

Some Prima Facie Arguments for the Trinity as the Image of Renewed Sociality in the Church

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Does the church, as a community of God's people, reflect the trinitarian communion that is constitutive of the very being and life of God? Many *confessional* evangelicals appear to be uncomfortable with affirming and developing a trinitarian ecclesiology of communion. It is not so much that they have openly attacked the arguments of those who describe the fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as paradigmatic for ecclesial life and fellowship. Rather, confessional Reformed and Lutheran scholars appear to have avoided the question altogether. A quick search of theological journals published by institutions associated with orthodox confessional Protestantism uncovers little or no interest in the connection between the Trinity and the Church. This ecclesio-trinitarian skittishness, however, is not found within broader evangelicalism. Evangelicals like Grenz,¹ Grudem,² Garrett,³ even Erickson,⁴ that *do* theologize about the church as an image of the Trinity are, nevertheless, not members of ecclesiastical

¹ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).

³ J. L. Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990-95).

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), pp. 331-339; and *Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000).

communions faithful to the magisterial Reformation and its confessions and catechisms.⁵

Perhaps what is not explicitly dealt with in our own confessional books will always be viewed with suspicion. As far as I can tell, neither the confessions nor the catechisms of the Reformation and Protestant Scholasticism explicitly connect the Church's common life together with God's communal life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. No doubt, this lacuna within the symbolic books of the Reformation reflects the fact that the Reformers themselves, while affirming and defending the Trinity, and clarifying its defining significance for the *divine-human* relationship, nevertheless, did not attempt to develop a trinitarian theology of *human-human* relationships within the church. This second theological move, although hinted at by earlier, pre-Reformation trinitarian theologians,⁶ has only begun to be explored by modern theologians in tandem with the blossoming of interest in what has been called "social trinitarianism" in the 20th

⁵ To my knowledge the only confessional Reformed theologian that has written at length on this topic is Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "The Hodgson-Welch Debate and the Social Analogy of the Trinity" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1982); "Gregory of Nyssa and the Social Analogy of the Trinity," *The Thomist* 50 (1986): 325-352; "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*; "The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity," *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 37-53; "The Perfect Family: Our Model of Life Together is Found in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," *Christianity Today* 32 (Nov. 4, 1988): 24-27; and "Images of God," in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View*, edited by M. A. Noll and D. F. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 51-67.

⁶ Only here and there do we find hints of the possibility of a trinitarian ecclesiology in patristic and medieval theology (Tertullian, *Ad Praxeas*, chpts. 20-25; Cyprian, *Ep.* 74 [*ANF*, p. 390-1]; Augustine, *de Trin.* 4.12; 6.4; Richard of St. Victor, *de Trin.* 3.9). John Thompson notes that "in the patristic era there were clear signs showing an awareness of the church as a trinitarian reality emphasizing the mystery of God's being and action, creating the unity and fellowship of the church reflecting his own divine life" (*Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* [New York: Oxford, 1994], p. 80). Nevertheless, Thompson's own analysis relies on the work of Heinz Schutte, who argues in his *Im Gespräch mit dem Dreieinen Gott* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1985) that the trinitarian dimension of ecclesiology remained largely *implicit* in patristic and medieval theologians (pp. 361-375). What lay dormant in these early trinitarian theologies has been made a theological research program in the 20th century.

century.⁷

Unfortunately, most of the productive theological work on the social character of the God's triune life has been done by modern theologians who can at best be described as less than confessional. It is no doubt this very fact that conjures up for conservative evangelicals fears of inadvertently supporting the questionable theological presuppositions of more liberal and neo-orthodox modern social trinitarians.⁸ Within Reformed circles, for example, most of these trinitarian theologians clearly evidence Barthian sympathies, a fact that certainly does not help them gain a fair hearing in Reformed academic communities that often have good reasons for being highly suspicious of neo-orthodoxy. It doesn't help any that Barth himself was at the headwaters of the revival of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity in the twentieth century.⁹

Tomas F. Torrance, for example, has produced an enormously productive corpus of scholarly essays and books on trinitarian theology.¹⁰ Most, if not all of his trinitarian theology

⁷ For overviews of this development see, Thomas R. Thompson, "Trinitarianism Today: Doctrinal Renaissance, Ethical Relevance, Social Redolence," *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (1997): 9-42; and John J. Gresham, Jr., "The Social Model of the Trinity and Its Critics," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993): 325-343; and John O'Donnell, "Trinity as Divine Community: A Critical Reflection Upon Recent Theological Developments," *Gregorianum* 69 (1988): 2-22.

⁸ I think one can detect such a fear, for example, in Peter Toon's *Our Triune God: A Biblical Portrayal of the Trinity* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), esp. chapters 2 and 3. Sometimes this "fear" of modern trinitarian theology manifests itself in the absence of any mention of modern insights. So in Robert Morey's 600 page doctrinal exposition of the Trinity not one 20th century trinitarian theologian is even mentioned, let alone interacted with (*The Trinity: Evidence and Issues* [Grand Rapids, MI: Word Publishing, 1996]).

⁹ Barth does, however imperfectly, discuss the community of the church in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity (*Church Dogmatics*, 4/2, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. by G. W. Bromiley [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958], pp. 643ff. [hereafter cited as *CD*]). The trinitarian scheme of Barth's ecclesiology is everywhere evident in his works (see Colm O'Grady, *The Church in the Theology of Karl Barth* [London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968], p. 99).

¹⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988); *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); and *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three*

studiously avoids straight-line deductions concerning social programs and visions. Nevertheless, his trinitarian theology is viewed with suspicion, even open skepticism¹¹ for at least three reasons: 1) he has carried forward Barth's theological program in other areas; 2) he has continued his membership in the Church of Scotland (considered by most conservative Presbyterians to have given up orthodox Reformed theology generations ago), and 3) he has argued for the ordination of women.¹²

One also suspects that the association of social trinitarianism with left-leaning socio-political agendas and ecumenical efforts has dampened the interest of confessional Reformation communities, which tend to be much more conservative in their social philosophies.¹³ The "socialist" programs of radical modern theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, who argue from the

Persons (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996). For a comprehensive bibliography see Alister E. McGrath, *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), pp. 249-296.

¹¹ See, for example, the scathing review Torrance gets in the *Westminster Theological Journal*: Sebastian Rehnman, "Barthian Epigoni: Thomas F. Torrance's Barth-Reception," *Westminster Theological Journal* 60:2 (Fall 1998): 271-296

¹² T. F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).

