

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF MUSIC

“It’s All About Relationship”: The Purpose of Life and Its Origin in the Triune God

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the Faculty of the School of Music
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by

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ABSTRACT

The impetus for this study is the fact that many times I have heard people describe Christianity using the phrase, “It’s all about relationship,” and the more I meditate on that thought, the more I do not think most people know what they mean when they say that. Sometimes the relationship they describe amounts to prayer and Bible study. Sometimes it is an attempt to draw a contrast between works-based religion and “the real thing.” In my experience, however, they never drill down to defining what that real thing is. I wholeheartedly agree it *is* all about relationship; thus, this work is aimed at defining more precisely the nature of this relationship. To state the *problem* this thesis addresses succinctly: the specifics of the relationship between Father and Son, Son and Spirit, and Spirit and Father, have not yet been adequately explored. To state the *purpose* of the project succinctly: the purpose of this work is to offer more robust commentary on the nature of the interpersonal Trinitarian relationships, various aspects of the relationship between God and humanity, and several aspects of our relationships with others. The main thrust of this thesis is that the purpose of life is to fellowship with God and with others, and the origin of that purpose is found in the interpersonal self-fellowship of the Triune God.

Keywords: Trinity, Relationships, Perichoresis, Interpersonal

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this study is the fact that many times I have heard people describe Christianity using the phrase, “It’s all about relationship,” and the more I meditate on that thought, the more I really do not think most people know what they mean when they say that. Sometimes the relationship they describe amounts to prayer and Bible study, but their version of prayer usually consists only of talking to God and does not include hearing His reply. Sometimes they are simply trying to draw a contrast between works-based religion and “the real thing,” but in my experience, they never drill down to defining what that real thing is. Thus, when these people say “relationship,” they speak in platitudes and do not really help us understand what this relationship entails.

Statement of Problem and Purpose of Writing

The Apostle John opens his first epistle by talking about being an eyewitness to Jesus’ life, ministry, and miracles. He indicates that his purpose for writing is “that you also may have *fellowship* with us; and truly our *fellowship* is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3).¹ He does not say that the point of Jesus’ coming was so that we could be saved or avoid hell. He says it was so that we could have *fellowship* with God and with each other. Fellowship is the goal. Fellowship with our Creator is the purpose of life. It is the main reason we were created. God came to walk with Adam and Eve “in the cool of the day” (Gen 3:8). They

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages are in the New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982). In this thesis the terms *fellowship* and *relationship* are considered interchangeable.

were made to fellowship with Him. After the Fall, God executed His plan of redemption so that through His “precious promises” we could “be partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). That does not mean we become God or gods, but rather, we are allowed to share in the attributes that set Him apart as holy and uncorrupted.² In other words, we get to fellowship with Him. Paul similarly teaches that “from Him and through Him and to Him are all things;” therefore we are to give glory to Him (Rom 11:36).³ We do this by presenting ourselves acceptably to Him in holiness. This, Paul writes in the next verse, “is your true worship” (Rom 12:1, CSB). We were created to fellowship with Him; we were created to worship Him. This is how God receives glory, which is the purpose of our existence as His creation.

In previous works, I have defined *worship* as “declaring, expressing, and demonstrating to God, in reverence and servitude, that He is worth more to you than is anyone or anything else.”⁴ Such a definition implies that worship is rooted in relationship, for we ascribe worth precisely to those (people and things) with whom we are in relationship. You do not buy jewelry for someone else’s wife, and you do not work forty hours per week in order to feed someone else’s family. We ascribe worth to those with whom we have relationship. In the same way, the worship of God entails ascribing worth to Him through the ongoing developing relationship we have with Him.

² On this point, Donald Fairburn writes, “The early church affirmed that *theosis*, or *deification*, involved overcoming our mortality and corruption by participating in God’s immortality and sharing more and more in the godly qualities Peter lists.” Donald Fairburn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 8.

³ Taken from the Christian Standard Bible, hereafter abbreviated CSB; (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017).

⁴ Gabriel Miller, *The Worship of God* (Lynchburg, VA: All Peoples Ministries, 2018), 57; Gabriel Miller, *Idol Worship* (Lynchburg, VA: All Peoples Ministries, 2018), 7.

So, I wholeheartedly agree *it really is all about relationship*. What I aim to do in this work, then, is to begin to define more precisely the nature of this relationship. Relating to God properly is the foundation of acceptable worship, and we need to understand how to do so. Further, according to the Scriptures (e.g., 1 John 4:20-21), part of properly relating to God is properly relating to others. Worshipping God requires proper relationship to God and proper relationship with mankind. We worship God not only by how we interact with Him, but also by how we interact with others.

In order to move toward the defining characteristics of our relationship with God and our relationship with others, I will first start by defining God's relationship to Himself. Thus, this thesis asserts that *the purpose of life is to fellowship with God and with others, and the origin of that purpose is found in the interpersonal self-fellowship of the Triune God*.

To state the *problem* succinctly: the specifics of the relationship between Father and Son, Son and Spirit, and Spirit and Father, have not yet been adequately explored. To state the *purpose* of the project succinctly: the purpose of this work is to offer more robust commentary on the nature of the interpersonal Trinitarian relationships, various aspects of the relationship between God and humanity, and several aspects of our relationships with others.

Research Questions

To successfully move from the interpersonal relationships within the Trinity, to the various aspects of our relationship with God, to aspects of our relationships with others, we will seek answers to the following research questions:

1. What do the church fathers and modern scholars on the Trinity have to say about the nature of the relationships between the Father and the Son, the Son and the Spirit, and the Spirit and the Father? (Answered in Chapters 1 and 2.)
2. What gaps remain in terms of defining these relationships? (Answered in Chapter 3.)

3. How are the interpersonal Trinitarian relationships projected onto humanity, defining proper biblical relationships between humans and God and between humans and other humans? (Answered in Chapters 4 and 5.)

Research Methods

The work involved in this thesis primarily falls under the category of *historical research*. A search will be undertaken—as comprehensive as possible in the allotted time frame—to gather thoughts from the early church fathers all the way to the most modern scholars on the interpersonal relationships within the Trinity. Based on this research I will suggest practical implications for our understanding of God’s relationship to Himself, our relationship to Him, and our relationships with others.

Background: A Brief History and Summary of the Doctrine of the Trinity

(With Emphasis on Relationships)

The word *Trinity* does not appear in the Bible, and yet the Scriptures do give enough language to ensure us that the God we serve is triune. In the very first chapter God says, “Let *us* make man in *our* own image” (Gen 1:26). God, the *He*, is talking to Himself as a *Them*. In the same chapter, we learn that the Spirit of God hovered over the waters (Gen 1:2). We also learn that God “said” when He created, and we later learn that the Word through whom the world was spoken into being is the Son (Gen 1:3; John 1:1; Col 1:16). Although the Old Testament overwhelmingly emphasizes the oneness of God, most explicitly stated in the *shema*, “the LORD our God is One” (Deut 6:4), there are other hints of Threeness. The Son is, of course, prophesied on many occasions (perhaps most notably, Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:6, and Psalm 110:1); and, “Judaism [was] able to speak quite unproblematically of the Spirit (*ruah*) without seeing the

unity of Yahweh being affected.”⁵ Certainly, the New Testament features an exponential increase in Threeness references. Most notable among these, of course, is the introduction of the main character of these 27 sub-books: Jesus, the Son. Jesus’ references to the Father (indicating difference on some level), combined with His bold assertions of equality with the Father,⁶ lead us to no other conclusion but that the One God at least has some sort of Twoness to Him. Jesus’ references to the Spirit further lead us to conclude that God is not Two-in-One, but is, in fact, Three-in-One.⁷

Nevertheless, the Trinity must be “found” in Scripture. It does not assert itself with great force. The next five centuries of Church history featured, in large part, that “finding” process. Among the earliest confessions of the faith, the Apostles’ Creed, the development of which began in the second century and continued into the fourth, pays homage to Father, Son, and Spirit; however, it makes no specific reference to the deity or equality of the Son or the Spirit; nor does it offer insight into interpersonal Trinitarian relationships beyond the obvious statement that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Although the divinity of Jesus was a closely held belief of the early church,⁸ the doctrinal stance did not make its way into the creeds until nearly 200 years later.

⁵ Franz Dunzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church*, trans. John Bowden (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 117.

⁶ For example, John 8:58 (especially the NKJV, where *I AM* is translated in all-caps).

⁷ Jesus’ description of the Holy Spirit in John 14, for example, points strongly to the Spirit’s divinity. We are told that we will do greater works than Jesus did because He is going to the Father and sending the Holy Spirit in His place. The Spirit, who is sent from the Father, will live with us forever. If the case for full divinity is not made from that passage alone, surely it is made in the apostolic epistles, which commonly speak of Father, Son and Spirit when referencing God (e.g., 1 Peter 1:2, 1 John 5:6-8).

⁸ The eyewitness testimony of the pagan, Pliny the Younger, in the early second century, for example, is that the Christians “were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and

The Nicene Creed was a response to heresy, as was the case with many creedal formulations. In this case, the Arian heresy precipitated the need for clarity of language and a statement of agreement by the leading authorities of the day. Thus, in response to the widespread heretical view that the Son was “less than” the Father, the First Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) agreed that the Lord Jesus Christ is τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρὸς (of the same essence as the Father), “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made.”⁹ The Holy Spirit was given no additional verbiage of divinity simply because the question had not yet arisen to the degree of critical contemplation. Fifty-six years later, at the First Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.), came acknowledgement of the Holy Spirit’s full divinity: “who in unity with the Father and Son together is worshiped and glorified.”¹⁰ The language of relationship in this creed is strikingly terse, making mention only that the Spirit “proceeds from the Father.”¹¹ (Later, a controversy ensued over whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and* the Son or from the Father alone. I will not address this controversy in this paper.) By the time of the Athanasian Creed (500 A.D.), the use of the term *Trinity* had become normative, and the creed indicates that Christians worship “one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.”¹² The creed

sing responsively a hymn to Christ *as to a god*.” “Pliny the Younger on the Christians,” <http://earlychristianwritings.com/text/pliny.html>.

⁹ <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/prayer/traditional-catholic-prayers/prayers-every-catholic-should-know/nicene-creed/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.fourthcentury.com/constantinople-381-creed-english/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <http://www.beginningcatholic.com/athanasian-creed>.

states, “the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Spirit is God. However, they are not three Gods, but one God.”¹³

A more robust examination of some of the terminology regarding Trinitarian doctrine during this historical period is in order. First, both the Nicene and Constantinopolitan creeds use the Greek word *ousios*, translated “essence,” to refer to what Father, Son, and Spirit share—the being, or “stuff” of God.¹⁴ The Nicene fathers came to the conclusion that the Son was *homoousios* with the Father (of the same essence), as opposed to merely *homoiousios* (of similar essence). Instead, the relationship of the Three (Father, Son, and Spirit) to the One God was described as *hypostasis*, which, in English theological terms, is translated *subsistence*, and takes on the connotation of “standing under.”¹⁵ God (Father, Son, and Spirit) is one in essence, with three subsistences. Thus, Father, Son, and Spirit “stand under” God; or, as R.C. Sproul puts it, “the distinctions [of Father, Son, and Spirit] within the Godhead are, if you will, *sub-distinctions*.”¹⁶

The Athanasian Creed, following centuries of use as far back as Tertullian, employs the Latin word *persona* to refer to what sets Father, Son, and Spirit apart (i.e., *persona* is synonymous with *hypostasis*). From this word, we get our standard “Person” label for indicating the sub-distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit. “In legal terms, a person’s estate or a person’s

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ R.C. Sproul, “One in Essence, Three in Person: The Mystery of the Trinity with R.C. Sproul,” Ligonier Ministries, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9T2K8f6W3o>. I find this short teaching to be a masterful yet simple summary of Personhood, such that I have derived most of the following two paragraphs from it.

¹⁵ R.C. Sproul, “One in Essence, Three in Person.”

¹⁶ Ibid.

ownings and possessions were part of the *persona* of the individual.”¹⁷ Drawn from the world of Greek drama, *personae* also came to refer to the masks worn by actors on stage who played multiple parts.¹⁸ *Persona* is in some respects a better word for describing the individuality of Father, Son, and Spirit than is *Person*, for we certainly do not wish to attribute the modern concept of *person*, “a psychological center of consciousness,”¹⁹ to the three Divine Persons; we do not want to think of God as having three wills, or three consciousnesses, or worse, three bodies, for example. The “mask” connotation, however, is potentially problematic as well, as it could easily lead one into modalism, the heretical belief that God merely presents Himself in one of three modes of existence, based on context.

Persona, or *Person*, then, in the sense of Classic Trinitarian doctrine, which is the same sense I plan to use it here, refers to a sub-distinction within God by which relationships can and do exist, but without multiple wills or consciousnesses; *Persona*, or *Person*, refers to roles, but not modes—in other words, *Persona* should not be understood as “God *as*,” such that God can only be Father *or* Son *or* Spirit, depending on context; rather, the relationality of the Persons is the strongest defense against modalism; all Three must be eternally present together in order to be in relationship.

Trinitarian doctrine continued to develop throughout the first millennium. The interrelatedness of the Trinity came to be understood in terms of a *perichoretic* relationship,

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Paul Fiddes, in Paul S. Fiddes, Stephen R. Holmes, Thomas H. McCall, and Paul D. Molnar, *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, Ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 165.

beginning with the work of Gregory of Nazianzus.²⁰ *Perichoresis* is a Greek term used to refer to the effervescent, playful interrelationship of the Persons of the Trinity. Some writers, such as Paul Fiddes, Clark Pinnock, and Peter Leithart, attribute to *perichoresis* the connotation of “Trinitarian dance”²¹ in which the divine and mysterious movement of the Persons, together as Three-in-One, make it difficult to pinpoint where One ends and Another begins. Pseudo-Cyril and John of Damascus employed the term *perichoresis* to give “expression to the dynamic Union and Communion” of the Three-Persons-in-One-Being “in such a way that they have their Being in each other and reciprocally contain one another, without any coalescing or commingling with one another and yet without any separation from one another, for they are completely equal and identical in Deity and Power.”²²

²⁰ G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 291.

²¹ For example, Peter Leithart writes: “To talk about God’s perichoretic unity is to talk about a dynamic unity, and to talk about a God who is always at work, always in motion, pure act. It is to say that the life of God is peri-choreographed.” Peter Letihart, “The Dance of God, the Dance of Life,” <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2003/09/the-dance-of-god-the-dance-of-life/>. See also, Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 72; Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 31.

Others, however, such as Larry Perkins, argue that the connotation of dance is erroneously based on the similarity of the words *perichoreo* and *perichoreuo*, with the former meaning “to go around” and the latter meaning “to dance around,” and they hold that “there is no warrant for suggesting that *perichoresis* has any connection with dancing.” Larry Perkins, “The Dance is Not Perichoresis,” <https://nbseminary.ca/the-dance-is-not-perichrsis>. See also, Thomas Torrance’s thoughts in James D. Gifford, *Perichoretic Salvation: The Believer’s Union with Christ as a Third Type of Perichoresis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 16. Indeed, the tendency toward tritheism that the dance metaphor evokes should be avoided at all costs; the Social Trinitarians in particular (discussed below) seem to readily embrace the dance metaphor, without, unfortunately, repudiating its tendency toward tritheism.

²² Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (New York: T&T Clark LTD, 1996), 170.

