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The Art of Spiritual Conversation

Comfortable chairs. Munchies. Social lubricant (beer). And lots of unhurried time. The ingredients for *gooooood* conversation. Not just regular conversation (“Hi-how-are-you-I’m-fine-how-bout-that-local-sports-team”), but the kind of conversation that starts casually enough but then, upon receiving an unexpected blessing from the conversation fairy, becomes extraordinary.

You know the magic I’m talking about. All by itself, the conversation just starts to groove of its own accord. Everyone present talks deeply about anything and everything, especially the things that matter most. The sharing becomes easy, as if we humans were made for this sort of thing. Eventually the social lubricant gives way to chemical stimulant (coffee), and before you know it, it’s 4am and you’ve been talking all night and you still don’t want to stop, because you know this magic doesn’t happen everyday.



What’s happening in these conversations? Simple: Trinity.

In theological terms, Father and Son know one another (and all things) in the fellowship of the Spirit. In more down-to-earth terms, the life of God is an eternal 4am rap session. An unbounded Conversation that has always been and will always be. The gospel is that through the incarnate Christ, the human race has been included in that conversation. Whenever we engage in knowing one another (or knowing anything, for that matter) we are sharing in the Father-Son-Spirit conversation.

Now let’s look at evangelism in this light.

It’s [theoretically] easy to befriend non-believers and to do friend-things together. But things get awkward when we start to feel like we should be ‘witnessing’ to our friend. Why, for many of us, does ‘the talking part’ of evangelism feel weird?

It feels weird because we have it in our heads that non-believers are *not* already part of the conversation. I, the evangelist, am in contact with God. My target non-believer is not. If the non-believer wants to get in on the conversation, there are certain hoops he must jump through. And my job is to show him the hoops and somehow talk him into jumping.

Right? No wonder it’s awkward! But everything changes when you realize that Christ has already drawn us all

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into his life with his Father in the Spirit. Whether you believe in Jesus or not, you live and move and have your being in God. Likewise all your conversing (whether you know it or not) lives and moves and has *its* being in God's conversation. Your talking with your non-Christian friend is possible only because God is *already* talking with *both* of you.



What does this understanding do for us evangelists? It removes the burden of salesmanship. Because salvation truly is free. Grace really is grace. There are no hoops to jump through. There is no method for entering the Triune conversation. Non-believers are already in it, whether they are aware of it or not. There is no product to sell. There is only conversation to be had, conversation to be deepened.

My job with my non-Christian friends? To participate in Jesus' already-in-progress conversation with them, and to learn along with them to taste and see the goodness of God and the life he's given us. How do we do that? Paul gave the Colossians this advice: "*The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation, not put them down, not cut them out*" (Col 4.6).

So really, the rules are no different from the rules for 'normal' conversation:

1. Listen more than you speak.
2. Be interested in the other person.
3. Say 'Wow,' and mean it.
4. Be honest. Agreement and disagreement are natural.
5. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
6. Ask good questions.
7. Don't be afraid to disagree.
8. Admit when you're wrong.
9. When you don't know, say "I don't know."
10. Don't try to 'win.'



Why does 'the talking part' of evangelism feel weird? Because we think it's a different kind of a talking, with a different set of rules. Why do we think it's different? Because we believe untruths about God and about our friends. Our problem, as usual, is the problem of unbelief. But never fear: Our Teacher is none other than the Spirit of God himself, and he's good at what he does.

~ John Stonecypher

Cheap Grace?

In *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes against what he calls “cheap grace” and in favor of what he calls “costly grace.” In part he says this:

Cheap grace means grace as bargain basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament. . . It is grace without a price, without costs. . .

Costly grace is the Gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which has to be asked for, the door at which one has to knock again and again.

I sympathize with what (I think) Bonhoeffer is saying. He seems to be trying to counteract the disturbing trend of “laziness” in Christianity. We are disturbed that many believers seem to not take their sin and the Father’s love very seriously. I would agree with those who say that there is a lethargy in the Church. That symptom seems readily obvious to me. But I believe that Bonhoeffer has identified the wrong underlying disease which is the cause of this symptom. Don’t get me wrong. I respect Bonhoeffer, he is a great saint and martyr of the Church. But we should also think critically about what our brothers in the faith say.

