

God in Three Persons: The Trinity and the First Revelation

When the psalmist said that the heavens declare the glory of God (Ps. 19:1) he was saying that creation is no less than a vehicle of revelation. This is true both of creation as the noun and creation as the verb. Creation the noun refers to all that God has made. Creation the verb refers to God's act of creation. So if the heavens declare his glory it means that not only do they (as representing of all things God has made) bear the stamp of his being upon them and, as we have seen previously, the creation bears the stamp of his purpose, the goal to which he is moving, but also that God made the heavens and sustains the heavens precisely because he intends to communicate himself to that creation at every point through everything he has made.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

We must again see the significance of Romans 1:16–23:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; ²¹ for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³ and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

The gospel is the vehicle by which the righteousness of God is revealed. There are those who argue that 'the righteousness of God' is a phrase only referring to God's actions towards men and women. So Millard Erickson says: 'his righteousness . . . is, as it were, the holiness of God applied to his relationships to other beings'.¹ Given the nature of the biblical revelation, it is not hard to see why this is the way righteousness is defined. The scriptures are truly concerned with the justification of men and women and with all God's action in human history as he moves towards that goal (see Gal. 5:5). God always acts righteously and the result of this righteous action is that through his work in Christ sinful people are not merely counted *as if* they were righteous, but they are truly made righteous. At the same time, his righteousness also involves the judgment of evil, that is, of all things which contradict his purposes of love. This judgment is revealed as fully active at the cross and is being worked out in history now (Rev. 15:4) and it will finally be concluded in the complete purging of all that is unclean in the final conflagration (Rev. 20:7–15).

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1973, p. 286.

The goal of this final judgment is expressed in 2 Peter 3:5–13:

They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, ⁶ through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. ⁷ But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless.

⁸ But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

¹¹ Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³ But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Peter's purpose is to remind the readers of the seriousness of their situation. Instead of indulging in ungodliness they should realise that the word of God by which the heavens and earth were formed is also reserving the creation for the final judgement so that there may be the new heavens and new earth, of which the prophets of old spoke (2 Pet. 3:2).

The revelation of the righteousness of God through the gospel is, however, not only related to the saving works of God. I suggest that it has both a backwards and a forwards reference. The backwards reference is to the whole of the righteousness of God which is revealed in creation and which is an element of his glory. Not only do the heavens declare the glory of God but they also declare the righteousness of God (Ps. 97:6). Only in seeing his righteousness do 'all the peoples behold his glory'. The forwards reference is to the goal: the new heavens and new earth where the righteousness of God is again freely known and totally uncontested. The reason God's righteousness is revealed through the proclamation of the gospel is that: (i) men and women, by means of their ungodliness and wickedness, 'suppress the truth', which basically refers to the truth of God, 'what can be known about God' (Rom. 1:19); and (ii) God's justification of men and women, his making them righteous, all relates to the justification of God himself. This was the point made in Romans 3:25–26:

He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

If the righteousness of God relates to the revelation of himself in creation, before there was any contesting of the truth of God and so before men and women needed to be 'made righteous'—that is, justified—and if it relates to the time when such action is completed, then it would seem to me that restricting a definition of the righteousness of God to his saving actions is inadequate. Given that the word righteousness and its cognates derive from a root with implications of 'conformity', and especially conformity to the law or to customs etc., I offer the following 'working' definition of the righteousness of God:

The righteousness of God is his total consistency with his own nature, which he both expresses and expects, and which he works for us in Christ.

The aim is to see that, with or without sin in the creation, God is still righteous. His righteousness action does not flow from a situation of ‘un-righteousness’ but from his ‘inability’ to deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13). God cannot be other than he is. What he is in his actions toward humanity he is in himself, and that is how it has always been.

In John 17, Jesus uses two epithets of the Father: ‘Holy Father’ (v. 11) and ‘Righteous Father’ (v. 25) and does so in contexts that indicate that the relation of the Son to this Father existed ‘before the world existed . . . before the foundation of the world’ (vv. 5, 24). God did not *become* the Righteous Father in his saving actions towards humanity (which includes in his dealings with Israel). So what does it mean for us to say that God is always righteous?