Augustine attempted to describe this interpenetration of God’s self-love by drawing an analogy to human love, a tactic not unlike that I will use in this thesis. He writes, “When I ... love something, there are three: I myself, what I love, and love itself;” continuing, “Just as you have two somethings, mind and its love, when it loves itself, so you have two somethings, mind and its knowledge, when it knows itself. The mind therefore and its love and knowledge are three somethings, and these three are one thing.”²³

Gregory also affirmed another important truth regarding Divine Persons: that they share *one* will, not three. He writes that the “Monarchy” of God is not contained in one person, but in a “plurality of persons,” and this plurality “consists of an equality of nature, *a unanimity of will*, and an identity of action ... which converges back into the One from which they come—a thing unheard of among created natures.”²⁴ When we consider the words of Jesus in the garden, “Father ... not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42), it is easy to assume that Father and Son have two (possibly contradictory) wills; this assumption is in error. It is specifically the *human* Jesus whose will came into conflict with the will of the Father (and the will of the Son and Spirit), and it is the *human* Jesus who submitted His will to the will of God on every occasion, without fail. This is why it is the *human* Jesus who, according to the author of Hebrews, is able “to make propitiation for the sins of the people” and “to aid those who are tempted” (Heb 2:17-18).

²³ Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity (De Trinitate)*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991.), 272-273.

²⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Five Theological Orations*, trans. Stephen Reynolds, 46; <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/36303/1/Gregory%20of%20Nazianzus%20Theological%20Orations.pdf>.

Hilary of Poitiers, in his work on the Trinity, used the earthly father-son relationship to work backward and infer truth about God (as I will also do in this thesis). However, his conclusion about the Father-Son relationship in God is more of a contrast to the earthly father-son relationship than a similarity. He writes:

In earthly generation in fact, the father ... does not transmit to [his son] all his living substance, nor is he in the son with his proper personality but only by way of his power as agent. As to the divine Father, who is all life and who communicates to his Son all his living substance, he is in his Son and he possesses his Son in himself in virtue of this perfect unity of nature.²⁵

As the doctrine of the Trinity continued to be developed into the second millennium, more nuances emerged. Aquinas receives Augustine's baton in many respects; for example, he takes Augustine's conception of Holy Spirit as the "bond of love" a step further, referring to the Holy Spirit *as* the Love of God, stating, "God the Father has performed the creation by His Word and by His Love which is the Holy Spirit."²⁶ The Reformers added their own nuances as well. Luther's view on Trinitarian relationships, for example, may be understood this way: "The Father is the Speaker, the Son the spoken Word, and the Holy Spirit the Listener who communicates what he has heard in the divine conversation to God's created conversation partners."²⁷ Despite these nuances, however, as Stephen Holmes puts it: "I simply do not see any substantial difference in doctrine, between, say, Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine, Boethius, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin."²⁸

²⁵ Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, Translated in Bertrand de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1982), 181.

²⁶ de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History*, 110, 189.

²⁷ Christoph Schwöbel, "The Eternity of the Triune God: Preliminary Considerations on the Relationship Between the Trinity and Creation," *Modern Theology* 34, no. 3 (2018): 355.

²⁸ Stephen R. Holmes *et al*, *Two Views*, 39.

This brings us into the modern context, in which theologians of the previous century began to codify the language of earlier generations through the use of the terms *Immanent Trinity* and *Economic Trinity*. These terms are now in widespread use, and I find them essential for right thinking about God. *Immanent Trinity* refers to God, in and of Himself. The Triune God exists from eternity past, independent of His created order. He does not need us, as He is self-sustained. As the Creator of time and space, He need not even relate in any way to time or space (though in some mysterious way or another, He does!). *Economic Trinity*, then, refers to how the Triune God relates *to us*. One may see immediately that, although the Immanent Trinity and the Economic Trinity are the same God, He may act or relate differently in each paradigm (though never in contradiction with Himself). For examples, we may consider that God is Savior only in the context of the Economic Trinity (that is, there would be no need for Him to be Savior were it not for the fallen world); on the other hand, the Father is the Father in both the context of the Immanent Trinity and Economic Trinity (that is, He is the Father of the Son, and He is also our Father).²⁹

Statement of Alignment and Intent

One of the main reasons I wanted to include this brief synopsis here was to be able to state at the outset that I consider myself to be in alignment with all of the major tenets of Classic

²⁹ Karl Rahner famously states that “The Economic Trinity *is* the Immanent Trinity, and the Immanent Trinity *is* the Economic Trinity.” This has come to be known as “Rahner’s Rule.” Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 22. We must all capitulate that there is only one God, and thinking of God in terms of Immanent Trinity and Economic Trinity should in no way be meant to imply that God is two. The full-bodied interpretation of Rahner’s Rule, however—that there is no reason to think about God apart from His interaction with creation—does make it difficult to discuss certain facets of Godness, and eventually leads to a view of God that is too low and a view of humanity that is too exalted. This will be explored further below.

Trinitarian doctrine. The reader should be at ease that none of the speculative work later in this thesis should be conceived of in any way as a denial (or even a modification) of these postulations. I *am* attempting to find ways in which the knowledge of our Triune God, and in particular His relational qualities, may be applied to humanity and our relational qualities. I intend for my work here to be an exercise in applying what we can about our knowledge of God to ourselves, *not* rewriting God (and man) through the lens of our fallen and cursed experiences. I want to stay away from “a projection of human experience and relationality into God in an overt or unwitting attempt to define God by our experiences of relationality.”³⁰ On the other hand, “the spiritual being of each [human] person is [in some way] an image of the Trinity,” and so may the activity of other relations “also be a representation, deficient assuredly ... but still a representation of the relations between the divine Persons.”³¹ Indeed, the speculative proposal presented below is an endeavor in keeping with Christian tradition. “Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and others formulated analogies for intradivine life.”³² In fact, the quest to find *vestigia trinitatis* in creation has been an activity of thinkers from the church fathers through the Renaissance, and beyond.³³

³⁰ Molnar *et al*, *Two Views*, 72-73. Such is the charge conservative scholars commonly lay at the feet of the so-called “Social Trinity” view put forward by Jürgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, Catherine LaCugna, Ted Peters, and others. As will be demonstrated below, I do reject this view, and I hope that such an admission will lead readers to give me the benefit of the doubt as I tiptoe into the dangerous waters of speculation about our God (beginning in chapter 3). I do so with fear and trembling, as well as childlike wonder.

³¹ de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History*, 277.

³² Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper One, 1991), 217.

³³ See, for examples, the various ideas reported by Dennis R. Klinck, “*Vestigia Trinitatis* in Man and His Works in the English Renaissance,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42, no. 1 (1981): 13-27.

Here, then, is a definitive summary statement on the Doctrine of the Trinity that I trust all Christian readers should be able to accept: *God is Three-in-One: Three Hypostases in One Ousia, Three Personae in One Essentia, Three Subsistences in One Essence. The Son is begotten of the Father; the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son. Whatever it means for the Son to be begotten and for the Spirit to proceed, it does not mean that either the Son or the Spirit had an origin in time; instead, Father, Son, and Spirit are eternal and are eternally One. The Three Persons of the Trinity are fully divine. The Persons do not constitute parts of God, neither do They constitute modes of God. No One Person contains more Godness than another, no more superiority, no less power. God has one will, not three. God, within Himself, is a relational Being; that there are Three Persons in relationship is a fundamental aspect of Godhood.*

Definition of Terms

Arianism – the heretical doctrine of Trinity, promoted by Arius, that claims that the Son and the Spirit are less than fully divine; the doctrine includes the belief that the Son and the Spirit originated in time; an extreme version of subordinationism

Deification – see Theosis/Deification

Economic Trinity – God in relation to creation; the three Persons, as they relate to creation, and humanity in particular (i.e., soteriology); referring to those elements of Trinitarian relation that would have no reason for existence or conceptual understanding if God had not created

Godhead – the set of divine qualities; God’s God-ness

Godhood – see Godhead

Homoousios – of the same essence; used to describe the full divinity of the Son (and the Spirit), being of the same essence as the Father

Homoiousios – of similar essence; used in a heretical (Arian) sense, it describes the Son as being of mere similar essence to the Father (not the same essence), and thus, not fully divine

Hypostasis/Persona/Subsistence – the Greek, Latin, and English words (respectively) that indicate what sets Father, Son, and Spirit apart; a sub-distinction within God by which relationships can and do exist, but without multiple wills or consciousnesses; refers to

roles, but not modes—in other words, *Persona* should not be understood as “God *as*,” such that God can only be Father *or* Son *or* Spirit, depending on context; rather, the relationality of the Persons is the strongest defense against modalism; all Three must be eternally present together in order to be in relationship

Immanent Trinity – God in relation to Himself; the three Persons, as they relate to themselves; referring to those elements of Trinitarian relation that are eternal and would be present even if God had not created

Modalism – the heretical doctrine of Trinity that holds that the one God exists in three “modes,” such that He exists as Father in certain contexts, as Son in other contexts, and as Spirit in yet other contexts; modalism denies the Threeness of God by implying that God cannot be Father, Son, and Spirit “all at once”; the ice-water-steam analogy is the classic representation of modalism; by definition, modalism also denies any relationality among the Persons

Perichoresis – a Greek term used to refer to the effervescent, playful interrelationship of the Persons of the Trinity, it carries the connotation of “Trinitarian dance;” the interpenetration of the Persons of the Trinity such that, in their divine and mysterious movement together as Three-in-One, it is difficult to pinpoint where One ends and Another begins; the quality of interconnectedness

Perichoretic – of or relating to *perichoresis*

Person – see Hypostasis/Persona/Subsistence

Persona – see Hypostasis/Persona/Subsistence

Pneuma/Ruach – the Greek and Hebrew (respectively) words translated spirit (or Spirit), wind, or breath

Ousios – essence, being, substance, stuff; used to note the shared quality that Father, Son, and Spirit all lay claim to equally; what makes God God

Ruach – see Pneuma/Ruach

Subordinationism – the heretical doctrine of the Trinity that holds that the Son and the Spirit are subordinate to (or, less than, or, unequal with) the Father

Subsistence – see Hypostasis/Persona/Subsistence

Theosis/Deification – the process by which (and the effected result being that) redeemed humanity takes on the nature and characteristics of Godness; *theosis* is not in any way meant to convey that we become God or even gods, but rather, God’s act of salvation brings us to and into Himself such that we become “partakers in the divine nature” according to 2 Peter 1:4; we begin to operate in this divine nature by the power of the

Holy Spirit during our time on earth, and we experience the full extent of our “union with Christ” in glorification

Tritheism – the heretical doctrine of Trinity that holds that God is Three without truly being One

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this review is to examine modern scholarship on the nature of the relationships between Father and Son, Son and Spirit, and Spirit and Father. (To cover Trinitarian doctrine more generally here would be far too large an endeavor.) Little has been written on the nature of these relationships, at least in the way this thesis addresses them. Most authors are rather trying to describe how God is one and how God is three, or how the different Persons are involved in the affairs of humanity (creation, salvation, sanctification, etc.). They are not deeply describing the *nature* and *characteristics* of the interpersonal Trinitarian relationships.

The works I reviewed did display great variety in purposes and audiences and styles. Many are simply an author's "take" on Trinity, restating Trinitarian doctrine (in a new or not-so-new way). Others are more focused on a particular purpose—focused, for example, on refuting subordinationism, or defending the view of the absolute authority of the Father over the Son. Others are variously didactic, homiletic, and practical. Included below are the works and ideas that emerged as the most relevant to my particular study.

The Issue of Subordinationism

One of the more interesting debates in modern writings on Trinitarian doctrine revolves around the issue of authority within the Godhead. Specifically, the question these scholars wrestle with is whether or not the Father has eternal and absolute authority over the Son (and by corollary, whether or not the Son's position with respect to the Father is one of eternal and absolute submission). Some, such as Bruce Ware, say *yes*. Others, such as Kevin Giles, say *no*,

arguing that such a claim reeks of subordinationism, a heresy condemned by all of the major ancient councils.

Bruce Ware

Bruce Ware's concept of the Trinity, as expounded in *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, & Relevance*, should be extremely troubling to proponents of Christian orthodoxy. He argues that, "First, the Father is, in his position and authority, supreme among the Persons of the Godhead."³⁴ This is a startling statement, particularly the use of the word *supreme*. He goes on to sum up what Millard Erickson later refers to as the "gradational authority"³⁵ view: "Father and Son are in a relationship marked by eternal authority and submission."³⁶ The evidence of Scripture does not lead to this conclusion; instead, Ware projects a human understanding of father-son relationships onto God. I aim to challenge this below. Ware's position becomes more entrenched as he escalates his rhetoric, from merely claiming "the presence of an eternal and inherent expression of authority and submission" between Father and Son as *a* characteristic, to claiming that it is *the* "most marked characteristic of the Trinitarian relationships."³⁷ In making such a claim, Ware reveals the narrowness of his perspective. Ware assumes (and preaches) that the authority-submission paradigm is the *defining*

³⁴ Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, & Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 46.

³⁵ Millard Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2009), 27ff.

³⁶ Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit*, 71.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

characteristic of the father-son relationship. I strongly disagree. As I will argue below, the defining characteristic is, rather, *begetting*.

Kevin Giles

Kevin Giles takes exception to the gradational authority view. Indeed, he devotes three separate books to attacking it.³⁸ For Giles, the root of the modern gradational-authority view is a staunch commitment to complementarianism. He writes, “Many conservative evangelicals concerned [with] maintain[ing] the permanent subordination of women have been developing a doctrine of hierarchically ordered Trinity in which the Father rules over the Son just like men are to rule over women in the church and the home.”³⁹ That the gradationists construe “the doctrine of the Trinity ... to prove [such] a prior belief or commitment,” is an example, according to Giles, of “the tail wagging the dog.”⁴⁰ He argues “that *eternal* functional or role subordination involves by necessity ontological subordinationism.”⁴¹ Thus, he plainly states that “the central thesis of this book is that the contemporary evangelical case for the eternal subordination of the Son is a clear breach with historic orthodoxy.”⁴² Among his many supporting arguments, notable is his recognition that no unique “order among the persons can be detected in the many Pauline triadic comments.”⁴³

³⁸ See Bibliography.

³⁹ Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 32.

Millard Erickson

In *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?* Millard Erickson proves a fair and balanced moderator of the debate, in spite of the fact that he ends up roundly rejecting the gradational authority view in favor of what he calls the “equivalence” view (of Giles, *et al*). He provides a wealth of criteria for evaluating the alternatives, including biblical evidence, historical considerations, and philosophical/theological and practical implications. He notes that Isaiah’s equating of Child/Son with “Everlasting Father” (Isa 9:6) is problematic for gradationists.⁴⁴ He offers biblical passages such as Matthew 4:1, Luke 4:1, and Matthew 12:31-32 that refer to the mutual authority of the Son and the Spirit.⁴⁵ He asks us to consider who makes the ultimate decisions—Father or Trinity?—and he points out that there are many places in Scripture where two different Persons are credited with the same job.⁴⁶

Erickson’s summaries of each viewpoint are helpful. Of the equivalent-authority view, which receives my endorsement, Erickson comments that Father, Son, and Spirit are equal; Father and Son denote similarity more so than authority; Father and Son are not directly analogous to fathers and sons; the authority of the Father over the Son is “usually thought of as referring to the time of the Son’s earthly ministry;” and the equivalent-authority view “has been the dominant view of church theologians of the past.”⁴⁷

⁴³ Ibid., 109-110. These “triadic comments” that reveal no unique order—at least thirty in total, according to Giles—include Ephesians 4:1-6, 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, and 2 Corinthians 13:14.

