

## **God Is Love—Trinitarian Love!**

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What follows is not primarily a doctrinal/biblical study (the “what” of the Trinity doctrine), but a theological reflection on the profound implications of the doctrine as it illuminates the meaning of creation, sin, atonement, and personal reconciliation with God. But before we proceed to considerations of the theological significance of this foundational doctrine, a review of its fundamental doctrinal elements is in order.

The Trinity doctrine teaches that the Godhead consists of three divine Persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There are not three gods, but three divine Persons who are One in nature (same essence or substance), character, and purpose. They have eternally pre-existed; that is, there has never been a time in eternity past when they did not co-exist, and there will never be a time when they will cease to exist.

While these three divine Persons are One, they have taken different roles or positions in the Godhead’s work of creation, redemption, and the loving administration of the universe. The Father has assumed overall leadership, the Son has subordinated Himself to the leadership of the Father, and the Spirit is voluntarily subordinate to both the Father and the Son.

The Son is the fully divine second Person of the Godhead who, while retaining His full deity, laid aside the trappings or prerogatives of His divine power and became fully man in the Incarnation. The Spirit proceeds forth from the Father and the Son as the personal, divine representative of the Trinity on earth. The Holy Spirit is just as much divine as the Father and the Son and is fully personal.

These are the main convictions that Christians have confessed as the biblical truth about the Holy Trinity. We would humbly submit that the Trinity is an absolutely foundational and essential doctrine that clarifies

*WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

gross misconceptions about God's nature and character. And such clarifications will make it easier for us to be reconciled to Him and be more effective servants in our witness to and for Him.

**SDA Trinitarian Developments**

One of the great surprises of Seventh-day Adventist history is that the "movement" did not formally embrace the biblical truth of the Trinity earlier than the mid-20th Century. When, however, the historical background of the movement is better understood, it does help to explain the tardiness of Trinitarian considerations in the SDA theological pilgrimage. With its radical, rationalist, and highly individualistic approach to Bible study and a strong aversion to anything that smacked of papistical "tradition" (all such ideas arising from Adventism's Christianite/Restorationist heritage), it is little wonder that the subtleties of classical Trinitarian thought did not initially fare too well.

The Sabbatarian Adventists, however, did possess at least two significant resources that paved the way to a theology that became undergirded with Trinitarian principles. Foremost among these resources was (1) a strong advocacy that any doctrine be biblical. Their rationalist and "restorationist" prejudices were significant blinders to Trinitarian truth, but there was another factor which would help to clear off the mists of anti-Trinitarian thinking: (2) the steadily advancing Christological and Pneumatological testimony of Ellen G. White. Over time the testimony of the "lesser light" raised consciousness regarding the essentially Trinitarian testimony of the "greater light" (the Bible). And the heart of this biblical exposition was the full, eternal deity of Christ and the deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit, who have existed co-eternally with the Father. With the unfolding of her expositions of Bible truth, especially in the setting of the "Great Controversy between Christ and Satan" meta-narrative, the issue of divine love comes to the fore as the centrally contested theme.

I would suggest that the most succinct presentation of the "Great Controversy" motif is appropriately located at the heart of Ellen White's profoundly moving expositions of the significance of the passion of our Lord (especially His atoning death). This inspired commentary is found in *The Desire of Ages*, in the chapter entitled "It Is Finished."<sup>1</sup> I would further suggest that these comments undoubtedly form the theological

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1898), 761-64.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

and spiritual “Most Holy Place” of the writings of the “Messenger to the Remnant.”

The arresting theme of her commentary on Calvary as the climactic moment of the “Great Controversy between Christ and Satan” revolves around the concept of God’s love as a delicate balance of divine justice and mercy. The social love of the Trinity has been contested by Satan, and his argument has always been that radical, selfish individualism is the source of a love that is superior to God’s love. God’s response to Satan’s proposal of radical, selfish individualism centers in the plan of redemption flowing out of God’s nature of love. And what, one may ask, is at the heart of God’s love response to the Satanic “love proposal”? The “crux” of the issue came to a profound manifestation in the incarnate ministry of Christ and climaxes at Calvary:

God’s love unfolds from His Trinitarian Oneness as radical, self-sacrificing, mutually submissive, yet always creative and redemptive out-flowing Social Love. God’s love, revealed as balanced justice and mercy, has been consistently manifested in the three eternally divine Persons of the biblical Godhead. Furthermore, the Holy Trinity has (from all eternity past) been only able to fully reveal and define themselves through their relationship to one another—Yes, in profoundly unitive social love!

What follows is a theological reflection on the powerful implications of Triune love as it illuminates the meaning of the doctrines of creation, sin, atonement, and personal salvation.<sup>2</sup>

### **Creation and Sin**

These fundamental doctrines begin to unfold in the biblical narratives of the creation and fall of human beings. Humanity was made in love to live out our lives in loving relationships. God’s social circle of Trinitarian love has always been expansively seeking to multiply the venues of loving arenas. From the profoundly self-sacrificing love of God has emerged new orders of beings (in an expanding physical universe) who can experience God’s love and share it with others—especially those beings made in God’s image. I believe that it can be persuasively argued that God’s out-flowing love (which is highly expansive) is the only metaphysical explanation for what physicists have perceived

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<sup>2</sup> What follows is largely adapted and extracted from the final three chapters of the book co-authored by Woodrow W. Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve: *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2002).

*WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

as an ever-expanding universe. And what the physicists have perceived is just what Trinitarian Christians would expect.

God's ever expanding "love fest," however, has been seriously disrupted by the emergence of sin. Sin involves everything that is antithetical to God's love. It is self-absorbed (not expansive) and implacably opposed to anything like self-sacrifice. Furthermore, the only love force which could overcome the horrible effects of this horrific "unlove" is the Divine love that created in the first place. In fact, if God does not act to redeem the creation and its creatures, who have been designed to live in love, His love can be seriously called into question.

Once more, I raise the question: What is God's love? The central theme of Ellen White in *The Desire of Ages* (especially 761–64) claims that God's love is a profoundly balanced revelation of justice and mercy played out in venues of social love. And thus, the next logical question is this: can such a love overcome and heal the effects of the "unlove" which has spoiled God's original creation plan?

The first basic theological thesis goes like this: only the love that created a universe to revolve around social, self-sacrificial, and outward flowing relationships can heal the effects of Satanic "unlove." Neither creaturely being nor any "thing" can fill this demanding order. Please indulge me in a bit of expansion on this most basic of all biblical themes.