¹³ One suspects that for many modern theologians not only how one might use the Trinity as a ideal for reform in church and society, but also how one formulates a doctrine of the Trinity has a great deal more to do with certain pre-theological sociological and political commitments than to a careful exposition of the Bible and received trinitarian theological tradition. Those who favor radical pluralization in church and state often develop or adopt more radical social constructions of the Trinity. This does not mean, of course, that all influences arising from one's life in the church ought to be excluded when theologizing about the Trinity. Zizioulas notes that the ecclesiastical experience of the early church helped shape the development of the patristic doctrine of the Trinity (*lex orandi, lex credendi*) (John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* [London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1985], p. 16ff.). Miroslav Volf suggests that "the trinitarian character of the church was gradually acquired parallel with the growing consciousness of God's triune nature" (*After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998], p. 195). Certainly our experience of God within the liturgical, sacramental, and communal life of the church affects our understanding of the Trinity. What would seem suspicious, however, is allowing our extra-

communitarian nature of God for egalitarian social agendas, do not sit well with American orthodox theologians. The easy rapidity with which many modern social trinitarians move from theological reflection on the interpersonal trinitarian relations to egalitarian social and political conclusions is astonishing. And it is a contemporary novelty not found in the Christian tradition. The church seems to be bypassed or, if included in these reflections, becomes little more than an instrument for accomplishing sociopolitical goals directly skimmed off of the creamy top of their trinitarian speculation. Even modern trinitarian theologians who evidence a more “conservative” bent overall often readily use their social construal of the Trinity to argue for egalitarian structures of ministry within the government and liturgical life of the church.¹⁴

More damning associations should also be considered. Social trinitarianism often appears like a weapon in the hands of those who wage war against confessional Protestantism. Orthodox Protestants are suspicious when they see how these newer social trinitarian theologies have been used to justify and ground philosophies of religious pluralism.¹⁵ Moltmann¹⁶ and LaCugna,¹⁷ for example, appear to dissolve the ontological Trinity into the economic. Radical

ecclesiastical political and social experience to dictate how we construe the Trinity, especially when we have some secular agenda to push.

¹⁴ Catherine M. LaCugna, *God for Us : The Trinity & Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1973), p. 397; Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (London: Burnes and Oates, 1988); and Volf, *After the Image*, esp. chpt. 4.

¹⁵ See Trevor Hart, “Karl Barth, the Trinity, and Pluralism,” Gary Badcock, “Karl Rahner, the Trinity, and Religious Pluralism,” and Richard Bauckham, “Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* and the Question of Pluralism,” in *The Trinity in A Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997).

¹⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

¹⁷ Catherine M. LaCugna, *God for Us : The Trinity & Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1973); idem, “Philosophers and Theologians on the Trinity,” *Modern Theology* 2 (1986): 169-181; idem, “Re-Conceiving the Trinity as the Mystery of Salvation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985): 1-23; idem with K. McDonnell, “Returning from ‘The Far

proposals similar to this are not confined to traditionally liberal circles. More and more Evangelicals are adopting what has been called “open theism” and using social trinitarian arguments as part of its case against classical conceptions of God.¹⁸

Worse and worse, the theological pioneers responsible for initially formulating a “communio” ecclesiology grounded in the trinitarian communion were mostly Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox scholars. I am not here referring to the genesis of modern social trinitarian theology, but to the theological ground-breaking work of Catholic and Orthodox scholars like Rahner,¹⁹ von Balthasar,²⁰ De Lubac,²¹ Congar,²² Ratzinger,²³ and Zizioulas,²⁴ who worked to

Country’: Theses for a Contemporary Trinitarian Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1988): 191-215.

¹⁸ Clark Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in Pinnock, et. al., ed., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 107-109; and Gregory Boyd, *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne’s Di-polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), pp.332-33. Boyd’s thesis has been popularized in his *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000).

¹⁹ Karl Rahner, “The Church,” in Karl Rahner, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Theology* (London: Burnes & Oates, 1975), pp. 205-27.

²⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990 [1969]); *Pneuma und Institution* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1974); *The Heart of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1980 [1945]).

²¹ Henri De Lubac, *The Spendour of the Church*, trans. by Michael Mason (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956); *The Motherhood of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), esp. chapt. IV, “*Ecclesia de Trinitate*”; *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, trans. by James R. Dunne (Staten Island, NY: Ecclesia Press, 1969); and *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

²² Yves Congar, *The Mystery of the Church* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1960); *Lay People in the Church* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1965); and T. I. MacDonald, *The Ecclesiology of Yves Congar* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984).

²³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 1988); and *Introduction to Christianity* (London: Burns & Oats, 1969).

²⁴ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1985); “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution,” in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, ed.

make explicit connections between the inter-personal relations and unity of God, on the one hand, and the life and structure of the Church, on the other. These men laid the foundation for Vatican II's revised "communio" ecclesiology." Given confessional Protestantism's intensely anti-Roman undercurrent, is it any wonder that there is widespread suspicion of trinitarian-based ecclesiological reflection? The fact that trinitarian reflection on the life of the church originated in modern Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox circles does nothing to endear such theologizing to orthodox Protestants.

All of these associations—with Barth, ecumenism, socialism, pluralism, heterodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy—no doubt cause the hair on the necks of confessional Reformed and Lutheran theologians to stand up. Surely there are "safer" and much more pressing theological research programs that demand our immediate attention. That may well be. I would not want to argue that theologizing about the Church in the light of the Trinity is somehow a critical necessity for our generation. I want to make a more modest appeal. It seems to me that we could do much worse. The Church finds herself in deplorable shape. She is divided across confessional, denominational, even cultural lines. She has succumbed to the siren call of individualism and democratized her liturgical and sacramental life, especially in America. Colin Gunton has argued that our the current ecclesiastical malaise cries out for a trinitarian analysis. ". . . the manifest inadequacy of the theology of the church derives from the fact that it has never seriously and consistently been rooted in a conception of the being of God as triune. . . . because [the Trinity] has been neglected, the church has appropriated only a part of

its rich store of possibilities for nourishing a genuine theology of community.”²⁵ I will argue in this essay that given all the significant reasons to be cautious about drawing conclusions about how our life together ought to be lived in the church based on our understanding of God’s triune relational life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that it nevertheless ought to be thoughtfully pursued by orthodox confessional Protestants. There are good *prima facie* reasons for doing so.

Let Us Make Man—Male and Female

Before I begin framing arguments, it may be helpful to stop and restate my thesis. There are good biblical and theological reasons for thinking that the Trinity is an image of the communal life of the Church. The oneness of the community of the Church and the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are intimately connected. This means, on the one hand, that the heart of the mystery of the unity of the church is *de facto* grounded in the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Cyprian described the church as “a people united by the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”²⁶ This theological reality remains hidden from us and must be accepted by faith, even when it is not experientially evident in the historical church. But the connection between Trinity and Church also means that the manner by which individual Christian people are united in one ecclesial community, in both local and larger contexts, *ought* to reflect the way in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are personally united. Clearly this simple assertion begs for clarification and qualification, a task I will address later in this essay. For now, suffice it to say that what I am concerned to defend is that the members of the Christian ecclesial community have a *task* set before them—to make their fellowship into a visible image of the community of

²⁵ Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, second ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), p. 57.

