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# A TRINITARIAN VIEW OF THE CROSS: RELATIONAL DYNAMICS WITHIN THE GODHEAD

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Ever since Georg Hegel, Karl Barth, and Karl Rahner, the doctrine of the Trinity has enjoyed a recent surge in theological reflection. However, the issue of the Trinity *at the specific moment of the Cross*—where the purpose of the Incarnation climaxes—has been rarely touched.

There have been a few notable contributors, such as Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel, but otherwise the topic, for the most part, has been left alone. Many reasons exist for this void; however, many abound for why we should penetrate the depths of the relational Trinitarian dynamic present at the Cross.

First, the Cross represents one of the primary modes of revelation concerning the triune God. Second, our knowledge of the nature of God can be greatly enriched by a deeper understanding of what happened at the Cross. And, finally, the realization of the magnitude of what transpired at the Cross is more than worth the effort in terms of teaching and preaching value.

This article, then, will examine three significant biblical passages on the issue of the Trinity at the Cross, explore the relevant theologians on the topic, and offer feedback on the proposals of these theologians in the discussion. Further, I will make one addition concerning the current discussion on the role of the Holy Spirit at the Cross.

**Jesus at Gethsemane**

Let us first look at some key biblical passages that illuminate the activity of the Trinity at the Cross.[1] A few portions of Scripture stand out: the account of Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane, His cry of dereliction on the cross, and Hebrews 9:14.

Howard Marshall places the real struggle for Jesus at the moment of His prayer to the Father when He asks that the cup be taken from Him. Here Jesus comes to terms with His fate, so to speak—and, having done so, is then able to endure with incredible poise what lies ahead.[2] For Marshall, this makes sense because, after this moment, Jesus' will is in total alignment with the Father's and He sets His eyes on the goal for which He came. In other words, this change does not diminish the utter desolation and anguish of the Cross but simply portrays Jesus' mind as made up.[3]

Peter Bolt notes the allusion to Psalm 42 in Jesus' "agitation" and "distress," with the "where-is-your-God" cry asked by the psalmist.[4] Bolt explains this instance as when Jesus prepares for the cosmic battle, which mandates some kind of disruption between himself and the Father.[5] Not only must there be a disruption, but the future of the entire world, the future of the human race, our whole existence is wrapped up in this passionate exchange between the Son and His Father.[6]

John Nolland believes, however, that Jesus made up His mind well before the prayer at Gethsemane. Rather, while the disciples at the Last Supper participated in the benefits of Christ's death, Jesus drank the cup of commitment—commitment to His coming death on the cross.[7]

Further clarification of what unfolded in Jesus' prayer can be gleaned from the imagery of the "cup." In the biblical world, the cup could convey the benefits that God provides, such as love, comfort, strength, and fellowship (Pss. 16:5; 116:3; 1 Cor. 10:16).[8] The cup can also represent, and more often does, the judgment of God upon sin (Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15, 16; Eze. 23:31–34; Mark 14:36).[9] In these examples, God punishes people by making them drunk (a seemingly mild consequence for many). In context, however, God plays the role, not of the generous host who welcomes guests but, rather, as the One who hands down destruction.[10] Thus, when Jesus cries out to the Father to take away the cup, it must be seen as the growing anguish (emotion) from the full weight of the Father's anger against sin that will soon fall on His shoulders.[11]

**Jesus on the Cross**

Jesus knows this anger, because He experienced it himself on the cross when He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Many have struggled with the meaning of this cry. Donald Hagner laments the impossibility of understanding what this meant to Jesus; for, he asserts, these words contain one of the most impenetrable mysteries of the entire Gospel narrative.[12] Hagner further says that, perhaps, the words should stand as they are—stark in their incomprehensibility to our finite minds.[13]

However, much can be deduced from the cry. For instance, there's the obvious connection to Psalm 22 from which Jesus quotes.[14] Indeed, these words of Jesus have had many and varied interpretations, but no substantial reasons exist for not reading the pessimistic pathos literally in which Jesus expresses torment on account of the Father forsaking Him.[15]

**The Holy Spirit and Calvary**

Thus far, the first two passages have dealt specifically (perhaps not as specific as we would like) with the relationship between the Father and the Son at the Cross.

Hebrews 9:14 gives us an insightful glance into what or where the Holy Spirit was during this moment: "the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God."[16] Here the Holy Spirit is seen as continuing His empowering work that had been carried out throughout Jesus' ministry, even up to Christ's death.[17] This must be seen as a mission of the Holy Spirit, that is, to empower Christ, as He does all believers, yet on the scale of *par excellence*.

This two-directional hermeneutic (Christ's and the Spirit's missions) does not threaten Christology or the Cross, when positioned within the salvific paradigm of "from Father back to Father."[18] In fact, the Spirit's mission here must be interpreted this way or the Trinity collapses on the side of subordinationism.[19] McDonnell writes, "both Christ and the Spirit are at the center but in different ways: Christ as the 'what' and the Spirit as the 'how.' "[20] This fact serves as a pivotal reminder that as the Christ, God in the

flesh, needed the Holy Spirit to walk with Him daily for ministry, so do we, but ever more so.