If "God is love" (1 John 4:8)<sup>3</sup> in the very essence of His nature and we have been made in His "image" and "according to" His "likeness" (Gen 1:26, 27), then this ought to tell us that the very core of what it means to be human is found through our experience of social/spiritual relationships which are loving, trusting, and submissive to God and our fellow human beings.

Maybe we could put the issue like this: if the gist of God's nature is eternal, infinite, and relational love and we are made in His image, *then the very heart of what it means to live is to live in loving relationships!* In other words, to really and truly exist is to live in outward oriented love, not in inward-directed, self-focused gratification.

The first practical implication is this: if the very nature of the God-created social universe is the life of out-flowing love, then any attitudes or actions which prove destructive for genuine, God-like (lawful) love relationships become suspect. And those attitudes and actions that build satisfying, productive relationships are what should be pursued.

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<sup>3</sup> All biblical references are from the *New King James Version*, unless otherwise noted.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

This, however, raises a very serious issue: Can sinful humans truly know what constitutes legitimate, other-oriented love relationships? Is this the way things are? Is this truly the way things ought to be? The great “Adversary,” Satan, has claimed that the only way to find love and true happiness is to make self and self-gratification the major goal of life.

Who is right? We would suggest that God, in His Trinitarian Self-revelation, has claimed that we have been created to reflect the love that super-naturally resides in His very being as an eternally loving God. And Who is this God? The God Who is One in Three. Furthermore, the Triune love found in God is not self-oriented and thus strongly implies that we will find our greatest joy and satisfaction in living for and serving others.

Now we do believe that all Christians would acknowledge that God’s way of love is the best. In fact, it is the only way to go. The next consideration, however, is this: we humans simply do not naturally want to live like that. Our very nature, in conflict with the heart of God’s nature of self-sacrificing relationships, constantly pushes us to live like the Devil—all out for self! What does the Trinity say to this terrible predicament that we find ourselves caught in?

**Who Alone Can Redeem?**

The biblical story tells us that in God’s original creation He invested humanity with the natural ability to love and live like the Trinity. But humans have rebelled and now naturally live more demonically than lovingly. How then has God reacted to this tragic turn of events?

The great good news from our Maker is this: not only has He created us in an amazing act of overflowing love (He wanted to widen the exercise circle of Trinitarian love), but He has now determined to redeem us in an amazing move of self-sacrificing love. It is at the very essence of this sacrificial love that the truth of the Trinity receives its greatest acid test and most startling, yet touching revelation.

God has been challenged to confront the issue of angelic and human rebellion, a type of sin that has gone totally against the grain of His heart of eternal love. What is He to do?

The compelling story line of the Bible is this: The Triune God has chosen to love us in a way that creates the only possible path for reconciliation and redemption. This path has manifested a redemptive scenario that can restore other-directed relationships with Himself, and such a relational orientation will once again enable human beings to live in love with one another.

*WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

While God does not love our sin and sinfulness, His very nature of love has instinctively impelled Him to reach out in redemptive mercy, not to lash out in a hot flash of righteous justice. And He has done all of this in ways intended to restore our status as His infinitely valued sons and daughters. His goal is to change us redemptively into His image through the healing of our sinful histories and natures which have so “be-deviled” our existence (and His).

Once more we ask: how is God to accomplish all of this? Is He to act with righteous force and purge the universe of its rebellion? Yes, He could have done this; but He has not chosen such a “quick fix.” The biblical narrative strongly suggests that His way has been the path of patient, long-suffering appeals and demonstrations of His eternal love. The heart of His plan has been to sacrificially give His own divine Son to come and be one with us as a man to show us what Godly love is really all about. The climax of the Son’s mission was to live and die in such a way that sinful humanity could be forgiven, reconciled, and ultimately healed of the disease of sin.

**Christ Alone Is Able to Redeem.** But did the sacrificial “gift” have to be the Person of His very Own Son? Could the agent of reconciliation have been an angel or some other unfallen being from some other world who has always loved God and remained loyal?

It was questions such as these that incited the ancient debates of the Fourth Century A.D. over the divine nature of Christ. Athanasius, the major advocate for the full deity of Christ at Nicea, took a very firm stand against Arius by affirming that the only One who could effectively redeem and heal the world was none other than God Himself. No created or derived being (angelic or otherwise) was deemed capable of pulling off this great mission.

But why is it that only the unique Son of God would be capable of such a mission? Why is Jesus the only being who could fully reveal what God is like? What follows are the answers, answers flowing from the very core of the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead!

**Only God Can Reveal God.** Only One who is God, in the fullest sense of the word, can effectively reveal what God is like (John 14:8–11; 1 Cor 1:21–24). And since Jesus was fully one in nature and character with the Father, He was fully capable of revealing the truth about God. Not only does it “take one to know one,” but it takes One who really knows about deity by nature to give a truly credible revelation of what God is like. No created god, semi-god, or god of some derived divine

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

nature could be sufficiently equipped to do the job. Only a divine “insider” can really reveal to humanity the inside, in depth truth about God.

**Only God Can Make the Sacrifice.** The deeper question, however, swirls around the issue of why it is that only a member of the Godhead (Jesus was chosen) could offer a fully effectual, saving sacrifice for sin. Here we need to move with the utmost care and clarity. We need to remind ourselves that we are on the borders of heavy truth shrouded in the most profound of all mysteries.

First of all, we need to admit that in a literal sense, true deity is naturally immortal and cannot experience death. This simple biblical truth (1 Tim 6:14–16) explains one of the reasons for the necessity of the incarnation (Heb 2:9, 14–18). Only dependent, mortal human nature could be subject to death. And in the experience of the incarnation, Jesus took on human nature and died.

But, once more we pose the question? Why was it that only one Who is fully divine would be capable of offering the sacrifice of an atoning death? Why would this be true if Christ in His deity was incapable of death?

**Jesus the Only Atonement Maker.** It appears that the answer comes in a number of fascinating facets:

(1) The very union of divinity with humanity in Christ’s incarnate nature suggests that though divinity did not literally die, it as good as died in the following sense:

Christ’s deity, along with His humanity, self-sacrificially consented to death at every step of the way to the Cross. And in so doing the very nature of Christ’s human death was invested with the infinite value of eternal love.