⁴⁴ Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?*, 118.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 122-133.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 80-81.

Wrestling with the “Social Trinity”

A recent development within Trinitarian theology with which any Trinity scholar must contend is the so-called “social theory.” The Social Trinity proponents stretch the relational aspect of Trinity beyond the limits of orthodoxy, though they certainly claim that traditional thinking about the Trinity supports them. The Social Trinity view emphasizes the Threeness of God over the Oneness of God, at times almost to the exclusion of Oneness. The Social Trinity doctrine, therefore, reeks of tritheism.

Richard Swinburne’s 2018 article encapsulates some premises of the Social Trinity view, which, in some form or other, dates back at least to the 1970s. He writes of “a ‘social theory’ [that] postulates three ‘persons’ in somewhat Boethius’s sense as ‘distinct centres of knowledge, love, will, and action.’”⁴⁸ However accurate or inaccurate Swinburne’s interpretation of Boethius may be, his enthusiasm for the quote is problematic at best. The Social Trinitarian, then, erroneously proposes three wills. To posit three wills is to posit the possibility of a contradiction in those wills. The Spirit may will something the Father does not, for example. This must be an impossibility. Again, we know from the biblical account of Jesus’ contemplation of His own death, that His will was distinct from the Father’s. He did not want to be tortured and murdered. He asked the Father if there was another way. When the answer returned was “no,” Jesus submitted His own distinct will to that of the Father. However, this picture of two wills only applies to the *human* Jesus. Jesus’ human will was distinct from His divine will, but His divine will (as Son) cannot be differentiated from the Father’s will.

⁴⁸ Richard Swinburne, “The Social Theory of the Trinity,” *Religious Studies* 54, no. 3 (2018): 419-437.

The phrase “distinct centres of knowledge” (and for that matter, distinct centres of love and actions) allows for too much difference among the Persons. Father, Son, and Spirit each know everything. So, it is the *how* of knowing that would seem to emerge as distinct. If the Spirit knows the Father in a way different from how the Father knows Himself or how the Father knows the Spirit, for example, then the Persons would truly have different parameters of knowledge. Not only would they cease to be One, but they would also cease to be omniscient!

Swinburne’s own words are clear enough to draw criticisms along these lines. He writes, “The Father willingly begets the Son; and so must have had separate consciousnesses (though ‘how many consciousnesses?’ was not the kind of question which the Fathers or mediaevals [sic] asked). The consciousnesses would be type-identical (that is have the same content), except in respect of the ‘characteristic acts’, but be token-distinct (that is, there are three of them).”⁴⁹ Here, then, is a faulty cornerstone of Social Trinity theology: three distinct consciousnesses.

It is not difficult to understand why a group of Trinitarians might reach such a conclusion. As a lifelong, committed Trinitarian, I must admit that the careless way we (evangelicals) often talk about the Trinity, three consciousnesses almost demands to be conceded. However, this is neither true of God nor true of the doctrine agreed upon coming out of the period of the early church fathers.

So then, the Social Trinity view holds that the three Persons are distinct in terms of will and consciousness. Other underpinnings and resulting positions emerge from the doctrine as well. For example, Social Trinitarians are apt to experiment with removing “masculine imagery” that “has led to oppressive practices,” and instead think in gender-neutral terms such as Parent-

⁴⁹ Ibid., 419-437.

Child, rather than Father-Son.⁵⁰ Although its proponents claim to be following orthodox tradition, the Social Trinitarian position was not even offered a single voice in the “Counterpoints” series book on Trinity—a series designed to present contrasting views on various doctrines—and every single author within the book wholeheartedly rejects the social view.⁵¹ With this introduction in mind, the following review features highlights from some of the major voices in the Social Trinity camp.

The Influence of “Rahner’s Rule” on Social Trinitarianism

Although Karl Rahner should not be considered a Social Trinitarian, it is fitting to include him here due to his profound influence on those who hold the view. In contrast to Swinburne, he is happy to say that “there exists in God only *one* power, *one* will, only *one* self-presence, a unique activity.”⁵² However, his rule (“Rahner’s Rule”), which states that “The Economic Trinity *is* the Immanent Trinity, and the Immanent Trinity *is* the Economic Trinity,” leads to a troublesome theological trajectory taken by the Social Trinitarians.⁵³ As previously noted, there is a sense in which this rule is absolutely true, namely, in the sense that there is only one God, not two (one Immanent and one Economic). But there is another sense in which the removal of the distinctions—Immanent and Economic—results in less clarity and a decreased ability to explore Godhood. Catherine LaCugna, in the foreword to *The Trinity*, gives us a bit of reassurance that the rule is meant to be understood in the *right* way: “If Rahner’s axiom is

⁵⁰ “The Social Trinity, Part 1 – A Quick Overview,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fe78DHHgF_s.

⁵¹ Fiddes *et al*, *Two Views*.

⁵² Rahner, *The Trinity*, 75.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 22.

construed *ontologically*, then it clearly requires qualification.”⁵⁴ Fortunately, “Rahner does not mean, as in a tautology, that eternal and temporal realms are strictly identical.”⁵⁵ Rather, “the basic meaning of the axiom” is that “God truly is as God reveals God’s self to be, and *vice versa*.”⁵⁶ With this we should have no problem.

The axiom is further clarified as Rahner brings up a hypothetical question that only those who reject his axiom would ask: Could one of the other Persons have become man (if God so decided)?⁵⁷ Christian thinkers, in general, according to Rahner, are more concerned with how *God* became man than they are with “what it means for the Logos, precisely as Logos, as distinct from the other divine persons, to have become man.”⁵⁸ Thus, Rahner’s Rule leads us in one good direction, which is to remind us of the specific way God has revealed Himself to us, and to infer backward: that is who God actually is.

So far, we may take no real exception to Rahner or his rule, but further investigation begins to reveal the dangers to come as the rule is taken to its conclusion. From his axiom, Rahner takes the next philosophical step of postulating that “There *must* be a connection between Trinity and man.”⁵⁹ It is not clear to me whether Rahner means, “It makes no sense to think of ourselves apart from God,” or, “It makes no sense to think of God apart from us.” There would be no problem in relation to the former, but there would certainly be a problem in relation to the

⁵⁴ Ibid., xv.

⁵⁵ Ibid., xiv.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 21.

latter. There is a real need in Trinitarian theology to maintain the distinction between who God is apart from creation, and who God reveals Himself to be in creation. If we do not, we run the risk of promoting a theology with, to put it in the words of A.W. Tozer, “low thoughts of God”⁶⁰ and high thoughts of man. This is, unfortunately, the track the Social Trinitarians take. A world without the Immanent Trinity, ultimately, is a world in which God needs us; such a world is a figment of the idolater’s imagination. In all, Rahner’s theology of the Trinity, though flawed in minor ways, is still orthodox. The theology of the Social Trinitarians who carry the torch of his “rule,” is not. The ways in which this is so will be explored below. Thus, to the Social Trinitarian view, we now return.

Catherine LaCugna

In Catherine LaCugna’s theology of Trinity, which she lays out in Part II of her book, *God For Us*, the concepts of Immanent Trinity and Economic Trinity—and with them, Rahner’s Rule—appear within a mere three pages.⁶¹ LaCugna’s reliance on the “rule” (of the equivalence of Economic and Immanent Trinity) in the remainder of the work occurs as often as it occurred early. She makes her conceptual divorce with the Immanent Trinity explicit when she writes: “We ourselves should abandon the self-defeating fixation on ‘God *in se*’ and be content with contemplating the mystery of God’s activity in creation, in human personality and human history.”⁶² The “low view of God” and “high view of man” emerge as LaCugna asserts that:

The life of God is not something that belongs to God alone. *Trinitarian life is also our life.* As soon as we free ourselves from thinking that there are two levels to

⁶⁰ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1961), 2.

⁶¹ LaCugna, *God For Us*, 213.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 225.

the Trinity, one *ad intra*, the other *ad extra*, then we see that there is *one* life of the triune God, a life in which we graciously have been included as partners.⁶³

The language here is concerning, as it seems to take the concept of *theosis*—as described in John 17:20-21 and 2 Peter 1:4, the process by which redeemed humanity takes on the nature and characteristics of Godness—further than it should go.

LaCugna rightly notes that the Immanent Trinity is not a “more real God” than the Economic Trinity,⁶⁴ but the fact that she feels she even needs to make such a statement hints that she may be missing the point of the distinction between Immanent Trinity and Economic Trinity. The reason we desire to consider ‘God *in se*’ is not because God *in se* is more real than God *pro nobis*, but rather because the fear of the Lord restrains us from entertaining the thought that we are in any way necessary in order for God to be God. Her reason for abandoning talk of the Immanent Trinity is that speaking “about God in immanent trinitarian terms is nothing more than to speak about God’s life with us in the economy of Christ and the Spirit.”⁶⁵ The ideas proposed in this thesis contradict this assertion. For LaCugna, “The doctrine of the Trinity is not ultimately a teaching about God but a teaching about God’s life with us and our life with each other.”⁶⁶ Again, this thesis challenges such a claim. The doctrine of the Trinity *is* a teaching about God; it is also a teaching about God’s life with us; it is *not* a teaching about our life with each other, though applications may certainly be made to interpersonal human relations, as will be done in Chapter 5 below.

⁶³ Ibid., 228.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 229.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 228.

LaCugna's lengthy description of personhood is interesting, sometimes helpful, though sometimes strange. She asserts that "The achievement of personhood [for humans] requires asceticism," explaining that "Vigilant prayer, an active sacramental life, and the practice of the habits of virtue contribute to the asceticism required for growth in personhood and conformity to the person of Christ."⁶⁷ In support of this, she quotes Colossians 3:5-10, which describes works of the flesh that we are to put to death. Interestingly, in her application, she warns against three of the "seven deadly sins" rather than any of the sins actually mentioned in the "to-do'n't list" in the quoted passage from Colossians. Additionally, she apparently either missed or dismissed the end of the previous chapter, which specifically denies the effectiveness of asceticism: "These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires" (Col 2:23).⁶⁸ Whatever LaCugna is aiming at here, it shows at least a partially impaired understanding of personhood.

In the end, unfortunately, Rahner's Rule ensnares LaCugna. "God's personhood," she claims, "*is* God's way of being in relationship with us;" "God for us is who God is as God."⁶⁹ We all should hope not. If God were *only* who He is *for us*, and did not stand alone as a God who needs no other, He would be no God at all.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 291.

⁶⁸ Taken from the New Living Translation, hereafter abbreviated NLT; (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004).

⁶⁹ LaCugna, *God For Us*, 304-305.

Jürgen Moltmann

There is much to like about Jürgen Moltmann's version of Trinitarian theology. So much of his mindset is dead-center of orthodoxy. For example, he agrees that "The Son and the Spirit proceed eternally from the Father, but the Father proceeds from no other divine person;" that "The Father communicates to the Son his divinity, his power and his glory, but not his fatherhood;" and that "The Spirit is 'breathed out' (*spiratio*) not begotten (*generatio*)."⁷⁰ He, like Kevin Giles, notes the various orderings of the Persons in Scripture,⁷¹ and the failure of the West to take this fact into account as the "dogmatic tradition" of the "Father-Son-Spirit" ordering was established.⁷² He gives us one of the more delightful descriptions of personhood in this statement: "Each of the Persons possesses the divine nature in a non-interchangeable way; each presents it his own way."⁷³

Moltmann follows Rahner's Rule, however, as is made clear when he states, "The notion of an immanent Trinity in which God is simply by himself, without the love which communicates salvation, brings an arbitrary element into the concept of God which means a break-up of the Christian concept."⁷⁴ Rahner's Rule leads Moltmann into some more questionable territory. He writes, "The unity of the three Persons of this history must consequently be understood as a *communicable* unity and as an *open, inviting unity, capable of*

⁷⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981): 165-169.

⁷¹ For example, Ephesians 4:1-6, 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, and 2 Corinthians 13:14.

⁷² Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 95.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

integration.”⁷⁵ Moving away from the church fathers, he asserts, “If we search for a concept of unity corresponding to the biblical testimony of the triune God, the God who unites others with himself, then we must dispense with both the concept of the one substance and the concept of the identical subject.”⁷⁶

Hints of a wider-than-desired separation of the Persons may be found in Moltmann’s thinking; for instance: “It is solely the Father of Jesus Christ whom we believe and acknowledge created the world.”⁷⁷ Actually, according to Paul, it was “by [the Son that] all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth” (Col 1:16), so we may rest assured that the Triune God—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—was the One who created.

Social Trinitarianism, in general, lends itself to certain theologies and philosophies that aim for the betterment of human life (whether or not they hit that target), such as liberation theology, feminist theology, and other various philosophies of social justice. We may begin to see this application in Moltmann, through statements like these:

“It is only when the doctrine of the Trinity vanquishes the monotheistic notion of the great universal monarch in heaven, and his divine patriarchs in the world, that earthly rulers, dictators and tyrants cease to find any justifying religious archetypes any more.”⁷⁸

“The disappearance of the social doctrine of the Trinity has made room for the development of individualism, and especially ‘possessive individualism,’ in the Western world: everyone is supposed to fulfil [sic] ‘himself’ but who fulfils the community?”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ibid., 149.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 150.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 163.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 197.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 199.

“The Christian doctrine of the Trinity compels us to develop social personalism or personal socialism.”⁸⁰

Leonardo Boff

Leonardo Boff explores the “social” part of “Social Trinity” further, in his book, *Trinity and Society*. Boff “frequently express[es] agreement with Moltmann’s” work, and he works to “achieve a non-sexist understanding of father, son, and spirit,” an “attempt” that “even sympathetic readers may question the success of.”⁸¹ The word *society* draws criticism from orthodox Trinitarians because society connotes more than mere relationship; society connotes a relationship of *individuals* (as opposed to Aquinas’ more palatable *individuum vagum*—vague individual).⁸²

Statements such as, “The united society that exists in the Trinity is the foundation of human unity,”⁸³ also draw criticism for Boff, because they err—in *non sequitur* fashion—in presuming that Trinitarian relationships necessarily serve as a model or prescription for human behavior.⁸⁴ A simple counterexample may serve as proof of the error of such an assumption. We cannot say, for example, that our view of Trinity as a monarchy “of the Father” automatically

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Shirley C. Guthrie, “Trinity and Society by Leonardo Boff,” *Theology Today* 46, no. 2 (1989): 205-206.

⁸² Rahner, *The Trinity*, 105; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 30, a. 4.

⁸³ Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988), 133-134.

⁸⁴ This jump in logic seems to be a trend among Social Trinitarians. Consider the simplified presentation of Social Trinitarianism in “YouTube” form, for which the narrator expands on the opening explanation of Trinity by prompting us, “Think about how your life works ...”. “The Social Trinity – Part 1,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fe78DHHgF_s.

justifies an ecclesial philosophical position that our churches should be run by single bishops;⁸⁵ nor can we say that because we believe the persons of the Trinity are equal, church government should be congregational. Instead, we can only make application of Trinitarian relations to human relations where those applications are supported by Scripture in other ways.