Bonhoeffer seems to think that our problem is not appreciating how costly grace is and what work it takes for us to experience it. I think our real problem is that we are trained to think of our relationship with our Dad in heaven in monetary terms like “cheap” and “costly”. Instead of thinking of grace in relational terms we think in debits and credits, laws and punishments. When we discuss grace this way it leads us to a performance-based, legalized, monetary theology. When we can’t perform, can’t keep the law, and run out of spiritual cash, we become lethargic and resentful. Christian lethargy results from this legalized theology that saps us of the will to “perform” and “deliver” for the God of our mythology - the great, all-seeing eye in the sky.

Think of this: do you want your kids to think of your love as something costly, as something that must be sought again and again, as something that must be asked for? (Bonhoeffer’s words) You would rather your kids see your love for them as a never ending relationship that surrounds and envelops them wherever they may be!

I would hit the roof if I walked in on my 9-year old telling my 4-year old “you take Dad’s love for granted, you need to understand how costly his love is and work harder to be a good boy and show that you appreciate all he’s done for you.”

Both “cheap grace” and “costly grace” should be contrasted with “relational grace.” By grace we are embraced in the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit. By grace the Son includes us in this relationship of life, passion, and excitement.

When we see that all we are and all we love is flowing out of the Triune relationship into which we are adopted, then our hearts begin to overflow with life, passion, and excitement for the relational grace the Son’s incarnation brings to us.



~ Jonathan Stepp

What's Wrong with Being Human?

After a long spell with no rain, the thunderstorm we were having was welcomed. My family watched the huge drops of rain fall on our thirsty lawn and on the struggling dogwood trees that I had planted earlier in the spring.

Then out of soothing rhythm of the rain broke an off-beat sound much louder and out of sync with the melody we enjoyed. With this single clap of thunder the house lights went out and all of the symphony-goers were in the dark. We “flicked our Bics” to light our home and there we sat singing children’s songs in the dark.



It was late in the evening when the power company arrived to work on our part of the problem. They explained that a lightning bolt estimated at 1.5 million volts had hit the power grid in our subdivision. As a result of the extensive damage to our transformer, it had to be replaced. This meant a small tracked machine and a three-man crew would need access through our yard to get to the fried transformer to replace it. I was happy to oblige them.

At almost 10PM the crew was ready to move their equipment down to the work area, and I was about to bid them good night and head off to sleep, when one of the workers told me that the three of them had worked together on the same crew for almost 30 years. I was astounded that in an industry with so much employee turnover these three had worked together for so long. It piqued my curiosity, so I asked them if I could hang out awhile and watch. They agreed and then authoritatively the lead man on the crew said, “You can watch but you must stay out of the way, and if we say get back or move, you must do so quickly.”



I agreed to the parameters they set and then spent the next 5 hours fascinated by the work they were doing and the inner workings of an electrical transformer. But more than that I was fascinated by how well they worked together. These three men had such a close relationship that they did not even need to talk to one another to get the job done. They knew each other so closely that they functioned as one.

I sat on the rubber tracks of their tractor and watched with the excitement of a little kid. I was watching the Trinity right in front of me. Seeing how these three men related to each other was a picture of the Father, Son, and Spirit. They even reached out through the night and drew me into their relationship. They joked with me and let me participate in the work they were doing. I got to loan them a shovel and help take down a part of a fence that was blocking access to the work site. They included me in what they were doing and in their relating with one another.

I was having the best time. They were just three very close human beings, and more importantly, that night they were *humans being*. They were just being themselves. They were comfortable and enjoying themselves. The lead man on the crew even told me that although they did not even need to talk to one another to get the

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What's Wrong with Being Human . . . (cont.)

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job done, they did talk to each other because they were friends.