An illustration from the death of Abraham Lincoln might prove helpful. Lincoln’s death, from a purely personal human point of view, was no more tragic than that of any other murder victim. From the perspective of his value to the nation, however, his death was a much greater tragedy. The value invested in the life and character of Lincoln, by virtue of his Office as President and his acts as the “healer” of the nation’s wounds in the Civil War, invested his death with much greater significance and value than the death of any other ordinary citizen. And Christ, the One Who was by divine nature invested with the “offices” of Creator and Redeemer, is the only Being of sufficient value and virtue to offer an effectually atoning sacrifice for sin.

Ellen White, following the same theme as Athanasius and the early Trinitarian writers, put it this way:

*WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

The divine Son of God was the only sacrifice of sufficient value to fully satisfy the claims of God's perfect law. The angels were sinless, but of less value than the law of God . . . His [Christ's] life was of sufficient value to rescue man from his fallen condition.<sup>4</sup>

Christ is equal with God, infinite and omnipotent. He could pay the ransom for man's freedom . . . He could say that which the highest angel could not say,—I have power over my own life, "power to lay it down, and . . . power to take it again."<sup>5</sup>

(2) Only a love residing in a member of the Godhead was capable of effectually judging sin. The issue of sin's judgment could be phrased this way:

The fully divine love of Christ possessed not only innate value, but also the power to conquer sin. And why is this so? A possible clue lies in the very nature of what sin is.

When we really boil it all down, we can safely say that sin involves the nature and actions of creaturely "un-love." You might ask, "What in the world are you speaking about with the use of the term 'un-love'?"

Think of it in the following terms: The very nature of Godly righteousness is the manifestation of love. The law of God is a concrete expression of His nature of love (Matt 22:36–40; Rom 13:8–10; 1 John 5:2, 3). The law of God practically defines, in vivid commands, the very way that beings filled with the love of God will think and act. And that which goes contrary to the express law of God goes contrary to the love of God. Thus sin is thinking and acting in not only an unlawful, but in an unloving manner.

To put the issue another way, sin could only come into existence because of the very nature of God's love. The fact that God's love requires free choice makes it possible for sin to come into play. The very God-given freedom essential to the exercise of love allows for sinful disobedience. Yet when sin takes advantage of God's love-borne freedom and goes against His very nature, it can only manifest itself as the selfishly chosen attitudes and actions of un-love. Sin becomes a human creation

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<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, 4 vols. (facsimile reproduction) (Washington: Review and Herald, 1969), 2:9, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Youth's Instructor* (June 21, 1900), in *Youth's Instructor Articles* (facsimile reproductions) (Washington: Review and Herald, 1986).



*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

that feeds off of God's love and becomes an intensely perverse twisting of divine love. Sin simply cannot exist without God's nature of love, but it is a parasitic development that feeds off of God's nature as a perverse parody of the real thing.

Most certainly, God is not in any sense the Author of sin. Sin is the mysterious, twisted brainchild of Satan and can never be fully explained. But without God's granting the right to choose those things that are contrary to His nature of love, there could be no such thing as sin. God could have played it safe and pre-programmed us not to sin. But then we would have been a bunch of robots doing God's will only by instinct. Yes, God chose a very chancy route when he created beings in the image of His own loving nature. But could He have done it any other way if He truly wanted a race of beings that could freely and responsively relate to Him in love?

Therefore, since sin can only be understood as that which is totally at logger-heads with God's love (freely choosing the un-loving attitude and action), then it must be true that only One Who is eternal, divine love in nature would be equipped to expose, define, and destroy sin and its satanic author. Only the knowledgeable power of selfless, divine love residing in Christ, in "Whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col 2:9), is equipped to expose and judge sin and its egomaniacal creator. The upshot of these facts is that the death of Christ on the Cross was, in principle, the judgment and defeat of sin.

This judging and defeat of sin through the divine power of Christ has two important consequences:

(a) In Christ's life and death divine love was revealed in a way never before seen in the history of the universe. God's loving and merciful justice reaches out in waves of spiritual and moral influence, leading sinners to repent of their sin. This repentance is inspired not only by Christ revealing the enormity of sin, but also results from a deeper appreciation of God's offer of a mercy that we really don't deserve. So Jesus' revelation of love in His perfect life and atoning death changes our attitudes towards sin and God so that we are enabled to respond to his offer of mercy and new life. But the Son's judgment of sin by His life and death demonstration of love enables God to do one more important act:

(b) The perfect obedience of Christ to the law and His bearing the penalty of the broken law for us enables God to forgive repentant sinners. The forgiveness given to the repentant sinner is granted for Christ's sake. That is, because of what God's love has secured in the life and death of Christ, God is able to secure our forgiveness by declaring that

*WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

all that belongs to Christ is now accounted as ours. We are given new histories (Christ's life is now ours), new legal standing, and powerful motives of God's love to live like and for Him from henceforth. And all of this has been secured on the basis of what the love of God has wrought out, not what some mere human creature has accomplished. The justifying merits of Christ are the manifestations of God's righteousness, not those of just any old loving creature!

This understanding of God's way of forgiveness and justifying grace is inextricably bound up with His divine love. Only the love residing in the fully divine Christ could secure such a righteousness. What has proven to be quite interesting is that over the centuries, anti-Trinitarian and unitarian religious traditions have always fallen into legalistic views of salvation. In other words, only when the sinner has been good and obedient is the sinner deemed forgiven. But when Trinitarian clarity comes, these Trinitarian movements have a strong tendency to give a renewed emphasis to forgiveness or justification by grace through faith alone, not earned by works of the law, lest any man should boast.<sup>6</sup>

Judaism, Islam, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and early non-Trinitarian Adventism all have tended to lack a clear doctrine of justifying grace based solely on the merits of Christ's divine righteousness. It was only when Seventh-day Adventism began to emerge out of its non-Trinitarian understandings of Christ's divinity that it began to find clarity on justification by grace through faith alone. In fact, there seems to be a law of sacred history: until greater clarity is gained regarding the full deity of Christ, salvation by grace through faith alone does not fare too well.

The benefits of Christ's full deity do not end, however, with the manifestation of justifying grace. His deity also guarantees a powerful experience of new life for the believer in transforming grace.

(3) The necessity of a divine sacrifice also arises from the fact that only a being Who naturally possesses immortality can offer everlasting life to those who take advantage of the saving power of His atoning death.