Ted Peters

The writings of Social Trinitarian, Ted Peters, most starkly reveal the heresy and pure arrogance that lie at the conclusion of Rahner's Rule: God is only who He is with respect to us, therefore, God cannot be absolute. Peters is willing to go where orthodoxy would not dare to go, asking, "If God is absolute, how can God be related to anything?"⁸⁶ Peters clearly lands on the side of God being relational, and thus, by his own definition, he lands on the side of God not being absolute. Rahner's Rule, then, taken to its end, leads to open theism and even process theology. "To put it most forcefully," Peters writes, "the fullness of God as Trinity is a reality yet to be achieved."⁸⁷

This low view of God is combined with an extremely exalted view of human potential in Peters' thinking. A glance at Peters' personal website reveals some radical and even bizarre beliefs. For example, Peters, a proponent of transhumanism, believes that "reality is fundamentally evolutionary in character, and its future is aimed at intelligence."⁸⁸ He claims that

⁸⁵ This is precisely the tactic of the orthodox bishop, John Zizioulas, who is often considered to be in the Social Trinitarian camp. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1985).

⁸⁶ Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 14.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

“you and I have a moral responsibility to increase evolution,” and his recommendations for the path we should take in that endeavor include implanting chips in our brains that will increase memory capacity.⁸⁹ He is hopeful that mankind will eventually evolve to the point where death becomes a thing of the past. Peters’ eschatological vision is that “What was previously known as *homo sapiens* will be replaced by *homo cyberneticus*.”⁹⁰ It is unclear whether this is his personal interpretation of the glorified bodies promised us in Scripture, or whether he is simply ignoring the Bible altogether in the pursuit of his utopia. The latter seems more likely considering this heretical quotation that Peters endorses: “In the twenty-first century, the belief in the Fall of Man will be replaced by the belief in his inevitable transcendence—through Superbiology.”⁹¹

The humanist strands that run through Peters’ transhumanist vision are far removed from orthodox Christian thinking. Peters has placed his faith in man—to overcome sin, and to overcome death—both of which have been achieved by God alone, according to the Bible. Thus, Peters, as the final figure to be covered in this section of the review, serves as the voice most representative of the darkness that is the outworking of Rahner’s Rule.

Criticism of the “Social Trinity” View

As a conclusion to this review of the Social Trinity concept, a brief review of the criticism of the view is in order. Critics of the Social Trinity doctrine, in explaining what

⁸⁸ Ted Peters, “The Future of Transhumanism as a New Religious Movement,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLHnEM6B3hA&t=1148s>.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid. Quoted from Simon Young, *Designer Evolution: A Transhumanist Manifesto* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006), 20.

relational Trinity is *not* (i.e., the Social view), get at some important distinctions of what relational Trinity *is*. These thoughts will be useful to us as we proceed.

Najib Awad, for example, is concerned that, for the postmodern-influenced theologian, “‘personhood’ means ‘relationality’ or relational events;” and on this incorrect view, “‘personhood connotes ‘being a relationship,’ rather than ‘being *in* relationship.’”⁹² Paul Molnar sees “potential dangers” in the Social Trinity approach of such theologians as Moltmann, whose “emphasis on *perichoresis* ... renders his approach crudely pantheistic.”⁹³ Molnar believes, along with Stephen Holmes, that the Social Trinitarians make “the assumption that we can use the doctrine of the Trinity as a model for social behavior,” thereby “improperly using analogies ‘univocally.’”⁹⁴ Molnar further takes exception to Ted Peters’ view that “God is in the process of becoming who he will be precisely by relating with us in history.”⁹⁵ What Molnar gives us in place of these faulty approaches is a reaffirmation that “God IS the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” as opposed to merely being “*like* a Trinity.”⁹⁶ He enlists Thomas Torrance’s help in

⁹² Najib George Awad, *Persons in Relation: An Essay on the Trinity and Ontology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 9.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁹⁴ Molnar *et al*, *Two Views*, 49-50. As a further delineation of my own approach, I would assert that neither of these are admirable. We *can*, however, use the doctrine of Trinity as a way of informing (not “modelling” *per se*) known biblical mandates (or, at least, implications) about how to relate to others. No, the Trinity need not necessarily be a model for human community, but it is proper to point out certain implications that do seem to emerge, which I aim to do in the chapters below.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

restating that “the whole Being of God belongs to each divine Person as it belongs to all of them and belongs to all of them as it belongs to each of them.”⁹⁷

Summary and Analysis of the Social Trinity Doctrine

A “societal trinity,” as opposed to a merely “relational Trinity,” implies three individual wills or consciousnesses; that is, three “I’s”. To be sure, a spectrum of views on this question is present even within the so-called Social Trinitarian camp. To the degree a Social Trinitarian moves toward a position of three “I’s” and away from a position of one “I,” that person is moving away from the Classic Trinitarian doctrine. The understanding of the Trinity that emerged from the early Christian period was one of a God who is one “I” who is yet also one “We.” Thus, when the Father says “I,” He does not and cannot mean something different from the Son when the Son says “I,” nor does the Son mean something different when He says “I” than the Spirit does when He says “I,” and yet They—Father, Son, and Spirit—can still say “We” without contradicting the self-referent of “I.” To frame it another way (and here, the reader is encouraged to read the following question from the first-person point of view): *Is God “more” one than I am, “equally” as one as I am, or “less” one than I am?* The answer cannot be that He is less one than I am. He must be either equally as one as I am or more one than I am. That being the case, there would be absolutely no reason to allow for more than one “I” in God. This, I submit, is what it means to be Triune, to be truly Three-in-One. There is mystery in this, and the church should be wary of rationalists, such as Peters, who chastise us for admitting so.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 125. Quoted in Molnar *et al*, *Two Views*, 83.

⁹⁸ Ted Peters, *God as Trinity*, 16-17.

The other primary issue of the Social Trinitarians is their insistence that the Trinity must necessarily serve as a model of human institutions and behaviors. As I believe I have shown, this is a *non sequitur*. While I do aim to show ways in which the Trinity exemplifies human institutions and behaviors in this very thesis, I make no claim (or implication) that model-ship is a necessary characteristic of God. In fact, claiming God as a model for *x* or *y*, without supporting that claim with layers of biblical underpinning, can easily result in contradictory doctrines, as in the case of the Episcopal-versus-Congregational church government scenarios offered in the section on Leonardo Boff above.

Incomplete Applications

The research undertaken for this thesis revealed several scholars who begin to make application of the interpersonal relationships of the Trinity to humanity. In all the cases I found, these applications do not extend to the areas covered in Chapters 3-5 below. Nevertheless, all such findings are included together as a section here.

Peter Leithart

Several titles gave the impression that the authors may have had in mind the ground I will be covering below; further inspection proved otherwise, however. This was true of Peter Leithart's offering, *Traces of the Trinity: Signs of God in Creation and Human Experience*.⁹⁹ With chapter titles such as "Like Father, Like Son," "I am His, He is mine," and "Word in Word in World," Leithart does get at such concepts as *meaning* (specifically, how meaning is embedded in layers of interconnectivity) and *sexual intimacy*, both of which I will touch on

⁹⁹ Peter J. Leithart, *Traces of the Trinity: Signs of God in Creation and Human Experience* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015).

below. However, this book is primarily philosophy. The first two chapters say nothing about God. The author gives chapter titles that hint at God-based relational concepts, but then just speaks philosophically about how man is interconnected with the world. The main idea seems to be anti-Cartesian. It is not “me against the world,” it is “me *in* the world;” and this idea he pulls directly from *perichoresis*. Leithart does some of the same sorts of things I am doing, except on a much smaller scale. He uses only *perichoresis* as the basis of his discussion, and he only overlaps parts of my outline presented in Chapter 5. That is where the similarities end. As an exemplar, consider this thought from Leithart: “My hammer and my computer don’t depend on me for their existence, but they are defined by the ways I use them.”¹⁰⁰ He attempts to explain the *perichoretic* mutual-ness of the world here, whereas I attempt to explain our purpose-for-being as expressed through relationships.

Millard Erickson

Millard Erickson’s application of the Trinity to human behavior in his *Making Sense of the Trinity* basically amounts to an emphasis on the equality and difference found in the Body of Christ. He includes one small paragraph in which he notes that the family should reflect the Trinity, but he does not explain how. He includes another paragraph on treating all of our fellow humans with respect.¹⁰¹ This particular work, though good, does not address much in terms of the nature of specific Trinitarian relationships.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 130.

¹⁰¹ Millard Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 90ff.

Donald Fairburn

Donald Fairburn gives hints that he may wish to derive principles of humanity's relationship to God from God's relationship to Himself. He writes that the church fathers "recognize that the central aspect of *theosis*—and thus the heart of the bond between God's life and human life—lies in our adoption into Christ's sonship in the Father."¹⁰² Later he asserts that "human life was meant to reflect the relationship between the Father and the Son."¹⁰³ However, he pursues this line of thought differently than I will.

Bruce Ware

In many ways, Bruce Ware's purpose in writing is similar to mine. That is, he discusses God in relation to Himself, and then extrapolates outward to discuss how we should live. Yet he does this with very different premises. In fact, his discussion—as shown above—is almost exclusively about authority and submission, whereas my discussion will be about many different relational aspects—communication, witness, sameness, etc.¹⁰⁴

Bertrand de Margerie

Bertrand de Margerie writes of the historic development of Trinitarian doctrine. It is in this context that he includes a chapter on relational "analogies of the Divine Trinity," in particular, "the family, the church, and the human soul."¹⁰⁵ Of the family analogy, he writes,

¹⁰² Donald Fairburn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 34.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁰⁴ Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*.

¹⁰⁵ de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History*, 274ff.

“The family together with the person of each of its members is incontestably the natural reality par excellence from which one can by analogy rise notably, with the gifts of the Spirit, to a very fruitful though still very imperfect understanding of the Trinitarian mystery.”¹⁰⁶ This analogy is not explored, however, with near the specificity I give below. What *is* given is weak and inaccurate, such as the comparison of the child proceeding from the parents as the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son.¹⁰⁷ He does note that “the human couple” is an image “of the pair Christ-Church,” but investigates no further.¹⁰⁸

Of the church analogy, de Margerie writes, “In the measure that it communicates the truth, the Church resembles the Father who utters his one and eternal Word; in the measure that it is communion in the love and concurrence of all its members in the exercise of charity, the Church manifests to the eyes of faith the procession of the Spirit.”¹⁰⁹ Again, no further extrapolation of this point is given. What de Margerie does give us—in the same sort of way my speculations are presented below—is a good and proper analogy of “the reciprocal immanence of the Christians who are equal among themselves” to the “circumincision of the divine Persons.”¹¹⁰

(The third analogy, that of the self-relationship, or the “trinity and unity of the human spirit,”¹¹¹ though intriguing, is not among the relationships I will be taking up here.)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 286.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 288.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 290.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 294.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 295.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 297.

John Zizioulas

John Zizioulas is usually lumped in with the Social Trinitarians. I did not include him in my review of Social Trinity theology, partly based on Thomas Ruston's suggestion that Zizioulas is, in fact, not a Social Trinitarian,¹¹² and partly based on the fact that I did not really discern the problematic pieces of Social Trinitarianism in my reading of him. Stephen Holmes posits Zizioulas as an influential Trinitarian theologian of the previous century whose great contribution was "to bring concepts of personhood and relationality into centre stage."¹¹³ Unfortunately, I did not find Zizioulas' offerings, *Being as Communion* and *Communion and Otherness*, to provide much that was truly new in terms of investigating God's self-relationship and its impact on human relationships. LaCugna seems to think Zizioulas offers many relevant ideas, but even my reading of her distillation of Zizioulas did not give me anything additional to comment on relative to the topic at hand. In terms of Zizioulas' attempt to bring out *vestigium trinitatis*, he sees baptism as an ecclesial *hypostasis* that brings about a 'new reality'.¹¹⁴

Paul Fiddes

Paul Fiddes' take on Trinity is worth consideration, as it is a strikingly relational view. In fact, he "make[s] the case for understanding 'person' or 'hypostasis' as nothing more or less than a relationship."¹¹⁵ Hints of my thesis' trajectory may be found in Fiddes' writing; for example,

¹¹² Thomas Ruston, "Zizioulas and Social Trinity," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrjeBHzBRU0>.

¹¹³ Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 9.

¹¹⁴ LaCugna, *God For Us*, 263.

¹¹⁵ Fiddes *et al*, *Two Views*, 62.

he reminds us of how the Persons of Trinity “are continually opened up to new depths of relationship” in ways Scripture describes as “wind blowing, breath stirring, wings beating, oil trickling, water flowing, fire burning.”¹¹⁶ Fiddes’ view “shares with social trinitarianism the conviction that human ‘life-in-relationship’ is our best way into a vision of God as Trinity,” but differs “in that it does not conceive of God as a divine ‘society’ or fellowship of individual persons.”¹¹⁷ Fiddes, however, “talk[s] of God as ‘an event of relationships,’” and here we surely have trouble.¹¹⁸ To describe God as an “event” is problematic in a way so obvious it need not be explored; God is a being—the Ultimate Being—who reigns sovereign over all mere “events.” Fiddes continues, “The persons are more than *constituted* by relations—they *are* nothing more or less than relations.”¹¹⁹ The positive side of such a proposal is that it emphasizes the oneness of God, totally rejecting tritheism and subordinationism; and the relational aspect within the Godhead staves off modalism. In the end, however, to define personhood *as* a relation (as opposed to being *in* relation) means that the Persons are fundamentally different in Economic Trinity than they are in Immanent Trinity. If the Son, for example, *is* a relationship, it can only be a relationship “within God.” Once the relationship is directed toward creation, it becomes a different relationship. This sets up, in my view, a minimum of two gods(!)—the god who is the event-of-relationships called *Immanent Trinity*, and the god who is the event-of-relationships called *Economic Trinity*.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

Michael Lawler

One of the writers whose approach (though not necessarily his theology) was closest to mine was Michael Lawler, who made clear application of the concept of *perichoresis* to both the institution of marriage and the church. Of the former, he writes, “In a marriage which is a prophetic symbol, the one human reality exists, and may therefore be interpreted, in two natures making room for one another and interwoven in mutual perichoresis.”¹²⁰ Continuing, “This perichoresis of the two natures is fully mutual and equal, more like the perichoresis in the three-personed God than in the two-natured Christ.”¹²¹ According to Lawler, “A Christian couple entering a specifically sacramental marriage say ... ‘I love you as Christ loves his church, steadfastly, faithfully, perichoretically.’”¹²²

Regarding the perichoretic nature of the church, Lawler has this to say:

I distinguish three levels of ecclesial communion. There is a first level on which all believers confess the same truth, participate in the same sacraments, worship the same God. There is a second level on which they all live the same Spirit-filled life, pastored by the same Spirit-gifted authority. There is a third level on which they all live and act as members of one People and one Body in communion with one another and with the God who called them into communion-being as the People of God and the Body of Christ. It is only this third level, the level of one People and one Body, that gives to churches as disparate and as far apart as Ireland and Sri Lanka more than an agreement in doctrine and obedience to the same authority. It is only on this third level that all believers are genuinely in communion with one another and with God. It is on this third level, I suggest, that the idea of perichoresis is illuminating.¹²³

¹²⁰ Michael G. Lawler, “Perichoresis: New Theological Wine in an Old Theological Wineskin,” *Horizons* 22, no. 1 (1995): 55.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, 56.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 61.

