

“The Son of God”

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“...God,” we read, “so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (John 3:16-17).

This is the second sermon in our series on the Divine Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The appearance, especially in the Gospel of John, that God has a son who is somehow separate from Himself, whom He sent to suffer and die for the sins of the human race, is, in one light, fairly compelling. The fact that this Son said, “I and My father are one” (John 10:30), and that “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9) is often explained as meaning that they are one in their plan or purpose, though still separate entities. It gets a little more complicated, however, when the Lord says, “...I am in the Father and the Father in Me” (John 14:11).

What are we to make of these teachings, among the many others that also seem to suggest a Divine Being somehow divided into separate personal forms?

Of course in the New Church we have a simple explanation, which is that the Father is to the Son as the soul of anyone is to his or her body. In other words, the Lord, Jesus is the embodiment of the Infinite love and wisdom in a human form that we can comprehend, believe and follow. Remember the beginning of John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” These verses make it clear that Jesus is not separate or a different “person,” but the same person taking on a physical mind and body in order to function in the natural world in a way that allows conscious human interaction with Him. This is why we call it the *incarnation* of God. In fact, the appearance of the Infinite in a finite human form really makes God a “person” for the first time. Until then His Divine Humanity could only be *represented* by flawed human agents – men or angels – in the natural or spiritual world.

So the real question is why this relationship of His soul and body is described as if they were a Father and Son. After all, in our world fathers and sons ARE distinct persons.

To answer the question we really need to ask another question, namely, if He was not the Son of God, who’s Son was He? Everybody has a father, right? In fact there are times in the Gospels when the Lord does call Himself the *Son of Man*, in a sense highlighting His dual nature, since He was born of a finite human mother. But even this term needs some explanation because it doesn’t really refer to the mother, Mary. It refers to the Word of the Old Testament, that is, the Word as it was clothed in appearances of truth accommodated to natural, worldly human minds.

OK, that was a mouthful, so let’s take it slowly. There are, for sure, many examples in the Word where ordinary people are called sons of man because they are, well, *human*. But when you finally come to Ezekiel you see the term used over 90 times to refer specifically to the prophet as a prophet, thus as a representative of God giving instruction to the people of Israel. In that sense

he is the Word made flesh before the coming of the Lord in His *own* body of flesh. And Jesus then calls *Himself* the Son of Man specifically referring to this teaching because He is the ultimate Prophet who fulfilled all the teachings of the Word in His own life.

But now, consider this statement in the Gospel of Matthew:

“Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come” (12:32).

Since the Lord is called the Son of God (in the Gospel of Luke 1:35) specifically because of the Holy Spirit “overshadowing” Mary and causing her to conceive, this passage contrasting an offense against the Son of Man with an offense against the Holy Spirit highlights the difference between the Son of Man and the Son of God. One is the WORD with all its puzzling, often troubling stories which we can certainly be forgiven for questioning or misunderstanding, and the other is the Divine Itself, the very *Spirit* of truth, clothed at last in His own body.

So we return to the distinction between God, our heavenly Father, and the Son of God. This is the thing that confuses people. Given that Isaiah plainly said that the Son who would be born to redeem and save Israel would be called “Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6), given that God said He is the only Savior, and besides Him there *is no Savior*” (Isa. 43:3,10,11), and given that His name was called “Immanuel, which is translated, ‘God with us’” (Matt. 1:23), *what exactly is this distinction, and why is it important?*

To understand it, like a thousand other teachings in the Word, it is absolutely critical that we recognize the symbolic language used throughout the Scriptures. In that language the word, father, does not just mean a person any more than the names of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Samson, Saul, David or Solomon just refer to people in an ancient story. In fact each one of these names, like the names of all the sons of Israel, is a composite of certain Hebrew words that describe the circumstances of their stories. Isaac, for example, means “to laugh,” David means “beloved,” Reuben, Simeon and Levi are names that mean “to see, to hear, and to be conjoined” respectively. Thus every one of these people represents some essential quality or characteristic that is part of our spiritual development, from which we learn about ourselves and the Lord.

So in the Word the term, father, refers to the Divine love, the origin, the source, the cause, the very soul of all creation, and the term, Son, refers to what proceeds from that origin and cause, which is the Divine truth or wisdom that makes love visible, at least to the sight of our understanding. The symbolism works because we often see the characteristics of a father in his sons, and we know that it is the seed of the father that fertilizes and causes the mother’s egg to grow, giving *form* to what otherwise is an invisible string of DNA. Again, as we noted last week, the Father in this case is Infinite and so can’t be visualized in ANY form except representatively, or in a body shaped by the Divine as its soul. But, you know, even now we do not see the Son of God as a physical Human Being; we don’t even have any authentic images of His face or any other physical features; what we *have* is the written record of His words and actions, which constitute the truths of the New Testament. So the Son of God that we worship is the love of God *made visible in the truths that He taught*, that we can “see” and understand, respect and obey.

Such is the New Church concept. And it beautifully affirms what is said in John many times in

many different ways, namely, that God the Father is IN the Son, that he who sees the Son sees Him who sent Him, that He and the Father are ONE, that the reason He came into the world was “to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37), and that he who loves the truth loves what is good.