The new life from Christ includes conversion to a life of love in time and a never-ending life at the second coming. Thus, His death not only

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<sup>6</sup> A possible exception to this tendency is Roman Catholicism. I would suggest that the reason for this exception is two-fold: 1) the Trinity doctrine is almost a philosophical dead-letter in the Roman tradition (on the books, but not really utilized theologically); 2) the intercessory work of Jesus has been just about totally obliterated by the practical emphasis on the intercession of Mary and the saints. In other words, human intercessors have virtually displaced the divine/human person of Jesus.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

cancels sin and destroys the power of death, but Christ's divine love enables us to be restored in our characters.

(4) This great work of character restoration we call sanctifying, transforming, or life changing grace. Not only is the full deity of Christ absolutely essential to His offer of forgiving or justifying grace, but it also provides the power of transforming grace. The power of sin has so profoundly deranged God's creation that the only Being Who can put it right is none other than the original active Agent of Creation—the divine Son of God!

Jesus the great Creator becomes the Great Physician of the human soul ravaged by the raging infection of sin! Flowing out of His righteous life and atoning death, His healing powers are so great that not one desperate soul need despair of a healing power failure!

Possibly another metaphor, other than healing, could explain the issue of transforming love. This is the metaphor of the comforting presence of a strong parent with a weak and fearful child. When I was a little boy, I was desperately afraid of the dark. When I would have to go on an errand in the dark, I imagined all sorts of evil ogres lurking in the shadows. But somehow, when my strong father was along, all seemed safe and secure. When the mighty God, the powerful Jesus, is by our side in the struggle with the demonic forces of darkness, we need not fear.

(5) Furthermore, not only was the full deity of Christ necessary to the effective provisions of His life and death to forgive sin and transform our characters, but His divine nature assures us that He is always there for us as our Redeemer. That is, the divine Christ is a constantly available and effective Advocate, "Intercessor" or "Mediator between God and men." Yet the One Who is divine is also Himself "the Man" (1 Tim 2:5, 6).

This concept is beautifully expressed in the metaphor of the "surety." This assuring (even spiritually alluring) term projects the idea of a person who unceasingly stands for another. This is particularly evident in cases of debt. The guarantor steadily and surely stands to guarantee that the debt will be satisfied if the one who has incurred the debt fails. Bible-believing writers have often used the wonderful description of Christ as the sinner's "substitute and surety" to picture Christ as our Mediating Advocate before the Father. Yes, there is One Who stands for us, One in Whom the plenitude of infinite love is cast in our favor! What a fully sufficient Savior we have in Christ!

Once more, Ellen White has expressed this theme in a way that closely resembles the classic Fourth Century A.D. Trinitarian reflections and confessions of faith:

### *WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

The reconciliation of man to God could be accomplished only through a mediator who was equal with God, possessed of attributes that would dignify, and declare Him worthy to treat with the Infinite God in man's behalf, and to represent God to a fallen world. Man's substitute and surety must have man's nature, a connection with the human family whom He was to represent, and, as God's ambassador, He must partake of the divine nature, have a connection with the Infinite, in order to manifest God to the world, and be a mediator between God and man.<sup>7</sup>

But Christ is no longer physically present with us to do this work. How then can He effect such changes and bring such comfort from so far away? The answer is found in the work and person of the mighty Agency of the Third Person of the Godhead, the precious and powerful Holy Spirit.

#### **The Holy Spirit and the Triune Oneness of the Godhead**

Most certainly the Holy Spirit has received less notice in theology and practical Christianity than has the Father or the Son. Yet, this is most likely just the way the Holy Spirit would have it. His business has never been to call attention to His own being or person. His greatest delight comes when He lovingly places the focus of His ministry on highlighting the Father through His (the Spirit's) representation and exaltation of the Son. It is in this ministry that the Spirit can truly be spoken of as "another" heavenly "Comforter" (KJV) or "Helper" (NKJV).

Could the Holy Spirit, however, truly and effectively carry out His helpful ministry if He were only some sort of created, celestial Internet, not the mighty Third Person of the eternal Godhead?

And finally, what theological implications could the Triune Oneness or profound unity of the Godhead have for our understanding of salvation and the security of God's governance of the universe? We will address the implications of Triune oneness, but we turn first to the "so what" of the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

#### **The Holy Spirit as the Divine and Personal Agent of Salvation**

Closely related to these issues of Christ's divine person and nature are those which relate to the Holy Spirit's deity, person, and work. The

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<sup>7</sup> Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald* (Dec. 22, 1891), in *Review and Herald Articles*, 6 vols. (facsimile reprint) (Washington: Review and Herald, 1962).

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

classic Trinitarian convictions have consistently held that only a being who is fully God could rightly represent the Father and the Son to the human race. Furthermore, only the fully divine Spirit could effectively make the work of Christ a saving fact in the human heart.

**The Full Deity of the Spirit.** The Bible text which witnesses most persuasively to the practical necessity of the full deity of the Holy Spirit is 1 Cor 2:7–12:

(7) We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery . . . (8) which none of the rulers of this age knew . . . (10) But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. (11) For what man knows the things of man except the spirit of man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. (12) Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.

This passage plainly claims that God can only be made known through the Spirit of God, who is now His authoritative representative on earth, the revelation of God's love and saving power.

Thus it only makes sense that if the Holy Spirit is to rightly represent both the divine Father and Son, then He must also be fully divine Himself. Once more, it not only "takes One to know One," but it takes a Being of the same essential divine "Kind" or nature to reveal that Kind to some other creaturely "kind." In other words, only a Being Who is fully divine, Who wholly shares the eternal nature of divine love, can adequately communicate such love to a created world woefully destitute of divine knowledge and doomed to death.

Carefully ponder a number of other "only" implications of the full deity of the Holy Spirit:

(1) Only the Holy Spirit of God could bring the converting and convicting power of the great love of God to fallen humanity. Only One Who has been eternally bound up with the heart of self-sacrificing love in the Father and the Son can fully communicate such love to lost human beings.

(2) Only the Holy Spirit, Who fully shares the adopting heart of God, inflamed with love for His lost children, can impart to these estranged human children "the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom 8:15, 16).

*WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

(3) Only One Who has worked with the Son in creation would be equipped to effect re-creation in souls ravaged by the destructive forces of Satan and sin (Rom 8:10, 11). This re-creative function of the Spirit is closely connected with the work of bearing spiritual fruit. Thus, only the Divine Spirit, Who works with Christ the vine (John 15:1–11), is competent to produce in God’s people the “first-fruits of the Spirit” (Rom 8:23).

Furthermore, the issue of the “fruit of the Spirit” takes on clearer meaning when it becomes apparent that all of these discrete fruits (joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, etc.) are but manifestations of the one, all-encompassing “fruit” of love (see Gal 5:22–24).