Hints of my approach are also found in Adesola Joan Akala's book, *The Son-Father Relationship and Christological Symbolism in the Gospel of John*. She briefly addresses the issue of subordinationism, calling Jesus "a *model* Son, a paradigm of sonship for believers whom he calls to come into relationship with the Father as children of God."¹²⁴ She also gives a nod to the gender issues that arise from the "Son" and "Father" language, but argues for the minimization of such issues based on several "insights," including the use of the word "flesh" in John 1:14 as opposed to a more gender-specific description, the Johannine context of "Son" and "Father" that "focuses not on gender, but on relationship," and the fact that the Gospel "refers to both female and male believers begotten of God through faith in his Son."¹²⁵

Akala further claims that the Son-Father Relationship (SFR) serves as "a model for discipleship."¹²⁶ In John's Gospel, "The Father is portrayed as sending, authorizing, commanding, teaching, revealing, testifying, and giving to the Son, while the Son is portrayed as obeying, pleasing, honoring, working for, receiving from, and returning to the Father." Akala concludes that Jesus' prayer in John 17 (specifically in verse 18) "shows Jesus sending his disciples into the world just as the Father sent him into the world."¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Adesola Joan Akala, *The Son-Father Relationship and Christological Symbolism in the Gospel of John* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 219.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

Summation

The aim of this literature review has been to summarize and comment on the modern scholarship regarding relationships within the Trinity, and various applications of these relationships to humanity and human living. My efforts have been focused on researching ancient and modern predecessors to the speculative work found below. Although I found some similar approaches and some similar applications, by and large, having come to the end of the research journey (at least at the time of writing this thesis), I still have not come across any writing that moves in the direction I am heading in the three chapters that follow. With this in mind, it is now time to forge ahead, to the body of the current work.

CHAPTER THREE: GOD IN RELATIONSHIP WITH HIMSELF

Having briefly summarized the basic doctrines emerging from the early church regarding interpersonal relationships within the Trinity in Chapter 1, and proceeding to a summary and analysis of relevant thoughts from modern scholars in Chapter 2, it is now my task to propose some more robust and specific ways of understanding the relationship of God to Himself; or, in the words of Anselm, we now wish “to speak of You, hear of You, write of You, speculate on You, and muse anon on Your glory in the heart’s deepest depth.”¹²⁸

Some Challenges with the Names *Father, Son, Holy Spirit*

As we now attempt to examine the nature of these Trinitarian relationships, the challenge that immediately rises is that the name *Spirit* carries no intrinsic relational properties. Whatever the relationship between the Father and Son entails (addressed below), we know that it revolves around Father-ness and Son-ness. Their names point to each other and the relationship that defines them. Yet Holy Spirit is different. *Spirit* is in no way indicative of a relationship.¹²⁹ We can think of our spirits in relation to our bodies, but even this relationship—spirit-body—is not implied by the words themselves. Of course, the Holy Spirit is certainly not to be conceptualized in relationship-to/contrast-to a Holy Body. We can speculate as to how the Holy Spirit relates to the Father and how the Holy Spirit relates to the Son, but the word *Spirit* will give us no help in

¹²⁸ Anselm of Canterbury, *Book of Meditations and Prayers*, 14th Meditation, I. *Of the wonderful being of God*.

¹²⁹ As Fairburn notes, “Because of the Bible’s relative scarcity of references to the Holy Spirit, it is not surprising that Scripture also does not say very much about the Holy Spirit’s relationship to the Father and the Son.” Fairburn, *Life in the Trinity*, 58.

defining that relationship. The Father is the Father of the Son, not the Father of the Holy Spirit; the Son is the Son of the Father, not the Son of the Holy Spirit.¹³⁰

The second challenge with the names of the three Persons is that, whereas the Son and the Holy Spirit have other names (e.g., Word, Paraclete, etc.) that may help us discover more about their various relational roles,¹³¹ the Father is only the Father. He has no additional names that shed light on His relationship to, for example, the Holy Spirit. He is variously called Father of glory (Eph 1:17), Father of lights (Jms 1:17), Father of mercies (2 cor 1:3), Father to the fatherless (Ps 68:5), Father of spirits (Heb 12:9), and Father of Israel (Jer 31:9). He is also called God, the Lord, and so on. Yet not one of these names clarifies His relation to the Son or the Spirit.

The Father and the Son

The Father and the Son define each other. The Father is not the Father without the Son, and the Son is not the Son without the Father. Whatever Father-ness and Son-ness is within Godhood, it is definitive of Godhood. Care must be taken not to make incorrect inferences about the Father-Son relationship based on our knowledge of natural fathers and sons; at the same time,

¹³⁰ As Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, “The name of Father signifies neither essence nor action but it indicates a relation, that which the Father has towards his Son or the Son towards his Father.” Gregory of Nazianzus, *Five Theological Orations*, translated in de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History*, 135.

¹³¹ Erickson credits B.B. Warfield for noting that “The names *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit* are not the exclusive names for the members of the Trinity.” I aim to use this to my advantage as much as possible in the thoughts that follow. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?*, 56. On the other hand, Thomas Torrance does assert that *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit* are “proper names.” Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, 116. If Torrance means that these are the *only* proper names of the Persons, how much support for this assertion lies in mere tradition, rather than in Scripture, is debatable. It may be hard to argue, for example, that *Jesus* is not another proper name for the Son. Similarly, we may think of *Paraclete* as tending more toward proper name than mere job description.

God has given us the father-son relationship, in part, to help us understand who He is. So, let us proceed with caution as we consider the relationship between the Father and the Son.

Some have attempted to define the relationship as no more than one of eternal authority and submission. As I noted above, I reject this claim. Instead, I would argue that the characteristic feature of the Father-Son relationship is *begetting*. The creeds claim (following John 3:16 and other verses) that the Son is begotten of the Father. Some theologians attach stronger language, such as *generated*, which carries more of a troublesome nuance. *Generation* has such a strong connotation of time, and therefore, creation, that for this reason, it should probably be avoided. Many speak of the *eternal* generation of the Son, but this is almost oxymoronic. The Son is eternal, and the Father did not create or “originate” Him.¹³² The Son is *begotten* of the Father. Or, the Son is “Fathered.” The Son “comes from” the Father, but not in the same way a natural son comes from a natural father. A natural son is a separate and distinct being, which is not the case with the Son. B.B. Warfield notes that, for the Jews, the word *son* “referred less to derivation from the father and more to the likeness of the son to the father.”¹³³ Loraine Boettner echoes, “In theological language [the titles *Father* and *Son* are] used in the Semitic or Oriental sense of sameness of nature;” and she reminds us that “It is, of course, the

¹³² Kevin Giles observes this problem, yet is content with the language. He writes, “To speak of *the eternal begetting* of the Son is to speak of what takes place within the life of God, of a reality outside of human experience, not definable in human categories, and not bounded by temporal constraints. In order to meet this linguistic challenge in some small measure, I argue that what we are in fact talking about in this study is *eternal self-differentiation within the life of God in eternity*, for which the human words *begetting* and *generation* in relation to the Son, and *procession* in relation to the Spirit, are the best words available to us human beings.” Fair enough. Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 24.

¹³³ Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, “The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1952), 50.

Semitic consciousness which underlies the phraseology of Scripture.”¹³⁴ This brings us back to “image and likeness” concepts applied to man in Genesis 1, and applied to Jesus in Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1. Begotten-ness has to do with an inseparable likeness, a mutual dependency. Even I, as a human father, am not a father at all, if not for my sons. They make me father just as much as I make them sons. So it is for God. My paraphrase of a passage from Hebrews 1 may be beneficial here:

To look at the Son is to see the reflection of the Father in a mirror. In one sense you would say you are technically not looking at the Father, but rather the *reflection* of the Father. In another sense you *are* looking at the Father; you’re certainly not looking at someone else. That’s how integrated the Son and the Father are. The Son is the Father’s exact image.¹³⁵

Of course, the mirror analogy fails on some level (as all natural analogies do). I am myself regardless of whether I look in the mirror. That image is dependent on me, whereas I am not dependent on it. Still, in the case of Father and Son, they are dependent on each other. It is inconceivable to think that the Father could be (or ever could have been) existent without the Son.

One way to help distinguish the natural father-son relationship from the divine Father-Son relationship is by considering the fact that there is no Mother in the Godhead. Certainly, all female-ness is contained within God, for He created women in His image. Nevertheless, motherhood is not a factor in the interpersonal Trinitarian relationships. Some have sought to mine out mothering qualities from the Holy Spirit (and there are some qualities there to mine).

¹³⁴ Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 112.

¹³⁵ Gabriel Miller, *Dear Church: A Paraphrase of God’s Letters to His People* (Lynchburg: All Peoples Ministries, 2020), 9.

However, those qualities are not definitive of God within Himself such that motherhood becomes a notable characteristic of God-ness (i.e., we do not speak of a divine Person called *Mother*). Similarly, the Son is not a Daughter, so there must be something specific in His Sonship that helps define His relationship to His Father. It is not a Father-Child relationship; it is a Father-Son relationship.

So, we are left with Father and Son only, and we must, therefore, infer that Father-ness and Son-ness are not perfectly congruous with (earthly) parent-ness and child-ness. The types of offspring roles that *both* sons and daughters play should not necessarily be mapped back onto the Son, and the types of parental roles that *both* fathers and mothers play should not necessarily be mapped back onto the Father. This is one reason why the authority-submission paradigm cannot be seen as definitive of Father-ness and Son-ness. Mothers have authority over their sons and daughters, too. So, authority is not intrinsic to father-ness as much as to parent-ness.

We can reasonably assume that the specificity in the Father-Son nomenclature we receive from the Bible refers back to “image and likeness.” I would imagine that fathers of daughters are just as proud of their daughters as I am of my sons, but I would also imagine that pride takes a slightly different form. There is an “image and likeness” factor between earthly fathers and sons that may not be present in fathers and daughters (or mothers and sons, for that matter). Furthermore, the Scriptures reveal something important about sonship, which is that the ancient near-east culture consistently records that sons receive the inheritance. This cultural principle in the Old Testament becomes a spiritual principle in the New Testament. Every time God’s children are referenced in the New Testament, we are called *sons*, not *sons and daughters*. (The

lone exception is a passage that quotes the Old Testament.¹³⁶) The writer of Hebrews makes this connection to divine Son-ship explicit: “having become so much better than the angels, as He has by *inheritance* obtained a more excellent name than they” (Heb 1:4). Part of the Father-Son relationship entails the inheritance of everything the Father “owns” by the Son.¹³⁷

Although there is an authority-submission dynamic at work in the Father-Son relationship, that dynamic is not eternal and static. To say so, as Bruce Ware and others do, is to verge on subordinationism, if not to cross over into it completely. To be sure, Jesus’ life as a human was lived in 100 percent submission to the Father. However, the Son’s complete submission within the Economic Trinity does not necessitate a submission-only role for Him within the Immanent Trinity. The root word of *authority* is *author*. The Father is not the author of the Son. Rather, it is better to think of authority and submission within the Godhead as part of His *perichoresis*. The Father has authority in certain contexts, the Son and Spirit likely in others. Only God fully understands and moves freely and without confusion or struggle in that passing of authority and submission. It should also be noted that whatever submission entails within the Godhead, it cannot describe a conflict of multiple wills.

This claim may be supported by Scripture as well as by examination of the natural father-son relationship. First, Hebrews 1:3 indicates that Jesus “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” after His ascension. This is metaphorical, of course. There are not two thrones in heaven. The “right hand” is a figurative way of saying that all of the authority of the Father

¹³⁶ We should in no way read into this fact that women are somehow “left out” of the blessing of sonship. Females are just as much sons of God as males are. This is not unlike the conceptually challenging fact that the bride of Christ includes males (as well as females).

¹³⁷ And by extension, the inheritance of everything the Father owns by His sons (with a small *s*)! Hallelujah! See Galatians 4:1 (particularly, the New Living Translation).

was given to the Son. But God is eternal, with no past, no present, and no future. If the Son sits at the right hand of the Father at one point in time (if He possesses all of the authority of the Father at one point in time), then He sits at the right hand of the Father eternally (He possesses all of the authority of the Father eternally).

Proponents of the “gradational authority” view look to the authority and submission found in the natural father-son relationship for support. However, authority and submission are not universally static even in that relationship. The authority of a natural father over his son only lasts until the son reaches adulthood. Biblically speaking, the son is legally removed from his father’s authority at marriage: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). Jesus Himself taught that those who have left “father” for His name’s sake would “inherit eternal life” (Matt 19:29). It should not be overlooked that the command to *honor* the father lasts a lifetime, even though the authority-submission dichotomy is no longer in play (Mark 7:10-13; Exo 20:12). Not only is the son removed from the authority of the father in adulthood, but in many cases, the son also becomes the authority for the father later in life. Power-of-Attorney may be transferred, and the son may be called upon to make decisions regarding assisted living or even life support.

Another factor in the father-son relationship is *service*, and this element, like authority and submission, is passed back and forth in *perichoretic* fashion. In the beginning, the father serves the son, changing diapers, working to put food on the table, etc. The son, in turn, serves the father in old age, caring for the infirm. The son, although servant, is certainly more powerful and more “in charge.” Jesus said, “whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant” (Matt 20:26). There is a link, in God’s economy, between service and greatness.

Here, then, are some characteristics of the Father-Son relationship. The first characteristic is love. The Father and Son love each other. The love they share and express toward one another is *agape*, God's own special kind of love, of which He Himself is the embodiment. The second characteristic is intimacy. The Father and Son are inextricably linked, so linked that they are, in fact, One. They share one will, and they share one purpose. The third characteristic is the duality of pride and admiration. The Father is proud of the Son, and the Son admires the Father. God's perfection is eternally on display, continually bubbling up within Himself into the effervescence of pure joy that radiates from His self-awareness.

God is Light

Although not a "name" of God, the Bible's references to God as Light¹³⁸ give us another avenue to pursue in terms of contemplating His interpersonal Trinitarian relationships. The formulators of the Nicene Creed saw fit to describe Jesus as Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός "Light from Light." With recent scientific advancements, this description has proven to be quite ingenious. We now know that light is made up of particles, called photons, which consist of electromagnetic radiation. In other words, light radiates. Light proceeds from a light source, but the Nicene Creed should not be mistakenly read as "Light from Light Source." That implies too much of a separation, too much of an origination, too much of a subordination. Instead, "Light from Light" accurately captures the oneness of Father and Son. The Son is the extension of the Father, and they are so closely tied together as to be inseparable. The Son is the Light (Energy, Photons, etc.) that extends from the (Father) Light that precedes Him. To separate a beam of light is to destroy (diffuse/reflect) it, to change its essence. Similarly, it is impossible to separate Father and Son.

¹³⁸ For examples, 1 John 1:5 and John 8:12.

As the writer of Hebrews put it, the Son is “the brightness of [the Father’s] glory and the express image of His Person” (Heb 1:3).

