons for that. But the truth is still the way things are. So as the vastness of the work of atonement is opened up, progressively no doubt, then faith embraces that and so lives in it.

Faith is never a 'thing' we have. It is always the response to the action of God announced to us. We never get faith 'under our belt' as it were, since everything we see in us and in the world seems effectively to contradict what God says. As with God himself, so with us in Christ, nothing can be proved; but it can be known. Where disobedience is given validity in life then, of course the reality brought by faith will seem to fade, as it certainly does in our conscious experience and enjoyment, so that all becomes flat and 'academic'. But faith hears the word of the cross and rises up to it, so that the work of the Father, and also of the Son and the Holy Spirit, becomes alive to us and so the declaration of who God is and what he has done, as that comes to us through the scriptures, is received with great joy.

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