²⁶ *De Orat. Dominica*, 23; Migne: *PL* 4:556A.

the Holy Trinity. In other words, if the Church of Jesus Christ is to live in a *godly* way, she must by grace be transfigured into the kind of community that the triune Godhead models. To put it another way, if a person wants to live in a *godly* way, he or she will relate to others in the church in a manner that reflects the manner in which the three persons of the Trinity live together.²⁷

The first argument stems from the biblical confession that humanity has been created in “the image of God” (Gen. 1:26, 27) and that the renewal of that image involves not only what happens within individual hearts and minds in relation to God, but also inevitably includes the transformation of our social relations (Eph. 4:24 with 5:1 and 5:22-6:9; Col. 3:10 with 3:12-4:1). Without rehearsing the convoluted theological history of the problems associated with the precise identity of the “image of God,” I only wish to call attention here to few salient introductory points before moving on to consider its social dimension. First, whatever else it means, humanity not only *bears* the image of God in that we inescapably reflect God, but humanity is also *called* to image God. The image of God is both a gift and a task. “Image” is therefore appropriately used as noun and a verb. Most Reformation theologians have therefore spoken of both post-lapsarian humanity’s *retention* of the image and our *inability* after the fall to fulfill our calling to actively image God. The question, then, for us is: does the image of God embrace the social dimension of humanity’s created existence? And if it does, what bearing does God’s own eternal sociality have upon our understanding of humanity’s calling to image God’s life on earth?

It was no divine monad who created man in his image. The immediate context would appear to provide us with the “missing link” sought for in the interpretation of the “Let *us* make . . . in *our* image” in Gen. 1:26-27. The presence and activity of the divine Spirit in Gen. 1:2

²⁷ “. . . by faith a person takes his stand on the ground of God’s own being” (Hilary of

seems to be the most likely referent of this address within the structure of the creation narrative itself.²⁸ In fact, as Sinclair Ferguson notes, “the engagement of the Spirit in the work of creation would mark the beginning and end of a literary inclusio in Genesis 1.”²⁹ In support of this reading, one discovers in the wider canonical context of the Old Testament how Yahweh’s ongoing creative work includes the activity of his Spirit (Ps. 104:30; Job 33:4). Victor P. Hamilton explains,

The best suggestion approaches the trinitarian understanding but employs less direct terminology. Thus Hasel calls the *us* of v. 26 a ‘plural of fullness,’ and Clines, God here speaks to the Spirit, mentioned back in v. 2, who now becomes God’s partner in creation. It is one thing to say that the author of Gen. 1 was not schooled in the intricacies of Christian dogma. It is another thing to say he was theologically too primitive or naïve to handle such ideas a plurality within unity. What we often so blithely dismiss as ‘foreign to the thought of the OT’ may be nothing of the sort. True, the concept may not be etched on every page of Scripture, but hints and clues are dropped enticingly here and there, and such hints await their full understanding ‘at the correct time’ (Gal. 4:4)”³⁰

Being privileged to live “at the correct time,” and having been trained by the New Testament authors to read the Old Testament with the new eyes afforded us by the final, defining revelation of the Son of God, we know that all three persons of the Godhead participated in the creation of the world and humanity, specifically that God the Father created the world, as

Potiers, *De Trin.* 1:18).

²⁸ Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), pp. 13-15. See also D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 53-103.

²⁹ *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 21.

³⁰ *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 134. H. C. Leupold says, “Behind such speaking lies the truth of the Holy Trinity which, as it grows increasingly clear in revelation, is in the light of later clear revelation discovered as contained in this plural in a kind of obscure adumbration. The truth of the Trinity explains this passage” (*Exposition of Genesis: Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 86).

Irenaeus has nicely put it, using his “two hands,” the Son and Spirit.³¹ As Christians, therefore, we cannot but read Genesis 1, with its narrative description of God, his Spirit, and his powerful Word, as a trinitarian text, and the “let *us* make man in *our* image” of Gen. 1:26-27 as a reference to the uncreated original “social” God creating man to image his own life within his own dynamic social relations with his Creator and fellow creatures.³²

Moreover, just as it was not a divine monad that created humanity, so also it was not merely the human monadic individual that was made in the image and likeness of God. Not only do we have the “let us” in Gen. 1:26-27, but at the end of that passage we read “in the image of God he created *him*; male and female he created *them*.” The alternation between “him” and “them” as well as the “male and female” strongly supports an interpretation of the image that embraces man’s social life, the pairing of male and female being paradigmatic.³³ Just as God is essentially a relational being, so also man is ineradicably relational. Adam and Eve are who they are in relation to God and to one another. Brueggemann observes, “On the one hand, mankind is

³¹ Irenaeus, *Ad. Haer.*, 4.20.1; Hilary of Potiers has the Father and Son together (*consortium*) uttering the “Let us” of Gen. 1:28 (*de Trin.* 4.17). Other early church fathers provide the same sort of theological exegesis, but they do not always seem to have consistently incorporated the Spirit into this divine consortium. Other early church fathers also understood the plural as a reference to the Son (G. T. Armstrong, *De Genesis in der alten Kirche* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1962], p. 39; R. Wilson, “The Early History of the Exegesis of Gen. 1:28,” *Studia Patristica* 1 (1957): 420-37).

³² See also Colin Gunton, “Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of Imago Dei,” in Christoph Schwöbel and Colin Gunton, eds., *Persons, Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), pp. 47-61; and *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), pp.193-211.

³³ I agree with Francis Watson when he argues that Barth does not go far enough when he describes the image of God in a strictly dualistic fashion as male and female corresponding to Father and Son (*CD* 3/1, pp. 182-205). Watson argues that “it is preferable to speak of an open community at both the divine and human levels. The triune God seeks communion with the human other; correspondingly, male and female do not remain self-enclosed but are fruitful and multiply” (*Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994], p. 150).

a single entity. All human persons stand in solitary before God. But on the other hand, humankind is a community, male and female. And no one is the full image of God alone. Only in community of humankind is God reflected. God is, according to this bold affirmation, not mirrored as an individual but as a community.”³⁴ Gunton gives the following answer to the question, “In what sense are we like the triune God, while being ontologically totally other than he?”:

Likeness to God consists in the fact that human beings are persons while the remainder of the created world is not. We are in certain ways analogous to the persons of the Trinity, in particular in being in mutually constitutive relations to other persons. Who and what we are derives not only from our relations with God, our creator, but to those others who have made and continue to make us what we are. Just as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit constitute the being of God, so created persons are those who, insofar as they are authentically personal—and we shall return to that matter—are characterized by subsisting in mutually constitutive relations with one another. . . . Just as to be God is not to be an individual, so to be man, as male and female, is to be created for life in community.³⁵

The image of God, therefore, is not merely the human individual possessing various faculties, but also humanity as whole as it reflects God’s uncreated and eternal social life.³⁶ This

³⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 34.

³⁵ Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, p. 208.

³⁶ This social dimension of the *imago dei* was not absent from early church theologians. For example, although Augustine has been accused of reducing the image of God to faculties found in the individual soul, such a reading of Augustine is severely truncated. One might stop and consider whether a good deal of the theological angst over Augustine’s psychological analogies has more to do with modern Western readings of his work which assume that Augustine’s illustrative triads refer only to isolated individual (i.e., *self*-conscious) minds (Michael Hanby, “Desire: Augustine Beyond Western Subjectivity,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds. [London and New York: Routledge, 1999], pp. 109-126). At any rate, Augustine clearly does not understand the “image of God” in a modern individualistic sense. Curiously, most systematic presentations of his trinitarian theology take no notice of his exegetical and polemic works, concentrating solely on his *De Trinitate*. Pursuing a broader spectrum of Augustine’s works, one discovers that he did indeed understand that the individual alone could not adequately image the fullness of God’s inner life. Individuals *per se* are not created in the image of God, but mankind, human beings, “male and female” (Gen. 1:27) image God. One wonders if Augustine has become the

“image” is both an ineradicable structural feature of created human life and an essential aspect of mankind in need of redemption. Every human being is inescapably related to God and other human persons, but these relations, as a result of the fall, are perverse and abnormal. What this means is that if the image of God is not merely “located” within the human individual possessing various faculties, but also in humanity in its social relations as it reflects God, then the church must be included in any consideration of the renewal of the image of God.

