

Unitarian Truncation of God's Sacrificial Love

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In their zeal to defend the oneness of God, Unitarians have attacked one of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian Faith – the preexistence (and thus original deity) of the Son of God. They have done a good service in pointing out the multitude of errors and contradictions of Trinitarianism. However, they have done a great disservice to their readers by offering a replacement for Trinitarianism that comes with a deadly catch. In denying the preexistent Son of God, they necessarily demolish the primary motivation for loving God. John wrote that *“We love Him because He first loved us.”*¹ That is, our love for God is a reaction elicited by His demonstration of love for us. Our communion and fellowship with God is centered around and continuously motivated by this shared reciprocal love. Our response to God's love is possible only by our grasping just how deeply He loved us, demonstrated by what our redemption cost Him personally. *“He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that **God has sent His only begotten Son into the world**, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”*²

The Unitarian Jesus is a special man, born of a virgin by a miracle of God. But Isaac was also a special man, born of a barren womb by a miracle of God. Eve was a special woman, created by God out of Adam's own flesh. In fact, all humans are special, produced by the divine miracle of procreation from the original pair. For Unitarians, Jesus is only God's “son” by adoption. Christians are also God's “sons” by adoption. It cost God nothing to create Eve, or to perform the miracle in the barren womb of Sarah. And for Unitarians, it cost God nothing to create a miracle in the womb of the virgin Mary. Jesus is therefore not unique in his relationship to God. When Jesus was obedient unto death as the sacrifice for our sins, how did this cost God anything more than when Abel was murdered, or any of the prophets were killed because they chose to obey God? Why would God grieve over Jesus' death any more than any other of His servants? He would not. This is because there is an enormous difference between giving up your only-begotten Son to save others, and giving up something that you have fashioned with your hands. Yes, an adopted son out of many adopted sons is valuable to a father. But a “begotten” son is different. He is actually part of his father's own flesh.

¹ 1 John 4:19

² 1 John 4:8-10

And an “only-begotten son” is by far the most precious thing a father could have. He is not only part of himself, but the only one who has such a relationship.

The grief concerning the loss of an “only-begotten” child was illustrated when Jesus had great compassion on a woman at the funeral of her “only-begotten son,” raising him from the dead, and presenting him alive to his mother.³ But even this kind of grief does not compare to a father sending his only-begotten son to a brutal death on behalf of others. In fact, Abraham’s internal grief was no doubt suffocating as he raised the knife to plunge it into his “only-begotten son”⁴ at God’s command. Why would God test Abraham in this brutal way, making him suffer so much in the process? Was it only to test his faith? Indeed, it was to see whether his trust in God could even overcome his intense love and compassion for his own “only-begotten son.” God wanted to share something with Abraham – His own personal struggle, what it meant to God as a Father to send His “only-begotten Son” to His death as a sacrifice for the sins of His creatures. In that single test of faith, Abraham got to really know God in an intimate way. He shared in God’s own grief. But then he was given the sense of the great relief as Isaac was spared and another was slain in his place. Abraham did not have to actually go through with it. But God did. Did this experience motivate Abraham in his love for God? It absolutely did. And this is why properly understanding what it means that God sent His only-begotten Son into the world, to His death on our behalf, is so critically important. The depth of our love for God is at stake.

But what about our love for the Son of God? Don’t we also love God’s Son because He first loved us? Yes indeed. All are agreed that His willingness to lay down his life as a Man demonstrates great love. Jesus Himself said, “*This is My commandment, that you love one another **as I have loved you**. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.*”⁵ And that is indeed the greatest kind of love that any mere human might have. And Jesus asks us to have the same kind of love for one another. But, did Jesus’ love go even beyond giving His life for His friends? Indeed. He gave His life for God’s enemies!

Romans 10:6-11 (NKJV)

*6 For when we were still without strength, in due time **Christ died for the ungodly.***

7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die.

³ Luke 7:12-15

⁴ Heb. 11:17

⁵ John 15:12-13

8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.

10 For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

11 And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

Both John and Paul push the love of the Son of God for us far beyond His merely being a martyr, or laying down His life for His friends which many humans have done. There are news stories regularly about how people died while saving the life of another, even a stranger. This is indeed a very admirable sacrifice. But, is it the ultimate sacrifice?