**The Trinity and Calvary**

After this brief overview of three main texts concerning the personal relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit at the Cross, we can unpack the dynamic a little more.[21] Moltmann sees both the Father and the Son suffering at the Cross and detects that the divine consistency is at stake, the inner life of the Trinity. At the Cross, the self-communicating love of the Father becomes infinite pain over the death of the Son. Likewise, the responding love of the Son converts into infinite suffering over being forsaken by the Father. What happens at the Cross reaches into the very depths of the infinite Godhead and, therefore, puts its impress on the trinitarian life of God for eternity.[22]

Thus, for Moltmann, an almost drastic shift exists from *apatheia* (the idea that God cannot suffer) to suffering, which becomes the foremost aspect of the trinitarian doctrine. Moltmann claims that a God who cannot suffer cannot love, and that a God who cannot love is a dead God. Thus, a self-imposed limitation surfaces that makes the relationship within the Godhead, and with us, meaningful. God has something at stake in all this.[23] Further, this Godforsakenness and patricompassionism are not merely mirages with which to identify, but rather events that take place *in* God, a dialectic where He takes everything of the "far country" (all that is opposed to God) into himself in order to overcome it.[24]

Moltmann is not the only theologian taking up the theme of suffering at the Cross. Hans Urs von Balthasar contends that, in some way, all Three Persons of the Trinity suffer at the Cross.[25] For Jüngel, there seems to be an implicit suffering in the very fact that God is love. Barth exclaims, unconditionally, that, as a sinner, God rejects Jesus. Jesus stands not only under the wrath of God, but because wrath is necessary, Jesus stands under God's sentence and judgment. [26] Further, He knows that He must perish; He considers that He must die and, thus, He is not merely in the grip of death, but from the depth of His election, He must constantly hear the voice that reinforces the knowledge that He is in the grip of death, and that He is lost.[27] The impact of this constant inner voice must *not* be understated or neglected in the light of Him being the One and only elect of God in such communion with the Father and Spirit that this would indeed be a severe struggle within the inner-trinitarian life.

The struggle is clearly felt not only on one side but among both the Father and the Son. Gérard Rossé points to the non-intervention of the Father on the cross as a revelation of himself, not despite His silence but because of His inactivity. The abandonment of the Son should be seen positively as the culminating expression of the Father's love for the Son.[28] By not intervening at the Cross, the Father actually carried out the sacrifice that Abraham almost did with Isaac, an act that certainly caused the Father great suffering. John 3:16 says that God the Father *gave* His only Son, and Brown notices that in this verse, the role of the Father becomes prominent.[29] In this act, the Father gives His Son and risks, as Moltmann would argue, the very consistency of the inner-trinitarian life itself.

The Holy Spirit also takes part in this risk during those few short hours at the Cross. If the Father risks something by standing by idly, then the Holy Spirit has just as much at stake. Jüngel sees the Holy Spirit at the Cross as the bond of love that holds the Trinity together.[30] At such a crucial time, when the unity of the Godhead is most at jeopardy because of the necessary abandonment, the Spirit becomes the link, the glue that preserves the blessed unity of the Trinity.[31] With Moltmann, one finds that the Spirit is the link, but he gives more focus to the communion of the wills as pointing to the Divine Unity at the Cross. Also, the Spirit for Moltmann plays a vital

role in the action of bringing all God-forsakenness *into* the divine being and transforming it.[32] Thompson gives a warranted critique of Moltmann on this point, recognizing that for Moltmann the triune God is an evolving subject who in Moltmann's theology borders on tritheism (three separate gods).[33]

We move back now to Hebrews 9:14. If Jesus was empowered throughout His ministry from baptism through the healings, teaching, and raising others from the dead, then surely the Holy Spirit contributed more in the ministry of the Cross than simply being glue. Rather, without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit living within Jesus, and in complete unity, perhaps Christ would have succumbed to pushing the cup aside. In all Three Persons, the total self-giving is so evident that, in this case, the Holy Spirit gives of himself fully to the Son in order to strengthen Him for what lays ahead—the Cross. Thus, while the Spirit may be the bond of love between the Father, Son, and Spirit at the Cross,[34] He also became the empowering Presence within Jesus that enables His humanity to endure the cup of suffering and triumph faithfully.

**Conclusion**

A trinitarian look at the Cross gives us an insight into the community that is the Trinity, and this can serve as the paradigm for our communal thinking (eternal self-sacrifice). A beneficial approach to the issue of the Trinity at the Cross is one that adopts a modified Moltmannian view,[35] which takes more seriously the work of the Holy Spirit at the Cross. The components of Jesus' bearing the cup of suffering and the anguish it caused Him, the suffering of the Father in giving up His one and only Son, and the Spirit's empowering bond are all pivotal factors in God's work of redeeming a lost race. At the Cross we have the clearest exposition of who our sacrificing God truly is.

