

Carriers of the Good Infection

A Paper by

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The revelation of God in Jesus and the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit after Pentecost, presented an interesting new problem for Christians seeking to understand the nature and the purposes of God. As the Church worked on this problem in light of Christian experience and the New Testament record, they came to understand and refer to this new self-revelation of God as the Holy Trinity--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God as Holy Trinity is one of the most important but often one of the most neglected concepts related to the work of evangelism. However, grasping and being grasped by the reality of this revelation offers more than just a solution to a sticky theological problem. It is here that we begin to understand the contagious nature of God and our Christian witness as part of that contagion. If we fail in this undertaking, we remain only marginally aware of all the gospel means for the salvation of the world, and in fact we may be--without knowing it--bearing false witness.

God as Holy Trinity

Although our confession of God as Holy Trinity has been classical, orthodox Christianity for nearly the entire history of the Church, it has never been easily explained nor readily appreciated by the vast majority of ordinary Christians. Often it simply has been declared as "truth" without seeming to be the kind of truth Jesus referred to when he said "know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). As a child growing up, my own recollection of the Trinity was that it ranked as an important formula to dust off and recite in creeds, baptisms, and benedictions; but otherwise, it remained nicely tucked away like a family secret not to be discussed.

Thomas Jefferson, although a Deist and not a Christian, probably struck a note to which many Christians would unwittingly say "Amen" if they could honestly express their own thoughts on the matter. In a letter to Timothy Pickering he wrote:

When we shall have done away with the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three; when we shall have

knocked down the artificial scaffolding, reared to mask from view the simple structure of Jesus; when, in short, we shall have unlearned everything which has been taught since his day, and got back to the pure and simple doctrines he inculcated, we shall then be truly and worthily his disciples.¹

Is the doctrine nothing more than “artificial scaffolding” hindering our view?

Some would still say so. But scaffolding is only a barrier for those who remain outside at ground level trying to peer through it instead of making use of the free ticket in their hands to enter the grandstands. From the elevated view inside, the scaffolding is a great blessing that allows a whole new experience of the drama played out below, and a chance to become much better acquainted with the actors, artists, or athletes involved.

This is not the place to unfold again the whole history of trinitarian theology and its impact on the mission of the Church, particularly as it relates to evangelism. Most of us are familiar with the basics. But a few high points along the way need to be shared as important reminders of whose we are and what we have to declare as “stewards of the mysteries of God.”

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--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--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. . . . By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. (1 John 1:1-3; 4:13-15, emphasis added)

The Biblical Witness

Working to clarify the relationship between the one true God, Jesus Christ the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit was a difficult task for the early Church. The writers of the New Testament became increasingly aware of the importance of this relationship, even though they never officially named it “Trinity.” But the roots of the doctrine are found in both the teachings of Jesus and in the experience of the first century Church.² For example:

“If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. . . . And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” (John 14:7-9, 16-17)

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God the Father (Matt. 3:16; 10:20), the Spirit of Christ Jesus the Son (Gal. 4:6; Phil. 1:19), the Spirit of the Lord (Luke 4:18; Acts 5:9; 8:39), and sometimes the expressions come all jumbled together.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. (Rom. 8:9-11)

The Father, Son, and Spirit are three, yet one. How can this best be explained?

The Trinity Through History

Through the ages many have sought to clarify the divine “Trinity.” Tertullian, who first coined the term, offered analogies such as “Root-Shoot-and Fruit,” “Spring-River-and Channel,” and “Sun-Beam-and Point of Light” to explain the Father-Son-and Holy Spirit relationship. What is most helpful with these images as contrasted with many that are still in use today (three sides of a triangle or three states of matter “solid-liquid-gas” or three roles of one person “father-son-brother”) is that they suggest a dynamic relationship rather than a static one. The biggest problem with most contemporary trinitarian analogies, however, is they are non-personal. The relationship revealed in the Bible and in the experience of Christians through the ages is dynamic *and* deeply Personal, i.e. related to three “persons” not just three aspects of time, space, and matter.