As the night wore on they finished up the job, and when the light on our deck came on, I knew that soon my new friends would be leaving and going on to the next job. Out in our cul-de-sac I helped them load up their tools. By this time it was 3AM. We were shaking hands and they thanked me for helping them out and letting them use my yard to access the transformer, when all of the sudden, one of the men asked me the question I had dreaded all night. It was the one question I hoped would not be asked. He said, “What do you do for a living?” I panicked. I scrambled for something to say that would be true but not give away my occupation. Cornered and on the spot I said, “I’m a pastor.”

With those words everything we had shared that night ended. All three of them bristled and one man even corrected his posture as if he were not standing erect enough to be in the presence of a ‘man of the clergy’. In a flash the conversation turned superficially religious. Each of them became synthetic and not at all like the comfortable relational humans just being that I had befriended. They became plastic and fake and it broke my heart. Instantly I was excluded from the circle of friendship into which I had been drawn.

That is why I did not want to tell them I was a pastor. Because I knew it would most likely ruin all the fun we were having. Sadly, I was right. For hundreds of years religion has told people that it is somehow wrong to be human. The religion of man has taught us to be ashamed of who we are as human beings. Being human is not something to be loathed; after all, Jesus Himself is yet human. (I Timothy 2:5)

God made us human. He created us and said “It’s good.” In Jesus Christ, that humanity has been perfected before the Father and as the vicarious human being, Jesus shares that perfection with each of us. While we participate in the divine life offered to us in Jesus, let’s remember that we can be ourselves everywhere. We can be ourselves at church. We can be ourselves in the company of pastors. We can even be ourselves with Triune God.

We are no more or less in the presence of God at church than we are at any other time. If we truly live and move and have our being in Jesus, then are we not always in His company? My prayer is that the Christian Church will recover the truth that humanity is good and being human is okay and that we are free to be human in Jesus in the Shared Life of Father, Son, and Spirit. It was Irenaeus who summarized the will of God the Trinity to share His life with us when he said: “the glory of God is man fully alive!”



~ Bill Winn

Losing Lazarus



I imagine it was a day like many other springtime days in Judea. The air was full of the anticipation of the imminent Passover season. In the midst of the excitement, hustle, and bustle, Jesus received word that one of His best friends, Lazarus of Bethany, lay dying, his body ravaged by illness.

If we were the disciples sitting with Jesus at the time, we might have expected Him to immediately rise and hurry to Lazarus' side. Instead, Jesus stayed where He was for two more days. Though He promised His disciples that Lazarus' sickness would not end in death, Jesus fully intended that Lazarus would die.

It is here that our stories, if we allow them, intersect with those of Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. All three loved Jesus more than family. All three of them professed Him as the Messiah, although they still didn't realize everything that meant. What they did know was that at a simple word from this Nazarene carpenter, evil spirits fled, the blind saw, the lame walked, and the sick were made well. At issue was not their faith that Jesus was the answer to their problem. At issue was Jesus glorifying the Father, and the Father glorifying Jesus, through their loss: Mary and Martha's loss of their brother and Lazarus' loss of his own life.

How many of us have watched a dying child slip from this world as we fervently believed that God could not only heal him, but that God *would* heal him? How many of us have seen our life's dreams die with the end of a marriage, all the while praying for the God of reconciliation to step in and save us from our heartbreak? We have watched our businesses crumble, though we diligently worked and even more diligently gave in each Sunday morning's offering plate. We have experienced all this and more, waiting for and believing in the One who can make everything right to step in at the last minute and save the day. But He didn't. The cancer won. The divorce happened. The business closed its doors forever.



Where does that leave us? Where did that leave Mary, Martha, and Lazarus? We can wonder how cognizant Lazarus was that his life was slipping away. Perhaps God mercifully allowed him to die in his sleep. Mary and Martha, however, were not so fortunate. They waited for Jesus to come and heal Lazarus. They waited as they watched their brother die. They waited as they prepared his body for burial. They waited as they sealed the cave that became Lazarus' final resting place. For four more days they continued to mourn. And, they continued to wait, feeling abandoned and betrayed by their Lord.