In contrast to this many churches teach that God from eternity had a Son who was separate and distinct from Himself, and that He sent this Son into the world to atone for the accumulated sins of the human race by offering Himself as a sacrificial “scapegoat” to appease His own Divine wrath, that is, His own eternal requirement of justice. Because it is a substitutionary sacrifice in which the real guilty parties are relieved of any consequences for their sin, and a perfectly innocent but loving martyr takes all the blame, this is called a “vicarious” atonement, vicarious meaning done or experienced by someone other than the person who gets the credit for it.

Now, to be fair, there are some teachings that support this idea. One is that we can’t do any good of or from ourselves; only the Lord can do what is genuinely good in us and for us. It seems logical to say, therefore, that all we can do to obtain salvation is to accept and believe that He does it all. The trouble is that logically even this acknowledgment ultimately would come from Him, and so in the end what we’re left with is predestination, because we really have no choice in the matter. God elects whom He elects, and everyone else goes to hell.

The New Church response to this is also Scriptural in that the Lord clearly *commanded* us to love Him, and to do so implies that it is possible. But a careful reading of the Gospel shows that we love Him by **DOING** what He taught. When we **DO** it – by our free choice as if of ourselves – we provide a foundation on which He can build, an orderly life that can receive His love and blessing. Yes, He does the real work, but we have to co-operate in order to get the benefit of it.

Another set of teachings that seems to support the vicarious atonement doctrine is represented by the saying in John, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). This harks back to Isaiah, chapter 53, made famous in the libretto of Handel’s “Messiah,” where we read,

“Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:4-6).

These passages seem to suggest that He suffered so that we don’t have to. But in fact this is not what they really say. First of all, the Lamb of God does not “take away” the sin of the world; the Greek work here means that He *bears* or *carries* that sin, which is to say that He suffered because people made Him suffer (D. Lord 15). They made poor choices; they threatened, accused and condemned Him; they even made Him carry His own cross. So He bore, He carried all the grief and sorrow that **ONLY** He in His Divine love could feel for the human race as they betrayed Him and rejected His pure love and wisdom and blessing.

And yet, we read, “by His stripes (that is, by His torture) we are healed.” What does **THAT** mean? Well, sadly, it is an undeniable truth that unless evils and falsities are allowed to break out and be seen for what they are, we can never understand them or address them, we can never

appreciate the harm they cause, and we can never be saved from them. They will fester under the surface of our conscious life like gangrene or cancer until it is too late. In fact the Lord allowed Himself to be crucified NOT to appease the wrath of an angry, jealous Father, but to allow the evils and falsities of human arrogance to be exposed *and to overcome those evils and falsities in the resurrection* so that once and for all we could fully appreciate His Divine love, mercy, patience, forgiveness and wisdom. Remember His words to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” (Luke 24:26). So He also said, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission (i.e., forgiveness) of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Ibid, vv. 46-47).

Just think of it! At the crucifixion all the disciples – not just Judas, nor Peter who denied Him three times, but **all** the disciples had forsaken Him and fled (Matt. 26:56, Mark 14:50). Yet here He was, in all His glory, forgiving them, teaching them, breaking bread with them, reassuring them, *servicing them* breakfast by the sea. How could they not be filled with gratitude and awe, *and with fervent zeal to share this incredible gift with others?* How would YOU feel if you had betrayed your best friend, a completely innocent friend, who then suffered incredible torment because of you, and yet when it was all over he simply blessed you, and comforted you, and explained why he had allowed these things to happen, and then, even more incredibly, entrusted you to share His message of love and forgiveness to all who would listen? Once you got over your embarrassment and shame wouldn't you be moved to tears with relief and with renewed commitment to this man?

So the Lord in His wisdom and mercy allowed all this evil to attack Him, in fact He subjected Himself to the very same violence that the people had inflicted on the Word by abusing and contradicting it, so that He could **do what no other man could do**, that is, **correct the falsity** and **overcome the abuse** so that all on earth and in the heavens and hell might know the truth, and that the truth, if we live according to it, might make us free. So He redeemed us, indeed He paid a heavy price, giving His **life** in this world, as He said, “a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28).

But note, He didn't give His *death* as a ransom, He gave His *life*, that we might be led and taught by the judgments of His mouth, the mercy of His grieving love and the power of His work. So He said, “I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15). And again, “If you love Me, Keep My commandments, and I will pray the Father, and He will give you **another Helper**, that He may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you, and will be in you” (John 14:15-17). Who is this Helper? – Still another person in a trinity of persons? NO! It is the Lord Himself coming to us again and again in the spirit of His truth, the understanding of His Word. Remember, He said, “**I** will not leave you orphans, **I** will come to you” (Ibid, v. 18). We will review the teachings about the Holy Spirit next week.

Amen.

Lessons: *Isaiah* 40:3-5, 10-11 & 61:1-3
Children's talk on “the arm of Jehovah”

John 1:1-14 & 3:16 and *True Christian Religion* #84