Some of the most helpful insights over the last 1600 years concerning the dynamic and relational unity of God as Holy Trinity emerged from three theologians who lived and wrote in vastly different ages and contexts: Saint Augustine of North Africa (AD 354-430), Jonathan Edwards of New England (AD 1703-58), and C.S. Lewis of Great Britain

(1898-1963). The unique trinitarian thread holding these men and their ideas together is the understanding that God's essential nature is "Love" (1 John 4:8, 16).

Augustine emphasized the unity of God--one God possessing a single nature, a single deity, a single majesty, a single glory, a single will, and a single operation of that will. Although there are three "persons" in the Trinity, there is only one "personality." Thus, Augustine could conceive of no activity in which only the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit would be involved. His most helpful new idea was to explain this unity and diversity by drawing on our understanding of love. The Holy Trinity is Love between the Father (the Source of love and the Lover) and the Son (God's perfect self-image eternally emanating from the mind of the Father, and the Object of the divine love), with the Holy Spirit constituting the Love Bond itself between the Father and the Son. This image of God as solitary thinker and lover became the standard rationale of the Trinity for most of the next fifteen hundred years.

Jonathan Edwards in his writings on the Trinity reflects the influence of Augustine, as can be seen in the following.

The Father is the Deity subsisting in the prime, unoriginated and most absolute manner. The Son is the Deity subsisting in act, or the divine essence generated by God's understanding, or having an Idea of himself and subsisting in that Idea. The Holy Ghost is the Deity subsisting in act, or the divine essence flowing out and breathed forth in God's infinite love and delight in himself.³

But notice how the static, solitary Thinker-Lover of Augustine is expanded in Edwards' description of the "sacred energy" in this love bond.

The Godhead being thus begotten by God's loving an Idea of himself and shewing forth in a distinct subsistence or person in that Idea, there proceeds a most pure act, and an infinitely holy and sacred energy arises between the Father and Son in mutually loving and delighting in each other The deity becomes all act, the divine essence itself flows out and is as it were breathed forth in love and joy. So that the Godhead therein stands forth in yet another manner of subsistence, and there proceeds the third person in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, viz. the deity in act.⁴

The Holy Spirit is the Love of "God is love." Yet, Edwards sets the love of the triune God in motion, "flowing" in joy, and finds himself uncomfortable with the dominating idea being restricted to "self-love." He does not resolve his own discomfort, but he suggests that we consider the possibility of thinking of the divine Mystery as a

“society or Family of the Three.”⁵ Augustine had tightly bound the love of God into a self-love in order to protect the unity of God’s oneness. Edwards believed the theological tether needed some loosening (while still being careful not to untie the knot altogether and slip into tri-theism) in order to make God’s love more directly related to God’s action in human history.

Many nineteenth and twentieth century theologians have greatly expanded our appreciation of God’s nature as Holy Trinity.⁶ But perhaps no more helpful contribution has been made related to God’s nature as divine love than that by C.S. Lewis who begins by clarifying why at least two “persons” are important if “God is love.”

All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that “God is love.” But they seem not to notice that the words “God is love” have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love. Of course, what these people mean when they say that God is love is often something quite different: they really mean “Love is God.” They really mean that our feelings of love, however and wherever they arise, and whatever results they produce, are to be treated with great respect. Perhaps they are: but that is something quite different from what Christians mean by the statement “God is love.” They believe that the living, dynamic activity of love has been going on in God for ever and has created everything else.

And that, by the way, is perhaps the most important difference between Christianity and all other religions: that in Christianity God is not a static thing--not even a person--but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance. The union between the Father and the Son is such a live concrete thing that this union itself is also a Person.⁷

Lewis goes on to explain that the Spirit who is generated out of the eternal love between the Father and the Son is in fact similar to the “spirit” generated in any communal relationship among humans. We easily speak of the spirit of the winning team, or of the losing team, or of a happy marriage, or of a couple facing divorce. This is the spirit of the relationship itself, something other than and yet a unique combination of the persons involved. In other relationships the spirit does not actually become a “person,” but in the divine dance of love, the Spirit is truly Person who is one with and yet other than the Father and the Son. Lewis goes on to explain:

And now, what does it all matter? It matters more than anything else in the world. The whole dance, or drama, or pattern of this three-Personal life is to be played

out in each one of us; or (putting it the other way round) each one of us has got to enter that pattern, take his place in that dance. There is no other way to the happiness for which we were made. Good things as well as bad, you know, are caught by a kind of infection. If you want to get warm you must stand near the fire: if you want to be wet you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace, eternal life, you must get close to, or even into, the thing that has them. They are not a sort of prize which God could, if He chose, just hand out to anyone. They are a great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very centre of reality. If you are close to it, the spray will wet you: if you are not, you will remain dry.⁸

It should almost be clear now why we need to talk about the contagious God. To say "God is love" means God as Creative Source (Father) and God as Perfect Image (Son) powerfully love each other in such a way that a contagious Holy Spirit is generated. Out of this eternal union springs forth all that has been created. The Spirit of this love relationship communicates this ultimate reality of unity in diversity into every atom and cell of created matter. We who are made in the image of God, are uniquely designed to catch this "good infection." The Life of this eternal Love has come from the Father, in the Son, and reaches out to catch us in the Spirit *if* we will get close to the fountain.

Carrying the Good Infection

Infections are not normally associated with words like "good" but with invisible microbes, pain, disease, and even death. We would be quite familiar with a headline from the Disease Control Center warning people to take precautions against an outbreak of E. coli 0157, tuberculosis, or some other infectious disease. Of course, the fact that a warning was issued would not necessarily mean all would heed it. Nevertheless, everyone who read about or heard the announcement would realize it was intended to protect people from "catching" the mysterious enemy so destructive to the human body and what we call health.

In contrast, what response might be given to an announcement about an "infectious ease"? Probably most of us would not even be sure we understood the language. The words don't seem to fit together. What is an "ease." *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* defines the noun "ease" as: "freedom from labor, pain, physical annoyance, concern, anxiety, difficulty, great effort, need, stiffness, constraint, or formality." More positively it describes "tranquil

rest, comfort, a quiet state of mind, unaffectedness, a sense of relaxation and well being.” If there were an infectious ease, wouldn’t it be delightfully good news to announce?

Describing and declaring the gospel is challenging. For one thing, it is multifaceted and multidimensional; and in our attempts to make it understandable to as many people as possible, we have at times reduced it to something far too simplistic and flat. There are secrets to God’s designs that we may never know, and surely we will not know them this side of eternity. However, as we examine this contagious life form from different angles, we can begin to see a cohesive and yet simplified order to the whole that is both exciting and life changing. It is something like Jesus must have had in mind when he said “know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).

Several biblical strains of the “good-infection-gospel” should be examined to get the whole picture and show both its unity and diversity—i.e. shalom, eternal life, salvation, liberation, glory of God, kingdom of God, new covenant, and Christian discipleship to mention a few. But a brief glance at just one strain seldom explored, THE GLORY OF GOD, might help clarify how God’s contagious nature is meant to be manifested as the outcome of announcing the gospel.

The concept of “glory” includes such attributes as splendor, brilliance, excellence, magnificence, praise-worthy, and in the original Hebrew “weight.” If something was “heavy”—it meant it was “full” of importance, honor, and even wealth. Most often when describing the glory of God, the Hebrew writers were reminding their readers that God was awesome beyond anything imagined. Yet, God had revealed something of this awesome glory through what was created and through self-revelations known as the “shekina” or “dwelling with us glory.” This presence of God is often recorded in the Bible as a penetrating, brilliant light or fire. Moses first experienced this radiant presence of the Lord when the bush on Mount Horeb was aflame but not consumed (Ex. 3:1-5). Later, all of the liberated children of Israel saw the glory on Mount Sinai and “the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel” (Ex. 24:17).

But the glory of God is more than the presence of God as a localized brilliant light. The glory of God is something that is intended to “fill the earth” (Num. 14:21; Ps.

72:18-19) “as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). The glory of God is the beauty of God revealed in all creation, and intended ultimately to be seen in the children of God “whom I created for my glory” (Isa. 43:7). This beauty of God is also the holiness of God, the perfect purpose of God, and the righteous character of God. In fact, God’s glory is best seen as God’s “personal presence,” which is literally in Hebrew the “face(s)” of God⁹ Notice how the familiar Aaronic benediction captures this sense of God’s glory as a blessing of his personal presence intended for us.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face (literally “*faces*”) to shine
upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance (literally *faces*)
upon you, and give you peace. (Numbers 6:25-26)

God’s glory shines on us as a radiant, personal presence--God’s face--to bring us peace.¹⁰

The glory of God filling the earth is ultimately connected to God’s children who are uniquely designed to hold and to spread the glory as bearers of the image of God. But this reality is by no means automatic, it is dependent upon God’s redemptive and saving work for all who will “turn to him in their hearts.” Notice how these notes come together in this song of the psalmist.