(4) Only the Holy Spirit Who sustained Christ through the horror of Gethsemane and Calvary can effectually comfort us through our dark valleys and frightful nights of the soul.

(5) Only the Spirit, Who fully knows the heart of our great High Priestly Intercessor, can fully represent the comforts and effectually impart the blessings of Christ’s constant intercessions on our behalf before the Father of Love.

(6) Only the Spirit who inspired the prayers of Jesus can effectually help in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God (Rom 8:26, 27).

(7) Only One Who can be fully in tune with the heart of Jesus’ incarnate ministry, and yet at the same time be able to be everywhere at once (the omnipresence of God), could ably represent the redeeming presence of Christ to the entire world. The only being Who could do such a thing is the ever- and all-Present Holy Spirit.

**The Personhood of the Spirit.** Why is this issue so critical? Do we really sense the power in the statement that the Spirit of Christ is the manifestation of the personal presence of Christ to us?

Is not a lover’s personal presence the heart of the power of love? Can there really be an effectually redeeming love that is not ultimately manifest in personal presence? Does the thought of the Holy Spirit as being some sort of celestial Internet bring any thrill of personal anticipation to your soul? Thank God that the Holy Spirit is the divine Person communicating, rather than some sort of impersonal, electronic network!

I recall the joy of communicating, via electronic means, with my fiancée when we were temporarily separated by seemingly interminable

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

miles and days. But blessed as these electronic means were, they ultimately proved not to be a very satisfying substitute for actually being with her personally! If the only hopes of love I could have aspired to in those days were an e-mail or phone relationship, I would have been “of all men most miserable” (1 Cor 15:19 KJV)! Thank God, the Holy Spirit is an effective, personal presence of the Bridegroom to the Bride.

How many have experienced the technically competent, but impersonal ministrations of medical personnel who lack what we call a good “bedside manner.” Yet, when Christ comes to comfort us in all of our sin-related stresses and illnesses, His bedside manner is powerfully and personally ministered to us through the person of His Holy Spirit representative on earth.

Furthermore, when we are called upon to serve, witness, and do mighty acts for God, it is the power and guidance of the personal Spirit that is present to guide, strengthen, and provide courage, vision, and the precious ointment of wisdom. Thus only the Holy Spirit, the heavenly Comforter, can truly heal the sick human soul and direct our witness and service in the world.

**The Oneness of the Godhead and Its Theological Significance**

**God’s Oneness and the Unity of the Universe.** Right now, the situation of the world is one of terrible divisions and deep fractures. The moral and social fabric is deeply conflicted in wrenching alienation between individuals, people groups, religions, and nations.

Furthermore, based on the concepts undergirding the “Great Controversy” theme, there is also a sense of intuitive distrust pervading the larger universe when it comes to the issue of how God meets the crisis called sin. Does the Oneness of the Godhead have anything to say to these troubling dilemmas?

**Triune Unity Promises a Unified Universe.** If the divisions disturbing the tranquility of our world and the cosmic concerns of the intelligent universe have any chance of being healed, it will have to come from the reconciling efforts of the Godhead. We say this because the doctrine of the Trinity holds that the profound unity of nature, character, and purpose of the Godhead provides the only sure basis for hope that the alienations of the created order can be healed.

Wayne Grudem expresses the issue this way: “If there is not perfect plurality and perfect unity in God himself, then we have no basis for

*WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

thinking there can be any ultimate unity among the diverse elements of the universe either.”<sup>8</sup>

The alienations which have produced deep divisions in God’s universe have their source in the horrific phenomenon of sin. The core of the issue is this: does the Godhead have within Its nature of infinite love the resources to reconcile the disruptions that sin has caused?

**Christ’s Death Brings Reconciliation.** We would suggest that the heart of the Christian response to the above question revolves around the atoning death of Christ. Can the death of Christ truly bring full reconciliation? We are convicted that it can, and the “crux” of the issue has to do with God’s judgment of sin, manifested through our divine Lord’s substitutionary sacrifice.

Many Christians, however, have expressed deep misgivings about the whole concept of Christ offering a sacrifice of substitution to satisfy God’s nature of justice. They argue that such a view is not only morally questionable, but that it makes God look like some angry ogre who is intent on taking out His wrath on an unwilling third party. What is the truth of this issue?

If there is to be a fair assessment of the concept of Christ’s death, understood in terms of an act of sacrificial substitution which satisfies God’s justice, it will be necessary to provide some background on the various explanatory models which have been used to explain the meaning of Christ’s death. Thus, we invite the reader’s careful attention to the following lines of thought.

**The Models of the Atonement.** Thinkers who have deeply reflected on the meaning of the death of Christ have come up with a number of classic theories or models with which to illustrate the meaning or make sense of Christ’s death. In other words, these models seek to answer the question as to why Christ had to die?

While all of these models have proven helpful to our understanding of the atonement, not any one of them (or even all of them put together) can exhaust the mysterious depths of God’s redeeming act of sacrificial love. Yet they do help us to gather our thoughts in a more focused way as we think about the meaning of Christ’s death.

The most influential models fall into two basic categories: “Subjective” and “Objective.”

*Subjective Models.* Those preferring “subjective” models advocate that the death of Christ was mainly to *demonstrate* differing aspects of

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<sup>8</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 247–248.



*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

God's redeeming love so that a subjective change would be made in the minds and hearts of rebellious sinners.

The best known of the "subjective" models is the "Moral Influence" Theory. The gist of this model contends that Christ died to demonstrate the lengths to which God would go in manifesting love for the sinner. God loved us so much that He would give His Son to die so that His love could be expressed in solidarity with sinners in their terrible plight. We know of no one who would disagree with this point.

What, however, makes this theory controversial is what it denies, not what it affirms. It denies that there was any need for the death of Christ to satisfy God's nature of justice as the prerequisite to His offer of forgiveness. The "Moral Influence" advocates claim that God's love freely or gratuitously forgives sin, and there was no prior need for divine justice to be satisfied in the execution of a just penalty for sin.

These thinkers claim that the necessity for Christ's death is found in God's desire to demonstrate love, not the loving satisfaction of justice through paying the penalty for sin. Thus, the death of Christ is deemed to be only a demonstration of love, not the loving execution of divine justice.