Redemption restores both God’s relation with humanity as well as the warped relations that exist within post-lapsarian human communities. The ecclesial community is the locus of this social dimension of the renewed image of God. “The church is the place where the recreation of human personhood in the image of Christ is acknowledged in faith as the reconstitution of the created sociality of human being as redeemed sociality.”³⁷ This is why God, from the first announcement and application of the Gospel in Gen. 3:15, has always acted to renew not simply

theological-whipping boy simply because modern authors can only with great difficulty fashion readings of him that would support their own radical social or political agendas; see Charles Sherrard MacKenzie, *The Trinity and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1987); David S. Cunningham, “What’s [Not] New in Trinitarian Theology,” *Reviews in Religion and Theology* (1997): 14-20; idem, “Trinitarian Theology since 1990” *Reviews in Religion and Theology* (1995): 8-16; and idem, David S. Cunningham, *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998). The image of God is ineradicable social. After all, it is more than a little ironic that Augustine himself is chiefly responsible for the shift in antique culture from private, mystical asceticism towards an understanding of the indelible communal nature of human life, especially Christian ecclesial living. Robert Markus calls attention to Augustine’s communal monastic rules as well as the vision of the *City of God* in order to argue that Augustine transformed Greco-Roman culture by steering it away from its concentration on the isolated self. Augustine held that “the most insidious form of pride, the root of all sin, was ‘privacy,’ self-enclosure” (Robert Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], pp. 73-83). Similarly, Cochrane argues that it was Augustine’s “discovery” of trinitarian personhood that revolutionized life in the ancient world (Charles Norris Cochrane, “*Nostra Philosophia: The Discovery of Personality*,” chapter XI in *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* [London: Oxford University Press, 1957], pp. 399-455).

³⁷ Christoph Schwöbel, “Human Being as Relational Being: Twelve Theses for a Christian Anthropology,” in Gunton and Schwöbel, eds, *Persons, Divine and Human*, p. 158.

individuals, but marriages, families, and communities. Grenz nicely summarizes what we have discovered thus far:

It is not surprising that ultimately the image of God should focus on community. As the doctrine of the Trinity asserts, throughout all eternity God is community, namely, the fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who comprise the triune God. The creation of humankind in the divine image, therefore, can mean nothing less than that humans express the relational dynamic of the God whose representation we are called to be. Consequently, each person can be related to the image of God only within the context of life in the community with others. Only in fellowship with others can we show forth what God is like, for God is the community of love—the eternal relationship enjoyed by the Father and the Son, which is the Holy Spirit.³⁸

If the Triune God created human beings to enjoy fellowship with himself and with one another, even to reflect the unity and love that existed between the persons of the Godhead, then we should expect to find (as Gunton hinted at above) evidence in the narrative of the fall not only of individual rebellion against God, but also of a disruption in the social fabric of human life as it existed in the paradigmatic pre-lapsarian communal relations between Adam and Eve as husband and wife. Not surprisingly, this is exactly what we discover in Genesis chapter 3. The “community of love,” as Grenz described it, didn’t last very long.

A detailed exposition of the fall narrative is not possible here, but we can call attention to the fact that the fall was *simultaneously* a failure on the part of the first man and woman before God *and* in relation to one another. In disobeying God’s command, Adam failed to love his wife Eve. Eve also not only transgressed God’s explicit direction concerning the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but she did so by communicating with and submitting to the Serpent rather than her husband “who was with her” (Gen. 3:5). One cannot say, as I recently heard a preacher assert, “This chapter [Gen. 3] is not about marriage but about man’s relationship with God.” These relations cannot be so neatly segregated one from the other—

distinguished surely, but not separated. Adam fails in his relationship to God precisely as he fails his wife (“because you have listened to the voice of your wife,” Gen. 3:17). At the very least we should be able to acknowledge that integral to the multivalent account of Adam and Eve’s fall was their failure to fulfill their calling to image God in their relation to one another.

We can probably go further than this and approach an understanding of how Adam should have acted toward his wife by examining the Second Adam’s faithful relation to his bride, the Church.³⁹ In order to see this here in Genesis 3, we have to be sensitive to how the rest of the Bible uses this material (2 Cor. 11:1-6; Eph. 5:22-33; Phil. 2:1-11). Jesus is the true Image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; Col. 1:15). According to the analogy of Scripture, seeing how Jesus Christ, the New or Second Adam and Faithful Husband behaved, we can surely reason that the first Adam ought to have been jealous for his own wife’s purity (with a “godly jealousy,” Eph. 5:26-27; 2 Cor. 11:2). Unhappily, he thought more highly of himself than he ought and did not esteem his wife as better than himself (Phil. 2:3). He did not look out for the interests of his wife (Phil. 2:4), but sought to insure his own limited liability in the rebellious deal brokered by Satan (Gen. 3:12), standing by silently, according to Gen. 3:5, with the full knowledge that his wife was being spiritually seduced (1 Cor. 11:2-3; 1 Tim. 2:14).⁴⁰ He did not *love* his wife (Eph. 5:25a), which means that he failed to treat Eve as his own body (Gen. 2:22) such that he would “feed and care for her” (Eph. 5:28-30). In so far as the New Testament links

³⁸ Grenz, *Theology for the Community*, p. 179.

³⁹ This is why the “love of Jesus,” that is, Jesus love for his bride becomes paradigmatic for all human social relations, just as Adam’s love for his bride ought to have been.

⁴⁰ The Bible every where lays the principle blame upon Adam for the fall of man. The sin which plunged mankind into a fallen estate was Adam’s. The implication of 1 Tim. 2:14 is that Eve was genuinely beguiled, really duped by the Devil. Her sin was real, but her guilt was mitigated. It was what the Bible later calls a sin of inadvertence. This necessarily implies that Adam was not deceived. In other words, he was cognizant of what was going on. He stood by silently, even though he knew what was going on. His was a “high handed” sin.

Adam with Christ and Eve with the Church (Eph. 5:25b), we should conclude that the First Adam ought to have laid down his life for Eve and for the destiny of the entire human race. The extent of the first Adam's love for his wife, however, came nowhere near even his own discomfort, let alone his death.⁴¹ The first Adam ought have loved his wife sacrificially by guarding her from Satan to the point of sacrifice in defense of her purity. Adam's rebellion against God was enacted in his failure to love and guard his wife. Thus, one cannot separate Adam's behavior before God from his behavior with Eve. He failed to behave in a way that imaged God's love, and in hating Eve he becomes an anti-image of the true Image of God, Jesus Christ.