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land. (Ps. 85:8-9)

This is the design. However, throughout the Old Testament the consistent problem is that God’s children refuse their part in revealing the glory of God. They glory in themselves, or their own creations, or in other gods.

For Jerusalem has stumbled
and Judah has fallen,
because their speech and their deeds
are against the Lord,
defying his glorious presence. (Isa. 3:8)
The more they increased,
the more they sinned against me;
they changed their glory into shame. (Hos. 4:7)

But in the midst of such continuing failure, God announces that there will be a way.

A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, . . .

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

and all people shall see it together,

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (Isa. 40:3, 5)

God will provide. The glory of God shall be revealed, and all shall see it.

The expectation emerges of a messiah who will embody God's glory and rescue God's people. In him the long awaited revealing of the glory of God will be seen and God's children will emerge from their darkness into the wonderful light intended for all nations.

For darkness shall cover the earth,

and thick darkness the peoples;

but the Lord will arise upon you,

and his glory will appear over you.

Nations shall come to your light,

and kings to the brightness of your dawn. . . . (Isa. 60:2-3)

. . . and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues;

and they shall come and shall see my glory,

and I will set a sign among them.

From them I will send survivors to the nations, . . .

to the coastlands far away

that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory;

and they shall declare my glory among the nations. (Isa. 60 ;18-20)

Into this long anticipated promise steps Jesus son of Mary and Son of God, prompting John to declare as he begins his Gospel:

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. . . . And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (John 1:9, 14, 18)

The amazing thing about the good infection of the glory of God is not merely that Jesus is the Messiah who reveals the glory, but that he is also the Savior and Redeemer who provides the means by which the glory will be spread to all nations and cover the earth. Jesus reveals this larger understanding of his coming on behalf of his Father's glory in his prayer on our behalf.

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23)

The glory of God in Jesus Christ is related to the oneness he shares with the Father. This oneness is a oneness of love intended to be manifested in those who believe in and receive Jesus because they have seen his glory as the glory of God. The glory is not inherent in being human, for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). But by God's undeserved grace Jews and Gentiles alike are called not to be objects of wrath like faulty clay pots good for nothing but destruction, but "to make known the riches of his glory (as) objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory" (Rom. 9:23).

And how is this glory revealed in us? How is it that our faulty clay can show forth the radiant glory of God? Paul cautions that none of us should think that the glory is any of our own doing. It must all be to the honor and glory of God.

What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? (1 Cor. 4:7)

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. (2 Cor. 4:6-7)

So the mystery is made clear. Christ who is the glory of God died and rose again in order that the tarnished darkness of sin might be replaced by the radiant glory of God in those who confess their need to be cleansed and restored, and received the true light of life--Jesus Christ--into their own lives. To *believe* in Christ is only the means by which we open the door and *receive* the life of Christ, the glory of God, into our own beings.

Paul summarizes his whole ministry for the Christ's body the church in these words:

I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To

them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Col. 1:25-27).

The wondrous glory of God fills the earth as the contagious life of God in Jesus Christ penetrates and overcomes human darkness and is welcomed to dwell within us as the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of truth and holiness. Once more Paul tries to summarize the gospel of this good infection.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:14-19)

Identifying Common Strains

One of the tasks of diagnosing an infectious disease is recognizing which symptoms are common to many related diseases and which are unique to the particular infection contracted.

My teenage son was having problems recently with a sore throat, a low grade fever, and swollen tonsils--good signs of an infection. A trip to the doctor was in order. After examining the patient and running a quick test for the "streptococcus" bacteria (which was negative), the doctor said "Well, this could be lots of things, but if he were my son I'd give him some antibiotics just in case." We filled the prescription and began to pump him full of the "good stuff." A week later the pain was still present and the tonsils were huge. We also noticed two or three tender and swollen lymph nodes on the back of his head and in his neck. Obviously the antibiotics had had little effect.