The realm of quantum mechanics has opened up new ways to imagine the Godhead as well.¹³⁹ Photons of light are not only particles, but also waves—not only matter, but also energy. They are difficult to pin down. They emerge in different forms depending on the type of experiment used to measure them. Could this be a clue to Godhood and the relationships that define Him? Pneumatology rightly majors on the fact that the Holy Spirit is a Person (as opposed to merely a Force). There are also many ways in which He seems to emerge as a Force as well. Let us also not forget that Father and Son are “Spirits,” too (2 Cor 3:17). They, too, it would seem, are both Persons and Forces. *Perichoresis* becomes a fairly strong explanation of this “difficulty in pinpointing” concept. In the Trinitarian dance, like the subatomic dance it created, the moment you pinpoint One, you are on to Another.¹⁴⁰

The Immanent Word

The Word is normally conceived of in terms of the Economic Trinity,¹⁴¹ but He also may be conceived of as Word-to or Word-within God Himself. The Word, *logos*, indicates a sign that points to a signified. A word is something that communicates meaning. Within Trinitarian relationship, there is *meaning*! The Word means something; the Spirit (Breath) conveys this

¹³⁹ See Ernest L. Simmons, *The Entangled Trinity: Quantum Physics and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

¹⁴⁰ Erickson has preceded me along this line of thinking. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 67-68.

¹⁴¹ As indicated by Thomas Aquinas, “The name *Word* indicates reference to the creature.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I 34.3, translated in de Margerie, *The Trinity in Christian History*, 191.

meaning; the Father is what is meant, or what communicates, or both. Such a description is likely too simplistic and rigid, but it pushes us in the right direction. The communication of meaning within the Trinity is another *perichoretic* endeavor. It is probably difficult to pinpoint who is communicating, who or what is being communicated, and how the communication happens—sign, signified, and signification dance together such that they are all wrapped up in one another¹⁴²—but we can be sure that God is meaningful to Himself!

The Immanent Wind and Immanent Breath (Pneuma/Ruach)

Holy Spirit is, of course, an English translation of His name. The Greek for *Spirit*, *pneuma*, and the Hebrew for *Spirit*, *ruach*, may both be variously translated *wind* or *breath*. So, it would not be incorrect to refer to Him by name as *Holy Wind* or *Holy Breath*. Focusing on these naming nuances brings out the “force” side of the Holy Spirit, whereas thinking of Him as *Paraclete* brings out the “person” side. It is fairly easy to see how, as the Wind of God, the Holy Spirit blows *onto* creation, and as the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit blows *into* creation. Yet we may also contemplate this Wind and Breath within the context of the Immanent Trinity. As the Wind of God, the Holy Spirit animates the Trinitarian dance. He blows between Father and Son, making the interpenetration of the Godhead a reality. As the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit is God’s life force. In the natural, we think of breath as something external to us. I take air in, and I let air out. The breath is not a part of me. That is not how breath works in the divine. God’s Breath is not external to God. His Breath is Himself. His Breath is His Life. The Holy Spirit, the Breath of God, the Life of God, is the animating Force, the animating Person of God. The Holy

¹⁴² Or, as Barth puts it, God is “Revealer, Revelation, and Revealedness.” Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1:1, “The Doctrine of the Word of God,” trans. G. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 344.

Spirit “breathes” Life into God. (This concept, of course, should not be misunderstood, by superimposing the baggage of time, to mean that God was lifeless “before” the Holy Spirit, in the same way that man was lifeless before the Holy Spirit.)

The Immanent Paraclete

At the Last Supper, Jesus explained that He would be going away, and that when He did, He would send Someone in His place, One who would be more beneficial because He would indwell each and every believer. The name of this Person Jesus promises is *paracletos*, which we have Anglicized *Paraclete*. The Paraclete, who is the Holy Spirit, is usually identified as our Helper or Comforter. This is a role of God toward us in the Person of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus’ indications about the Paraclete all focus on His ministry to *us*. Therefore, not surprisingly, and appropriately, thinking about the Paraclete has primarily been in the track of the Economic Trinity (whether the track has been made explicit or not). There is nothing in Scripture to indicate that Holy Spirit’s Paraclete role could not be an eternal one, intrinsic to His Immanent Trinity identity. Thinking about Spirit as Paraclete within the Godhead gives us more to consider in terms of interpersonal relationships. We noted earlier that there is nothing intrinsically relational about the name *Spirit* (as there is with the names *Father* and *Son*). Yet there is something intrinsically relational about the names *Helper* (Facilitator) and *Comforter* (Encourager). To be a Helper to the Father and Son implies that Father and Son stand in relation to Him as “the Helped.” To be a Facilitator to the Father and Son implies that Father and Son stand in relation to Him as “the Facilitated.” To be a Comforter to the Father and Son implies that Father and Son stand in relation to Him as “the Comforted.” To be an Encourager to the

Father and Son implies that Father and Son stand in relation to Him as “the Encouraged.”¹⁴³ Such relationships seem eminently in keeping with *perichoresis*. Again, service is part of the equation here. The Spirit is serving the Father and Son in His role as Helper, and, as was stated previously, there is a link in God’s economy between service and greatness. The Spirit’s role as Paraclete within the Godhead should not be interpreted as relegating Him to second- (or third-) place status. Likewise, the Father and Son, in whatever capacity they serve each other, should not be thought of as inferior or subordinate.

The Immanent Witness

Another role, if not a name, of the Holy Spirit, is that of His Witness. Paul writes, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:16). Again, we normally think of the Spirit’s role as Witness in the context of the Economic Trinity, but an important facet of interpersonal Trinitarian relationships is illuminated when Spirit is conceived as Witness to/within the Immanent Trinity. The Spirit is an eternal Witness of the Father and Son.

I am proud of my sons. I am proud of them not merely for their accomplishments, but because they are mine. Technically, I am proud of myself in them. I am proud of their essence, which is an extension of my essence. Therefore, my pride does not subside when they perform poorly. Nevertheless, when they perform well—when they reveal a particular acumen, or when they have a “winning” moment, or when they merely make a good choice—pride is magnified. That pride is further magnified when there are *witnesses*. When a son spells a word correctly, we

¹⁴³ On this point, Bruce Ware’s assertion that “the Spirit assists” serves as a supporting text. As critical of him as I was earlier, here I believe he is on the right track. Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit*, 107.

are proud; but when a son spells a word correctly in a spelling bee in front of a live audience, we are even more proud. Witness augments joy.

The Father is proud of the Son, and the Son admires the Father. Their relationship is one of mutual love, pride, and admiration of each other's essence (that essence is the same for both). Each looks on the other with awe at His God-ness. Whatever they "do" within their relationship, it brings them a sense of pride and admiration. Their pride and admiration are augmented by the Witness of the Holy Spirit. Father and Son exhibit awesomeness, experiencing joy as a result. That joy is further magnified by the realization that Another has witnessed the awesomeness, too!

Of course, the Spirit is not the only One witnessing. Father, Son, and Spirit are all eternal witnesses of God's awesome God-ness.

Conclusion: God is Love

John's statement, "God is love" (1 John 4:7), is so mysterious. As with any mystery, it piques our interest. What does it mean that God is love? Many have traversed wrong theological paths by over-admiring this statement to the point of landing on the heresy that God is love-only. Nevertheless, the Christian world has pondered this mystery now for nearly two millennia, and we still do not know exactly what it means.

The contemplations of this chapter bring a degree of clarity to this question, however. It is by understanding the nature of the interpersonal Trinitarian relationships that we begin to see more clearly *how* God is love. God is in relationship with Himself. God's self-love "predates" creation; He loves Himself. His Three-ness defines love because love is the bond shared among Them. Father and Son maintain a relationship, the nature of which is intrinsic to their names. Their relationship is marked by pride and admiration, each looking at the other in loving awe of

His God-ness. The Son is also the Word, and in this, we see another facet of interpersonal Trinitarian relationship. God is sign, signified and signification, all rolled into One. He is, therefore, meaningful to Himself. The Spirit's relationship to the Father and to the Son is not intrinsic to His name, but by contemplating some of His other names, a clearer picture of His relationship to (love for) Father and Son emerges. He is their *Paraclete* (Helper, Facilitator, Encourager, Comforter); He is the Wind that animates God's *perichoresis*; He is the Breath that serves as the very Life-source of God; He is the prime Witness to Godhood.

CHAPTER FOUR: GOD IN RELATIONSHIP WITH HUMANITY

Having explored some ways in which God relates to Himself—Father in relation to Son, Son in relation to Spirit, and Spirit in relation to Father—this chapter will probe the various aspects of our relationship to God. God engages in certain relationships with us by virtue of His being our Creator, our Word, our Father, and our Paraclete. The Lord Jesus Christ is our Master, Savior, and King. The community of believers, furthermore, relates to the Son as a bride to her Groom.

Creation (Ecstasy)

Just as God’s self-pride and self-joy is magnified by the Witness of the Holy Spirit, so He has chosen to create additional witnesses, that we may observe Him, know Him, and behold His awesomeness. In this, our spirits are filled to overflowing, and God’s own glory is magnified. Creation came to be out of the overflow of God’s effervescent self-love.¹⁴⁴ In one ecstatic moment—the first “moment” in God—the love of God burst forth, becoming what we call *the universe*. A new relationship was born: God to creation. God began to “relate” to inanimate objects in one sense, to animals in another, and to angels in yet another. His most salient relationship, outside of His self-relationship, was reserved for humanity. God created man in His image and likeness. We have been created in such a way to relate to God in a personal, intimate, special way. The universe is the offspring of God, but we, redeemed humanity, maintain relationship with God in several specific and marvelous ways. We are His sons. We are His

¹⁴⁴ See Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 1-61.

bride. We are His subjects. We are His slaves. We relate to God as One, and we relate in various ways to the Persons of God as Three. It is in a close examination of these aspects of our relationship with Him that the phrase “It’s all about relationship” may come to truly carry real meaning.

The Word

The Father is Father in both the Immanent Trinity and the Economic Trinity. He is Father to the Son, and He is “*our* Father” (Matt 6:9). The Son, however, is only Son within the context of the Immanent Trinity, not the Economic Trinity. The title *Son* means relatively little to us. It does not define the relationship between Him and us. He is not *our* Son.

Instead, in order to gain a greater appreciation for the relationship between the Son and humanity, it is important to investigate the Son’s other names/titles. Here, we begin with *the Word*. John opens his Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Later, he makes explicit the link to humanity, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). In this description, mysterious as it is, we learn much of our relationship to God, and in particular, our relationship to the Second Person of the Trinity. The Son, to us, is the Word. A word is a sign; meaning, it *signifies*. The Word signifies the Father. The Word “stands for” the Father. The Word is the Sign that points to the Father. This is why Jesus was so upset when the Pharisees and Sadducees asked for a sign (Matthew 16:1-4). They were already looking at Him. The Greek *logos* is derived from the verb *lego*, which implies more than just speaking; it means to ‘lay open.’¹⁴⁵ Thus, we might say that the

¹⁴⁵ Dunzl, *A Brief History*, 22.

Son “exposes” God. He lays God out on the table, so to speak, so that He is fully revealed to Himself, and then by extension, fully revealed to us.

A word also communicates. The Word is the communicative agent between us and God. Communication between us and God is only possible through the Word. In this sense, His name/title *Word* is similar to His names/titles *Door*, *Way*, etc. It is only through Jesus that God can be known.

A word also carries meaning. The Word *means* something. The Word *means* the Father. Jesus, however, is not *a* word, He is *The* Word. There is something ultimate about what He means. More than merely meaning something, He is meaning-*ful*. Here we may begin to consider two types of meaning. The first type is the sign type: *signified meaning*. The word *curtain* means *fabric draped in front of a window*, for example. The Word has this kind of meaning; the Word’s signified meaning is “the Father.” That is to say, if we were able to look up the word *Word* (Jesus, the Son, the *Logos*) in a spiritual dictionary, the definition would be “the Father.” The other type of meaning is more abstract. The other type of meaning is *relational meaning*. It is the type of meaning that is meant when someone you admire tells you something encouraging, and you reply, “Thanks, that *means* a lot.” That meaning is not signified. There is no word, no sign, no object that “stands for” something else. Rather, *meaning* in this context has to do with a satisfaction that is derived from relationship. The reason it “means a lot” is because of the connection between you and the person who said something encouraging. Even if the relationship is a new or surface-level relationship, the meaningful statement becomes meaningful precisely because some level of relationship has been forged. At the very least, the person has discerned something good in you and has spontaneously built enough relationship to say so.

The Word carries this kind of meaning, too. He is the Agent who makes the relationship between God and man *meaningful*. The Word is what allows us to look at God and say, “You *mean* everything to me,” which is another way of saying, “I value our *relationship*.”

The Lord Jesus Christ

In addition to the Word, three more names/titles for the Son that help define our relationship to Him are “Lord,” “Jesus,” and “Christ.” Throughout the epistles, the Son is called “The Lord Jesus Christ,” and it is said about Him, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” This three-part name/title is eminently significant for us to understand and apply to our lives daily. Moving in chronological order, the Son is first revealed as Christ, then as Jesus, then as Lord.

Christ (Greek), or *Messiah* (Hebrew), is the term referencing the Son’s role as King. The word literally means *anointed one* and connotes the pouring of oil over the head of a new King, thereby anointing him to his task. The Messiah was prophesied all through the Old Testament, and at the time Jesus came, the Jewish people were looking for this promised King who would re-establish the throne of David, ruling over all Israel.

For we who “receive Christ,” we are receiving (and agreeing to operate within) a specific aspect of our relationship with God: the King-subject relationship. This entails several things. We recognize the sovereignty of the Son over us. We revere and respect Him. We are loyal to Him. We serve Him and do His bidding. Christ-as-King also implies a secondary relationship: the King-king relationship. We are kings, with delegated authority from the King (Rev 19:16). Because He has “all authority” (Matt 28:18), He has delegated that authority to us to do even

“greater things” (John 14:12)¹⁴⁶ than He did during His time on earth. He reigns, and He calls us to “reign with Him” (2 Tim 2:12).

Jesus is the Greek version of *Joshua* (Hebrew: *Yeshua*), which means “whose help [salvation] is Jehovah” or “Jehovah-saved.”¹⁴⁷ Thus, the name *Jesus* carries the connotation of salvation. It is Jesus who is our Savior. The Bible clearly indicates why the Son was to be given the name Jesus: “you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt 1:21).

Lord is the name/title indicative of the Master-slave relationship. Once we recognize our need of a Savior and receive Jesus, we are called to “follow” Him for the rest of our lives, picking up our crosses, submitting our wills to His. The freedom found in Christ Jesus is a freedom from sin—both the guilt of sin and the power of sin. It is not a freedom from His Lordship; we do not get to do whatever we want. The *Lord* rules, absolutely. This is nowhere made clearer than when Jesus asks, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do the things which I say?” (Luke 4:46). To call Him *Lord* is to make a verbal covenant that you will do what He says.

Interestingly, Jesus’ own words reflect the Christ-Jesus-Lord chronology of our unfolding relationship with Him. In the first chapter of the first Gospel ever written, the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ first words are: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. *Repent*, and

¹⁴⁶ Taken from the New International Version, hereafter abbreviated NIV; (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

¹⁴⁷ Definitions from *Genesis’ Lexicon* and *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, respectively. W. Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, first published 1815; J. Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1894). Both found at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=H3091&t=NKJV>.

believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). In the subsequent verse, Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee and sees Peter and Andrew fishing (Mark 1:16). The next verse records, “Jesus said to them, ‘*Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men*’” (Mark 1:17). Thus, the order of relationship, according to Jesus is: first repent, then believe, then follow.