As Alister McGrath stated, the Cross forces us to make a decision: To seek God here, in the apparent defeat of the God-man and abandonment of the Son by the Father at the Cross, or to seek Him elsewhere.[36]

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[1]All Scripture quotations have been taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

[2]I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, eds. I. Howard Marshall & W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 828.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Peter G. Bolt, "The Cross: Where God Comes Close," in *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 109.

[5]Ibid., 108, 109.

[6]Ibid., 110.

[7]John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, eds. I. Howard Marshall & W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 1099.

[8]*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 186, s.v. "Cup."

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid. It should also be noted that those who do not take Jesus' sacrifice seriously or reject it completely will drink the cup of God's judgment (1 Cor. 11:27–30; Rev. 17:3–6; 18:6–8).

[12]Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, eds. Bruce Metzger, et al. (Dallas, TX: Word, Inc., 1995), 844, 846.

[13]Ibid., 846.

[14]Raymond E. Brown, "Jesus Crucified, Part Three: Last Events, Death," in *The Death of the Messiah,* vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1044.

[15]Ibid., 1047. Brown in typical fashion gives the gamut of arguments against the literal interpretation of which none are compelling. Most frequent is that Jesus is quoting the psalm and the listener/reader should immediately know and jump to the last verse of the psalm. While this hermeneutic principle is valid in some New Testament instances, in this case it would necessitate the reader recognizing the one verse as a psalm, knowing which psalm, know the

entire psalm, detect in the agonizing reference an allusion to the triumph, and finally, in essence, read the exact opposite meaning into the words than what is there. Further, taking the words literally does not in any way diminish Christ's deity. Bolt also gives a good summary of the attempts to evade the literal meaning in *The Cross From a Distance*, 127–30. As does John Stott—pointing out the claims that the cry is simply a cry of anger, unbelief, or despair; that it is a cry of loneliness; or the common, cry of victory. John R. W. Stott, "Looking Below the Surface," in *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 63–84. Moltmann in a different approach gives six answers to the question of where God is during the cry. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 151–211.

[16]It is no coincidence that in regards to the Holy Spirit, we are nearly relying on one word, *dia,* for our perspective of the action of the Holy Spirit at the Cross. For of the Three Persons of the Trinity the Holy Spirit is the One who is completely intangible and unseen, distinguished from the humanity of Jesus and the frequent interaction with YHWH, the Father of Jesus. This study is somewhat of an effort to find what the role of the Spirit was in the moment of the Cross. Precious few ideas have been offered, namely from Moltmann and Jüngel.

[17]Anthony D. Palma, "The Spirit and the Messiah," in *The Holy Spirit: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield, MO: Logion Press, 2001), 51.

[18]Kilian McDonnell, "A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit?" *Theological Studies* 46, no. 2 (June 1985): 210–212.

[19]Ibid., 226.

[20]Ibid., 227.

[21]I will from here on assume the position with Moltmann, Barth, Jüngel, and others that the Trinity is the mystery of salvation and the salvation comes through the Cross and thus the Cross is the basis/key for understanding the nature and acts of the triune God. However, His being is not determined by these acts at the Cross as others will say.

[22]Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 173.

[23]Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 38.

[24]Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1974); John Thompson, "A Trinitarian Theology of Cross and Resurrection," in *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 61. Others would disagree with Moltmann on this point of God taking into Himself the opposition. For example, Barth in dealing with the *communicatio idiomatum* thought that God had in His nature those aspects which enable Him to remain Himself while entering into the human predicament as reconciler. Jüngel then would say that "God is able to suffer and die
as man," while remaining ontologically Himself. Quoted in Thompson, 56, 57.

[25]Although for Balthasar the nature of God's love is also transformed at the Cross, becoming somehow greater, at least enriched. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 136–147.

[26]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.W. Bromiley, vol. 2, pt. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956).

[27]Ibid.

[28]Gérard Rossé, *The Cry of Jesus on the cross: A Biblical and Theological Study* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 133.

[29]Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2d ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 147.

[30]Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983).

[31]Badcock asserts that Jüngel's approach in defining God at the event of the Cross is both the strength and the weakness of his argument. For the relation between the immanent and economic Trinity must be recognized, but to say that God is ontologically defined by actions in time and space is to make Him contingent on His own creation. Moltmann also makes clear in his writings that the triune God is to some extent not complete until the end. Gary D. Badcock, "The Holy Spirit in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology," in *Light of Truth & Fire of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 170–211.

[32]Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 122–128.

[33]Thompson, 51.

[34]I think it better to simply add the Holy Spirit to the objects being bonded. Then there is a self-inclusive union and no implicit diminution. It is recognized that there is not intended subordination but the language is hard to escape
especially if you are building the trinitarian doctrine from the event of the Cross (Jüngel).

[35]Namely the idea that the Trinity is an evolving event not yet complete and the warning that he is often too focused on the Three separate Persons while the unity slips away must be heeded.

[36]Alister McGrath, "The Crucified and Hidden God," in *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 102.