

A response to a trinitarian's view of the death of Jesus

At the beginning of this year, I placed on my website a response to Max Hatton's challenge to the non-trinitarian Seventh-day Adventists. This is a challenge found on his website. This brought about a further exchange of emails between us (there have been others over the years) – all of which have concerned the trinity doctrine.

Hatton - a devout trinitarian and a retired Seventh-day Adventist minister (he wrote the much acclaimed Seventh-day Adventist publication 'Understanding the Trinity') - disagrees with my non-trinitarian beliefs. This is on two points in particular. He disagrees with my belief that

(a) a divine person died at Calvary

(b) in becoming incarnate, the divine person of the Son of God put at risk His eternal existence.

In keeping with trinitarianism, Hatton maintains that it is impossible for a divine person to die. He also believes - again in keeping with trinitarianism (also hand in hand with the belief that a divine person cannot die) - that it is impossible for there to have been a risk to the divine person of Christ in becoming incarnate. This I believe, on both counts, is a denial of the gospel. I believe that a divine person did die at Calvary – also that if during our Saviour's time on earth He had sinned, which the Bible clearly says could have happened, He would have lost His existence. In trinitarianism, both of these beliefs are denied (prohibited).

When relating his views on the death of Jesus, Max Hatton explained to me

“The suffering of Jesus was felt by the Divine human Jesus right up to the point of death. His Divinity experienced the agony of it all just as much as His humanity suffered. At the point of death His humanity died but His Divinity which had suffered everything that death means to anyone could not [c]ease to live. A Divine Person could not and did not die.” (Email, Max Hatton to Terry Hill, 27th February 2014)

I had repeatedly explained to Max that whilst I do not believe that *divine nature* died at Calvary, I do believe a *divine person* died. I believe that a *divine person* died *in humanity*. This is something that the divine Son of God could not have done in His pre-existence as God (when He had His existence in divine nature only). Divine nature cannot die. This is why He became incarnate. It was so that He could die. I also explained to Max that if a divine person did not die at Calvary, then a divine person did not make the atonement. This much appears reasonably obvious. Whoever died at Calvary made the atonement.

My pleas made no difference. Max Hatton continued to insist, as he says above, that “A Divine Person could not and did not die”. This leaves us of course, if it were true, with a sacrifice of something that was only human. You will see later why I say 'something' and not 'someone'.

In another email he further explained

“When Jesus died He was still the Divine/human God-man until the point of death. That means His death had the quality of Divinity and therefore that death was of infinite value. As I have pointed out before Jesus had to become a man in order for

Him to die. He could not die as God and the God part of His make-up could not die on the cross. It did however suffer all that His humanity did in His dying. It must have been a shocking experience for the Members of the Trinity.”(Email, Max Hatton to Terry Hill, 27th February 2014)

When Max Hatton says “Jesus had to become a man in order for Him to die”, he does not mean that the divine person actually died. What he means is that the divine person 'experienced' what it is like for humanity to die. In other words, when the humanity of Jesus died, the divine person of the Son of God was still alive. This 'experience' of death therefore, for the divine person, was only what might be termed a second-hand experience. It could be said He experienced death by proxy (by something or someone else doing it on His behalf). As Hatton says (his conclusion of the matter), the divine person did not die. He does say though that realising what death was all about “must have been a shocking experience for the Members of the Trinity”.

Notice Hatton says concerning the incarnate Christ, “the God part of His make-up could not die on the cross”. This is the trinitarian understanding of the death of Jesus.

Perhaps the best way to explain this belief is by using the illustration of a puppeteer and a puppet. What I mean is: no matter how much the puppet (human nature) is 'damaged', the puppeteer (the divine person) remains in His original pristine condition. In other words, in this belief system (trinitarianism), it is apparent that the divine person does not actually become flesh but only dwells within a human framework. It is just as though He is 'in' human nature rather than human nature becoming an integral part of His being.

Hatton concludes therefore that even though the divine person did not die at Calvary, the death of humanity on the cross had the “quality” of a divine death. This is because, according to Hatton, divinity had experienced the suffering of humanity “until the point of death”.

Two weeks later, Max re-emphasised his view by saying

“The Divinity and humanity of Jesus both suffered right from the time of the Garden of Gethsemane right through to the moment of His death on the cross. His Omnipotent Divinity tasted His death but it could not actually experience it. Only His humanity could actually die.” (Email, Max Hatton to Terry Hill 11th March 2014)

This is simply confirming what has been said previously – that at Calvary, according to trinitarianism, only human nature died and not a divine person. The same has been said to me by a number of trinitarian Seventh-day Adventist ministers. In fact in his latest article (released 27th April 2014) called 'Our God is an awesome God', Max Hatton repeats this very same thought. He confirms that in the trinitarian understanding of God, the divine person of the Son of God did not die at Calvary. He also makes reference to “A friendly non-Trinitarian SDA” who wrote to him “insisting that a Divine Person died on the Cross”. I believe he is referring to me.