In *repentance*, the Holy Spirit draws us and convicts us of sin, revealing to us our need to change our thinking (i.e., repent). We come to an awareness that there is a King who transcends the selfish world we have operated in up to that point. We make it known to a Holy God that we wish to abdicate our current throne as the king of self, and subject ourselves to the King of kings, the Christ, the Anointed One. As we admit with our hearts and our mouths that we are choosing to repent, the Gospel presents us with the solution to our problem: Jesus, the Savior. We take the next step of *believing* in Him, trusting fully in Him and Him alone to be saved from sin and reconciled to God. To believe is not merely to hold a set of beliefs, but to believe in and appropriate the atoning work of Jesus to our own lives. This will inevitably lead us to bear the fruit of holiness to God, because good works will follow true faith. This is because a true Christian does not merely believe, but also *follows* Jesus as *Lord*, as slave to Master. We do what He says, no questions asked. Thus, we enter the Kingdom of the Christ by repenting; we enter the freedom of righteousness and relationship by believing in the Savior, Jesus; and we enter the final rest of eternal life by dying to self, picking up our cross, and following Him as Lord.

Our Father

Turning to the Father now, we may see several more aspects of our relationship with God. First, and perhaps foremost, the Father *gives*. According to John 3:16, “God loved the world in this way: He *gave* his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, CSB). The *agape* love of the Father led Him to do the

unthinkable, to give up His begotten Son to come to earth and be tortured and killed for us. Our Father is a giver, magnanimous and altruistic, unconditionally good and kind to His children.

Once we enter into relationship with God, our Father also *affirms* us. The Jewish mind was not unfamiliar with God as Father (see, e.g., Isaiah 64:8), but Jesus extended the concept to reveal a more tender Fatherhood of God. This is particularly evident in sections of the sermon on the mount such as Matthew 6.

Paul takes the theology of personal relationship with Father to its zenith when He uses the term *Abba* in Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6, a term Jesus had used in Mark 14:36 in addressing the Father personally. Having a Father called *Abba* means that we can and should relate to this God-of-the-universe, not only in the formality of His kingship and the severity of His Lordship but also in the informality and tenderness of His Daddy-ship. “If you have been newly revealed as God’s son, then you have every right to crawl up into God’s lap and exclaim, ‘Daddy!’”¹⁴⁸ In the lap of God is found a marvelous two-fold inheritance: security and affirmation. The child who sits on Daddy’s lap feels totally secure. She does not give even the slightest hint of concern that she might possibly be in danger or unable to cope with a variable of life. She has zero anxiety, zero fear. The child who sits in Daddy’s lap also receives affirmation, that she is His, that she is valued, and that she is pleasing to Him. The informal Daddy-God, *Abba*, is proud of us. He made us in His image. When He looks at us, He sees Himself, and He is proud of Himself in us.

What then should we do to embrace the Father in this dimension? “‘Truly I tell you,’ He said, ‘unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’” (Matt 18:3, CSB). Such was Jesus’ warning. We must turn to God in complete trust,

¹⁴⁸ Romans 8:15b, in Miller, *Dear Church*, 69.

never wavering in our belief that He is for us and that He is working together the circumstances of life for our good (Rom 8:28). We must practice fixing our gaze on Him in adoration and admiration. We must humbly submit at every turn.

Another aspect of the Father's relationship with His children is that He *prunes* us. Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:1-2). The believer is always a work in progress, until his dying day. We are perfected in Him and *becoming* perfect in Him. It is only through tribulations that perseverance is produced, and this perseverance, in turn, produces character (Rom 5:3). We should "count it all joy" (Jms 1:2) when the trials of life come. They are the sandpaper (indeed, sometimes the chisel) that shapes us into the mature people He desires us to become.

The Father also *chastens* His children. Whereas pruning is more about productivity, chastening, otherwise known as discipline, is corrective. Corrective discipline need not necessarily be tied to illegal or immoral activity, as we often imagine it. Discipline may rather be as simple as putting a cast on a broken bone; or it may be more severe, as in putting a hardened criminal in prison. Likewise, the spiritual chastening of the Father may range from the slight and gently guiding variety to the severe discipline imposed when a child strays into rebellion. Even discipline should be something we receive joyfully. It proves that we are actually His children, and not illegitimate. He is not in the business of disciplining those who are not His (Heb 12:5-8). (Though it should be pointed out that He is very much in the business of *punishing* all who are *not* His, which He will do in the last Day.)

Another characteristic of our relationship with Father is begottenness. It seems strange at first to think that we could be begotten of God, since certain passages make it clear that Jesus

was the *only* begotten Son of God (John 1:14; John 3:16, 1 John 4:9, etc.). However, according to Peter, we, too, have been “begotten” of God “to a living hope through the resurrection” (1 Pet 1:3). Earlier we considered begottenness as primarily referring to sameness. In the more strict, Johannine sense, the Son is the *only* One who is begotten of (i.e., of the same essence as) the Father. In the expanded, Petrine sense, we, God’s sons are *also* begotten when His nature is imputed to us. We will not and cannot ever be “of the same essence” as the Father, but we are given His nature, His righteousness, His holiness. We are made to be like Him (Rom 8:29). We become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4).

Finally, it is through our relationship to God as Father that we embrace our role as heirs. Jesus is the “firstborn,” the Ultimate Heir (Col 1:15). It is He who “by inheritance obtained a more excellent name” than the angels (Heb 1:4), who is “the heir of all things” (Heb 1:2), who was able to sit “at the right hand of the majesty on high” (Heb 1:3). Yet “in Him also *we* have obtained an inheritance” (Eph 1:11). *We* are “joint heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17). Our “inheritance incorruptible and undefiled” is waiting for us in heaven (1 Pet 1:4). Jesus’ death has ensured our inheritance, since an heir can only inherit after a death occurs (Heb 9:16). Through Jesus, then, we become heirs of our Father, and He includes us as sons—brothers of Christ—as He doles out the great eternal inheritance.

The Paraclete

The name *Holy Spirit* carries no intrinsic relational properties and does not specify what His relationship to mankind might entail, in the way that, for example, the name *Father* does. He is not holy “as opposed to us”—rather, we are holy because He is holy (1 Pet 1:16)—and He is not spirit “as opposed to us”—we, too, are spirits. Instead, the relationship between Holy Spirit and humanity is better understood as we ponder one of the other names attributed to Him in the

Scriptures (primarily in John 14-16): *Paraclete*, or *Helper*. Seeing Holy Spirit as Helper immediately defines the relationship. If He is the Helper, we stand in relation to Him as “the helped.” In this section, then, we want to consider the ways in which Holy Spirit helps us.

We see some of the ways He helps us by simply observing the various ways *paracletos* is translated: Comforter, Advocate, (and Helper). *Advocate* evokes the legal, defense-attorney, or mediator analogy. The Holy Spirit advocates for us, He intercedes for us (Rom 8:26). In His Advocate nature, He testifies about Jesus to our spirits (John 15:26). His Comforter role has to do with His parental nurturing, and His constant presence. He can never be accused of neglect. A comparison of the NIV and King James translations of John 14:18 reveals this: “I will not leave you orphans” (John 14:18a, NIV) or “I will not leave you comfortless,” (John 14:18a)¹⁴⁹ Jesus says; “I will come to you” (John 14:18b, NIV and KJV). He is with us! This Comforter/Advocate/Helper also teaches us about God and reminds us of Jesus’ words (John 14:26). In addition, He serves as a Witness to us from within that we are children of God (Romans 8:16).

Another way the Paraclete helps is by *leading* us. According to Romans 8:14, precisely those who are led by the Spirit are God’s sons. Some current voices would have us believe that the Spirit’s leading primarily has to do with hearing the Lord’s voice in the mundane details of life, such as allowing the Spirit to dictate whether you should buy watermelon or cantaloupe. Without denying that the Spirit may very well lead us in this way, that is not the *primary* meaning of this verse. The surrounding context makes it clear that being led by the Spirit has to do primarily with allowing Him to keep you away from sin. Note the previous verse: “For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the

¹⁴⁹ Taken from the Authorized Version, hereafter abbreviated KJV.

body, you will live” (Rom 8:13). The Holy Spirit leads us through our consciences, arresting our spirits in times of temptation, gently whispering, “No, not that way.” The *Paraclete* holds the reins of our lives, and those who display a broken and yielded spirit, progressing in sanctification, submitting and not rebelling, will be the ones who will not have to hear “I never knew you” (Matt 7:23) in the end.

We are able to avoid sin because of another way the Helper helps: He *empowers* us. He empowers us in multiple ways, but first and foremost, He empowers us to be holy. Jesus’ death erased the guilt of sin, but His resurrection erased the power of sin (Romans 6:4-11). Now the Holy Spirit has been given so that we can have power over sin rather than it having power over us (Romans 6:14).

Secondly, the Holy Spirit empowers us *to be witnesses* (Acts 1:8). The Greek word for *witnesses* used in this verse is *martys*, sharing its root with the word we now know as *martyr*. Contrary to the teaching of some Pentecostals (of which I am one), the defining characteristic of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost was not the gift of tongues. Neither was it a special power to be able to tell others about Jesus. (One need not be Spirit-baptized to articulate to someone who Jesus was and what He did.) No, the power of the Spirit poured out at Pentecost was a power that gives those who receive it the ability to live a life of such consecration and devotion to God that they are able to keep their witness, if necessary, even to the death.

Thirdly, the Holy Spirit empowers us *to do miracles*. It is within the context of the *paracletos* passage of John 14 that Jesus says these words:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.

-John 14:12-14

The word *greater* indicates both a quantitative *and* qualitative increase.¹⁵⁰ The Church of Jesus Christ, His Body, is empowered by the Holy Spirit to do everything Jesus did during His earthly ministry, and more. This is made evident by Jesus' closing words before His ascension:

And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.

-Mark 16:17-18

Furthermore, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to do miracles is confirmed by the testimony of the remaining portions of Scripture, particularly the accounts in Acts.

The takeaway from this truth for our study is that God wants to use us, and He wants us to derive pleasure from being used and from being useful! To be used of God is one of the dearest signs of relationship!

Besides comforting, advocating, leading, and empowering, the Holy Spirit also helps us by *giving gifts*. These gifts are given to individuals for the benefit of the Church (1 Cor 12:7). Spiritual gifts are to be stewarded with an open hand. We receive in order to give. We operate in our gifts only from a heart of love (1 Cor 14:1, punctuating Chapter 13), otherwise, the gift becomes poisoned and may easily wound. When we operate in the spiritual gifts properly, we find ourselves participating in relationship, with God and with others. God calls us into a partnership, and the working together of all the gifts to build up the Church together becomes a *perichoretic* act.

¹⁵⁰ Definition adapted from *Thayer's Greek Lexicon* and *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*. Joseph Henry Thayer, Carl Ludwig Grimm, and Christian Gottlob Wilke, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Co., 1889); J. Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1894). Found at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G3173&t=NKJV>.

Finally, in the Spirit's *pneuma/ruach* and *living water* (John 4:10-14) nature, He helps us by *blowing and flowing*. Jesus said that those who believe would have “rivers of living water” flowing out of their bellies (John 7:38, KJV). The Holy Spirit satisfies completely, and He brings a joy and an effervescent outflow that affects those around us. On another occasion, Jesus likened the Spirit to the wind that “blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes” (John 3:8). We who are born of the Spirit are blown about in this way. Like a feather in the wind, we are completely dependent on the whims of a holy and omniscient God. The life of the believer is a life wholly surrendered to the control of Another, even though it may mean complete ignorance of the next twist and turn of life. The relationship with the Holy *Pneuma/Ruach* is one of total dependence.

Christ and the Church

It remains to examine one additional relationship between God and humanity, which is the relationship of Christ to His Church. In Ephesians, Paul teaches us that, mysterious as it may be, the relationship between the husband and wife is like that of Jesus and His Church. We are His bride, for whom He has given of Himself in order to make us holy and without spot or blemish. We, in turn, submit to Him as Lord (Eph 5:22-33). When we do this, the Holy Spirit begins to cultivate fruit in us. That fruit, according to Romans 6:22, is holiness.

In Chapter 7 of Romans, Paul does something very interesting. Having just articulated in the previous chapter that we have been freed from sin, he continues by adding that we are also free from the Law of Moses. He ties the two thoughts together—freedom from sin and freedom from the Law—by drawing an analogy to marriage, and in this analogy, we come to realize that the reference to holiness as *fruit* is not meant to paint an agrarian picture, but rather a (human-) reproductive one. My paraphrase of the passage makes this clear:

Let me illustrate what happens to us when we are freed from the Law. Imagine that you and the Law are a married couple. You're the wife and the Law is the husband. Now your husband, the Law, really makes your life miserable. You just can't get any peace or happiness while you're living with him, because he simply expects more out of you than you can provide. That's when you notice Jesus. You just know that Jesus would be the perfect husband for you, and you begin to pine after Him. There's only one problem. You're married, and there's no way you can ditch the Law and get with Jesus. That would be adultery. What would be ideal is for your husband to die. Then you would be free to marry Jesus, and life would be a bed of roses.

But that's not what happens. God never does kill the Law. Instead, He pulls a total 180. The Law doesn't die, *you* die! Because you're dead, you are freed from the covenant of marriage—just as free as if your husband, the Law, had been the one who died. Now you're free to marry Jesus (figuratively speaking). And what's the purpose of that marriage? To bear fruit to God. Nothing has changed since God first told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. Except now we're talking about spiritual offspring, not natural children. The Church, who is the Bride, is to become intimate with her Groom, Jesus, in order to produce spiritual offspring that may be presented back to God the Father. And that spiritual offspring, that fruit, as I've already said, is *holiness*. The purpose of your life is to have spiritual intimacy with Jesus so that you can bear the fruit of holiness to God!

What a transformation! What a rescue! When you were married to the Law, you were intimate with sin and the spiritual offspring you produced was death. Thank God He made a way for us to begin producing the right kind of fruit!¹⁵¹

This picture of intimacy, this union with Christ, is implied by Pauline phrasing such as *I am "in Christ"* and *Christ is "in me."*¹⁵² The *perichoretic* nature of divine relationship extends to us, the bride.¹⁵³ Now and forever, we are intertwined with God.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Romans 7:2-6, in Miller, *Dear Church*, 56-57.

¹⁵² For example, 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 2:20.

¹⁵³ In the words of James Gifford, "To state that the believer's union with Christ is a perichoretic relationship is to proclaim that there is a mutual relational indwelling of the believer and Christ, that is, that Christ is in the believer and the believer is in Christ. Furthermore, this relationship is neither merely static nor spatial. There must be an active, loving pursuit of this relationship by both parties at all times, ultimately reaching the goal of being one, analogous to the way the Father and Son are one." James D. Gifford, *Perichoretic Salvation: The Believer's Union with Christ as a Third Type of Perichoresis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 3.

Conclusion: Love the Lord Your God with All Your Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength

If the conclusion to our investigation of God's self-relationship was "God is love," then the conclusion to our investigation of God's relationship with humanity must be "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). We have noted many aspects of our relationship to God in this chapter. All of these aspects clearly reveal God's unwavering *agape* love for us. He shares His *agape* love with us so that we may love Him with every fiber of our being in response.

¹⁵⁴ Indeed, one theologian goes so far as to assert that "the language of perichoretic union with the divine is more apropos of the believer than of the Spirit." David Crump, "Re-examining the Johannine Trinity: Perichoresis or Deification?" *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 59, no. 4 (2006): 395. I am not sure I agree with him, but the biblical support for his argument is intriguing.

CHAPTER FIVE: HUMANITY IN RELATIONSHIP WITH HUMANITY

In Chapter 3, we looked at some ways in which God relates to Himself. In Chapter 4, we looked at some ways in which God relates to humanity. Now we turn to our final study and explore some ways in which the knowledge of Trinitarian relationships is revealed in the aspects of humanity's relationship with humanity.