Another well-known "subjective" model is the "Governmental" Theory. This model also affirms that Christ's death demonstrates God's love and that it was not necessary for Christ to die as a substitute to satisfy God's personal wrath or justice. Let's be very clear about this model: it does not deny the need for Christ to die; it simply claims that the death of Christ was not needed by God to satisfy the just wrath which resides within His own nature of love.

This model goes on to claim that the demonstration of God's love is given through a manifestation of God's public justice. What the death of Christ establishes is that God is willing to suffer as much as He has to in order to maintain governmental order in the universe.

Furthermore, it claims that the death of Christ clearly demonstrates that if sinners persist in sin, they will have to pay the consequences of an executionary death. Thus, in love, God warns sinners of the just consequences of persisting in sin and reminds us that He will maintain justice in this universe where He presides as moral governor.

What both of these "subjective" models hold in common is that the death of Christ was (1) a saving necessity and (2) a clear demonstration of God's love; but they also proceed to an important qualification: (3) the death of Jesus was not needed to satisfy God's personal nature of justice or revulsion against sin. Thus, the death of Christ demonstrates the

*WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

greatness of divine love and warns against the deadliness of sin. The advocates of these “subjective” models, however, have expressed deep reservations about the need for the death of a substitute whose sacrifice satisfies God’s nature of loving justice.

*“Objective” Models.* These models of the atonement present explanations of the death of Christ which hold that God in His love needed to take certain actions in order to insure that the provisions for human salvation were fully consistent with the justness and mercy of divine love. Thus, these models demand more than a demonstration of love. They strongly claim that love must act in such a way that justice be fully satisfied before God can offer mercy to sinners.

Therefore, the expression “Objective” refers to what God’s nature of love did for us, not to a demonstration by God that needed to change how we would respond to God within ourselves. Objectively, God had to demonstrate His love in the death of Christ through first judging sin. It is then, on the basis of His just judgment of sin, that God can offer us the fruit of His love. Thus, there was provided a merciful forgiveness for our sins which is consistent with His nature of justice. In other words, the death of Christ objectively changed the human status before God, not just our mental state or attitude towards God.

The most well known of the “Objective” Models is the so-called “Satisfaction” Theory.

The gist of this model goes like this: God’s love offered Christ as the sinners’ substitute in order to pay their just penalty for sin (eternal death). In the course of this substitutionary sacrifice, Christ’s death satisfied divine justice.

The “Satisfaction” model does not deny any of the positive claims of the “Subjective” models, but only disagrees with what they deny. It clearly teaches that God’s love cannot be manifest in mercy unless the justice of His love is fully satisfied in the substitutionary payment of the penalty for sin.

The “Satisfaction” Model has had numerous well-known proponents. Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and Ellen G. White are among the notables most familiar to Protestant and Seventh-day Adventist Christians.

**An Appraisal of the Models.** Now the reader might ask, what do all of these Atonement Models have to do with the Divine Unity of the Godhead? What might our understanding of the death of Christ have to do with the full deity of Christ and His equality with the Father and the Holy Spirit?

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

As already pointed out, all of the advocates of these various models affirm the positive truth of the “Subjective” Models. All agree that divine love needs an extraordinary demonstration by none other than God Himself. And as we have argued previously in this essay, only a fully divine Christ could effectively “demonstrate” God’s love to an alienated world. Furthermore, only the fully divine personal Spirit could “communicate” such a love “demonstration” to the sin afflicted world and the whole universe.

The crucial question, however, is this: Did Christ need to die in order for God’s loving justice to be satisfied? Was the satisfaction of divine justice a necessary demand of God’s love before He could offer His merciful forgiveness to sinners?

We would earnestly urge that God’s loving justice did need to be “satisfied” by Christ’s death as a penalty for sin.

The whole basis for this contention arises out of what we mean by God’s love. We contend that the Bible’s and Ellen White’s understanding of divine love includes a perfect balance of two complementary components—justice and mercy. God’s love has been manifested in the justice of His law and His wrath against sin, not just in a gratuitous (free) offer of forgiving mercy. All agree that God’s love was demonstrated and has been offered through His willingness to forgive sinners. But the question that seems to most urgently cry out for an answer is, what do we mean when we speak of God’s wrath? Can there be any such thing as a “just wrath” in God’s nature of love?

Many are confused by this term “wrath.” It provokes visions of God having some sort of bad temper or fit of revenge against sinners. But such a view terribly misses the point of God’s justice. We would propose that God’s wrath refers to that aspect of His love that can do no other than have an allergic reaction to sin. That is, when God’s love confronts that which is contrary to His just nature, His nature cannot ultimately abide that which is contrary to His core nature of just love!

Yet God’s revulsion is against sin, not sinners. Thus, when God’s just love confronts sin, it is then that the merciful side of His love comes into play. God’s loving mercy simply will not allow Him to give up on those held in sin’s grip without a vigorous offer of redemption. And this arresting offer has been provided through Christ’s merciful offering of Himself to die for our sins.

Thus, His death has provided mercy in a manner that is fully consistent with divine justice. Christ our substitute satisfied God’s just wrath. This satisfaction enables God to be “both just and the justifier of the one

*WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). Therefore, in the death of Christ we have not only a demonstration of God’s justice, but a fully just satisfaction of it so that there can be a fully just offering of divine mercy.

**Who is the Substitute?** The key question that confronts the “Satisfaction” model is who would be an acceptable candidate for the office of atoning substitute? Here is where the issue of the Oneness of the Trinity’s divine nature comes into play.

We have already established that whoever this substitute would be, it could not be a mere human being or some other creature. Only One who is fully God could both demonstrate divine love and capably judge sin in all of its horror. If we claim that it could be some created being (the Arian version of the Son of God) or some being who is only possessed of some sort of derived deity (the semi-Arian view of the Son of God), then we have the odd situation of God being dependent on some creature to demonstrate His love and satisfy His justice. Such a picture very much conjures up visions of a creature begging God for mercy or God demanding justice from some creaturely victim. And finally, God would be taking out His wrath on an innocent third party, and this would certainly raise the question of the justice of such an act.

If, however, the sacrificial victim is both fully God and truly Man, such as we find in Jesus Christ, then we have a new set of possibilities. Think of it this way:

The death of the God/Man, Jesus, is not merely the death of a human or an extra-terrestrial creature, but it is also the death of God! As we pointed out earlier, the death of Christ did require Christ’s deity. This is not to say that His deity literally died, but that it was there in full unity with His human nature. His deity fully consented to His death as a sacrifice for sin. The deity of Christ died a proverbial “thousand deaths” in the death of His humanity!

