

Why I Believe in a Purgative Hell

First, a couple of disclaimers: What I am talking about in this article is my personal belief, not the doctrine of my denomination, GCI. Or, to put it another way, for those who are also part of GCI: if you don't like what I say in this article, write me about it, don't pester Mike Feazell about it. Secondly, please be clear that I am not talking about the doctrine of purgatory. That is something else all together.

What I am talking about is the belief, held by some of the Church Fathers (such as Gregory of Nyssa) that hell is purgative, not punitive. What does that mean? It means that the Father allows the existence of hell in order to purge us of - not punish us for - the sin of disbelief. After all, didn't Jesus pay for all sin - including the sin of disbelief - already? Why would we need to be punished for a sin that is already forgiven in Jesus? A purgative view of hell says that since all are reconciled in Jesus anyone in hell can leave at anytime they want to - right now, or a million years from now. No one is locked in hell forever by the Father.

In the Bible, Jesus makes it clear that all humanity is adopted in him as children of the Father (Rom. 5:18, Col. 1:20, Eph. 2:15.) Jesus also makes it clear that if we do not believe this truth about ourselves then we will suffer great pain and anguish, and that if we keep on not believing this truth about ourselves then we will keep on suffering this anguish - possibly forever (Matt. 13:50, Rev. 14:10-11.)

But there is something even more important that Jesus makes clear to us: his Father is our Father. God the Father is our Daddy, who loves us. He is not a judge who yearns to punish us for criminal behavior. He is a loving Papa whose whole plan, purpose, and reason for relating to us is to draw us home to himself where we belong.

If my purpose in disciplining my kids is to purge them of their wrong beliefs and help them come home to me then how is that purpose served by imposing an eternal sentence of torture or death on them? It isn't. I allow consequences and punishments in their lives that are purgative, not punitive, so that they will change.

As soon as my kids learn their lesson, they are free to stop experiencing purgative discipline and begin enjoying life. Since I don't believe that I am a better, more loving Father than my Daddy in heaven, I believe that the consequences he allows in our lives (e.g. hell) are designed to purge us of wrong belief, not to punish us forever for our failures. I believe that anyone in hell can believe in the truth of who they are in Jesus and leave hell at any time.

As far as I know, GCI doesn't take a specific position on the exact nature of hell. However, GCI's statement on Judgment does say, "God disciplines those he loves so that they will return to him and live . . ." That sounds like a kind of judgment that leaves me room to never give up hope for others.

~ Jonathan Stepp

Bowing Down in Worship

When we want to talk about worship, we usually start with what the Bible says about it. The Bible uses several different words to talk about worship, including words that mean “to bow down” and “to serve.”

But before the Bible, or Israel, or humanity, or anything in all creation existed, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existed in a relationship that was expressed by their bowing down and serving each other. The Divine Persons of the Trinity have forever, and will always, serve each other, bow down before each other, and tell each other how much they love and adore each other. The Divine Persons are constantly worshipping each other.

So, worship is an inherent property of the Triune Life itself. The Father, Son, and Spirit worship each other. Their worship is similar to the way that we might describe a married couple who are so in love that they “worship” each other. This is the worship that flows from mutual love, mutual respect, and mutual adoration. This is the worship that gazes longingly at the other.

The worship of the Trinity has very little in common with the worship devised by human beings to appease the angry gods of our imagination. For example, the ancient Greeks bowed down before capricious and angry deities that they imagined to be toying with human lives. Is that what is happening in the Triune Life when the Son bows down before the Father or the Father bows down before the Spirit? Of course not. Such an image of worship is a direct contradiction of the Life that Jesus shares with his Father and reveals to us.

Even though this image of worship is not faithful to who Jesus is, it has still influenced Christian thinking about worship. You do not have to go far to find Christian thought about worship that centers on our human, fearful response to the overwhelming holiness of God. It is true that when we first encounter the Triune Life in a new or more immediate way it often evokes a response of terror in our human nature – we might think of Peter saying to Jesus “go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8.) But this response of terror is not the Triune Life, it is the response of fallen human nature to the glorious love and joy of the Triune Life.