Whatever the wording, it always comes back to the same point – a divine person did not die at Calvary. Did you notice that Max uses the phrases, “right up to the point of death” or “until the point of death” - also “to the moment of His death”. Again this is a denial that a divine person actually died at Calvary. He very clearly says that a divine person “could not actually experience” death. He says that. “Only His humanity could actually die”. This is the trinitarian view of the atonement.

At this point I would ask you to reason with me.

In Jesus there were not two persons. This means that if the trinitarians are correct in saying that the divine person of the Son of God did not die at Calvary, then not even a person died. According to this reasoning, the only thing that died was a person-less human nature.

Look at it this way.

There are only three persons of the Godhead therefore there are only three divine persons involved in our salvation. This means that if neither the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit actually died at Calvary - which is what the trinitarians maintain - then no actual person died at Calvary. There was no fourth person to die.

Whilst there was two natures in the incarnate Christ, there were not two persons. The two natures were blended together to form ONE PERSON – the man Christ Jesus. He is the pre-existent divine Son of God incarnate.

Nature in itself is not a person. All three persons of the Godhead have a divine nature but they are not one person. It is just like you and I have the same human nature but we are not one person. We have our own individual personalities – which in turn makes us individual persons.

Hatton speaks of the human in Christ doing one thing (dying) whilst the divine is doing something else (not dying). This can only be applicable to the natures of the incarnate Christ and not the person Himself. The person of Jesus could not be dead and alive at the same time. This would be impossible.

As has been said, the two natures came together to form ONE PERSON. This is why they could not be separated from each other. Hatton, as a trinitarian, appears to believe differently. He explained (this same reasoning can also be found in his article 'Our God is an awesome God')

“In the Divine/human Jesus we have Divinity and humanity somehow merged together but not inextricably.” (Email, Max Hatton to Terry Hill, 28th February 2014)

Inextricably means in a way which is impossible to be unravelled or separated therefore by saying that in the incarnation the divine and the human were “not inextricably” merged together, Hatton appears to be saying that the two (the divine and the human) can be separated. I disagree with this view. This is because the two natures were blended together to make ONE PERSON. The natures could not be separated without destroying the person of Jesus. As I said previously, trinitarianism makes it look as though the divine Son of God was only 'in' human nature – and had not actually become flesh by taking humanity into Himself (into His person).

Hatton's views concerning how the two natures in Christ existed together are exactly the opposite to the way he describes how the three persons of the Godhead have their existence together. Regarding the latter he says

*“The Three are obviously One, **inextricably bound together** in One Divine Substance.” (Max Hatton, *Our God is an awesome God*, page 21, April 2014)*

This the trinitarian understanding of God. It means that none of the three can ever become separated from each other. They are said to be [“inextricably bound together”](#). This is exactly the same as the orthodox view of the trinity. This is why on the point of the three divine persons being a trinity, there is no difference between the Orthodox version of the trinity doctrine and the version held by the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Seven years ago, an orthodox priest explained the orthodox view to me. He wrote saying

[“We \[orthodox trinitarians\] maintain rather the *invariability of the Godhead* \(its simplicity and unity\) in the sense that *no action can lead to ontological change*; namely in this case that the Word, one ousia with the Father and the Spirit, *never leaves the Father's side even when He joins with our human nature in the Incarnation.*” \(Email, Father Gregory Hallam, Orthodox Priest, to Terry Hill, 16th May 2007\)](#)

This is trinitarianism - no matter what version it may be. It is saying that all three persons are, as Hatton says, [“inextricably bound together in One Divine Substance”](#) as the one God. This is why, in this teaching, the divine Son of God never dies. It is also why He can never put at risk His eternal existence. He is always alive as God.

Earlier this year, Hatton had written to me saying

[“I would suggest to you Terry that if you want to impress me with your integrity please take seriously the things I have offered to you in favour of the Trinity. Also, prove your arguments from the Bible as Ellen White says you must.” \(Max Hatton to Terry Hill 20th January 2014\)](#)

Needless to say, because of the way trinitarian beliefs affect what the divine Son of God achieved (and risked) in becoming incarnate, I cannot take seriously what Hatton says in support of the trinity doctrine although I did honour his request regarding the Bible study.

To this end I put together a study on what the Bible says about who actually died at Calvary - also the possibility of the divine person of the Son of God sinning and losing His existence. I did send it to Max Hatton. If you wish to read it you will find it here

[The Death of Christ and the possibility of Him sinning](#)

As regarding who and what died at Calvary: if you would like to read what we have been told through the writings of Ellen White (through the spirit of prophecy), I have placed a number of statements at the following link. Obviously there is much more saying exactly the same thing but there is no point in simply repeating what she wrote. If you read it, you will see she says very clearly that a divine person did die at Calvary.

