

God's Power of Love in Creation, Cross and Consummation

THE RELATIONAL CREATOR

We may need first to revise any false or deficient understandings of God that remain as a hangover from our sinful and rebellious mindset, and the philosophies that give expression to that. When we view and misrepresent God through the distorted lens of our sin-determined experience and our own misuse of power it is likely that we will think of God as a despot, and see God's power over us as oppressive and abusive. A good antidote to that will be God's revelation of Himself conveyed through the text of Scripture.

Terence Fretheim¹ has drawn attention to elements in the text of Genesis 1 and 2 that depict God, not as a lone, unilateral, all-powerful, independent Deity in absolute control, but rather as a God who keeps company, is intentionally interdependent with what He makes, and shares power with the non-human creation and the human creatures in such a way

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, Elva B. Lovell Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, St Paul, Minnesota, in 'God created the world good, not perfect', a Public Lecture at the Adelaide College of Divinity Campus, Brooklyn Park SA, 20th November 2007.

that they participate with Him in the creative activity, as He comes to work from within the world, rather than upon the world from the outside.

When God said, ‘Let the *earth* put forth vegetation’ (Gen. 1:11), ‘Let the *waters* bring forth swarms of living creatures’ (Gen. 1:20), and ‘Let the *earth* bring forth living creatures of every kind’ (Gen. 1:24), He was not just creating by divine fiat—He was calling upon already-existing creatures to participate in the creative process as material for creating other creatures. Similarly, the ‘vegetation’ was ‘plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it’ (Gen. 1:12)—containing within themselves the means for ongoing creation. So also God spoke directly with His blessing to the sea creatures and the birds: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth’ (Gen. 1:22).

When it comes to the human creation, the ‘Let *us* make . . . in *our* image, according to *our* likeness’ (Gen. 1:26), indicates that God, in the making of human beings, is not speaking or acting as one alone. There is an ‘us-ness’ in God that indicates some kind of relational participation on God’s part, through conversation, dialogue and interaction, in the creation of human beings in God’s image.² The man and the

² Fretheim, with most modern scholars, takes this to be a reference to the ‘divine council’, the ‘myriad of holy ones . . . a host of his own’ (Deut. 33:1), possibly referred to in the designation ‘LORD God of hosts’. Fretheim’s point would be that God somehow involves the divine council with Him in the creation of humankind. (Certainly the influential translation of Isa. 6:3 as ‘God of power and might’—as in *A Prayer Book for Australia*, p. 128—rather than the literal ‘LORD God of hosts’ sadly characterises God wholly in terms of Almightyness, rather than as One who keeps company with others!) Fretheim acknowledges, however, that there is no direct reference in Gen. 1 to any ‘divine council’, and that Gen. 1:27 and 9:6 speak only of the ‘image of God’, not of God and the divine council. This suggests that 1:26 indicates some kind of plurality within God, which has given room for a later Christian Trinitarian interpretation.

*God's Power of Love in Creation,
Cross and Consummation*

woman are also invited to participate in the ongoing creative process by being fruitful and multiplying, filling, subduing (as God Himself did with the 'formless void and darkness' of Gen. 1:2), and having dominion. The sabbath rest of God has a sense of letting the creatures be what they have been created to be, with a bit of breathing space, in mutual appreciation and interdependence with God. In Genesis 2, it would appear that God has come down, in a massive act of divine self-limitation, apparently in human-like form, to get 'dirt under the divine fingernails' in the messy business of forming the man and breathing directly into him 'the breath of life', planting a garden, and getting trees to grow out of the ground. God is remarkably free in bringing each creature to the man, getting the man to name them, and abiding by the man's decision. The man's disinclination to be content to settle for any of the animals as 'a helper fit for him' prompts God to again become involved directly in the messy hands-on surgery that brought forth the woman.

All of this depicts a God not authoritarian and removed, but directly engaged in the hazardous, disorderly, even suffering processes of ongoing creation, drawing both human and non-human elements into participation with Him in the creative action—a God almost prone, if we can put it this way, to incarnation! If we are made in the image of *this* God, then we will be along these lines also.

MUTUAL INDWELLING

We will see that underlying much of our sinful thinking is a preferred sense of being separate, independent, and over against one another as persons, each with our own independent patch of ground on which we stand, from which we attempt to relate with one another, often in a somewhat

Power in Relationships

prickly fashion. This is especially true when we feel under an obligation to others that we want to somehow pay off so we can be free of it. We will see that Jesus has broken through that with something far richer, more generous, and of a much larger—eternal—dimension. Jesus came with God's love—the love that is in God, the love that is from God to us and to the world.

The sinful independent perspective was no part of Jesus' own experience or teaching. No way could Jesus ever contemplate any separateness or over-against-ness between himself and the Father. The reality for Jesus was always:

... I am in the Father and the Father is in me (John 14:10, 11).