For the Love of God

This kind of sacrificial, self-effacing love is precisely the divine love manifest in the incarnation and death of the Son of God. And this divine love cannot simply be the love God has for us *ad extra*, but must be an expression of the quality of love shared between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. John's Gospel explains that the confession "God is love" means that the love shared between Father and Son (John 3:35; 5:20) has now been extended to include those (like a bride) that the Father has given to the Son (John 3:29; 14:21-23; 15:9; 17:24). Indeed, the perichoretic personal relations of love and service between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are only known to us "in Christ." Which is *not* to say that it is only the love of Christ that we know, but that the love of the Father for Christ, the love of Christ for the Father, and the loving service of the Spirit for Father and Son in all its eternal glory is only revealed in the redemptive economic actions of God

⁴¹ Cornelius Van Til has argued very convincingly that Adam was something of the first "neutral" social scientist, performing an experiment to see whether what God had said would come to pass—his wife being the experimental guinea pig (see Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology* [Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969], pp. 18-22, and *Defense of the Faith* [2nd ed.; Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1953], pp. 91, 98-101).

for us. This love of the Father for the Son and Son for the Father does not arise “accidentally” within the history of the man Christ Jesus, but is the eternal ground and motive for the Son’s incarnation. In the work of Christ both the Father’s love for the Son (Jn. 15:9a) and the Son’s eternal love for the Father (John 14:31) is revealed and declared to the world. In truth, the Son loves his own as the One who is loved by the Father and who loves him in return (John 15:9). And the Father loves us with the same eternal love with which he loves his Son (John 14:23; 17:23). This is explained nicely by Barth:

The New Testament as a whole forces us even more than the Old to the question whether it is only casually and externally that the One whom it calls God fulfills the fellowship with man foreshadowed in the Old Testament covenant by humbling Himself so deeply, and exalting man so highly, that He was ready to take the being and nature of man to Himself and to be concealed and revealed as the Lord in the man Jesus of Nazareth. If this act was not casual, if in it He did not estrange himself from His divine essence, if on the contrary He was supremely true and just towards it, in this act and in His essence He was again the God who cannot in any sense be equated with the unmoved deity of Plato and Aristotle and therefore with a God who is to be loved erotically. In His very essence He was the Father who loves the Son and the Son who loves the Father, and as such, in the communion and reciprocity of this love, as God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the God who is self-moved, the living God, the One who loves eternally and as such moves to love.⁴²

What this means for the inquiry at hand is that this inter-trinitarian divine love now serves as the model for all brother-brother relationships in the church. At least two Johannine themes deal with the paradigmatic nature of God’s social being for the Church.⁴³ The first is

⁴² *CD 4/2*, p. 759

⁴³ Much more could be said about how John emphasizes the character of the social relations between Father, Son, and Spirit in his Gospel. “In the Fourth Gospel it is the personal and social God who is revealing himself to creatures who are also personal and social because they have been made in the image of the divine Community. What is arresting as one listens to Jesus speaking in the dialogues of John is how much he reveals about the inner social relationships of God as Father, Son, and Spirit and of their oneness-in-threeness and threeness-in-oneness” (Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John: A thematic Comentary on the Fourth Gospel* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986], p. 5).

John's record of Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17, and the second is the way John so forcefully brings out the link between God's love and ours in his epistles.

Trinitarian Unity Manifest as Love Within the Community

Consider the trinitarian ground of the "high priestly prayer" of Jesus for the unity of his church (John 17:11, 20-23). Jesus first makes a petition for unity in John 17:11.

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one [ἵνα ὡσιν ἐν καθὼς ἡμεῖς].

Jesus will expand on what this oneness means in vss. 20-23, but here we should note that this is *a prayer for his disciples who will remain in the world after he has departed*, a prayer that looks forward to the situation immediately following his ascension into heaven. Jesus says to his Father, "I am coming to you," but the disciples will remain "in the world." It is this state of affairs—their remaining behind without him in the world—that Jesus addresses in his prayer for their oneness. Somehow they will be "protected" or "guarded" (τηρέω) if the Father answers Jesus prayer and grants them to "be one as we are one." That Jesus is speaking about the immediate future and the "survival" of his disciples' after his own exit is confirmed by what comes after this petition for oneness (vss. 12-19). It is their remaining "in the world" that is Jesus primary concern. Even though he himself is leaving the world, he wants their joy to be complete *in the world* (v. 13). The world hates them (v. 14), but Jesus prays to his Father not that they be taken out of the world, but "that you protect them from the evil one" (v. 15). They are being "sent into the world" just as Jesus himself was, which is why they must be "sanctified by the truth" (vss. 17-18). These contextual features argue against a purely "eschatological" reading of Jesus petition for oneness here in v. 11 or in the expanded prayer of vss. 20-23. Jesus

is not merely praying for the perfect unity that will be fully established in the Church only at the eschaton. Rather, he is requesting immediate help for his disciples when he shortly leaves them behind. Their survival “in the world” will be dependent in some sense on their experiencing the kind of oneness that exists between Father and Son. These petitions, therefore, are directly applicable to the issue of ecclesiastical life and unity in the present age.

Jesus expands the prayer to include “those who will believe in me through their message” in 17:20-23. Once again, as we discovered from the context of 17:11, there is nothing here to suggest that Jesus is now praying for a unity that will only be experienced at the Last Day. This eschatological reading ignores the connections between 17:11-19 and the 20-26. It is the same “world,” the one in which Jesus will leave his disciples when he departs, that is now in view when Jesus twice asks that the oneness of the new community (disciples and other believers) result in the “world believing” (ἵνα ὁ κόσμος πιστεύῃ) that the Father has sent the Son (vss. 21, 23).

Having seen that Jesus prays for the unity of the left-behind community, we are faced with exegetical questions regarding the meaning of this oneness. First, it is a oneness which has as its archetype the unity of Father and Son (“that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you,” v. 21a). Just as (καθὼς) Father and Son are one, so the community of believers are to be one. But what does the phrase “just as you are in me and I am in you” refer to? What kind of unity does Jesus reference here? I would suggest that Jesus is not referring to the ontological *perichoresis* (or *circumincessio*) that trinitarian theology traditionally uses to describe the shared essence or substance of divinity, or even the mutual interpenetration of the three divine persons. I am not denying the accuracy of such metaphysical assertions. I believe that the metaphysical and/or personal perichoresis of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can be defended from other passages and maybe even at a secondary level from these passages. It

seems to me, however, that in this passage, where Jesus prays that these human creatures would exhibit the same kind (καθώς) of oneness as the Father and Son enjoy, he cannot have metaphysical or even ontological hypostatic perichoresis in view. Strictly speaking the divine perichoresis is a distinctive mode of divine existence. Neither is Jesus speaking of the ontological relationship between God and man, as Augustine thinks.⁴⁴ What is in view in Jesus' prayer is something inter-personal, something that human creatures can emulate and image, not a metaphysical existence characteristic of the uncreated trinitarian mode of being. Moreover, the oneness that Jesus prays for is capable of maturation or completion (ἵνα ὅσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἓν, John 17:23), so it must admit of degrees. All of this suggests a oneness that is not fundamentally ontological.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ “And so they are in us, and we in them, in such a way that they are one thing in their nature, and we one thing in ours. For indeed, they are in us as God in his temple, but we in them as the creature in its Creator” (Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 55-111*, translated by John W. Rettig, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 90 [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994], p. 290). Through some truly torturous reasoning in which he concludes that the “world that believes” and the “all” that “are one” in Jesus' prayer are the same group of people, Augustine is able to deny any temporal or causal connection between the oneness of the disciples and the believing of the world. The surface meaning of the text is overthrown in order to dispense with the connection between the world's coming to faith and the unity of the church. Indeed, Augustine makes no mention at all of what it means that they disciples as a community are to be “one.”

