

# Unitarian Obfuscation of God's Sacrificial Love

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**B**iblical Unitarians have done a valuable service to modern Christianity by pointing out the multitude of errors and contradictions of Rome's Trinitarianism. By stressing the full humanity of Jesus, Unitarians have rightly emphasized Jesus' personal struggle and ultimate victory in overcoming the human frailties and temptations that we all face with the power of God's holy Breath which is available to all of us. The emphasis on Jesus' full humanity and His complete dependence upon His Father, instead of an alleged cloaked inherent divinity, provides the perfect pattern for us to follow<sup>1</sup> since none of us have any such cloaked divinity which Trinitarianism presupposes for Jesus Christ. He was just like us, having all of the same frailties.

However, in their zeal to defend the oneness of God, Biblical Unitarians have obfuscated the primary motivation for loving the one true God and faithfully following the pattern established by His Son's humble obedience.

*Philippians 2:5-8 NIV*

*5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

*6 Who, **being in very nature God**, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he **made himself nothing** by taking the very nature of a servant, **being made in human likeness**. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!*

The words translated "made Himself nothing" (ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν) literally means "emptied Himself" or "voided Himself." Exactly what He "emptied" or "voided" is clearly stated. It was His being "in very nature God" and His "equality with God." In this complete transformation He became "made in human likeness." Notice also that His act of emptying Himself was the result of His prior contemplation ("consider") while "being in very nature God." The NASB follows the Greek more precisely rendering this clause as "He existed in the form of God."

There is an unfathomable chasm between the reality of the divine Son of God and the complete humanity of the Jesus, Son of Man. The various theological systems attempt to do away with this chasm with their various views of the Son. Trinitarians attempt to bridge this chasm between divinity and humanity with their doctrine of "hypostatic

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<sup>1</sup> Heb. 4:15; Heb. 12:1-3

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union," two natures existing simultaneously in the Son of God. Yet these two natures are mutually exclusive, and logically must give significant ground to Gnosticism, making the Son essentially two persons. Unitarians try to do away with any form of divinity for the Son in order to solve the paradox.

Yet it is this very paradox, this chasm between divinity and humanity (both of which the Son of God has partaken – sequentially not simultaneously), which demonstrates the lengths to which God and His Son have gone in order to redeem mankind. Exactly what God sacrificed by giving up His only-begotten Son and what His Son did by choosing to empty Himself of equality with God in nature (in order to transformed into dust like us) were both intended to ignite a reciprocal reaction which cannot be gained any other way. We need the right view of the depth of God's love for His Son and for us, and we need a right understanding of the utter humility and self-sacrifice of God's only-begotten Son. It took the free choices and cooperation of both Father and Son to span the chasm which separated sinful humanity from the God who created us.

### **The Father's Sacrifice:**

The ancient Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus captures the ancient understanding beautifully, showing that the Father's own sacrifice was the motivation that allowed the ancient Christians to face martyrdom unflinching.

*"... God Himself, who is Almighty, the Creator of all things, and invisible, has sent from heaven, and placed among men, [Him who is] the truth, and the holy and incomprehensible Word, and has firmly established Him in their hearts. He did not, as one might have imagined, send to men any servant, or angel, or ruler, or any one of those who bear sway over earthly things, or one of those to whom the government of things in the heavens has been entrusted, but the very Creator and Fashioner of all things – by whom He made the heavens ... As a king sends his son, who is also a king, so sent He Him; as God He sent Him; as to men He sent Him; as a Savior He sent Him, and as seeking to persuade, not to compel us; for violence has no place in the character of God. As calling us He sent Him, not as vengefully pursuing us; as loving us He sent Him, not as judging us. ...*

*"Do you not see them exposed to wild beasts, that they may be persuaded to deny the Lord, and yet not overcome? Do you not see that the more of them are punished, the greater becomes the number of the rest? This does not seem to be the work of man: this is the power of God; these are the evidences of His manifestation. ...*

*"As long then as the former time endured, He permitted us to be borne along by unruly impulses, being drawn away by the desire of pleasure and various lusts. This was not that He at all delighted in our sins, but that He simply endured them; nor that He approved the time of working iniquity which then was, but that He sought to form a mind conscious of righteousness,*

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so that being convinced in that time of our unworthiness of attaining life through our own works, it should now, through the kindness of God, be vouchsafed to us; and having made it manifest that in ourselves we were unable to enter into the kingdom of God, we might through the power of God be made able. 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."<sup>2</sup>

There is one profound statement in this early quote which is lost in virtually all of the modern doctrines of the Godhead, that God the Father "*Himself took on Him the burden of our iniquities.*" How did the Father take on the burden of our sins? By delivering, first to mortal humanity and then to death, His only-begotten Son whom He had literally fathered out of His own Person,<sup>3</sup> whom as His heir and apprentice, they together had fashioned what is to eventually become the Son's own inheritance.