We were planning a family trip out of state for the next week during school break, so it was back to see the doctor. "It may be some sort of allergy," he said. "Let's just keep him on the antibiotics and when you get back call me if he's not better. I'll give him something for the pain."

Off we went on vacation only to notice after attending worship on Sunday, Easter Sunday, that a rash was emerging all over his face, neck, arms, hands, and trunk. His

throat was still very sore, but he seemed to have little fever. This was frightening. We had been to the doctor! What was the problem? Was this “strep”? “scarlet fever”? or what? No place to go but to the emergency room at the closest hospital. After lots of forms were filled out and questions were asked, blood was drawn. The strep test came back negative, once more. More blood was drawn. Another lab test was run. Two and a half hours after arriving at the hospital we had an answer. It was “mononucleosis.” The antibiotic prescribed and taken faithfully actually contributed to worsening the symptoms and created the rash. Observing symptoms and treating them is not always helpful. The “real thing” may be masked by symptomatic features shared with other infections. It is critical to observe all of the symptoms in order to diagnose the actual condition of the patient. Otherwise, even the best intended efforts to bring relief may in fact only make things worse.

Religion is a lot like the story above. There are actually many different “infections”; and although they may look alike, even to some “experts,” they produce quite different results if allowed to run their full course. Being “religious” is not the same as being “alive in Christ.” Even being “Christian” is not the same as being “alive in Christ.” The good infection we have been examining must not be allowed to be lumped into the wrong category with other “look-a-likes.” Yes, many religions and even various outward manifestations of Christianity share much in common. But the “good infection” of the gospel of Jesus Christ is unique unto itself and must not be confused with “religious infections” in general. In fact, it is the opinion of this writer that some have almost become immune to the “real infection” of God’s forgiving and transforming presence and power in Jesus Christ, because they have been inoculated by various “doctors” and “doctrines” that only vaguely resemble the “the word of truth, the gospel” (Col. 1:5). This has always been a danger. “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” wrote Paul (Gal. 3:1). And John warned:

We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. (1 John 5:20-21)

So, what are the most essential characteristics of the good infection?

First, God is, by nature, Life and Love.

Second, God desires this Love-Life to be manifested in the world through human beings who are made in God's image.

Third, because human beings have misused God's gift of "freedom" so necessary for love, and distorted God's image by both personal and corporate sin, we all stand in need of being delivered from the deadly and destructive power of sin's disease before we can become "eased" and alive in Love through God's good infection.

Fourth, God's true and perfect reflection, the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, came among us to display the glory of this Love-Life in human form, and offer the only effective remedy to heal us from sin's "anti-glory" and restore in us God's glorious Love-Life.

Fifth, the divine remedy required a three-fold intervention on our behalf. God the Holy Trinity: (1) absorbed the destructive force of our sin through Jesus' death on the cross; (2) demonstrated that this Jesus was God's true Son in the flesh by raising him from the dead to reveal that God had power over sin and death; and (3) established the new "good infection" community through the outpouring and indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Sixth, this glorious contagion is freely available to all, but only becomes active in those who open themselves to it through faith in Christ who offers a divine cleansing and a regeneration of the full divine image in us through the indwelling Spirit.¹¹

Seventh, this "salvation-healing" creates a contagious and glorious covenant-community known as the church, the body of Christ, the people of God, in order that directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, they will spread the gospel of this good infection and fill the earth with the glory of God seen as "Christlikeness universalized."

A Note from the Doctor

At various times in my life I have settled for less than the whole infection described above. Sometimes I did this because I did not know the difference. I was ignorant. Ignorance in matters pertaining to both good and bad infections can be extremely dangerous. We need guides, teachers, and doctors who know the difference and have the God given knowledge and wisdom to direct us as we move from the early

stages of recovery from the destructive disease, into the ever-unfolding glory of being “participants of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4) and manifestations of the life “God has prepared for those who love him” (2 Cor. 2:9).