[Ellen G. White - The death at Calvary of the divine Son of God](#)

I have also put together statements from her writings showing that she fully agreed with the view that in becoming incarnate, the divine Son of God put at risk His eternal existence. This shows that on both counts (the death of the divine Son of God and the risk factor) it was impossible for her to have agreed with the trinity doctrine. You will find these statements here.

[Ellen G. White - The risk taken concerning Christ's existence](#)

Before you look at any of these things though (if this is your intention), may I ask you to consider the following.

To whom does this world owe its redemption? To whom does the forgiven sinner owe his or her salvation? If a divine person did not die at Calvary then it is not to a divine person that we owe our salvation. Whoever or whatever died at Calvary paid the penalty for sin. Whoever or whatever died at Calvary made the atonement.

One final thing before I close.

Through the aforementioned Bible study, I believe I had clearly showed Max Hatton that the Scriptures reveal that a divine person did die at Calvary. I had also showed him that we have been told exactly the same through the spirit of prophecy. This did not change his views. I wondered therefore, at that point, what else I could do to resolve our conflict of beliefs. The only thing I could think of was to try to pin-point exactly where our reasoning differed.

To this end, I put together a series of statements (10 in total) that I thought would achieve this objective. I asked Max if he would read them through and tell me where he thought I was wrong. Unfortunately, he refused to do so. Instead he said he would not continue the conversation. This is unfortunate because I really do believe it could have resolved the problem.

If you are a trinitarian, you may be interested in reading these statements. You may also wish to explain to me, if you believe I am wrong, where you believe my reasoning is faulty. Here are the 10 statements

1) God the Father and the Son of God are two distinct personages. They are not the same person. John opened his gospel by saying, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God" etc. He was saying these two (God and the Word) are two divine beings (two personages). All through the Scriptures, God and Christ are depicted as two persons.

2) It was not the Father who left (vacated) Heaven, came to earth and became flesh but the Word. The Father remained in Heaven whilst the Word, the divine Son of God, was born of a virgin at Bethlehem (became incarnate). How this was achieved is a mystery known to God alone. We therefore must not speculate as to how it was done.

3) The 'holy thing' born of Mary was the Word (the divine Son of God) incarnate. He was the pre-existent Word made flesh. In contrast to how He was previously in Heaven (a person of one nature - divinity), He was now, in the incarnation, a person of two natures (fully divine and fully human). Again it can only be said that how this was achieved is a mystery to us.

4) Each nature (the divine and the human) was not a person. The two natures were blended together in ONE PERSON - the man Christ Jesus. The two natures therefore could not become separated. They had formed ONE PERSON. Whilst the two natures were not two persons, neither was there a divine being inside a human body manipulating it like a puppeteer manipulates a puppet. The Word had actually become flesh. He was not a separate person from His humanity. Humanity was integrated into His person (into Himself).

5) During His time on earth, this ONE PERSON lived His life not depending on the use of divinity in His own right (as the pre-existent divine Son of God) but exercised it (as we exercise it) through faith in His Father. In other words, He lived His life on earth exactly the same way as we need to live it - trusting in God for power and to overcome temptation etc. Like as we are (as Christians), He was fitted for the conflict by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

6) It was this ONE PERSON (the divine Son of God incarnate) who died at Calvary. The ONE PERSON died in His humanity (in His human nature). Divine nature did not die. The divine person therefore (the incarnate Word) had died. Previously, when He was in Heaven (as God), this is something He could not do. This is because divine nature cannot die. He needed to become incarnate so that He could die.

7) In the grave, this ONE PERSON (the Word incarnate) was not alive. He was therefore unconscious (unaware) as to what was happening around Him. His Spirit, like ours in death, was sleeping. He was awaiting a resurrection. He could not resurrect Himself. In death He, the divine person of the Word (the divine Son of God), knew nothing.

8) Divine nature did not die at Calvary. It was the divine person who died. As I said above, each nature (the human and the divine) was not a person. Together they were blended in ONE PERSON. This ONE PERSON (the incarnate Word) was dead. He had died in His human nature.

9) It was the Father who resurrected Christ from the grave. He, the incarnate Word, was dependant upon His Father for a resurrection. If the Father had not called Him from the grave, He would still be there today.

10) In the grave, this ONE PERSON (the incarnate Word) was not doing two things at the same time. He was not dead (unconscious/asleep) and at the same time alive (conscious/awake). He was only ONE PERSON. Each nature was not a person. The ONE PERSON, the incarnate Word, was dead. The divine person had surrendered Himself totally to His humanity - even unto death.

Please feel free to email me with your comments. I will look forward to hearing from you.

In the meanwhile, may God bless you as you continue to meditate upon this very important subject. After all, who or what made the atonement is the very heart of the gospel. We need to be sure of what we believe – also be able to explain it to others. If we cannot understand it, then how can we explain it to others?

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