The Love of God

by James D. Nickel

In July of 1979, James Nickel ventured into the Philippines. The mountainous regions north of Baguio City form the backdrop of this meditation on the love of God. The first edition was published in *The Living Word* (Winter, 1979).

In the summer of 1979, I journeyed from Hawaii to the Philippines and then to Indonesia. On the trip to the Philippines, I served as a guardian for two of my high school math students, daughters of Youth With A Mission (YWAM) missionaries, and another missionary lass. My task was to lead these girls through airports and arrange the necessary transportation (taxis, jeepneys, and buses) to get them safely to Baguio City, about eight hours north of Manila by road. It was a grueling experience, especially the extra-long flight from Honolulu to Manila on a wobbly, ancient Boeing 707. When this plane finally landed, the exhausted passengers, as one, heaved a sigh of relief and then broke into spontaneous applause!

After arriving in Baguio City, I toured the area for a few weeks. Upon the recommendation of a local missionary, the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) at the local university asked me to teach a class on "How to Study the Bible." They were a great group of young people, as the photo shows. For a couple of days, I joined a YWAM outreach team and visited beautiful backcountry mountain regions terraced with rice paddies.



IVCF, University of Baguio.

One day, we visited a local hospital. We walked down the corridors and through the wards, singing songs about Jesus. Several young children gathered around us. I am not sure if they understood what we were singing, but they were curious. Few of them had ever had the chance to look at white skin so closely. As they surrounded us, we kept singing, and one little girl approached me cautiously. She reached out her hand, and I reached out to her. Immediately, she drew back. She did not yet trust me. We continued singing the praises of Jesus and moved to another ward. Like bees descending upon pollinated flowers, the children followed us. I kept my eye on this little girl, continued singing, and focused my attention on her. She approached me again, and I reached out to her. This time she freely embraced my outstretched arms, and for a few minutes, I held her on my lap. She was starving for love and acceptance.

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The arms of God reach out to a perishing world (John 3:16-17). The song of God is an embrace that fully knows the sinner and the nature of sin. Often, we hesitate in our approach to God *because we do not fully understand the nature of His love.*



Source: iStockPhoto.

Love is the self-imparting quality, the reaching out, at the ground of who God is. Love is God's personal and purposeful desire, seeking, actively and continuously, the highest good for His creation. This action is not based on the way of being of the one being loved, but on the way of being of the One loving. In most human relationships, a person sees something in another that makes them love that person. God loves all without respect of the person, *not* because He sees something in the person that moves Him to love, *but because He is love.* As the Everlasting One, God's infinite love has no beginning or end. For eternity, this self-giving love has existed in Trinitarian fellowship. From before the foundation of the world, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have existed in loving communion.

Because of God's Triune nature, we know God as God in a loving, interpenetrating, self-giving relationship (1 John 4:8-16). The early church fathers invoked a word to describe this relationship, *perichoresis.*[1] Perichoresis is a signpost word that directs our thinking about God to the eternal mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Spirit: God is neither solitary nor divided, but a communion of distinct persons in inseparable, self-giving love. *Perichoresis* describes the in-depth, loving, other-centered fellowship, the hospitality between the Father and the Son in the communion of the Holy Spirit. This relationship is so profound that they mutually indwell one another, making room for one another by making space for the other's indwelling. *Perichoresis* points to the mutual interpenetration of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit without losing personal distinction, i.e., without losing personhood.

God's being is being, not in isolation, but in fellowship. The pristine purity of this communion is what Scripture means by stating that "God is light, God is holy." That God is being in relationship has profound implications for human freedom, implications beyond the scope of this essay. In brief, what stands out as we read Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, is that God seeks to establish a personal relationship with humanity. God the Father has accomplished this relationship through His Son and His Spirit. Although the

[1] *Peri* means "around," while *chora* (noun) means "space" and *chorein* (verb) means "make space."

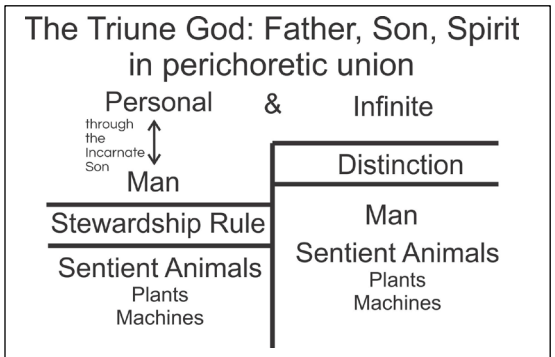
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Trinity initiates this relationship, the One God in the mutual indwelling of three persons, the individual must sustain it with a reciprocal response.[2]

God's love is *so* great, *so* immeasurable, and *so* boundless that He *chose* to create a universe, a habitable planet, and a people upon whom He could freely dispense His love. Years ago, Christian philosopher and apologist Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984) drew a simple diagram. The truth it reveals has never ceased to amaze me. It shows that God is both infinite and personal. Because He is infinite, a distinction, like a gulf, separates God from creation. God existed before creation, and He is separate from creation. God, while infinite, is also personal. Being personal means God communicates. His Trinitarian communication overflows to man. His Trinitarian communication, His self-giving nature, and His personal presence overflow to man because He created man as an authentic person.



The Schaeffer design redesigned/reinterpreted.

This lack of interpersonal commonality separates the rest of creation from God. This unique mutuality exists only between God and man. The infinite, personal, triune God created man for loving fellowship! Stand back and wonder!