One who made very effective use of the image of the gospel as God’s ultimate medicine for both our temporal and eternal health (although not directly the image of a good infection), was John Wesley. Everyone in his day did not agree with the imagery. Many felt he went too far with his positive attitude toward the human potential. But in reality, he saw little human potential apart from the redemptive intervention of God. England was a moral shambles, a society ready to implode on itself and only a step away from a bloody revolution akin to that which had shaken France half a century earlier. The church and religion were largely a formal toy of the aristocracy. Some sought to be serious about their faith, and practiced their piety in order that they might gain heaven, but few expected much from God in this life either for themselves or the masses.

Wesley himself spent thirty-five years of his life trying to find the “inward religion” that transformed shattered souls into the saints of God. All of his efforts only led him to despair. Then a band of lively and contagious Moravian missionaries convinced him that a form of contemporary Christianity existed like that of the primitive church. They spoke of the inward witness of the Spirit assuring all true believers in Christ that their sins were forgiven, that God loved them with a perfect love, and that this love was the true and perfect medicine of life intended for all humanity. Two more years passed before the reality of this “true religion” penetrated the mind and heart of John Wesley and began to shape him into one of England’s most successful but least appreciated reformers.

His life changing experience on May 24, 1738 is well known to all of us. In the years that followed, John, his brother Charles, and several other friends who discovered the transforming power of God that could work a “new birth” even in stubborn, grown men, shared this good news openly with any who would listen. Some heard the news gladly, were awakened in their souls, and by faith began the journey of salvation from “one degree of glory to another.” Others, especially other clergy, resisted the message and the messengers, sometimes accusing both of being of the devil.

In *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* published in 1743, John Wesley set forth a defense of both what they taught and what was available to be caught. He begins with a description of the need.

We see--and who does not?--the numberless follies and miseries of our fellow creatures. We see on every side either men of no religion at all or men of a lifeless, formal religion. We are grieved at the sight, and should greatly rejoice if by any means we might convince some that there is a better religion to be attained, a religion worthy of God that gave it. And this we conceive to be no other than love: the love of God and of all mankind; the loving God with all our heart and soul and strength, as having first loved *us*, as the fountain of all the good we have received, and of all we ever hope to enjoy; and the loving every soul which God hath made, every man on earth, as our own soul.

This love we believe to be the medicine of life, the never-failing remedy, for all the evils of a disordered world, for all the miseries and vices of men. Wherever this is, there are virtue and happiness, going hand in hand. There is humbleness of mind, gentleness, longsuffering, the whole image of God, and at the same time a 'peace that passeth all understanding', and 'joy unspeakable and full of glory' . . .

This is the religion we long to see established in the world, a religion of love and joy and peace, having its seat in the heart, in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing forth not only in all innocence--for 'love worketh no ill to his neighbour'--but likewise in every kind of beneficence, in spreading virtue and happiness all around it.¹²

The good doctor Wesley properly diagnosed the social disease destroying his nation and God's world. By God's grace he also discovered for himself and carried to others the "good infection" that could change a human heart and redeem a lost world. This "salvation" was larger than some cared to believe. It was inclusive not exclusive. It broke down the dividing walls established by "flesh" and erected a new temple not built with hands but composed of living stones.

By salvation I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth. . . . Without faith we cannot be thus saved. For we can't rightly serve God unless we love him. And we can't love him unless we know him; neither can we know God, unless by faith. Therefore salvation by faith is only, in other words, the love of God by the knowledge of God, or the recovery of the image of God by a true spiritual acquaintance with him. . . .

Justifying faith implies . . . a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for *my* sins, that he 'loved me and gave himself for me'. And the moment a penitent

sinner believes this, God pardons and absolves him. And as soon as his pardon or justification is witnessed to him by the Holy Ghost, he is saved. He loves God and all mankind. He has 'the mind that was in Christ', and power to 'walk as he also walked'. From that time--unless he 'make shipwreck of the faith'--salvation gradually increases in his soul. For 'so is the kingdom of God'. . . .

Although no man on earth can explain the *particular manner* wherein the Spirit of God works on the soul, yet whosoever has these fruits cannot but know and *feel* that God has wrought them in his heart. Sometimes he acts more particularly on the understanding, . . . Sometimes he acts on the wills and affections, . . . But however it be expressed, it is certain all true faith, and the whole work of salvation, every good thought, word, and work, is altogether by the operation of the Spirit of God.¹³

This note from the doctor is rather long, but it is a wonderful summary of the design and the workings of God to infect a sick world with the healing power of the new covenant in the Spirit.

