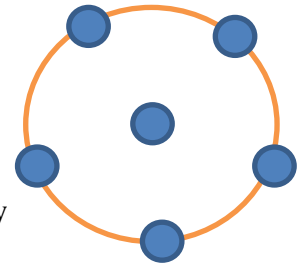


The Christian Life Now, and In the Future

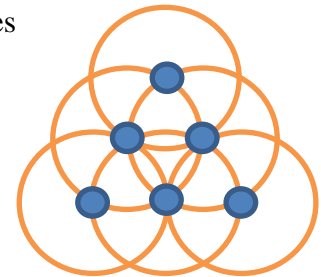
The Bible is often described as a great drama told in four acts. It is the story of God and his dealings with humanity, and the four acts tell the story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. We have spent the last several weeks discussing the reality of our sin and God's solution to it, but now we want to draw the strands of the story together and ask where we belong in it.

Our Tendency towards Self-Centredness

When we look at the world around us and consider our place within the story, we have a very strong tendency to place ourselves in the centre of our own universe and assume that everyone revolves around us. We interact with and invest in other people, but usually only those who will also do something for us. If we were to illustrate it graphically it would look something like this:



Of course, the problem with everyone assuming that the world revolves around them is that it is of course completely impossible. Because if everyone only cared about themselves and expected everyone to make way for them (which is exactly what happened in the Garden of Eden, and with every other sin since then), then no one would ever move at all because everyone would be expecting everyone else to move around and accommodate them. It would look something like this:



Is God Self-Centered?

Often when we think of who God is and what he asks of us, many of us think of him as acting in much the same way. He created us for his glory and he demands our worship, praise, and obedience, so he must be a self-centred God, right?

The Triune God in His Relationships

In order to understand how God relates with his creation, it is helpful to consider how he relates in Himself. For example: if there is no God, then the whole universe is merely the product of blind impersonal forces, and whatever we may feel or think, life has no ultimate meaning or purpose. We sought to disprove this in our earlier discussions.

Alternatively, if there is a God who is all powerful, but he is unipersonal and eternally alone, then he has no need for love, since before creation he would have been alone, and thus his ultimate essence would not be one of love but one of power.

But what if, as the Bible tells us, God is eternally Three? If God is a relational God in his very essence as this would require, then love becomes a necessary and inherent part of His being. This is exactly what the Bible tells is true of God. "God is love," 1 John 4:16. That means that only a Trinitarian concept of God can make any sense of our inner need for relationship and community. We feel this need because a relational God created us for a relationship with Him, and it is only as we enter into relationship with Him that it can be met.

Of all the truths about God revealed to us in the Bible, the doctrine of the Trinity is by far and away the hardest to understand. But even though we cannot possibly wrap our human minds around the idea that God can be both eternally one and eternally three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we should be very careful not to diminish or ignore its truth. In fact, it is only as we consider the eternal Threeness of God that we understand the love and community of God. Consider the testimony of the Bible about how God relates in himself:

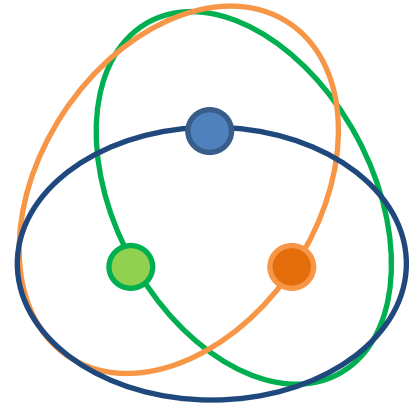
The Son “in the bosom” of the Father – John 1:18 (A metaphor for a loving relationship)

The Spirit glorifies Christ – John 16:14

The Son glorifies the Father – John 17:4

The Father glorifies the Son for all eternity – John 17:5

In other words, the trinity gives us a beautiful image of a perfect community, completely free from selfishness and wholly focused on the other. The ancient Greek church fathers had a word for this: *perichoresis*. It means that the members of the Trinity “dance or flow around the others” in a continual display of self-giving love. If we were to illustrate it graphically it would look like this:



God’s Invitation to Us into Community

The amazing reality of the Christian life is that this is just the kind of community that God invites us into! God invites us to join the dance and move beyond our own lives to centre ourselves on something outside of ourselves. We see this quite clearly when Christ tells of the greatest command of all: Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28-34).

This also provides for us the answer of whether God is ultimately self-centred because he asks us to glorify him. The answer must certainly be no, because in the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ we find the greatest example of all of God moving beyond himself and centering his life around us! (Philippians 2:3-11)

The Wholeness of the Christian Life

If we fail to see this vision of our place within the story and the invitation that God extends to us to join the dance, as it were, then the other common but incorrect view of Christianity is that it serves as a sort of heavenly fire insurance against the flames of hell. In this view Christianity does very little to change my life now, but it protects me from any nasty consequences in the future. This results in a self-centered, stunted form of “Christianity,” and fails to see in the Christian life the glory and possibility for real transformation in this life.

When Christ gets ahold of our hearts and we see the vision of the community of love that he has invited us into, then we are freed to live a whole and complete God-and-others-centred life now, because it is where we can find the most joy. In this true version of the story, Christianity is no longer a list of dos and don’ts, we aren’t saved on our merits and God does not accept us for how good we behave. It is a vision of a community of love that we step into and centre our lives around the God who is worthy of all glory, and our fellow man who is made in the image of God, because it is only in losing ourselves for the sake of God and others that we are able to find any true and lasting joy. (Mark 8:34-38)

The Future for Those in God's Community

Not only does this correct understanding of what God is calling to help correct our understanding of the Christian life now, it also gives a better understating of the future. Many Christians have a myopic vision of the future, seeing heaven merely as a place full of personal, individual delights, a sort of personal paradise. When we understand that God created us for joyous, loving, self-giving community, then we will also have a fuller vision of our future as children of God. Revelation tells us that one day heaven will descend and God will restore perfect harmony here on earth. In other words, contrary to most other world religions, true Christianity is not escapist. God will restore all creation to its former glory, there will be perfect racial, cultural, interpersonal harmony, and we will live forever enjoying the dance that God designed us for (Romans 8:21, Revelation 21:4).