⁴⁵ I am willing to grant what Volf claims—that the mutual giving and receiving of love spoken of in this passage and others “presupposes an already existing connection of some sort, however rudimentary” (Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 212). Such an ontological state of affairs *may* be presupposed in what Jesus prays for, but it does not help us explicate the meaning of the oneness for which he prays. Is there some sense in which God's perichoretic mode of being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has been structurally reproduced within the created existence of humanity? Is the ontology of created human existence such that we inevitably exist in some deep structural sense in perichoretic relation to one another and all “partake” of one common human “nature”? Maybe. I'm not affirming or denying such a philosophical construct. Colin Gunton makes a good argument that the transcendental ground of human sociality resides in God's trinitarian sociality (*The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity, The Bampton Lectures, 1992* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993], pp. 210-231). If, however, such a “trinitarian” anthropology is correct, it will have to be defended from other passages. I can find no evidence that John 17:11, 20-23 refers to, or

Perhaps the best way to unpack the meaning of these enigmatic “oneness” petitions of Jesus is to search the immediate context for clues. There are a few. For one, verse 23 ends with what appears to be the climactic and therefore defining clarification. Jesus prays that the “perfected unity” of his left-behind community would “let the world know that you sent me, and have loved them, even as you have loved me.” Here the oneness of Father and Son is the *love* the Father has for Jesus. The Father’s love for the Son shows up again in v. 24b, where Jesus says that Father has loved him “before the creation of the world.” Finally, at the end of his prayer, Jesus’ prayer for his disciples is that the “love you have for me may be in them” (v. 26). Jesus asks that the love the Father “had” for the Son may be “in” the church. It is precisely the divine inter-trinitarian *love* between Father and Son that Jesus asks be present within the community of disciples. This inter-personal love between the Father and the Son is the paradigmatic “oneness” that the church must participate in and manifest to the world in their own community.⁴⁶ Schnackenburg explains, “The unity that is desired is brought about in reciprocal love.”⁴⁷

Because of its compact formulations, John 17:20-23 invites the reader to explore just how the Father and Son are one by re-reading the Gospel with a view toward discerning the manner in which the loving relations between Father and Son serve as a model for the project of unification

assumes such a state of affairs. Jesus is praying for something that his left-behind community does not possess by virtue of their creation, but possibly something they have lost as post-lapsarian humanity. At any rate, he is praying that the Father grant to them something “extra,” that is the renewal of God’s intention in created human sociality.

⁴⁶ The divine persons share a unity of will akin to humans. They are a “society of love,” as Augustine notes (*De Trin.* 4.8.12).

⁴⁷ R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 3 (London: Burns & Oates, 1982), p. 303.

that must be “seen” in order that the world will believe.⁴⁸

That a oneness grounded in love for one another is indeed Jesus’ concern in John 17 finds support in John’s epistles. There John uses the same sort of “perichoretic” language to refer to our participation in and imitation of God’s love. “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16b).

Three Persons

A *prima facie* argument can also be made from the very the language we use in the *doctrine* of the Trinity. If the members of the Trinity are “persons,” and they interact as persons one with another, it would be difficult to believe that their interaction would not be paradigmatic for human social relations. To put it another way, it would seem as if one would have to deny that the Three are “persons” in any normal sense of the word in order to deny that their several relations one with another are exemplary for human relations. How can we avoid affirming the Trinity as image if we use personal language to describe the members of the Trinity and their complex relations one with another? I am not suggesting that the word “person” can be univocally applied to both God and created humanity. Our language and conception of

⁴⁸ See Gruenler’s *The Trinity in the Gospel of John*, for a thorough investigation into the inter-trinitarian personal relations as they are revealed in the interaction between Father, Son, and Spirit in the Fourth Gospel. Even though the Gospel of John was a major source for the patristic doctrine of the Trinity, they never seem to have mined it for its implications for human sociality (see Cornelius Plantinga Jr., “The Fourth Gospel as Trinitarian Source Then and Now,” in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology From an Evangelical Point of View*, ed. By Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988], pp. 303-321). Augustine, for example, seems so bent on illustrating the ontological unity of the Three that he disparages their social or interpersonal unity. Although he mentions it in passing, he does not linger over it. Jean-Baptiste Du Roy argues that Augustine was enough of a Christian churchman in submission to the written Word to be attracted to ecclesiastical intersubjectivity from John 17 as a viable social analogy for the Trinity, but too beholden to Neoplatonic ontology

personhood is *theomorphic*, we being created in the image of God. We need not worry about projecting “personhood” and “personality” onto the divine nature since God himself has described himself to us using the language of personality and personhood. If we bracket all personal language in our theologizing about God, we will not arrive at a purified, transcendent being worthy of the divine nature, but with abstract, lifeless philosophical categories that in the end will work to depersonalize his existence and relations with creation.

It is interesting to note that much of the Western, post-Augustinian trinitarian theological tradition has only affirmed that the Three are “persons” with great hesitation. One might legitimately ask whether the absence of a trinitarian-informed ecclesiology in the West has had something to do with this tendency. Augustine himself laid the groundwork for substituting more abstract, philosophical terms to describe the Three and their relations when he predicated “personhood” to the Three only as a *necessitas loquendi* (*De. Trin.* 5.9, 92). On one level, the entire Western tradition fails to articulate adequately immanent *personal* relations within the Godhead. The West has always tended toward Modalism. Thus there is a powerful propensity in post-Augustinian theology to de-personalize the eternal fullness of God’s inner life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So much of pre-modern trinitarian theology’s discussion of the intra-divine strikes one as reality oddly modalistic. For example, Aquinas speaks of “subsistent relations,”⁴⁹ Barth of *seinsweise*,⁵⁰ and Rahner of “three distinct manners of subsisting.”⁵¹ Cornelius Plantinga rightly questions these terminological attempts to define more

to fully embrace it (“L’expérience de l’amour et l’intelligence de la foi trinitaire selon saint Aubusin,” *Recherches augustiniennes* 2 [1962]: 441-43).

⁴⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 29, a. 4.

⁵⁰ Karl Barth, *CD*, I/2, pp. 348-368.

⁵¹ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York and London: Herder and Herder, Inc, 1970), p. 110.

philosophically the relations of the Three. The Trinity consists of “real persons, just as they are in the Gospel of John.”⁵² He questions substituting paternity, filiation, and spiration for the concrete personal names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁵³ In addition to this terminological confusion, there is an undercurrent throughout this history that trumps the language of interpersonal relations with terms which imply ontological and/or hypostatic relations of *causation* among the Three. Much of this scholastic philosophizing has only served to obfuscate the interpersonal relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so realistically narrated in the Bible.⁵⁴ This, in turn, historically has bracketed trinitarian theology from any significant interaction with anthropology and ecclesiology.

Whether the Augustinian trinitarian heritage is as bad as some have suggested,⁵⁵

⁵² Plantinga, “The Threeness/Oneness Problem,” p. 47.