We must, of course, remember that our scriptures are focussed on and directed by ‘salvation history’, so that most of what is in them does concern God’s righteous actions towards Israel and then towards all humanity. But we can deduce from God’s actions, in which he cannot deny himself, that God’s righteousness in his saving actions comes from his righteous being.

Thus we return to the working definition. God is always totally consistent with his own being. Creation, the first ‘revelation’ of God’s being, declares his righteousness. All creation is set to fulfil the purposes of God. Thus all things within creation were harmoniously made to express the character of the creator. Where part of creation, humanity, rejected that situation, all creation lost the cohesion and became contradictory. Creation cannot function as it was intended to while ever there is the fracture in the created harmony. Put another way, righteousness is a dynamic functioning and not just a legal state. Romans 8:19–21 spells this out:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, *in hope*²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

God both expresses his consistency and he expects it from his creation. We might say, then, that the highest joy of a creature would be righteousness (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24). However much the secular use of the word might imply moral correctness, the biblical use shows us the exquisite joy of being totally one with God:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;
⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;
⁹ the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb (Ps. 19:7–10).

‘Pure’ (v. 9) can also be translated ‘clean’ (RSV, AV, ESV). The fear of the LORD is delightfully unsullied and uncomplicated. The complications which are in contrast to this are those which rise from human guilt, from hearing the voice of God and having to hide our nakedness from him, or rather from the foolish and futile attempts to do so. ‘There is no peace for the wicked’. If there were then the righteous God would be denying himself.

All this implies that creation, the verb, is an act not just ‘of’ righteousness, though of course it is that, but an act ‘issuing from’ God’s righteousness. The act is consistent with who God is, just as the result of the act, the heavens and the earth and all that is

in them, is expected to be consistent. The act of creation reveals that the one who creates is never inconsistent with who he is and with his purposes.

It is my conclusion that there are no verbal hints that God is triune within the Old Testament, so that statements which may be understood from a different perspective still remain totally meaningful in their original context. So the word for ‘God’ (or ‘god’) is mostly the plural word *elohim*, but nowhere in the Old Testament did anyone, not even people of faith, reflect that this may mean that God is other than one (see Deut. 6:4). Suggestions of a ‘royal’ plural do not seem to find any confirmation.² The word means ‘god’ and is used for the one God of Israel and for the for false gods to which Israel turned:

Then he will say: Where are their gods [*elohim*], the rock in which they took refuge,³⁸ who ate the fat of their sacrifices, and drank the wine of their libations? Let them rise up and help you, let them be your protection!³⁹ See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god [*elohim*] beside me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand (Deut. 32:37–39; cf. 32:3–4).

There is also the somewhat, to our thinking, strange ‘let *us* make’ of Genesis 1:26 but, again, the Old Testament saw nothing suggestive in the plural.³ ‘Christians have traditionally seen this verse as adumbrating the Trinity. It is now universally admitted that this was not what the plural meant to the original author.’⁴ There are other equally unusual constructions in the Old Testament, but none of them demands a doctrine of the Trinity. This will be further developed in the next paper.

RIGHTEOUSNESS AND THE LAW OF GOD

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD (Lev. 19:18).

The phrase, ‘I am the LORD [your God]’ occurs a number of times in the Old Testament, in particular in direct association with commands to Israel. Doubtless, the fact of Israel’s redemption is the primary factor in understanding the commands, hence:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;³ you shall have no other gods before me (Exod. 20:2–3).

The people of Israel are to obey because they have been redeemed. But can we go further and ask concerning the nature of the commands? On one occasion (Lev. 11:44) we are told:

For I am the LORD your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.

² See Robert B. Girdlestone, *Old Testament Synonyms: Their Bearing on Christian Doctrine*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1897, pp. 19ff.