An Invitation to Dance

If we can begin to see the nature of God as a creative dance of dynamic love between the Persons of the Trinity, than much of the Bible takes on a whole new hue. The story is not just about a holy God who demands conformity to a code, nor is it about beliefs that are either right or wrong, true or false, which will determine where we spend eternity. There is more. In fact, the triune God of love we have been describing, made us to be participants in and bearers of this same eternal life and love.

Once more, the divine conversation in John 17 captures the longing of Jesus and his Father for all humanity to share in what the Godhead has always enjoyed.

And this is life eternal, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. . . . But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. . . . I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (17:3-6, 20-21)

The dynamic relationship of unity in diversity that is in the Godhead, the life that is eternal as a powerful and joyful union of love, is meant to be in us. God the Son was sent

by God the Father into the world to restore humanity to this divinely ordained life by initiating this good infection that draws us in to God's dance of love. And each and every one of us is invited to accept this embrace and join in the dance.

I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
 and I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun,
 and I came down from heaven and I danced on earth.
 At Bethlehem I had my birth.
 Dance, then, wherever you may be;
 I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.
 And I'll lead you all wherever you may be,
 and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.¹⁴

Can you see it? Can you hear the voice of God with the accent of a Galilean Jewish carpenter asking by name every child of God to come to the party, to join in the dance? Perhaps you can remember when you first heard his inviting voice and said "Yes" to his invitation to join him in the creative, dynamic, glorious dance of life. My prayer is that those of us who should know best this "true religion" (as Wesley called it) will not allow it to be counterfeited, lost or stolen, and will contagiously reach out offering it to others saying "Come with us, "catch the Spirit" and let the Spirit catch you, opening yourselves to the "good infection," and join in the "liberating dance" that has been going on in the heart of God from before the foundation of the world."

Come on, let's dance.

"The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight" (Rom. 8:19 JBP).

NOTES

¹ Charles W. Lowry, *The Trinity and Christian Devotion* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946), p. 22.

² Thomas C. Oden, professor of theology at Drew University and renown Patristics scholar, has contributed an excellent resource for this discussion in Volume One of his three part systematic theology. He writes, "The earliest Christians were steeped in monotheistic faith, but they had to make sense out of the inescapable revelatory event--this living, resurrected presence of the Lord in their midst. They understood Jesus to be not a demi-god, not part God, not proximately similar to God, but in the fullest sense 'true God' This is the reason we have triune thinking. If the disciples had not had that fundamental experience, we would not be talking about the Trinity today." *The Living God* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1987), p. 184.

³ Jonathan Edwards, *An Unpublished Essay of Edwards on the Trinity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903) with remarks by George P. Fisher.

⁴ Edwards, pp. 93-94.

⁵ Edwards, p. 79.

⁶ In the latter part of the 20th century mention could be made of the work of Jurgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Catherine M. McCugna *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. But I am particularly refreshed by Clark H. Pinnock's work, especially *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, IVP, 1996.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan Paperbacks Edition, 1960), pp. 151-52.

⁸ Lewis, p. 153.

⁹ The Hebrew word for "presence" is פָּנִים (panim) the plural form of "face." Thus, the presence of God is read literally as the "faces" of God. Here again we see the theme of unity in diversity. We all manifest one personality with multiple faces. The person is in the face(s) although the face is not the person. Our full presence is the sum of the faces, and more.

¹⁰ "Shalom"--well-being, blessedness, wholeness, restoration to the design of God for all creation.

¹¹ E. Stanley Jones defined F.A.I.T.H. as "Forsaking - All - I - Take - Him." Faith is an intentional giving up of oneself, a letting go, an opening of the door of trust to future possibilities based on confidence in the one who asks for my heart and my hand. It is the stuff of a real marriage, and the stuff of real freedom and health in love and life. In some ways it remains as mysterious as the very promises it leads to--life, love, truth, hope, eternity. But it is gate we have the key to open once we become aware of the truth of this gospel.

¹² *The Works of John Wesley: Volume 11: The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters*, ed. Gerald R. Cragg (Nashville: Abingdon Press, Second Printing 1992), p. 45.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-108.

¹⁴ The United Methodist Hymnal (Nashville, TN, 1989), 261.