Consider John in the first chapter of Revelation. At his first sight of the risen Jesus he is struck with terror and prostrates himself before him. (Rev. 1:17) But notice Jesus’ response to John’s prostration and terror: Jesus places his right hand on John and says “Do not be afraid.”

That is the worship of the Triune Life. It is not a worship rooted in terror of a God who is holy just because he is morally perfect. It is a worship rooted in the adoration and awe of The Three who are holy because their relationship is whole, healthy, perfect, and functional. The terror that our human nature experiences when encountering the Triune Life is like the terror one sometimes feels at a dinner party with people who all seem to you to be smarter, richer, and better looking than you. It is the terror of feeling inadequate.

In response to the cloying, sniveling, self-hating, kind of worship that the gods of our imagination demand, the Father picks us up off our feet, throws his arms around us through his Son Jesus Christ, and says “do not be afraid.” He embraces us into the loving, adoring, joyful worship of the life that he and the Son have always shared in the Spirit. In the light of the Trinity we understand our bowing down before God to be the bow of respect and mutual love between persons who adore each other.

So, worship is an inherent property of the Triune Life itself and therefore worship is a reality that Jesus is sharing with humanity. Because Jesus is both fully God and fully Human, he is therefore also both “worshiped God” and “worshiping man.” Our human nature, broken and fallen, does not know how to worship and is not capable of worship. This is especially true when we define worship as the adoration and service that the Divine Persons give to each other. All we are capable of doing is hiding in the bushes and barbecuing animals to appease the imaginary god we think is looking to kill someone to satisfy his rage.

Now that the Son has entered our humanity, and raised up our humanity into the Trinity, we no longer have to cringe in fear before our imaginary image of the god we think is out to get us. Because humanity is in Christ and Christ is in humanity, we are now able to participate in the worship of the Triune Life.

Jesus bows down before humanity, serves us, and adores us as the God who loves us. At the same time he bows down before the Father and the Spirit on our behalf, serving the Father and expressing the adoration and love for the Father that we are so incapable of expressing.

This is why we pray in Jesus’ name – and, in fact, carry out all worship in his name – because it is only in and through Jesus’ human nature (his blood and flesh) that any real human worship ever takes place. In his human nature he bows down and worships the Father on our behalf and in his Divine nature he bows down and serves humanity on the behalf of the Father. And it is the Holy Spirit who empowers and enables this relationship, both within the life of the Trinity itself and within the life that Jesus shares with humanity.

~ by Jonathan Stepp

This article is taken from an online class that Jonathan is teaching with Grace Communion Seminary (GCS) called “The Practice of Ministry.” To learn more about GCS’s online program, or to sign up to take the class during the upcoming fall semester, visit www.gcs.ambassador.edu.

No Excuse for Judging Each Other

A Trinitarian Christ-centered interpretation of Romans 1.1 – 2.11

[NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR: My scripture paraphrases will be a little haphazard for awhile, as I am working on a few specific texts requested by readers. Please excuse the seeming randomness.]

(1) From Paul, a servant of Master Jesus, chosen and sent to tell people about what the Triune One has done, what Papa promised long ago through the prophets, (3) the good news about His Son Jesus. Fully of our flesh, He was the Son of David (4) and the Son of the Papa, as was dramatically revealed when their Spirit – the Spirit of wholeness – raised him from the dead.

He is Jesus our Master, (5) through whom Papa has freely given us a life and a message to share, a message about who He is, a message that is inspiring in Gentiles the security and assurance they need to participate in the Triune life of love. (6) It is the message by which you yourselves have received the call to live fully in the real world, the world of Master Jesus.

(7) To everyone in Rome whom Papa has loved and has called to share in His family life. May you be receiving what Master Jesus and Papa are daily sharing with us—their own life-together of grace and peace.