Lazarus was evidently a well known and well-loved man. People came from miles around to add their tears to those shed by Mary and Martha. It is all too easy for us to imagine Jesus coming on the scene, some four days "late", as an aloof, sanctimonious God, detached from the very real, very great suffering that now enveloped the

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Losing Lazarus . . . (cont.)

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village of Bethany. We may have a tendency to believe that He looked down His nose at the mourners around him, annoyed – no, angered! – by their lack of faith that He would raise Lazarus from the dead. But this Jesus, this God who left His Father’s throne to step into our darkened world, did not walk into Bethany that day to judge those who mourned. He did not come to rebuke those who felt He had left them in their time of need. He came to mourn with them, even as He came to give them hope that could be found only in Him.

I believe that two of the Bible’s most powerful verses are found in this account of Lazarus’ death. One is John 11:25. When Martha tells Jesus that she believes Lazarus will rise again in the “resurrection on the last day”, Jesus’ answer is that He IS the Resurrection and the Life. Resurrection and life are not merely events or states of being – they are found only in the person of Jesus Christ. How comforted Martha would have been had she understood those words. How comforted we would be if we truly understood and believed them, as well.

The second of these powerful verses records Jesus’ response to the suffering of Mary, Martha, and the others who mourned the passing of their brother and friend. John 11:35 simply states, “Jesus wept.” He wept with those whose lives were shattered by Lazarus’ death. He wept that they couldn’t see that the Resurrection and the Life stood before them, full of mercy and compassion. But something we may miss is that He wept because of what He had put them through by allowing Lazarus to die in the first place.

The Greek word that is translated in verse 33 as “groaned” in the King James Version or “deeply moved” in the NASB actually indicates that Jesus blamed Himself for what they were experiencing. But, we must not err in thinking this implies that Jesus did anything wrong by allowing Lazarus to die. Rather, like a parent who mourns having to let his child learn a painful lesson the hard way, Jesus knew that Mary, Martha, Lazarus, the mourners in Bethany – indeed, all of humanity – could never know Him as the Resurrection and the Life unless they saw firsthand that He controlled not only sickness and demons, but even life and death themselves.

But the death and resurrection of Lazarus was not the endgame. It was only a prelude to the main event, intended to prepare their (and our) minds to comprehend the magnitude of what was yet to come. A few short weeks later, Jesus Himself was going to die. Jesus Himself was going to cry out, seemingly fruitlessly, to the Father that the blood-filled, agonizing cup of His final battle with, and victory over, the darkness of fallen creation be allowed to pass from His hands. Jesus Himself would remain in a rock tomb, wrapped in grave clothes and imprisoned by death. And Je-

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Losing Lazarus . . . (cont.)

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sus Himself would be resurrected.

Though it is our temptation to stop here, and glorify in the resurrection, even this isn't the end game. Unlike Lazarus, Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, taking Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and all of the cosmos with Him when He went. He rent the veil that stood between fallen humanity and the Father. By living our lives and dying our deaths, He reconciled all of Creation with the Father and included all of Creation in the perfect union of the Triune God. End game. Mission accomplished. Battle won.



We might ask at this point what this seeming digression has to do with our original question of why Mary and Martha had to lose Lazarus. Even more important to us, why does God allow – even expect – us to “lose Lazarus,” sometimes time and time again? For Mary and Martha to see Lazarus resurrected, he first had to die. For them to know they needed Jesus as Resurrection and Life, they had to be shown their need through suffering and death – first in losing Lazarus, then in losing their Lord. We are just the same, though losing our Lazarus may not be the death of our brother. It may be our struggles with divorce, or cancer, or drug addiction, or obesity, or abuse, or neglect, or pornography, or infidelity, or . . .

However it may manifest itself, our loss of Lazarus, our point of need in our life and death struggle, is the disease of humanity's fallenness that will cling to us as long as we grope about in our fleshly darkness. In that darkness, we will cry out in our pain. We will agonize as God makes us wait. We will bargain with Him. We will reason with Him. We will curse Him. We may even hate Him. But He will come in His time and not before.