³ A conspicuous exception, though not in the scriptures, is Philo the first century AD Alexandrian Jewish philosopher: ‘It is on this account that Moses says, at the creation of man alone that God said, “Let *us* make man”, which expression shows than an assumption of other beings to himself as assistants, in order that God, the governor of all things, might have all the blameless intentions and actions of man, when he does right attributed to him; and that his other assistants might bear the imputations of his contrary actions’ (‘On the Creation’ in C. D. Yonge, [trans.], *The Works of Philo*, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1993, p. 11).

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Word Biblical Commentary vol. 1), Word, Milton Keynes, 1987, p. 27.

The routines for sanctification are to be followed because of the character of God. Redeemed Israel is to be holy because God is holy. They are to reflect the nature of God in their own lives and relationships. The rationale is that the commandments are the vehicle by which the character of God is known.

So is righteous living, righteousness in relationships, expressing something about God? I will make the suggestion that the law of God, written on the heart of man at creation, is an essential feature of the image of God. We are possibly familiar with Motyer's statement, 'Man is the living, personal image of God; the law is the written, preceptual image of God'.⁵ From this perspective, can we not ask whether the 'trinity' of God is to be seen in the law. The various commandments, especially those dealing with the interpersonal relationships in Israel, can be seen, *with the hindsight provided by the incarnation*, to be an indication of the interpersonal relationships which exist within the Godhead. If this is a possible line to be followed, then we can see that discussion concerning three-ness in one-ness ceases to be an exercise in mathematical absurdity and becomes a matter of deep wonder that there is righteousness in God because each 'person' relates to the others in the freedom of total consistency. With that apostolic hindsight we would then say that the Father, by being the Father, finds his full fatherhood in the Son and the Spirit. Likewise, the Son, by being consistent as the Son, finds his full sonship in his relationship with the Father and the Spirit. And, to complete the picture, when the Spirit is consistently the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, then he is fully himself.⁶

What this implies is that righteousness is a most wonderful matter, since it is the truth of God himself. Of course, I am not positing righteousness as a greater or lesser 'attribute' of God. There could be no true righteousness that was not the expression of holy love. That is when righteousness becomes mere moral rectitude and so not true righteousness at all. It becomes 'the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees', which stands over against God:

[H]e answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends' (Luke 15:29).

In contrast:

I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine *righteous* persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:7).

In fact, Jesus added, 'There is joy *in the presence*⁷ of the angels' (Luke 15:10). Not only do the angels themselves rejoice, as they did at creation (Job 38:7), but also there is joy in their presence, because of the joy of God himself. In the final analysis, the man let down through the roof can rejoice ('be of good cheer'), not because he is healed and can now compare his present with his former condition, but because in forgiveness there is righteousness and the man can now participate in the joy of God

⁵ J A Motyer, 'Law, Biblical Concept of', in W. A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984, p. 624.

⁶ It becomes obvious, then, why God forbids adultery. Of course there are pragmatic reasons for the prohibition, but these can be overcome by the deviousness of sinful humanity. But the faithfulness of God to Israel and of Jesus to his bride the church are not just paradigms to be applied but the reality which sustains human marriage. A husband will only find his 'husband-hood' in his wife—and in no one else—and a wife will only find her 'wife-hood' in her husband. '[T]he path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day' (Prov. 4:18).

⁷ Greek, ἐνώπιον (*enōpion*).

himself. God is the 'Righteous Father' (John 17:25), the Son is 'the Holy and Righteous One' (Acts 3:14) and the Kingdom of God is 'righteousness and peace and joy *in the Holy Spirit*' (Rom. 14:17).

As we have seen elsewhere, creation (the verb) was a momentous happening, not merely for our sakes, but principally because by it the triune God commenced the revelation of himself. He declared his own righteousness and the creation (the noun) bears witness to who he is. Now we can also see that in revealing the glory of God, expressed in his righteousness, we are being given a glimpse into the joy and fulness of the triune being of God.

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