The offering of Isaac by Abraham provides a touching illustration of the truth we are seeking to clarify (see Gen 22). God brought to bear on Abraham the greatest test imaginable: “Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering” (Gen 22:2).

No one but God will ever be able to fully know the pain that wrenched the heart of the great patriarch! While Abraham was fully obedient to God in this awful test, the grace of God spared him the actual execution of his “only son.” But for all practical purposes, Abraham did sacrifice his son and died a “thousand deaths” himself in the process.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

And thus it was with the deity of Christ: His deity, so bound up with and blended with His humanity, fully shared in the mental anguish of Christ's death so that we can truthfully say that God died for us.

**The Godhead Suffers the Penalty.** And yet, when we say that God died, does this only have reference to the deity of the Son? Most certainly not! Because of their profound unity of triune Oneness in nature, we can say that the Father and the Holy Spirit were also profoundly present and in solidarity with Christ's atoning death. It is this deep and penetrating truth that the Apostle Paul expresses: "Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ . . . that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor 5:18, 19).

So, who is the substitute? Was it simply the Man Christ Jesus? Absolutely not! Did it include the Man Christ Jesus? Most certainly! Is this all that was included in the substitutionary death? Certainly not! Christ's humanity was so bound up with His full deity that we can truly say that when He died, the entire Godhead "was in Christ" and suffered this atoning death.

The deity of Christ is the full deity of the entire triune Godhead. And this amazingly unified self-sacrifice judged sin in such a way that full provision was made for the salvation of the whole human race.

Therefore we can truthfully say that God, in satisfying His nature of loving justice, did not take His wrath out on an innocent third party or some unwilling victim. Rather, in Christ He has satisfied justice through His own willingly given, divine self-sacrifice. Is there any injustice revealed in such a substitutionary satisfaction of God's justice? And is not such a sacrifice the very essence of Triune love for all eternity? It is a love that is mutually self-submissive, self-sacrificing, and overflowing with creative and redemptive consequences to the created beings of the universe.

Furthermore, what has been substituted is not moral character, but the satisfaction of legal requirements that are consistent with the demands of God's nature of love. And once more we hold that God's love involves an outflowing demand for both justice and mercy. And if one is denied, the other becomes meaningless and God's love dissolves into some sort of mushy mercy or untempered wrath.

This great truth has been powerfully expressed by both Ellen White and John R.W. Stott:

Through Jesus, God's mercy was manifested to men; but mercy does not set aside justice. The law reveals the attributes

*WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

of God's character, and not a jot or tittle of it could be changed to meet man in his fallen condition. God did not change His law, *but He sacrificed Himself, in Christ, for man's redemption.*<sup>9</sup>

In order to save us in such a way as to satisfy himself, God through Christ substituted himself for us. Divine love triumphed over divine wrath by divine self-sacrifice.<sup>10</sup>

The great truth of the Holy Trinity and the atoning death of Christ speaks eloquently that God has, in His Son, borne the penalty of sin as our substitute and made an infinitely valuable and powerful provision for the full reconciliation of the entire human race. And if God can make such effective provision for the sin-alienated human race, does this give hope that He can also heal the larger divisions of the universe?

**The Judgment and the Vindication of God.** The problem of evil is one of the most pressing philosophical problems with which religions wrestle. Many individuals have also struggled with this challenging issue. The basic question is this: how is it that a good God who claims to be the loving creator can allow so much evil, suffering, and injustice to spoil the happiness and joy of the inhabitants of the earth?

Once more we would suggest that the doctrine of the Trinity makes a very important contribution to this discussion.

The heart of the Christian answer to the issue of evil and the injustice of so much suffering is this: the ultimate source of the evil and suffering which afflicts the world is sin. Yet according to the Christian understanding of sin and evil, the present scene of suffering is not the whole story. Christians do believe that there will come a day when evil will be eradicated and wrongs righted. But who will get the job done?

Here is where the Trinity reveals profound truth. The solution to the problem of evil has and will continue to come from none other than God Himself in the Person and Work of His dear Son. God did not wimp out over this issue, but has thrust Himself into the battle with suffering and evil. And how has He involved Himself? Through sending His very own divine Son as a solution to the horrid blot which evil has injected into the creation. No creature could fully supply the answer; only God in Christ could.

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<sup>9</sup> White, *Desire of Ages*, 762; emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 159.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

Put another way, God has not sent the angel Gabriel, neither a mere man, nor some un-fallen extra-terrestrial from another world. But He has sent His Son to be the point “Man” in the battle with evil. Thus God has not passed the problem along to any finite being (natural or supernatural) to solve, but in His divine Son He has taken full responsibility.

**The Trinity and the “Great Controversy” Theme.** We would strongly submit that the work of the divine Jesus, in the setting of the “Great Controversy,” provides the only satisfying explanation of the existence of evil and its ultimate eradication from the universe.

The story line goes like this: Sin erupted into God’s heaven in the mysterious and inexplicable rebellion of Lucifer. God bore long with Lucifer, but He was finally forced to banish him from the heavenly courts.

Many have asked why God did not immediately destroy Lucifer and the angels who joined Him in his uprising. The “Great Controversy” answer is that God settled in for the “long-haul” solution rather than a “quick fix” of pure justice. He knew that the un-fallen beings of heaven and the rest of the universe did not then fully understand all the issues involved with Satan’s disaffection. If Satan was to be immediately destroyed, then these beings would serve Him more out of fear rather than out of rationally informed love.

But this sin emergency did not catch the Holy Trinity off guard. A plan had been conceived in which God would send His very own Son to this world to meet Satan in hand to hand combat. Through Christ’s life, teachings, and especially His death, Christ has defeated Satan, atoned for Sin, and exposed Satan for the liar and murderer that he really is.

While Satan was fully defeated in his temptations of Christ and alienated from the affections of the un-fallen beings, there were yet issues still to be clarified. These issues involved the disposition (in the sense of “disposal”) of sin and the salvation of the penitent sinners. These further questions could only be answered in a process of judgment.

And who is the key figure in this vindicating judgment? None other than the Lord Jesus Himself. The Son of God Himself, as both Savior and Judge, will demonstrate in each phase of judgment that He has acted in ways that are completely consistent with His love in the final settlement of each and every case. The cases of both the redeemed and those who are finally lost will all testify that God, in Christ, has acted in ways that will fully justify His final eradication of evil and his salvation of the redeemed.

*WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

Most likely the major reason why there were still issues to be settled after the atoning death of Christ was this:<sup>11</sup>

Satan had originally accused God of being unjust in requiring obedience to His law of love. The basic argument of Satan was that God's justice must be swallowed up by mercy. When Satan was able to seduce human beings to sin, he then argued that God must not extend mercy to them. Since Satan did not receive mercy and was banished from heaven, he claimed that God should not show mercy to Adam and Eve. Thus he turned around his original argument and went on to claim that justice must swallow up mercy.

Satan has continued to use both lines of argument whenever it suits his purposes. But when we come to the great crisis of the Cross, God confronted Satan with a powerful argument: The death of Christ was a perfect manifestation of both justice and mercy. In the death of Christ, as our substitute, God has provided a perfect manifestation of mercy that was profoundly informed by a flinty justice. Yet this justice, conditioned by mercy, has allowed God to forgive sins for Christ's sake. At the same time, Christ's death manifested a perfect justice that is profoundly permeated with mercy. Both of Satan's objections to God's love have been met, and Christ has triumphed. Therefore, why was the controversy continued?

The answer seems to revolve around the question of how God's treatment of sin and sinners would play out after the cross. This is especially crucial when Satan, after the Cross, now goes back full force to his original argument: justice must be completely swallowed up by mercy, and the death of Christ does away with the law altogether.

Yes, it would seem, superficially, that the death of Christ was such a telling and profound manifestation of merciful love that quite possibly God would get out of balance on the mercy side of things in applying the effects of the atonement to each needy human case. But would God's mercy cause Him to go soft on sin and evil?

What the judgment will demonstrate (in all of its phases—pre-Advent, millennial, and at the end of the millennium) is that God has not gotten out of balance. The investigation of all cases, both the redeemed and the lost, will fully demonstrate that Christ's divine love will be consistently and fairly applied.

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<sup>11</sup> What follows is a condensation of Ellen White's explanation of the essential issues at stake in the "Great Controversy between Christ and Satan," found in *The Desire of Ages*, 761-764.



*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

Thus, when the whole controversy is ended, God will be able to banish evil and all of its proponents from the universe. Perfect love will finally vanquish evil, vindicate the faithful, and fully vindicate God as the rightful moral governor of the universe. Then and only then will full and harmonious unity be restored.

The final question is this: Who is it that will have achieved the great victory over evil? It will be clearly seen that God, in Christ, pulled it off through the power of infinite, divine love. And this love is the very heart of the Triune God's nature. At last the intelligent beings of the entire universe will be unified under the governance of the Holy Trinity. One pulse of harmony will beat throughout the vast creation, and all will declare that the Godhead is love!!

**Conclusion**

The God revealed in the Scriptures is composed of Three divine persons who have existed for all eternity in a profound unity, or oneness of nature, purpose, and character. The most arresting implications of this divine unity have arisen out of the affirmation that Christ is just as fully God as is the Father and that the Holy Spirit shares the same and is a Person.

Furthermore, we have discovered that the essential nature of this divine unity is dynamic, creative, out-flowing and self-sacrificing love. This love has been most movingly and ardently revealed in the incarnation of Christ Jesus, the eternal Son of God. In this amazing demonstration of self-sacrificing love, the Good News of God's mercy and justice has been revealed in a victory over temptation, a death which provided forgiveness through the satisfaction of divine justice, in a resurrection that made eternal life possible, and in a heavenly intercession that makes the whole accomplishment of incarnate love always and directly available to the whole world.

The incarnation of the Son, however, did not end God's communications of love to the world. At the ascension of Christ, the Father and the Son dispatched the Third Person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, to be their unique, divine, yet earthly agent of conviction, conversion, comfort, and empowerment for those who respond to God's saving initiative in Christ.

I am convinced that the doctrine of the Trinity is not just a minor quibble over some peripheral doctrine or dubious moral issues. The truths contained in this profound doctrine form the essential basis for the very heart of what is unique to Christianity. Out of our understanding of

*WHIDDEN: GOD IS LOVE—TRINITARIAN LOVE!*

the Trinity emerges our very understanding of the greatest of all biblical notions—“God is love.”

But love is defined not just by feeling or human experience. It is defined by none other than the Creator and Redeemer God of the universe. And the definitions of love that really count are those that reside in the very core or substance of God’s eternal triune nature.

Such love, however, has not simply lain dormant in the inner being of God! To the contrary, it has been revealed in the ways that His nature has created the world, redeemed it from sin, and has continually sought to re-establish His moral governance over the universe. If this projected universal moral governance is not based on the justness of His love, then the universe is in deep trouble.

Without the creative and redemptive initiatives which have their source in the freely manifested and bestowed Love of God, the universe will ultimately sink into moral, social, and physical anarchy. Therefore, only the love that abounds in God’s Triune nature can establish the moral principles that make life orderly and meaningful. Not only do we owe our existence and salvation to God, but we are utterly dependent upon Him for any semblance of moral order (either now or in the world to come).

But this love is not just about tender, merciful sentiment and moral order. There is a flinty side to the Triune manifestation of love. This justice aspect of Triune love has been forced to confront the unspeakable horror of the invasion of evil into the universe created by expansive, divine love. And the question persists: Is there any solution to this indescribably demonic terror?

I would answer in the affirmative: God’s love is not only tender, relational, and personal, but it is also just and sovereign. The latter concepts comfort us with the consolation that God has not allowed and will not allow sin, and its horrible fruit of evil and suffering, to interminably afflict the universe.

While the wheels of His justice have ground slowly, they will ultimately grind to a satisfying finality: He will vanquish these unspeakably blighting terrors by finally taking care of the emergency Himself. In the Person of His beloved Son, God has come and met sin and its attendant terrors head-on and provided the only sensible and adequately powerful response appropriate to the very nature of evil and its causes. God has not ultimately delegated the solution of the sin problem and all its resulting suffering to some creaturely surrogate.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

The Trinity is simply too foundational, too essential, too biblical, and finally, too precious to the very nature of our understanding of God to relegate it to an irrelevant side track. I urge a renewed commitment to the truth of the Triune Godhead and the “Heavenly Trio’s” awesome vision of a loving and benevolent human existence.

In a word, the Trinitarian understanding of God points us to the exalted experience of making Him central to all of our worship, moral formation, service, and witness to the world. Our prayer is that one day soon, we may all be able to stand before the eternal throne and shout “‘Give Glory to Him,’ for the ‘hour of His judgment has’ passed and all is well with the universe.” Even so, Maranatha!

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