(8) Master Jesus is so grateful to his Papa for all of you, and so am I. You guys are famous with Him, with me, and with the whole world. 9) As I serve Papa with his Spirit, telling people the message of his Son, I'm constantly talking with Him about you guys, (10) asking Him to make it possible for me to finally somehow come visit you. (11) I'm aching to spend some time with you and share with you what the Spirit has given me, (12) and vice-versa. We would all benefit so much from some face-time.

(13) So many times I have tried to arrange a trip to Rome to see you, but it has never worked out. I want to come and be involved in what the Spirit is doing among you, just as I have been among the rest of the Gentiles. (14) I owe so much to Greeks and non-Greeks, to both the civilized and the uncivilized (15) – so I am chomping at the bit to speak the gospel among you in Rome.

(16) The Greeks think the gospel is absurd, but I am not the least bit ashamed to speak it. The good news of the Trinity is powerful beyond our imaginations, healing the brokenness of everyone who believes it. And I do mean everyone, not just Jews. Greeks too. (17) When we believe the truth – that the Trinity is putting right everything that is wrong in the world – it changes everything. As it is written, “When your beliefs fit reality, your life in the world is re-ordered and put right.”

(18) So many of us are in denial about reality, and our denial distorts and breaks us. But the good news is that Papa is infinitely intolerant of his children's ignorance. He's not going to give up on us, ever.

(19) To be human is to be included in Jesus' knowing of Papa; the Trinity is right in front of each person's face. (20) From the waltz of galaxies to the break-dancing of quantum particles, the universe is constantly witnessing to the Triune Tango. From Day 1, creation has made visible the all-encompassing power and nature of its Creator. To not see Him is to be blind by choice.

(21) We looked Papa right in the eye and said ‘No thanks.’ We did not relate to Him sensibly with honor and gratitude. Instead we chose to try to fool ourselves, to invent myths, to conform our minds to anything but reality.

(22) We thought we were being sophisticated, but we were just making fools of ourselves. (23) We turned away from the Eternal Adventure of Trinitarian Alive-ness and opted instead for plastic trinkets. (24) So Papa let us have what we wanted – orgies, and lots of them. Whatever way you can imagine to degrade the body and soul, we did that and more, because we'd convinced ourselves that it would make us happy. (25) We exchanged reality for unreality, truth for lies. We pledged allegiance to our pleasures, instead of to the Source of pleasure.

(26) That's why Papa gave us space – freedom to pursue every kind of nasty crap we thought might make us happy. All kinds of boundaries were overrun. (27) We thought sex might be better without boundaries, so we blew them to pieces in the name of ‘free love.’ In our sex lives, we disregarded our dignity and our bodies as irrelevant. But our experiment resulted in grief, not bliss.

(28) Because we would not accept reality (and reality's God), Papa let us believe in unreality and behave in ways that do not fit the real world of boundaries, limits, and consequences. (29) We

gorged on every nasty thing we could find – we drooled over each other’s stuff; we devised ever-new ways to hurt and kill each other; (30) we lied about each other; we lied about ourselves, trying make ourselves look big; we rebelled against our parents and against Papa; (31) we were foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

(32) We knew we were stepping outside Papa’s wisdom, and we knew the consequences. But we kept doing it anyway, and we egged each other on to keep doing it too.

(2.1) Therefore, we have no excuse for judging each other. When we condemn each other, we condemn ourselves, because we all do the same things. (2) Some have said: “For people who do those things, Papa’s judgment fits the crime.” (3) Who do you think you are? If you’re judging people, and you’re doing the same things, don’t you think Papa will have something to say about that? (4) Papa is full to overflowing with kindness and patience; are you really so un-interested in being part of that? In kindness, Papa give us the time and space we need to re-think our old beliefs and move step-by-step into reality. (5) But here you are, refusing to share in Papa’s patience, storing up poison in your own soul, the kind of poison that is destined for utter destruction.