In the following passage, Paul was urging the Corinthians to share generously in the offering that he was collecting for the impoverished believers in Judea. He encouraged them to follow Christ's example:

2 Cor. 8:8-9

8 I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others.

9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

Here Paul appealed to something that Jesus Christ had done. Having been "rich" He chose to become "poor" so that we might become "rich" through His "poverty." This begs the question, when was Jesus Christ formerly "rich?" And when did He become "poor?" We know what kind of "riches" we will share with Christ in the Kingdom. Yet Jesus was born in a manger into a family of meager means. He was a carpenter's apprentice growing up. Throughout His ministry, He was basically homeless. So it is evident that from the very beginning of His life on earth He was "poor." How then could Paul expect the Corinthians to use Christ as an example of giving away their wealth to help others? Notice that Paul did not offer any allegorical interpretation of his words. He expected the Corinthians to take them at face value! In a very similar situation, Paul instructed the Philippians to do the same thing:

Philippians 2:3-8 LGV

3 Yet, [do] nothing according to strife or self-seeking, but with humility, considering one another superior to yourselves, 4 not each one watching over what is his own, but also each other's.

5 Have this disposition in you which [was] also in Christ Jesus 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God [to be] plunder, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming in the likeness of men. And having been found as human in design, 8 He suppressed Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even death of a cross.

In Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians to be generous with their wealth to help the impoverished Judean Christians, he asked them to follow Christ's example of willing sacrifice of His own wealth. Here, he did exactly the same thing with the Philippians. Christ Jesus formerly had "equality with God." Yet, having pondered His existence "in the form of God," He chose willingly to take a different form – that of a servant, "the likeness of men." How? He "emptied Himself" of the form of God. This is exactly what Paul was referring to in 2 Corinthians by Christ's formerly being "rich," but choosing to become "poor." And it is on this basis that we are to follow His example in our willingness to sacrifice our own wealth to help the brethren in need. The passage continues by showing that Christ's sacrifice was actually twice. First, He emptied Himself of the form of God in order to take the "likeness" of lowly humanity. But after "having been found as human in design," He then humbled Himself further to become obedient unto death on our behalf.

The enormity of the sacrifice of the Son of God, being "in the form of God" and "equal with God," giving all of that up to become fully human, is really beyond human comprehension. This is especially significant since Jesus Christ remains "in the flesh"⁶ even in His resurrected state at the right hand of God, He will come again as the "Son of Man,"⁷ and will rule as "the seed of David according to the flesh."⁸

Christ's willingness to die in our stead was indeed a great sacrifice. Yet, He knew He would not remain dead for long. He knew that God was going to raise Him back to life on the third day. Furthermore, all men are going to die. And Christians also have the hope and promise of resurrection. Many men have been martyrs and have endured just as much physical pain for a cause they believed in. Jesus' death as a human was not unique. But the sacrifice mentioned by Paul in both 2 Corinthians 8 and Philippians 2 was much greater, and one no human being has or can experience. When the only-begotten Son of God sacrificed His deity in order to become human, it was permanent. He will always be resurrected human flesh. There is no going back to "the form of God" or "equality with God."

⁶ 1 John 4:2-3, note the perfect tense participle ἐληλυθότα

⁷ Matt. 24:30

⁸ Acts 2:30

This reminds me of a beautiful passage in an early Christian evangelistic epistle, the Letter of Mathetes to Diognetus. The kind of affection for God and His Son so clearly articulated by both Paul and John is evident in this passage.

*“But when our wickedness had reached its height, and it had been clearly shown that its reward, punishment and death, was impending over us; and when the time had come which God had before appointed for manifesting His own kindness and power, how the one love of God, through exceeding regard for men, did not regard us with hatred, nor thrust us away, nor remember our iniquity against us, but showed great long-suffering, and bore with us, **He Himself took on Him the burden of our iniquities, He gave His own Son as a ransom for us**, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for them that are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness? By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! that the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors! Having therefore convinced us in the former time that our nature was unable to attain to life, and having now revealed the Savior who is able to save even those things which it was [formerly] impossible to save, by both these facts He desired to lead us to trust in His kindness, to esteem Him our Nourisher, Father, Teacher, Counselor, Healer, our Wisdom, Light, Honor, Glory, Power, and Life, so that we should not be anxious concerning clothing and food.”⁹*

Unitarians are depriving themselves and their converts of realizing the kind of love that God has for us, described above as *“He Himself took on Him the burden of our iniquities, He gave His own Son as a ransom for us.”* Abraham only got a glimpse of what this was like for God. And the early Christians, particularly through the teaching of Paul and John, understood the immense sacrifice of the Son of God on our behalf. And this is what gave them the courage to stare down wild beasts, and remain calm as they were burned at the stake, their eyes heavenward. And it is this kind of realization that will motivate us to face the impending trial.

There are many statements in John’s Gospel about Jesus’ having come down from heaven to do the Father’s will. All of these point to that immense sacrifice outlined by Paul in Philippians 2. I am aware that Unitarians have developed many clever devices to explain these away. But none of their arguments stand up to sound, consistent exegesis, nor can they offer anything that can come even close to a heart pounding with

⁹ Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus, ch. ix

gratitude to God for His own personal sacrifice, and bursting with love for His only-begotten Son who was willing to demonstrate such selflessness for us. *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son ...”*¹⁰

¹⁰ John 3:16