

God who sends God – A Christmas Reflection 2018 (I)

When Christians say that, “God gives us grace,” it’s seldom clear what they think has actually been given. If pressed with the question, “What *is* grace?” the answers typically come back side-stepping the question, “It is unmerited/unearned/undeserved.” Or perhaps a more sophisticated “unmerited favor,” but that still leaves the meaning of “favor” unclear, and most of us gloss over it as some ethereal, abstract: “I guess that means God *kinda likes* me?” When grace is understood merely as something abstract like favor, or even something like “forgiveness/pardon/redemption/salvation,” we unintentionally center the entire situation around the *benefits* of Christ rather than his *person*. We reduce Christmas to us receiving a *something*, when in actual fact it is more about receiving a *someone*.

The Christian God is the God who sends God. He is the one who, in response to the fallen state of creation declares, “I myself will provide” (Gen. 22:8). So in the sending of Christ, God does not send *another*, but himself enters into creation in order to redeem it from within. With Christ as the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), such that if you have seen him you have seen the Father (John 14:9). Christ is not one other than God, and in the person of Christ, God unreservedly and whole-heartedly gives himself to us. The Christian God does not consist in three separate individuals in an eternal committee whereby the Son draws the short straw and has to debase himself on the cross. Such a view of God fractures his tri-unity and inevitably leads to apprehensiveness and anxiety about the Father, as though there is always an angry Father waiting to “get us” at the back of Jesus. No, in the person of the Son, we come to know and receive the Father’s love. Jesus does not “convince/persuade/coerce” the Father to love us by means of his atoning work. So so often we lapse into subconsciously relating to God as though the Father, because of his infinite justice and purity is forever angry, if not for the work of Christ that “twists his arm” and forces him to accept us. Rather, it is the Father who sends the Son out of love for us to begin with. The Christian God both exists and relates to creation in a threefold-manner. The Spirit, as the Spirit of Christ, almost never draws “attention” to himself but is always pointing to the person and work of Christ (John 15:26). Similarly, Christ is constantly turning people “back” to the Father (John 13:20). Believers are caught up in the threefold movement of God’s giving himself to creation by Son and Spirit. The way the Christian God gives himself to creation is by Son and Spirit. Grace just is “God’s self-giving” (Jonathan Edwards, John Owen). What is the gift? The gift is God’s own life! God gives *himself* to

us!! Forgiveness, redemption, eternal life are the benefits of that, but let us not forget the core of the gift.

But what does it mean to receive a person as opposed to a favor/thing? When we receive things from others, they are for us to wield. When I receive a watch as a gift, it is for me to use, to appropriate for my own purposes and pleasure. But receiving a person is of a totally different category. When a person gives himself/herself to you, the invitation is not to utility but communion and relationality. We are all familiar with the problems that arise when we treat persons as things, or when we have been treated this way by others. In the receiving of God in the person of Christ, we are invited into communion with the Triune God, and that is the chief end of the human person. We are created primarily for communion, and only secondarily for growth/transformation/activity. The latter is a natural outworking of the former (John 15) such that the Christian life is an overflowing-kind of life. God does not call us to give what he has not first given us (we love as we have been loved, forgive as we have been forgiven, etc.). He does not call us to give what we do not have.

If the Christian life is the call to the reception of God, the call to communion with a person, then that leaves us disturbingly unable to control the situation. Who knows what this God will do in relation to me? We *hope* that we only ever have sweet visions of rapture in our encounters with God, but more often than not that isn't our experience. In fact, visions of rapture and ecstasy are the minority report in the Christian tradition. When we are present to a person, we are in many ways at the mercy of that person. What will he say? What will he do? How will his presence make me feel? What if his presence makes me uncomfortable? And yet the primary vocation of the believer is to learn what it means to live in the presence of God. It is for that reason that the curtain of the holy of holies was torn. God invites us into his presence, he invites us to live *coram deo*.

This Christmas, amidst the hustle and bustle of the season, let us find time to recollect ourselves to the wonderful and amazing truth about the event, the reason for the season. In the incarnation of Christ, we hear God's unequivocal, resounding, "Yes!" to creation. It is, perhaps in a way only children might truly appreciate, the re-enchanting of creation by the divine presence once again.