When the Apostle Paul meditated upon the love of God, he saw it was higher than the heavens, deeper than the deepest sea, and longer than the expanse of space (Ephesians 3:14-21). The outpouring of His love makes a trillion instances of Niagara Falls a mere drop in a bucket. Unlike the modern conception of love, God's love is holy and stern, indeed, a consuming fire of refinement (Hebrews 12:9; 1 Peter 1:1-9). *The Triune God transforms the loved person into a lover like God.*

Nothing in the created order can separate God's loved man from God's love (Romans 8:31-39). The personal presence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is everywhere, pursuing us wherever we are (Psalm 139). The triune God knows everything there is to know about us, our faults, strengths, sins, hurts … everything. Knowing this, the interpersonal, self-giving God still loves us. We live, move, and exist in this love (Acts 17:24-28).

The preeminent definition of the God who is love, if we presume to define it fully, which we cannot, is revealed in Calvary's Cross. Man, created for love and fellowship, turned from God's life of love into the death of hate (Genesis 3). Instead of drawing life and love from God, man folded into himself, the ultimate act of unlove. Because of his rebellion, man, made to be God's friend, has become God's enemy. In this enmity, a diamond in the rough appears, a sparkling gem whose black background would *never be wondrously appreciated in any other context.*

[2] See John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985) and Timothy A. Dearborn, "God, Grace and Salvation," in *Christ in our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World—Essays presented to James Torrance*, ed. Trevor Hart & Daniel Thimell (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1989), pp. 265-293.

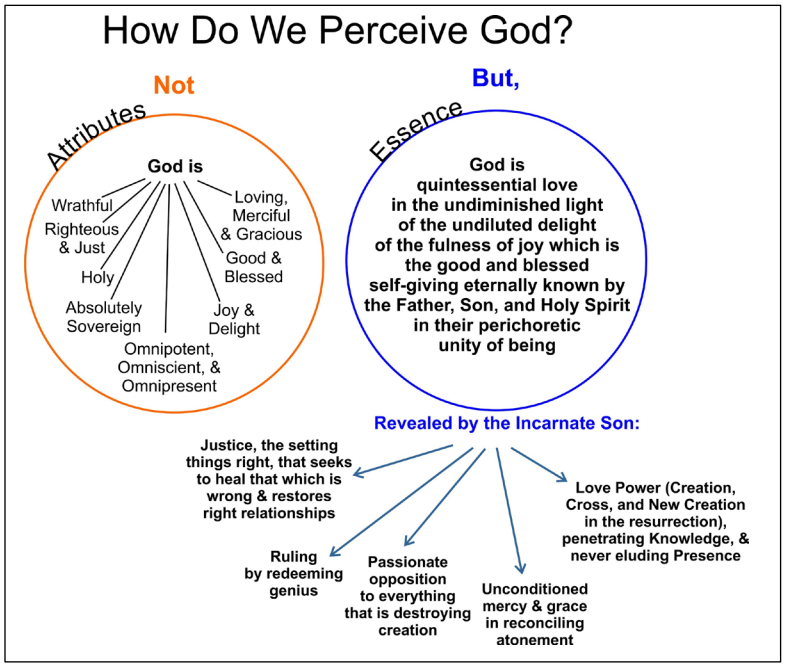
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Man is dead, alienated from the very Life and Love of God (Ephesians 2:1-3). Man runs from the hound of heaven, eyes blinded, ears covered, pounding wildly on the door of perdition. In this state, God, in love, still reaches out; He reaches out to alienated man with the song of the hill of Golgotha (Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:4-10). The person and work of the Incarnate Son of the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ—God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, of the same being as the Father—is not an afterthought; *in the incarnate Son we see the way the Father really is* (John 1:14-18).

> *By this the love of God was manifested to us, that God sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins* (1 John 4:9-10).



The Cross is the revelation of God's tough, transforming love. Because of the Triune God's *sui generis* nature, i.e., the triune God is holy, and in His opposition to all that is destroying man, His image, i.e., the triune God is righteous/just, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit give no quarter to anything that contradicts who He is. He must deal with it. Because death is the wages of sin (Romans 6:23), the Father dealt with this death in the death of His incarnate Son, enveloped inside the communion of the Holy Spirit. Talk about love! This love is not cheap. It is costly because it costs the life of the Father's only begotten Son. When, in the mystery of the new birth that resides inside the resurrection of the Son (1 Peter 1:3), the triune God bestows redemptive love upon and in a lost sinner, if that sinner opens his being to the ever-pursuing hound of the Spirit presenting the work of the Son to the inner man, the miracle of restoration becomes a subjective reality. Once an enemy, now a friend, restored to favor and service to the King of love (John 3; Romans 1:1-6).

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For the person who has responded to God's eternal song of Calvary, for the one who has jumped into "His lap," the full-orbed love of the Trinity provides rest and security for the journey of life, in time and for eternity. Those redeemed by the blood of God's Son learn to judge each circumstance from the perspective of Triune love. They recognize the false premise that love is judged by one's circumstances.

Even in our darkest night, when everything within us cries out that God is not love, His day soon dawns, and we come to realize that every event in life has come to us through the loving hands of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As the Apostle Paul confidently affirmed, "All things work together for good to them that love God and are called according to His purpose … that we might be confirmed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:28-29).

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