(6) Our actions have real consequences; that is how Papa’s world works. (7) We get what we seek. If we seek life and beauty and goodness, that is what we get. (8) If we seek to wrap ourselves in comforting lies, we can do that, but we also get the pain of living against the grain of reality. (9) Doing evil results in anguish and distress, whether you’re Jewish or not. (10) But doing good results in peace and beauty, again, whether you’re Jewish or not. (11) Papa doesn’t play favorites with his kids.

~ John Stonecypher

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The Beginning

A Trinitarian Christ-centered interpretation of Revelation 21.1-9, 22-27 - 22.5

(1) I saw creation made New, from top to bottom. Phase 1 of creation was complete. Done. There was not even a sea for monsters to emerge from anymore. (2) I saw the Triune Life earthed. I saw the City of wholeness/holiness/health/healing, the New Jerusalem. As lovely as a bride coming down the aisle. (3) I heard the Triune One make the pronouncement:

“The Triune God has made his home with humanity. They will belong to me, and I will belong to them. (4) The reign of death and grief is done. I will personally wipe away the last tears they ever cry. (5) I am making everything new!

The voice said to me:

“Write this down, son, this is good stuff I’m saying here... Don’t you see? It’s done. I have done it! I started it, and now I’ve finished it. The river of Triune joy now flows clear and sparkling, deep and free through humanity’s parched existence. (7) If you drink it, it will satisfy you and you will experience the life of sonship. (8) If you choose to drink poison instead, you will experience only pain and death.

(9) An angel then said to me: “Come, I will show you the Lamb’s bride.” The Spirit took us together to a high mountain so we could see Papa’s gift arrive -- New Jerusalem, the City of Wholeness and Healing...

(22) There were no church buildings, for they would have been redundant in this place so full of the presence of the Lamb and his Papa. (23) By the Spirit they illumine everything, outshining even the sun and moon. (24) The light will shine on every culture, transforming each one in order to make each more fully itself. In Jerusalem will all the diverse gifts of each culture dance together for the joy of all. (25) No one will ever be denied entrance to the city, for its inhabitants do not fear evil. (26) All that is good and true will be drawn to the city, (27) but all darkness and falsehood will steer clear of it.

(22.1) Then the angel showed me the Triune Life, flowing like a sparkling river from the Lamb, his Papa, and their Spirit, (2) gushing down the middle of main street. The river nourished the Tree of Life. Yielding 12 crops of fruit each year, the tree signified the beginning of Great Things, and its leaves would be used for the healing of everything outside the city walls. (3) No more brokenness. The Lamb, his Papa, and their Spirit will live in the city, and people will share in the life of mutual service. (4) By the Spirit, we will share in the Son’s face-to-face knowing of Papa. We will be marked and tagged as belonging to him. (5) No more darkness. Lamp and sun will be unnecessary, for the Triune light will illumine all things. We will embark together forever upon the ever-expanding creative adventure of the incarnate Triune life.

~ *John Stonecypher*

GCI's New Statement of Belief

Grace Communion International (GCI), the denomination in which *The Adopted Life* publishers serve as pastors, has recently updated its Statement of Beliefs to make the document even more fully expressive of the good news of humanity's adoption into the Trinity through Jesus. You can read the whole document at the GCI website: www.gracecommunion.org.

In this article we want to just highlight a few of the places in the statement where the gospel shines through with special clarity:

First of all, the document begins by describing God the Trinity — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Many churches and ministries start their statement of beliefs with a statement on their belief about the Bible. Kudos to GCI for getting first things first.

The opening statement on the Triune God also expresses his purpose in creating humanity using this language:

Though transcendent, God freely . . . involves himself with humanity directly and personally in Jesus Christ, that humanity, by the Spirit, might share in his eternal life as his children.

It's wonderful to see humanity's adoption as children of the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit, set forth in the opening statement as the purpose for our existence and the reason for the Triune God's involvement in our lives.

In the statement about "The Son of God" they make this declaration:

As our representative and substitute, he stands in for all humanity before the Father, providing the perfect human response to God on our behalf and reconciling humanity to the Father.