The notion of being 'in' another person may seem strange to us, who make a practice of separateness. But do we not get a taste of it in, say, a marriage, or a close friendship? Where one person is so much inside the other person's mind and heart that they know what the other person is thinking and feeling, and what the other person is going to say before they say it? That is something of the order of the oneness in relationship that is between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, that Jesus brought into the human environment, for us to experience with him.

This is the love that Jesus knew, and wanted us to know with him. He spoke of a time when we would experience this:

On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you (John 14:20).

The love-union between the Father and the Son covered and filled the whole of life:

The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands (John 3:35).

*God's Power of Love in Creation,
Cross and Consummation*

The Father holds nothing back of Himself, in His giving to the Son. The Son knows and lives in that love, and loves the Father in the flow of this:

The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing . . . (John 5:20).

Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise (John 5:19).

Everything the Son says and does is nothing other than what the Father says and does, that the Father showers him with, in their closeness with each other:

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me (John 14:10–11).

Making room, giving full hospitality to—this is the meaning of the word *perichoresis*, which the church fathers used to describe this divine mutual indwelling. No less is the Spirit involved:

He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands (John 3:34–35).

Jesus was praying that this love would be known by those who believe in him:

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us . . . so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:21, 26).

When was Jesus praying that? Just before he went to the cross to give his life.

THE POWER OF GOD'S LOVE IN THE CROSS

Jesus had said that when he was 'lifted up' on the cross to die (compare John 12:32–33), then we would see and know the love of the Father and the Son:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me (John 8:28).

In the action of the cross is focussed all the love of the Father for the Son:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father (John 10:17–18).

Jesus is doing this freely, without obligation, in full obedience. Here also is where we find the love of the Son for the Father:

... I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father (John 14:31).

What is it about the action of the cross that makes it the ultimate expression of the Son's love for the Father? Here the Son sees the Father doing what the Father has ever been doing: giving Himself, holding nothing back—as he has always been towards His creation (as in 2 Sam. 23:1–7)—but doing it now in a way that He has never done before: giving His all in His Son, so that there was nothing more that He could give: 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us' (Rom. 8:32). Jesus is loving the Father by joining in this action of the Father's heart and doing likewise.

*God's Power of Love in Creation,
Cross and Consummation*

Why does the Father love the Son as he lays down his life on the cross? Because there the Father sees the Son doing what has always been in the Father's heart—giving his all, holding nothing back, until there was nothing more that he could give, in the action with the Father of the Father's love for us.

How is this love for us? Well:

... God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:16–17).

Here we were, condemned and perishing, and here was God, giving His Son to that condemnation and death, so that we might live. What would have happened if He had not done that? We would still be stuck in all our sin, and we would end up in hell. What if God had said: 'I love My Son more than I love you, so I will save him from death, and you can go on to hell'? He didn't say that. So what was He saying? In giving My Son up to that condemnation and death for you, I am loving you no less than I love My Son! This shows us that true love is without measure—it cannot be 'more' or 'less'. If it were 'more' or 'less' towards one or another, it would not be true love.

This was the love that Jesus prayed we would know and be in, as he went to the cross:

Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:24–26).

Power in Relationships

This love-union, this mutual indwelling, this total self-giving, leaves no room for any separateness or over-against-ness, and dispels any notion that the Father was doing anything unto-ward with regard to the Son, or the Son was doing anything inappropriate with regard to the Father.

This love, displayed and communicated on the cross, is the true love, and the true power. This is the love that we are now in, if we belong to Christ through faith. We are still to be mindful of temptations to pride, and to make due provision against it:

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned (Rom. 12:3).

We are also to resist the tendency, that our flesh is still prone to, of seeking to control others:

Do not lord it over those in your charge . . . (1 Pet. 5:3).

To live in this love of Christ is the willing abandonment of this kind of power-play:

Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:42–45).

It would appear that the power of God's love in the action of the cross sets our sinful notions of power on their head. What, then, is the nature of this power of love?

*God's Power of Love in Creation,
Cross and Consummation*

THE POWER OF GOD'S VULNERABILITY

When Paul the apostle wanted to show the Philippians how they were to relate with each other, he pointed them to the coming of the Son of God in human flesh, and to the action of the cross:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was [literally, being] in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness (Phil. 2:3–7).

When Jesus was ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit’, when from his eternity as God he submitted himself to the miniscule and entirely vulnerable processes of human conception, and consented to be a naked child coming out from between his mother’s legs, that was no come-down, no great condescension; that was fully expressive of God’s own self-emptying and self-giving.

