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Hell is a Triangle

At its core, sin is a problem of relational darkness. I am deluded about how I relate to God and others, and that is why I misbehave the way I do.

As the Gospel illumines my darkness, I am coming to see more clearly the lies I have believed about my relationships. What does this dark relational vision look like? Interestingly enough, it's a triangle.

“The Drama Triangle” is a model of how dysfunctional relationships work. Widely used by psychologists since the 1970's, it has proven particularly fruitful in treating the underlying causes of alcoholism and other addictions. And I have found it to be a helpful way to understand my own relational darkness.

Relationships are hard work. So consciously or subconsciously, we put ourselves and others into categories (roles) that we already know how to relate to. “Good Guys” already know how to relate to “Bad Guys.” Republicans already know how to treat Democrats. Jews already know how to treat Samaritans. We reduce people into categories because it reduces our relational workload.

In conflicting relationships, we tend to reduce people (including ourselves) into three roles. This is the ‘Triangle’ part of the Drama Triangle. And each role reacts to the others according to relatively simple scripts. The resulting performance is the ‘Drama’ of neurotic relationship:

First of all, I am a **Victim**. I have been mistreated (this part is actually true), and therefore I am not responsible for how I live my life (this part is false). I have been victimized by my **Persecutor**, the Bad Guys, “those Mean People Over There.” Since I am in pain, I seek comfort from a **Rescuer**. The Rescuer is a person or a behavior that helps me feel better without addressing the actual problem.

Let's look at the classic example: The Alcoholic. In the alcoholic's mind, he is a Victim of a world that treats him badly. He just can't get a break. The whole world is his Persecutor. For relief, he turns to his Rescuer—booze. It dulls the pain and makes him feel good, at least for a little while.

But drunkenness results in several unintended consequences. So the alcoholic usually has a secondary Rescuer—an enabler (often a spouse) who shields the alcoholic from experiencing all the consequences of his own behavior. For example, when he has a bad hangover, his wife calls his workplace to tell them he's sick. She hopes her “kindness” will inspire him to stop drinking, but it actually just enables him to continue his self-destructive lifestyle.

The Drama Triangle isn't limited to alcoholics. For example, how would politics work without drama? Listen to what the campaign ads are telling you: You, [*the middle class, the taxpayer, the poor, the Christian, the gun owner*] are a Victim. You are being or will be Persecuted by the evil [*Insert name of Candidate X and his/her party*]. Your only hope is to vote for God's anointed Rescuer, [*Insert name of Candidate Y and his/her party*]. Campaign professionals are well-acquainted with how the human mind works.

The Triangle is also a pillar of my own darkened mind; it defines my twisted vision of God and my way of living out that vision. I see the same god that inspired Adam and Eve to dive into the bushes. A solitary deity who is self-absorbed, rule-obsessed, insecure, lacking in social skills, and carrying a REALLY big stick.

If this is the real God (and countless preachers assure me it is), then Adam and Eve were behaving quite sensibly. This Persecutor is the source of my pain, anxiety and loneliness. For some reason, my soul cries out for a God who loves me and embraces me as a father. But the only answer to my cry is the grin of an ogre, busily reading his list and checking it twice.

FEE FIE FOE FUM... You're screwed, little man.

My soul cannot breathe in this poison atmosphere. The only Rescuer available is the same old serpent and the same old fruit. Sin does not solve my problem (God), but it does help me feel okay for a little while. But my sin DOES make God even angrier, so he demotes me to an even deeper layer of Hell. Poor me. Poor little Victim. Boo-hoo. And so the cycle continues.

The problem doesn't end there. What happens when my dark eyes look at the Bible? I see the same terrifying vision, just with a little Jesus mixed in. I still see a deity who hates rule-breakers like me, but now I call him "Father." I still suffer the pain and anxiety of living in this god's shadow. I continue doing whatever it takes to cope with the pain, but I now do my best to hide it from my church friends.

The difference is that now Jesus enters the picture. My rage-filled god kills him instead of me. Jesus shields me from the consequences of my behavior. He hopes that I will be so grateful that I will change my behavior. But as any codependent alcoholic's wife can tell you, this never works. It merely enables the pattern to continue. It continues because **the real problem is still there: My god is an ogre.**

With apologies to Shrek and all the other nice ogres out there, living forever with Jesus and an ogre does not sound so pleasant to me. Sure, I'd like to avoid being barbecued, so that's a selling point. But the ogre is still an ogre, even if I am currently protected from his human-frying fetish. As long as God is of two minds about me, I can never be at peace.

The alcoholic finds freedom as he repents of his Drama-Triangle vision of life. He lets go of his victim orientation. He stops blaming others for his misery, and he stops expecting others to fix it for him. He learns to receive and give forgiveness.

This re-thinking is for everyone, not just alcoholics. And the Gospel takes it even deeper:

I am not a Victim, nor is anyone else. I cannot control the good or bad things that happen to me, but I can control how I respond. I can choose to accept the Spirit's witness of who I am. He makes me able to believe the truth about God and about myself, and to let my thoughts/feelings/actions flow from the truth rather than from lies. In this world, victimization is inevitable, but victimhood is optional.

Jesus is not my Rescuer, nor is anyone else. A Rescuer tries to take over the things that are my responsibility (my thoughts, my feelings, my actions, and the consequences that result). Jesus is not

that; instead, he is my Savior who has done for me what I could NOT do for myself. He makes me able to see and believe the truth. But he will never violate my personhood in order to spare me the pain of living out the lies I have chosen to believe.

My Father is not my Persecutor, nor is anyone else. Jesus saw the ogre and exposed it as a damned illusion. He shares his vision with me, and his vision is true, whether I believe it or not. I am the apple of my Father's eye. I am the child he always wanted. I am loved, and nothing can change that. I am treasured. I am delighted-in. I am provided-for. I am his beloved child in whom he is well pleased.

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.*

~ John Stonecypher