This emphasis on Jesus' role as the one who represents and speaks for all humanity before the Father is found throughout this new statement of belief. Such an emphasis is especially vital and necessary in our modern Christian culture, which so heretically emphasizes individual response, belief, and work, as the determining factor in humanity's relationship with the Father.

In the section on humanity, GCI makes this profoundly Christ-centered statement:

The eternally perfect image of God is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the last Adam. God creates through Jesus Christ the one new humanity over which sin and death have no power.

This is beautiful because it affirms that the first Adam, who sinned, is not the definition of what it means to be human. Rather, the last Adam, Jesus, is the definition of what a human being is. There are not two kinds of human beings in the world: those who are sinners and those who are not. There is only one, new humanity in Christ (Eph. 2:15.)

GCI's statement on the gospel also does a good job of getting ideas in their proper order. Because of Jesus, humanity belongs to the Father as his children. Since we already belong, we are able to begin to believe in our belonging. Our belief does not make us children of the Father, Jesus does – and now we can believe this truth about ourselves. The statement on the gospel phrases it this way:

It [the gospel] is the message that Christ died for our sins and has made us his own before and apart from our believing in him and has bound us to himself by his love in such a way that he will never let us go. Therefore, he calls on all humans to repent and believe in him as Lord and Savior.

At several key points in the document, GCI is not afraid to use the bold, clear language of the Bible. For example, in the opening summary of belief they make this statement taken from 2 Corinthians 5:14 and 1 Corinthians 15:22:

Since he [Jesus] died for all, all died in him, and all will be made alive in him.

Finally, their statement on Judgment is completely Christ-centered and rooted in the reality of who we are as humanity in Christ and what judgment must be because of who Jesus is:

God judges all humans through Jesus Christ as those who belong to God through him. Therefore, all humans are, in spite of themselves, loved, forgiven, and included in Jesus Christ, who is their Lord and Savior. God's love will never cease or diminish even for those who, denying the reality of who they are in him, refuse his love and consign themselves to hell; they will not enjoy the fruit of his salvation but rather will experience his love as wrath. God disciplines those he loves so that they will return to him and live . . .

This whole statement is profound in what it is saying in a few short words about judgment. Judgment is not something that a distant God imposes on us, rather judgment is something relational, that flows from the reality of our inclusion in Christ and our adoption as children of the Father. Judgment is not the punishment of the legalistic god in the sky, it is the discipline of a loving Father designed to bring his children to repentance.

All of us who are excited about the Spirit's work to refocus the modern Church on Christ and the life of the Trinity should be happy and thankful for GCI's new Statement of Beliefs. It is an important and significant step forward in modern theology and the life of the 21st century church.

~ Jonathan Stepp

Gregory of Nazianzus on Humanity's Adoption

We're sometimes asked "Are you sure the adoption of humanity is the gospel? I've never heard it before." That's why we like to bring in the thoughts of various theologians from throughout history to add to our understanding of the gospel.

In this text from the 4th century theologian Gregory of Nazianzus, he talks about how human nature has been joined to the Divine life because Jesus is the Son of God living forever as a human being.

He [Jesus] ever lives to make intercession for us. O, how beautiful and mystical and kind. For to intercede does not imply to seek for vengeance, as is most men's way (for in that there would be something of humiliation), but it is to plead for us by reason of His Mediatorship, just as the Spirit also is said to make intercession for us. For there is One God, and One Mediator between God and humanity, the human being Christ Jesus. For He still pleads even now as a human being for my salvation; for He continues to wear the Body which He assumed, until He make me God by the power of His Incarnation; *Oration 29, On the Son*, chap. 14

Obviously, when Gregory says "make me God" he doesn't mean that he will be become God as God is God. He means what Peter meant when he said we have become partakers of the Divine nature (2 Peter 1:4.) He means that, in Jesus, humanity and the Trinity are permanently and forever united. The Son has become what we are (human) so that we are now joined to his Divine life with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

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