When God created the world, the universe, it was a fearful hazard. He could have just stayed as God—and that would have been fine—rather than going to all this trouble, with the possibility that it could all go badly wrong. But that is not the way God is: God poured Himself out in the action of creation, so that it would not be just God and that’s all, hanging on to all that God has and is and keeping it to Himself. God made it so that there is God and others—God poured out Himself from Himself into others at His own expense.

We hold back from that kind of risk, and to that extent we are not Godlike. God continues every day to pour Himself

Power in Relationships

out for His creation. Remember David's great revelation as to how God rules His universe: like the sun coming up in the morning and like the rain on the grass—not by exploiting it but by serving it for its good—and ridding His creation of evil like taking a crowbar to a heap of thorns and bundling them into the fire (2 Sam. 23:1–7).

P. T. Forsyth said that the coming of the Son of God in human flesh was not contrary to God's Almightyness, but was the ultimate expression of it. If God could not enter into humanity in that way, His power would be fatally limited 'to all that is outside human nature'. 'The power to limit Himself into man is an essential part of His infinite power.'³ Because he was in the form of God—as the very expression of being in the form of God⁴—that is what the Son of God did. He was 'conceived by the Holy Spirit'. It was a true act of God.

Self-emptying is one thing, self-humbling is another. The Son of God did not humble himself to be born in human likeness. Human beings are in the image of God! God's own offspring! So it is no come-down, no humiliation, for the Son of God to enter humanity—it is of a piece with how God is. But Paul then goes on to say:

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross (Phil. 2:7–8).

The humbling is the ultimate extension of the self-emptying—going all the way with it. God has created human beings to be other than Himself, but to be related with God after His

³ P. T. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, NCPI, Blackwood 1987 (1957), p. 33.

⁴ Note that there is no 'though he was' in the original Greek of Phil. 2:6. That has been inserted by the translators—an indication of how entrenched the misconceptions of our sinful human mindset are?

*God's Power of Love in Creation,
Cross and Consummation*

image. Rather than pouring ourselves out, in the way God's love operates, we have instead set ourselves up to grasp to ourselves and exploit all that is. God, to see His creation through to how He intended it to be, consistent with Himself, then goes on in the way of humbling Himself: exposing Himself to the evil, entering in to the pain and guilt and shame, not holding back. To be a naked baby is one thing, which is innocent enough, but to be stripped naked as an adult man, and hung up in public view on a cross—that is humiliation. And it took all the resources of the eternal Spirit of God to carry that through to the end in the way that gave that full expression of God as He is.

This love is true power:

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9–11).

Our natural sinful tendency is to see Christ's exaltation as the opposite of his humbling, as if the Father were giving Christ some consolation prize or compensatory reward for what he has gone through. Paul's point in saying 'Therefore . . .' is that the humbling itself was the greatest thing, the point of highest exaltation, that which invests Christ with Lordship over all. We still tend to see power as opposed to weakness. Paul, however, says that Christ 'was crucified in weakness' (2 Cor. 13:4), and that this weakness itself is 'the power of God'—'God's weakness is stronger than human strength' (1 Cor. 1:23–25).

Power in Relationships

It is the strength of this weakness and humility that is at work in us, and that we carry into our relationships with one another:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12–13).

LOVE'S WORD

This understanding of the power of God's vulnerability in love at the cross, and its consistency with the whole of God's creating, redeeming and glorifying action, came to me in poetic form after I had accepted that Jesus was subject to the wrath of God on humanity in his abandonment and suffering on the cross.⁵ This poem was written during a retreat in 1982:

Word into darkness
(Spirit holding)
life unfolding
taming chaos
naming me.
Silence broken
—One has spoken—
Love's risk.

Word in outer darkness
hung
unsung
wearing sin
bearing—me.
Through the paining
Spirit straining—
Love's separation.

⁵ See further: Martin Bleby, *The Vinedresser: An Anglican Meets Wrath and Grace* (NCTM, Blackwood, 1985).

*God's Power of Love in Creation,
Cross and Consummation*

Word returning to the Father
glory taking
making sons
waking singing
bringing me!
Spirit filling
all things thrilling—
LOVE'S ACHIEVEMENT.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

- *Reflect on the Genesis 1 depiction of God 'as a God who keeps company, is intentionally interdependent with what He makes, and shares power with the non-human creation and the human creatures in such a way that they participate with Him in the creative activity, as He comes to work from within the world, rather than upon the world from the outside'. How is this different from the understanding of God that we have held previously? What does it tell us about the nature of humanity made in the image of this God?*
- *What did Jesus mean when he said: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:10, 11)? How does that affect the notion that on the cross the Father was doing anything untoward with regard to the Son, or the Son was doing anything inappropriate with regard to the Father?*
- *What is the power of God's vulnerability in love at the cross? What difference might that make in our relationships with each other?*