⁵³ “Thomas simplifies things so aggressively that even that difference is eventually washed out. For each person is identical with his relation: the Father just is paternity; the Son just is filiation; the Spirit just is procession. Further, these relations themselves, Thomas explicitly says, are all really the same thing as the divine essence. They differ from it only in intelligibility, only in perception, only notionally, not ontologically. For everything in the universe that is not the divine essence is a creature” (Plantinga, p. 47).

⁵⁴ John Frame is right: “What the Bible reveals is that there is one God in three persons, persons related to one another as Father, Son, and Spirit. Much of the rest of Trinitarian theology, one suspects, is an attempt to get beyond this fundamental truth by multiplying forms of *Father, Son, and Spirit*. When we are told, for example, that there are four “relations” in the Godhead, namely *paternity, filiation, and active and passive spiration (procession)* we get the impression that we are being taught something beyond the meaning conveyed by *Father, Son, and Spirit*. But is that impression correct? Does *eternal generation* mean anything more than that the Father is eternally Father and the Son is eternally Son? Much of this reflection, it seems to me, really amounts to putting the names of the three persons into different forms, without any increase in knowledge or edification” (John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* [n.p: 2000], p. 657).

⁵⁵ There are modern trinitarian scholars who critique the recent blame-Augustine-for-it-all movement. See Lewis Ayers, “The Fundamental Grammar of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology,” in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, ed. by Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 51-76; idem, “Augustine, the Trinity and Modernity,” *Augustinian Studies* 26, no. 2 (1995): 127-33; idem, “The Discipline of Self-Knowledge in Augustine’s *De trinitate* Bk X,” in Lewis Ayers, ed., *The Passionate Intellect: Essays Presented to Prof. I. G. Kidd* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1995), pp. 261-

nevertheless, the reluctance to speak of God's inter-trinitarian relations in fully personal terms has perhaps led to a corresponding lack of interest in developing trinitarian-informed theologies of the nature and life of the Church. Modern trinitarian theology has steadily moved away from Augustine's analysis of the Trinity in terms of an individual's inner consciousness toward more and more creative reflection upon the insights of the Cappadocian Fathers. Their trinitarian constructions emphasized the "social" or personal unity of Father, Son, and Spirit, who exists as one being in communion.⁵⁶ The persons of the Godhead are not best understood in the abstract, scholastic, even a-historical categories of subsistent relations, but as dynamically interacting personal subjects. A refashioning of traditional trinitarian theological categories in more personalist and relational terms has set the stage for the current interest in trinitarian ecclesiology.

Methodological Challenges

In keeping with my purpose to provide a few *prima facie* arguments, I will move on from this brief discussion of the image of God without attempting to work out the details of how human community images the triune Creator's social life. The broad outline seems clear enough, but the particulars need to be worked through carefully by orthodox Reformation theologians. I

296; Michael René Barnes, "Rereading Augustine's Theology of the Trinity," in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, ed. by Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 145-176; idem, "The Fourth Century As Trinitarian Canon," in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, ed. by Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 47-67; and Rowan Williams, "Sapientia and the Trinity: Reflections on *De Trinitate*," in *Collectanea Augustiniana*, vol. 1, ed. B. Bruning (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 317-22; and idem, "The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge in the *De trinitate*," in *Collectanea Augustiniana*, J. T. Lienhard, et al., eds., *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum* (New York & Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 121-134.

⁵⁶ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 21-47.

want to conclude with a few comments that hopefully will remind us of our need to be self-conscious about our theological methodology when we attempt to flesh out the concrete implications of God's triune life for human community. Augustine's warning, spoken with reference to trinitarian theology proper, will also need to be heeded when we do trinitarian anthropology and ecclesiology: "For nowhere else is a mistake more dangerous, or the search more laborious, or discovery more advantageous" (*De Trin.* 1.5).

First, it seems likely that different theologies of the Trinity *may* generate correspondingly different ecclesiologies. Doubtless, it will be very difficult to trace the lines of influence, especially when we are attempting to wed various historical ecclesiologies with distinct trinitarian emphases. I think it is safe to say that differing ecclesiologies do not always have their origin in differing conceptions of God's triune nature. They may. But we cannot make such a universal claim without a careful investigation. After all, the Medieval church gives evidence of quite a rich variety of ecclesiologies,⁵⁷ but none of them seems to have been spawned by some newly formulated, distinctive view of the Trinity. Even if we argue that there is within each distinctive ecclesiology an *implied* or *hidden* concept of the Trinity, one can ask whether it is fair to subject any given ecclesiology to trinitarian "decoding" in order to discover features unacknowledged by its adherents.⁵⁸

But what of the opposite claim—that distinctive ecclesiologies will generate corresponding trinitarian distinctives? Maybe "ecclesiologies" is not the word we are looking for. The question is: will distinctive ways of living in the church as a community tend to produce accounts of the Father, Son, and Spirit that "image" an ecclesiastical community's

⁵⁷ Scott H. Hendrix, "In Quest of the VERA ECCELESIA: The Crisis of Late Medieval Ecclesiology," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 (1976): 347-378.

experience ? It is sometimes argued, for example, that hierarchical relations in the church gave rise to hierarchical conceptions of the Trinity. This thesis seems more likely than that made in the previous paragraph, but it would appear to be very difficult to prove. As a polemic against hierarchical ecclesiastical government it has a powerful attraction and is similar to Harnack's thesis that the early church developed her distinctive dogmatic formulations because of her "hidden" and often unselfconscious loyalties to Hellenistic intellectual culture. But will it hold up under scrutiny? The problem is that the formulation of the creedal dogma of the Trinity in the early church, according to her own explicit witness, was developed for other reasons. Rather than an attempt to ground her hierarchical power in God's nature and life, the dogmatic trinitarian formulations were designed to defend, explain, and safeguard the reality of salvation through Jesus.⁵⁹ Whatever evidence of "hierarchical" or relational subordination early trinitarian theologians identified seems to have been grounded more in their desire to be faithful to the scriptural data than by an attempt to justify their own ecclesiastical power.

Having said that, we should not discount the possibility that distinctive trinitarian motifs are being used in the modern church to justify particular forms of ecclesiastical life. Free church ecclesiologies, for example, seek an ontological grounding in a conception of God's *egalitarian* relationality. Hierarchical forms of ecclesiastical life seek justification in the eternally God's *ordered* sociality. Such "trinitaries" run the risk of being projections of an author's own presupposed ideal human society. Although it would be an overstatement to deny any legitimate link between ecclesiology and trinitarian formulations, justifiable connections must be identified with great care.

⁵⁸ Volf cautions against overestimating the influence of trinitarian theology on political and ecclesial life and thought (*After our Likeness*, p. 194).

⁵⁹ See T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, pp. 1-11.

Similarly, we must be cautious how we use the doctrine of Triune fellowship in constructing a theological model of the church. The implications of the fact that the nature of God is “being in communion” ought not to be carelessly applied to ecclesiastical pragmatics.