In denying the preexistence (and thus the original divinity) of the Son of God, Unitarians are forced to explain away the "self-emptying" of the divine Son of God. In doing so, they greatly diminish the primary motivation for loving God. John wrote that "*We love Him because He first loved us.*"<sup>4</sup> Our love for God is a reaction elicited by grasping and then responding to His demonstrated love for us. The depth of God's love was demonstrated by His giving up His only-begotten Son. "*For God so loved the world*

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<sup>2</sup> Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus, chs. 7,9

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 2:7 cf. John 8:42 where the Greek reads: "*for out of God I issued forth.*"

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 4:19

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*that He gave His only-begotten Son ...*"<sup>5</sup> Our own reciprocal love for God is proportional to our understanding and acceptance of God's love for us. Whatever limits to the depth of God's love that are imposed by our theological paradigms necessarily limit the depth of our reciprocal love for God. Our fellowship with God is based upon our shared reciprocal love. But our full response to God's love is possible only by our grasping the depth of His love for us that was demonstrated by what our redemption cost God Himself 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."*<sup>6</sup>

The Unitarian Jesus is a very 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 not by genuine procreation. 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. 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. He is just one of many of God's creatures. When Jesus was obedient unto death as the sacrifice for our sins, this cost God nothing more than when Abel was murdered because he was righteous. 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 a father giving up his only-begotten Son who came from his own body to save others vs. a craftsman giving up something that he fashioned with his hands to save others. Yes, an adopted son is valuable to a father. But a "begotten" son is different. He is actually part of his father's own flesh. 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 widow at the funeral of her "only-begotten son," raising him from the dead and presenting him alive to his mother.<sup>7</sup> 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. Abraham's internal struggle was no doubt suffocating as he raised the knife to

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<sup>5</sup> John 3:16

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 4:8-10

<sup>7</sup> Luke 7:12-15

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plunge it into his own "only-begotten son"<sup>8</sup> at God's command. Why would God test Abraham in this brutal way, making him suffer so much grief 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 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. This experience motivated Abraham in his love for God. 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 and the necessary motivation that it provides 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.*"<sup>9</sup> And that is indeed the greatest kind of love that any mere human might have. 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. 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 any human is capable of doing and many have done. But, this is only the ultimate sacrifice that mere humans can achieve. God and His only-begotten Son demonstrated much more.

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<sup>8</sup> Heb. 11:17

<sup>9</sup> John 15:12-13

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Just as Paul urged the Philippians to emulate the "mind of Christ" demonstrated by His self-emptying, so also he urged the Corinthians to share sacrificially with the impoverished believers in Judea.

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! He did exactly the same thing with the Philippians.

The enormity of the sacrifice of the Son of God, having been "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"<sup>10</sup> even in His resurrected state at the right hand of God, He will come again as the "Son of Man,"<sup>11</sup> and will rule as "the seed of David according to the flesh."<sup>12</sup> He will always be fully human, only resurrected and glorified just as in God's promise to us.

Christ's willingness to shed His blood to meet the requirement for our redemption was indeed a great sacrifice which should not be diminished. Yet, He knew that His physical sufferings were only for a brief moment of time. He knew that He would not remain dead for long, but that God would raise Him on the third day. Furthermore, all men are going to die, and Christians also have the hope and promise of the 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

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<sup>10</sup> 1 John 4:2-3, note the perfect tense participle ἐληλυθότα

<sup>11</sup> Matt. 24:30

<sup>12</sup> Acts 2:30

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Paul in both 2 Corinthians 8 and Philippians 2 was much greater, something no mere human being has or can experience. When the only-begotten Son of God sacrificed His divinity and equality in nature with God in order to become fully human, equal with humanity made of dust, this was permanent. Jesus will forever be a resurrected Man of flesh. There is no going back to *"the form of God"* or *"equality with God."* Jesus' death and resurrection transformed Him from a lesser state to a permanent glorious state. But His transformation from the divine, only-begotten Son of God to the fully human Son of Man was a permanent transformation from the greatest possible state to a lowly state. And this is what we as Christians are commanded to emulate.

Unitarians are depriving themselves and their converts of fully 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. They are also depriving themselves and their converts of fully realizing the gravity of the Son's self-emptying which is the model for our self-emptying.

These are the things that gave the earliest Christians the courage to stare down wild beasts and remain calm as they were burned at the stake, their eyes heavenward like Stephen.<sup>13</sup> 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 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 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 ..."*<sup>14</sup> and *"let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus ..."*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Acts 7:55

<sup>14</sup> John 3:16

<sup>15</sup> Phil. 2:5