He already knows that our sickness will not end in death, but that doesn't mean we will not die before we actually see His deliverance. To know our need for Him, we must see our need. We must feel our need. We must bathe in its fetid waters, soaking us to the bone of our being. To know Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life, we must taste the death that we would be without Him.

Through it all – the pain, the weeping, the gnashing of teeth – He will be there with us. He will mourn as we mourn. He will weep as we weep. He will groan in the knowledge that He must put us through this suffering so that we will be able to know Him as He is, not as we think or fear Him to be. Then, one day, we will hear him cry “Lazarus, come out!” Our lives will be brought out of their fleshly tombs and He will unbind our grave clothes so that we will be free. Truly free.

~ Stephen M. Webb

Relate & Romance! Reproduce! Relax!

This article is actually about the first 3 commandments! If you think I am referring to a portion of the Ten Commandments given to the children of Israel through Moses, you would be incorrect! Those are another discussion for another day in the Light of Jesus!

I want to talk about the 3 commandments given to humankind BEFORE the Fall; the commandments we are actually being instructed to take seriously again, as the Father shares with us the relationship He shares with His Son Jesus in the Spirit, and in which we are included!

The first three commandments come from this passage in Genesis 1:26-28, which say in the NRSV:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

First, did you notice the language denoting distinct Persons within the Oneness of God in **verse 26**? Did you also notice how it said we were created in the image of this Triune God in **verse 27** (distinct but in Oneness)?

Did you see the 3 commandments noted in verse 28 that match up with the Trinitarian Theology we are learning about more accurately from Jesus in the Spirit?

Here they are:

The first command Triune God gives humankind is to **RELATE & ROMANCE,** or **"Be Fruitful and Multiply"**

Did you notice that the first command out of God's mouth was NOT "Get a job, earn money, get clothing, worry and struggle!"? Aren't these usually the main things we tend to be concerned about in our fallen flesh? Yes (see **Luke 12:13-31**)!

Are we not learning in Christ that RELATING with Him, our brothers and sisters, and ourselves (**as we really are in Jesus**) is the REAL, first command to be obeyed? Don't we already know and believe in our guts the saying, **"No one on their deathbed ever wished they had spent more time at work?"**

Is not the fruitful and abounding fellowship of the Triune God what we



Relate & Romance! . . . (cont.)

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REALLY want to see multiplied everywhere?

Did you also notice that this first command was NOT, “Stay away from thinking or talking about romance and sex – that icky, bad stuff!”? ☺ We all know better than that (whether married or shacked up!). This is one commandment we weren’t going to disobey, no matter what...or were we?

Are we not learning in Christ that there is a WAY of thinking and talking about romance that is NOT congruent with the Father, Son and Spirit Relationship (**John 8:1-11, Eph 5:1-18**), and a way that IS congruent with that Relationship (**Eph 5:18-6:1-9**)?

Don’t we already experience and believe in our relational guts the negative relational saying, “**Why buy the cow when I can get the milk for free?**”

Is not the exact Love, Trust, Faithfulness, Openness and Creative Imagination of the Father, Son and Spirit, what we all REALLY want to experience in our dating and sexual relationships (which are right and good, and from this Triune God)?

The second command Triune God gives humankind in the same sentence is to **REPRODUCE, or “Multiply, Fill the earth and Subdue it”**

Did you notice that this second command is NOT, “Make sure you always use birth control,” “You MUST be celibate to walk right before me” or “Be self-centered and keep all this property to yourselves”? Hasn’t our violation of this commandment pushed far too many us into the self-centered and cold icebox of empty high-rise condominiums, where we peer at life behind frozen gated communities through plastic and frigid personalities?

Aren’t we learning that self-centeredness, fear and hiding is NOT the experience of Jesus the Divine/Man in His relationship with the Father as a human being (**Mark 10:45, Acts 20:35**), but a participation in a lie about the Father, Son and Spirit and who we are in Him (**Eccl 2:1-11, Matt 4:1-10**)?