Gunton summarizes the dangers:

. . . the temptation must be resisted to draw conclusions of a logicising kind: appealing directly to the unity of the three as one God as a model for a unified church; or, conversely (and, I believe, more creatively, though still inadequately) arguing from the distinctions of the persons for an ecclesiology of diversity, along the lines of the expression currently popular in ecumenical circles of ‘reconciled diversity.’ That would be to move too quickly, playing with abstract and mathematically determined concepts and exercising no theological control over their employment.⁶⁰

We might add two “controls” that reflect orthodox confessional commitments and that would help those who would appropriate the insights of modern social trinitarianism to discern the wheat from the chaff. One is methodological and the other theological. The first might sound rather simplistic, but it is nonetheless crucial. For orthodox theologians the Bible must be allowed to control, indeed, veto, if necessary, our trinitarian theologizing about the nature and life of the Church. In other words, ecclesiastical speculations arrived at by “deduction” from the doctrine of the Trinity must be subject to those passages in the Bible that speak directly to questions about the life and structure of the church. This biblical control is violated, for example, when idealistic visions of human ecclesiastical communion are presented as if fully realizable before the eschaton. Some Eastern Orthodox ecclesiastical visions approach this when they ignore what confessional Reformation confessions declare about the biblical doctrine of human sinfulness. According to one Orthodox theologian (Nicholas Fedorov), his trinitarian social program is achievable by us before the eschaton because the resurrection power of Christ is “capable of transfiguring nature” and because “God has placed in our hands all the means for

regulating cosmic disorders.”⁶¹ Certainly the resurrected Christ is *able* and indeed does to some degree “transfigure nature,” and this means that people can, through Christ’s gracious power, learn to live in self-denying love one with others as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live. But the question is: has God completely given over “all the means” necessary for achieving such a goal? The biblical doctrine of depravity ought to control all such chimerical proposals. We do not expect that our efforts will actually achieve what is reserved for the eschatological future. Confessional evangelicals will want to incorporate our calling to image the divine life into the already-not-yet character of our participation in the God’s trinitarian communal life.

A second example of the need for biblical control comes from Colin Gunton’s speculation. Although Gunton himself cautioned against “moving too quickly” from Trinity to ecclesiology, he himself does not submit his applications to biblical control. Ironically, Gunton offers his own trinitarian speculations about proper male-female relations in the church as an illustration of the “caution” needed in “arguing directly to the church from the immanent Trinity.” Based on his own understanding of immanent trinitarian personal relations, Gunton argues against any relational subordination of women to men (presumably in marital as well as ecclesiastical relationships). Then, surprisingly, after quoting 1 Cor. 11:7 (“A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man”), Gunton says, “Paul’s exegesis and theology are both questionable.” Paul misuses “trinitarian attributions” because he moves “directly” from them to relations in the church. “Rather, we should not claim such detailed knowledge of the inner constitution of the godhead that we can

⁶⁰ Gunton, *Promise*, p. 71

⁶¹ Miroslav Volf, “‘The Trinity is Our Social Program’: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement,” *Modern Theology* 14 (July 1998): 403-404.

attempt direct and logical readings-off of that kind.”⁶² What Gunton fails to see is that his own “logicising” has elevated his own pet conception of trinitarian relations to a position where it trumps biblical statements. His call for an “indirect kind” of trinitarian theologizing about the church has conveniently permitted him to avoid *direct* Scriptural evidence of Paul’s own inspired trinitarian logic. This kind of “indirect” theologizing produces ecclesiastical theologies that are not subject to the control of direct statements in the Bible concerning the life and order of the church. This is exactly the kind of trinitarian theologizing about the church that sours confessional evangelicals to the whole project.

A second control would help insure that our theologizing about the church remain within the “center” of confessional, indeed biblical Christianity. McFadyen, for example, has criticized overly simplistic construals of the relation of Trinity to humanity. Being created in the image of God does not mean that the divine and human communities are merely related as *analogans* and *analogatum*. This would leave us “with an entirely static picture of a Platonist universe in which the Triune God’s sociality and communication is restricted to the ideal world of pure forms.” Rather, “the dialogical openness within the trinitarian being of God overflows into all God’s external relationships,” which willful gift enables humanity “to join in the fullness of divine life in a manner appropriate to its own creaturely existence.”⁶³ What this means for confessional Evangelicals is that we must be careful to maintain a proper Christological and Pneumatological grounding of our conception of the church along the lines provided for us in the New Testament. Indeed, the perichoretic loving relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are only known to us “in Christ.” Which is *not* to say that it is only the love of Christ that we

⁶² Gunton, *Promise*, p. 73-75.

⁶³ Alistair I. McFadyen, “The Trinity and Human Individuality: The Conditions for Relevance,” *Theology* 95 (1992): 12, 15.

know, but that the love of the Father for Christ, the love of Christ for the Father, and the loving service of the Spirit for Father and Son in all its eternal glory is only revealed in the redemptive economic actions of God for us.

Remembering this will help insure that we don't "begin" with speculation about the eternal relations apart from or "before" the cross and then attempt to present some idealistic program of *communio* for our ecclesiastical communities.⁶⁴ A pure, idealized *imitatio trinitatis* is always in danger of marginalizing the cross—the outward turning of eternal divine love for sinful man. Even the cross can be transformed into a cipher for human relationality, as it comes dangerously close to being in the trinitarian theology of Moltmann and LaCugna. Modern trinitarians, like Moltmann, evidence a penchant for transforming biblical and classical theological language that refers to God's ontologically distinct existence into Hegelian categories. So Moltmann claims that "God" is a retrospective description of "the unity of the dialectical history of Father and Son and Spirit in the cross of Golgotha. . . . In that case 'God' is not another nature or a heavenly person or a moral authority, but in fact an 'event.'"⁶⁵ But then there really is no independent Triune existence distinct from human society from which humanity might derive a model. The Trinity and the cross become ciphers for the eschatological end-point of human social evolution, which is always cast in egalitarian form.

Nevertheless, that divine love that is so wonderfully revealed in the cross of Jesus is not merely the love of God *simpliciter*, that is, an undifferentiated love of "God" *ad extra*, but is

⁶⁴ "I have argued that the social vision based on the doctrine of the Trinity should rest primarily on the downward movement in which God, in a sense, comes out of the circularity of divine love in order to take godless humanity into the divine embrace" (Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity is Our Social Program': The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14:3 [1998]: 417).

⁶⁵ Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 247, 286 n. 106.

most profoundly presented in the New Testament as the rich interaction of love and service of the Three, one for another in self-effacing service for sinful humanity—a rich, multifaceted love which alone is worthy of the designation “divine love” in the distinctively Christian sense. And it is that Christ-centered, Spirit-enabled trinitarian sense of “love” (no *amor incurvatus in se*) not the immanent Trinity in the abstract that ought to be modeled or imaged among believers in their ecclesiastical communities, according to Paul’s own admonition in Philippians 2:5-11:

Adopt this frame of mind in your community—
 which indeed [is proper for those who are] in Christ Jesus.⁶⁶
 Precisely because He existed in the form of God,
 He did not regard equality with God something to be seized.
 but poured himself out [unto death, Isa. 53:12],
 having taken the form of the Servant [Isa. 52:13; 53:11],
 having been made in the likeness of men.
 And having been discovered to be a man,
 He humbled himself,
 becoming obedient unto death—even death on the cross.
 Therefore God has highly exalted him. .

⁶⁶ For this “communal” translation of v. 5 see Moisés Silva, *Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary: Philippians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), pp. 107, 112.