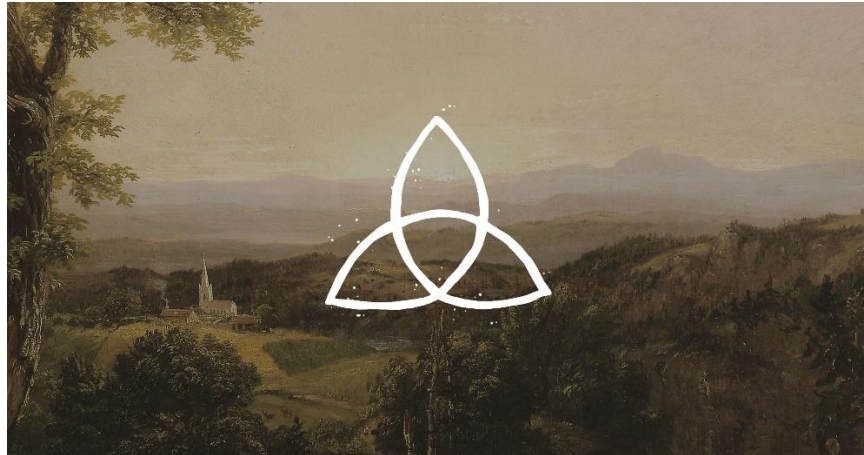


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The Trinity Transforms the Church into a Community of Love

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Defining the Church

Every generation struggles with devising a thoroughly biblical definition of the church. Previous generations defined the church through ecclesiastical hierarchies, while others shaped their characterization of the church around her distinct separateness from the world. Today, we tend to err by defining the church as a mere organizational social structure. To arrive at an accurate definition requires us to peer into eternity past when the church resided in the mind and heart of the triune God.

There is no more doxological foundation upon which we can formulate a definition of the church than the eternal work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church is not a Trinitarian afterthought in response to Adam and Eve's fall in the garden—quite the contrary. The church is the focused domain where all God's presence, promises, and purposes are unveiled and eternally realized. The church is the central body where all God's grace, forgiveness, and love are revealed and infinitely enjoyed. In the words of

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eighteenth-century New England pastor-theologian Jonathan Edwards, the whole world was created so that “the eternal Son of God might obtain a spouse.”¹

A Gift of Love to the Son

We are rendered speechless when we try to describe the beauty of God. David confesses that he could spend the entirety of his life gazing upon the beauty of the Lord ([Ps. 27:4](#)). Asaph joins David in his admiration of God’s perfect beauty: “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth” ([Ps. 50:2](#)). God’s beauty and loveliness shine most radiantly through the biblical concept of glory. Moses experienced this glory when God passed by him, revealing only the afterglow of his grandeur ([Ex. 33:12–23](#)). When God’s glory engulfed the temple, the priests could not perform their worship service ([2 Chron. 5:14](#)). Peter, James, and John became like dead men as God’s glory sparkled in their eyes when Jesus was transfigured before them ([Matt. 17:1–8](#)).

Jonathan Edwards attributes the beauty of creation as a mere reflection of God, who is altogether the fountain of all true beauty. Edwards recognized the beauty of God as the differentiating feature of God himself: “God is God, and is distinguished from all other beings, and exalted above ‘em, chiefly by his divine beauty, which is infinitely diverse from all other beauty.”² God’s beauty emanates directly from his being, and the supreme expression of God’s beauty is his Son, Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul affirms Jesus as “the image of God” ([2 Cor. 4:4](#)). That is, to see Jesus is to see God, to hear Jesus is to hear God, to know Jesus is to know God. Again, in [Colossians 1:15](#), Paul classifies Jesus as “the image of the invisible God.” The writer of Hebrews echoes the same language: “He [Jesus] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” ([Heb. 1:3](#)). As glory is a defining characteristic of God’s nature, the beauty that shines forth from God also shines forth from Jesus, for Jesus is the visible incarnation of God’s radiant glory.

According to Edwards, Jesus Christ is the end for which God created the world and how God most vividly expresses his beautiful love to sinful creatures—you and me. The expression of that divine love is selecting a bride for Christ that she too might beam with the loveliness of her bridegroom. Edwards reflects, “Christ is divine wisdom, so that the world is made to gratify divine love as exercised by Christ, or to gratify the love that is in Christ’s heart, or to provide a spouse for Christ—those creatures which wisdom chooses

¹ Jonathan Edwards, “The Church’s Marriage to Her Sons, and to Her God,” in *Sermons and Discourses, 1743–1758*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach, vol. 25 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 187.

² Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, vol. 2 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 298.

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for the object of divine love as Christ's elect spouse."³ To express his infinite love for Christ, God gives him a spouse, the church. The church is a gift from God to his Son "so that the mutual joys between this bride and bridegroom are the end of creation."⁴

When Christ lovingly looks upon his bride, the church, he beholds the reflection of the everlasting glory and infinite love of his Father, who is the primary fountain from which all true beauty flows. Just as the church is the glorious gift of love from God the Father to Christ the Son, so the church, as the body of Christ, reflects that Trinitarian love and beauty outwardly to the world. Since Christ's ascension to the Father's right hand, there is no more brilliant exemplification of God's perfect beauty, glory, love, and loveliness in this world than his church.

A Gift of Love to the Church

As the church is a love gift from the Father to the Son, the Holy Spirit is a love gift from the Son to his church. To comfort the hearts of his despondent disciples, who have just learned that Jesus will soon be leaving them, he promises them a "Helper." Jesus says, "The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" ([John 14:16](#)). The Greek word used here in reference to the Holy Spirit is *paraklētos*, which means "one called to another's side, specifically to help and aid." The word itself reveals the all-encompassing role of the Spirit within the body of Christ. He is our Helper, Intercessor, Assistant, Advocate, Comforter, Counselor, and Sustainer.

What love Jesus has for the church! He doesn't leave her to her own devices, inventions, creativity, or wit. Surprisingly, he says, "It is to your advantage that I go away" ([John 16:7](#)). We can almost hear the disciples lament Jesus's words if we listen closely. "What could possibly be good about you leaving us, Jesus?" Peter is so steadfast in his resolve that Jesus will not be leaving that he takes Jesus aside from the others and rebukes him ([Matt. 16:21-23](#)). Yes, the disciples have a daunting and seemingly insurmountable task of walking in Jesus's footsteps and continuing his ministry on earth. The proclamation of the gospel to the nations, the organization of the church, discipling believers, caring for orphans and widows, and all the rest—"You can't leave us, Jesus! How are we to accomplish all of this?" In his love and comforting care of his disciples, he essentially says, "My Father will give you a Helper." Jesus loves his church to such a degree that he gives her the Holy Spirit, who is sufficient enough to equip and empower you to

³ Jonathan Edwards, *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee, vol. 21 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 142.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies," 271, in *The Miscellanies, Entry Nos. a-z, aa-zz, 1-500*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer, vol. 13 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 374.

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discharge every aspect of the turning-the-world-upside-down ministry to which Jesus has called his church.

A Gift of Love to the World

The beautiful love so evident between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in creating, selecting, and sustaining the church creates more than a mere earthly organization. Instead, the church is fashioned into a community of love reflecting the same love characteristic of the Triune Godhead. This love is most evidently seen in her *oneness*.

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We don't have to read far into the New Testament until we find Jesus speaking of the oneness of his bride. The content of his high priestly prayer in [John 17](#) abounds with oneness petitions. He prays that believers "may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" ([John 17:21](#)). His people's oneness offers a flawless testimony that he is the Son of God. Not only are we to be one, but we are to be "perfectly one." In verse 23, Jesus prays, "I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." Proceeding out of the divine Trinitarian oneness—"I in them and you in me"—is the injunction that believers are to mirror such oneness *perfectly*. This perfect oneness is bound up in the Father's expression of love to his Son and the Son's declaration of love to his church through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, his people's perfect oneness is a brilliant testimony to the legitimacy of love expressed within the divine Trinity. As a community of love, the church is a community of the gospel that rightly reflects God's love through Christ to sinful creatures.

Without this unity, the world will likely see the church as a human organization devised by creative ingenuity, not a body of divine origin. In [John 17](#), Jesus is praying that when the world views the church, it will see not a man-made organization but a divine organism born from God. The church's growing oneness defines the church as having a loveliness. Samuel J. Stone rightly wrote in his magnificent hymn, "The Church's One Foundation,"

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Yet she on earth hath union
with God the Three in One,
and mystic sweet communion
with those whose rest is won.

The church is one with “God the Three in One,” and we reflect outwardly the beauty and love that emanates within the Trinity. The church is a community of love “because he first loved us” ([1 John 4:19](#)).

Dustin Bengé is the author of the [The Loveliest Place: The Beauty and Glory of the Church](#).



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© Crossway, March 14, 2022. Retrieved April 22, 2023.

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-trinity-transforms-the-church-into-a-community-of-love/>