Don’t we already experience and believe in our guts the saying, “**Money is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread around, encouraging young things to grow.**” - from *"The Matchmaker"*

Isn’t the joy we hear in the Father’s voice as He gazes at His children “in the Beloved” what we want to experience as parents and grandparents in the reproduction of humankind? Don’t we want to experience “With you I am well pleased,” and have our children and grandchildren experience it too?

The third command Triune God gives humankind is to **RELAX, or “have do-**

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Relate & Romance! . . . (cont.)

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minion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

Did you notice that the third command out of God's mouth was NOT "Ignore and make fun of people trying to save whales," "Don't ever skip church services for a fishing trip," or "Work and never *ever* take a vacation – because you'll have an eternity in heaven to rest"? Aren't those some of the pleasures many of us have desired to participate in but were pressured out of in the name of religion and sacrificing and working to please God?



Are we not learning to take more seriously that everything the Triune God made was made by Jesus, the Son of God, and is sustained by Him (**John 1:1-5, Acts 17:28, Col 1:15-17**)? Aren't scriptures a testimony to the Word of God Himself Who encourages us in the good care and feeding of animals - even on a church day (**Proverbs 12:10, Matt 12:1-12**)?

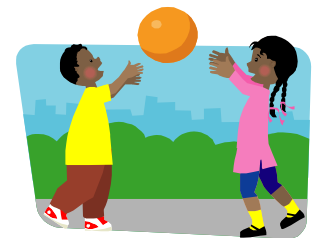
It is kind of hard for us to conceive of animal care being relaxing now because of the Fall (unless we go to a zoo), but walking among animals is really supposed to be a relaxing thing, not a fearful burden (**Isaiah 11:6-9, Romans 8:18-23**)!

Maybe it is helpful to remember the definition of **Relaxation, which is, "The act of relaxing or the state of being relaxed. Refreshment of body or mind; recreation: (played golf for relaxation.) A loosening or slackening."** (<http://www.answers.com/topic/relaxation?cat=health>)

In a world where many don't embrace the Gospel coherently yet (which has a negative impact on creation), it is important for some of us to help animals relax when they are burdened also (beached whales, seals in oil spills). And how could a congregational fishing trip during worship service time not be church when WE are the Church?!

Haven't we negatively experienced and known the saying that "**All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy**"? Of course we have! And this desire for play is because of our union with the Triune God in Jesus Christ, Who enjoys the most relaxing and refreshing relationship in all of creation, and shares that relationship with us! Isn't that the relaxation we want to experience?

Well, if those are the commandments you are interested in taking more seriously RIGHT NOW in Jesus, then I'm already obeying them with you, and I am a whole-hearted "legalist" on those terms! Ha-Ha!!!



~ Tim Brassell

Clement of Alexandria on the Gospel



We're sometimes asked "Are you sure the adoption of humanity is the gospel? I've never heard it before." In that light we find it helpful to go back to the ancient Christians who saw the gospel in light of humanity's adoption into the Triune Life.

Around 200 A.D. Clement of Alexandria wrote about all humanity belonging to Jesus. Clement says that some know this and some do not, yet Christ is training and leading all of them. He points out that Jesus' providence can be found everywhere in our world and that he seeks to persuade people to believe in him but never compels them to do so. Here's what Clement wrote:

Wherefore also all people are His; some through knowledge, and others not yet so; and some as friends, some as faithful servants, some as servants merely. This is the Teacher, who trains the Gnostic by mysteries, and the believer by good hopes, and the hard of heart by corrective discipline through sensible operation. Thence His providence is in private, in public, and everywhere. And that He whom we call Saviour and Lord is the Son of God, the prophetic Scriptures explicitly prove. So the Lord of all, of Greeks and of Barbarians, persuades those who are willing. For He does not compel him who (through choosing and fulfilling, from Him, what pertains to laying hold of it the hope) is able to receive salvation from Him.

Stromata, Book 7, Chapter 2.



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