Man and Woman

The first reason God stated for making woman from and for man was, "It is not good that man should be alone" (Gen 2:18). God knew from experience the importance of not being alone. As a triune Being, God was fully aware of the significance of relationship for abundant living. The second reason God gave for bringing Eve onto the scene was so that Adam could have "a helper comparable to him" (Gen 2:18). Again, God was aware that abundant life requires *help*. As Paraclete, He had been helping *Himself* from eternity past. None of the animals God brought to Adam would have satisfied his need for companionship or comparable help, so God made the woman. (It should be noted that it was not as if God was using a trial-and-error method here. He was not "learning" what might work. He knew all along what He was doing, and He did it perfectly.)

The first instruction God gave Adam and Eve was to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28). God had just created, and He turns right around and tells His creation to imitate Him in His creative acts. He wants us to create, to have a fraction of a sense of what it was like for Him to create. He created in order to bring increase to relationship (in quantity only; no creation could ever increase the quality of His self-relationship), and He expects us to do the same.

The mechanism God has put in place for increasing relationships is none other than relationship itself! It is through the relationship of man and woman that more relationships are reproduced. The gift of sex is a beautiful sign that points us to the relationality of Godhood. It is a *perichoretic* act, complete with movement, dance, and interconnectivity. The physical expression of love between man and woman imitates God's self-love. The climactic experience serves as a sign, which signifies the moment when God created, when the overflow of the effervescent relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit burst forth in the form of new worlds and new life.

It also serves as a sign of our union with Christ. As demonstrated in the passage from Romans 7 in the previous chapter (as well as Ephesians 5, and elsewhere), the relationship between Christ and His Church is clearly expressed as that of a Groom to His Bride. Christ and the Church are so intimately linked that they are elsewhere described as the Head and Body of the same functioning "Individual" (e.g., Col 1:18). Intimacy with the Groom, the *perichoretic* relationship between Christ and the Church, produces in the Bride the spiritual offspring of holiness. This, the Bible refers to as "fruit." The command to "be fruitful and multiply"¹⁵⁵ is now a spiritual principle directed at Christ and the Church. Physical intimacy between man and woman, therefore, serves as a sign, signifying this relationship between Christ and His Church that results in offspring.

God has given us the man-woman relationship as a clear indication of who He is, what He is like, and what He is about. He is a relational Being, who is the embodiment of love itself,

¹⁵⁵ See Romans 6-7 and the discussion in Chapter 4 above.

eternally moving in love; and He is about enjoying and reproducing relationships so that more may share the enjoyment of relationship, with Him and with others.

Parents and Children

If intimacy between man and woman serves as a sign of God's eternal self-love, and the climactic experience serves as a sign of God's creative act, then children serve as a sign of creation itself. They are the product, the result, the offspring, the fruit; children are the artifacts of love, just as creation is the artifact of God's self-love.

As our creation, then, our children's relationship to us is like our relationship to God. From their perspective, they are dependent and wholeheartedly trusting. They admire and emulate us. (Paul reminds us of this very concept in Ephesians 5:1—"Therefore be imitators of God as dear children.") They typically have no fear or worries, operating on the assumption that everything will be okay as long as mom or dad is around (Phil 4:6). They assume, and even presume, to be provided for. They do not think about whether their next meal will be supplied, nor even give thought to needing to prepare it themselves (Matt 6:25-34). Children, thus, serve as a sign to us of how we "should" view our good God, even if we do not always attain that proper perspective.

From the parents' perspective, we love our children unconditionally. It is difficult to conjure a scenario in which we would stop loving our children. Because we love them, we provide for them, we protect them, we train them, we discipline them. Sometimes we allow them to make choices; sometimes we intervene such that they only have one option. Everything we do as parents (except, of course, when we mess up) is done to give our children the greatest chance of success.

Furthermore, we are proud of our children. We are proud of them, not so much for their accomplishments (though we are proud of those, too), but rather because we are proud of ourselves in them. This, too, is a sign signifying how God views His children. As I wrote in a previous work:

True affirmation is only found in Daddy's lap. We may receive accolades from others, based on the things we do. But your Daddy (Abba Father) is the only One who gives you affirmation because He's the only One who truly knows who you are. He Fathered you. He made you in His image. When He looks at you He sees Himself, and He likes what He sees when He sees Himself in you.¹⁵⁶

Thus, we see once again, that the origin of relationship—the Triune God—reveals pieces of His nature through the signs of relationship He has given us on earth; the parent-child relationship is one of the clearest pictures of how God relates to us, and how we are to relate to God.

Other People

Finally, we come to the question of relationships with others—those with whom we have no familial relationship. These relationships range from friends to acquaintances, co-workers to church members, those whom we know well to the billions about whom we know nothing. What should these relationships look like? Do we see anything in the Godhead that would indicate an origin for how we are to relate to others?

The Scriptures are clear that the guiding principle for relationship with others is that we are to prefer others to self. This should be especially true of our disposition toward our brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul writes, “in lowliness of mind, let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil 2:3b-4). To exemplify this, we are reminded of how Jesus put our interests above

¹⁵⁶ Miller, *Idol Worship*, 18.

His own when He submitted to the humiliating task of setting aside the glory of heaven to take on “the form of a bondservant” (Phil 2:7). The Father also looked out for the interest of others—the whole world—when He sent His Son. God’s love, His *agape*, is characterized first and foremost by His *giving*. “For God loved the world in this way: He gave” (John 3:16a, CSB). “Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another” (1 John 4:10-11, CSB). God’s love is the model; our love should follow that model; and that love is a giving love, a preferential, deferential, selfless love.

It would be difficult to pinpoint examples of how the selfless, preferential love is revealed in the Immanent Trinity. Illustrations of how the Father prefers the Son or the Son prefers the Spirit or the Spirit prefers the Father, for example, may be hard to come by. The aforementioned role of the eternal Paraclete within the Immanent Trinity may be one notable example. The Spirit helps Father and Son; the Spirit serves Father and Son in this way. However, given that God has one will, selfless love within the Godhead cannot mean the subordination of One’s will to Another.

On the other hand, selfless love abounds in the Economic Trinity. One could almost say the Economic Trinity is defined by it. God gave. Jesus came. Although it was all done for God’s glory, the sacrifice and the selflessness were stark. Particularly eye-opening is the fact that many still choose to reject God, even after all He has done for us. Eye-opening, I say, because God is “not wanting any to perish” (2 Pet 3:9, CSB), and yet many perish. In other words, the staggering truth is: *God does not get everything He wants*. It goes without saying that, given this truth, we should not expect to get everything *we* want. Instead, we are to live life in such a way that our

desires are surrendered to His, and that others gain the maximum spiritual benefit from our choices.

The heart of *agape* love also leads the believer to feel a burden for the lost and dying world. This results in Gospel proclamation. The original command to humanity to “be fruitful and multiply,” or, reproduce, is now applied in the spiritual sense of reproducing more believers. This type of multiplication is more akin to cellular reproduction (duplication and division) than fertilization (addition and combination). Kingdom growth via an increase in new converts is most often achieved through relationship. Trust is developed—this could be over many years or a very short period of time—and the sinner, recognizing his need, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, receives the word from the one with whom he has relationship. Thus, even in the Great Commission, new relationships are developed through existing relationships.

Conclusion: Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

In the preceding three chapters, we have investigated 1) God’s relationship to Himself, 2) God’s relationship to humanity, and 3) humanity’s relationship to humanity. The conclusion to our investigation of God’s relationship to Himself was that *God is love*. Father, Son, and Spirit *agapaō* each other from eternity past, before the world was made. They admire and take pride in each other as they are eternal witnesses to their own awesomeness. The conclusion to our investigation of God’s relationship to humanity was that God loves us, and because His love has overflowed to His creation, we are obliged to *Love the Lord Your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength*. Through the Son, we believe and receive reconciliation. We then demonstrate our love to God by admiring and trusting Him as Father, obeying Him as Lord, and following Him as Spirit. In this chapter we have taken the additional step of noting the ways in which humanity should relate to humanity, observing origins for these relationship principles in

the Trinity. We found that the relationship between man and woman serves as a sign of God's self-relationship, the children we bear are artifacts of our love just as creation is the artifact of God's self-love, and the love we are to show to others is a selfless, preferential love that results in benevolence and Gospel proclamation. We may, therefore, now sum up the relationship of humanity to humanity with the simple biblical phrase that serves as the continuation of the conclusion of the previous chapter: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored three categories of relationship—God’s relationship with Himself, God’s relationship with humanity, and humanity’s relationship with humanity—investigating several aspects of relationship within each of these categories. Each category concluded with a biblical truth about love. God’s Trinitarian self-relationship may be summed up in the phrase “God is love.” God’s relationship to humanity (or, more accurately, humanity’s relationship to God) may be summed up in the phrase “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” Humanity’s relationship to humanity may be summed up in the phrase “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In closing, then, it remains to be reminded of how this study of relationship ties into the discipline of worship studies, and to explore some ways in which we may practically pursue the relationship with God for which we were created. It is my contention that *relationship* with our Creator (and, by extension, relationship with others) is the purpose of our lives; it is also my contention that *worship* is the purpose of our lives. Thus, although I may not quite be willing to say that worship and relationship are synonymous, I would contend that they are intimately linked.

Worship/Relationship as the Purpose of Life

The biblical words translated *worship* nearly all indicate either “bowing down” or “serving,”¹⁵⁷ both of which are relational concepts. The Old English word, *weorthscipe*, means

¹⁵⁷ Hebrew: *shachah* or *abad*; Greek: *proskuneo* or *latreuo/latreia*. Definitions adapted from *Gesenius’ Lexicon*, *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*, and *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*. W. Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, first published 1815; Joseph Henry Thayer, Carl Ludwig Grimm, and Christian Gottlob Wilke, *A*

“to ascribe worth,” and is thus another relational concept—we only ascribe worth to those people and things with which we have relationship.

The activities of the first couple described in the pre-Fall account (Genesis 1-3) reveal worship as a whole-life endeavor, not merely an intentional time of communication to/with God. They were fruitful (Gen 1:28), they walked in power and authority (Gen 1:28), they worked (Gen 2:15), they obeyed (Gen. 2:17) (up until the point they disobeyed), they used their brains (2:19), and they enjoyed God (Gen 3:8). We may rightly consider all of these to be acts of worship,¹⁵⁸ and in so doing, we see worship as a lifestyle more than a discrete act.

The Apostle Paul noted that all things are from, through, and to God. He is the end-all-be-all of everything. And the goal of it all is for the glory to go to Him (Rom 11:36). The consequence for us, noted in the next verse, is that we should worship Him (Rom 12:1, CSB and NIV). We were created to worship God, in order that He would receive glory. That is the sum total of our reason for being. The way we worship is to live lives of holiness (Rom 12:1, CSB and NIV). By living in holiness, we are pure before Him, and we can be the bride of Romans 7 that He desires. Purity before a holy God allows for intimacy with the Groom Jesus and the reproduction of spiritual offspring. Worship is all about holiness; relationship is all about holiness.

Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: American Book Co., 1889); J. Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1894). All found at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H7812&t=NKJV> ; <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H5647&t=NKJV> ; <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G4352&t=NKJV> ; <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G3000&t=NKJV> ; <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G2999&t=NKJV>.

¹⁵⁸ For a more complete discussion of worship principles from the pre-Fall account, see Miller, *The Worship of God*, 8-11.

Developing the Relationship: The Practice of Spiritual Disciplines

Having explored more deeply in Chapters 3-5 the aspects of relationship we were created for, it is now appropriate to comment on practical ways in which we may pursue relationship with God and with others. This commentary will be framed through a discussion of twelve spiritual disciplines: Bible reading, Bible study, Bible meditation, Prayer, Listening, Fasting, Gratitude, Praise, Service, Authentic Community, Submission, and Self-Examination. Any of these twelve could easily be expanded into its own thesis. The aim here, however, is simply to offer a brief set of suggestions for how these disciplines may lead the reader to the goal this thesis has been approaching: increase the quality of our worship through the development of relationship with God and others.

Bible Reading

The founding pastor of my church often quips, “Don’t study the Bible; read it!”¹⁵⁹ It is not that he is actually opposed to studying the Bible, but rather, over 60 years of ministry, he has seen many young clergymen and parishioners immerse themselves so deeply into the details, backgrounds, settings, and original languages, that they end up missing the larger narrative of Scripture and the main points God intends for us to understand from His Word. Simply reading the Bible, cover to cover, over and over, builds something within us. We begin to make connections. We begin to synthesize God’s Word and assimilate it into the core of our being.

If we truly believe we were created for relationship with God, our primary means of developing that relationship is communication, and the primary way God communicates to us is through His written Word. We must discipline ourselves to prioritize daily Bible reading. Reading our Bibles should not be approached as a contest or a chore, but rather as an act of trust,

¹⁵⁹ Bud Crawford, personal communication.

believing that God desires to speak to us, that He will speak to us, and that we will grow as we receive the nourishment of His Word daily.

Bible Study

The immature Christian is content with feasting on the Word once a week, allowing the shepherd to take on the role of spoon-feeder. More mature Christians read the Word daily, having taken it upon themselves to be self-feeders. Some choose to move beyond this level, to the point where mere daily reading does not completely satisfy. Here is where the practice of Bible Study allows us to draw even closer to God. We are so blessed in the 21st-century West, to have the most abundant supply of Bible-study resources in the history of mankind. Gone are the days when only professional clergymen would have the time and access to learn of the deeper elements of Scripture, such as setting, original language meanings, literary style, etc. Commentaries, lexicons, concordances, and more, sit ready to be used—many as free resources—a mere touch or click away from any layperson.

By studying the Bible with an open heart and a surrendered mind, we are able to learn more about the God who has revealed Himself to us. Commentaries, particularly those with a homiletic edge, such as the *NIV Application Commentary*, provide context for biblical passages, explanations of ambiguous passages, and suggestions for ways to put the Word into effect in our lives. Lexicons help us ascertain meaning beyond that of a given English translation. Internet-based concordances make it extremely easy to explore the often-hidden meanings of important Bible words. Through the use of such study tools, the believer becomes better informed about God and His plan. When approached with a right heart, Bible study is a dynamic spiritual discipline that will serve to augment our relationship with God.

Bible Meditation

This third Bible-related discipline is somewhat different, and uniquely important. Meditating on Scripture goes beyond reading and studying; it is the practice of turning the Word over in the mind. Whereas a goal of Bible reading may be to complete the whole Bible in a year, the goal of Bible meditation may be to memorize a single Psalm, or to rehearse an excerpt from an epistle. The focus is deeper and narrower, as opposed to the wide-angle snapshot of Bible reading.

Robert Morgan writes, “Biblical meditation is the powerful practice of pondering, personalizing, and practicing Scripture.”¹⁶⁰ When we ponder, personalize, and practice the Word, it becomes embedded in the warp and woof of our being. Spending long periods of time dwelling on single passages builds a fortitude in the believer that cannot be achieved any other way. As the psalmist proclaims, the one who “meditates day and night” on God and His law will “be like a tree planted by rivers of water that brings forth its fruit in its season” (Psalm 1:2-3).

Prayer

Prayer is the ongoing conversation between the believer and God. Many hold that Prayer and Bible-intake (reading, study, meditation) comprise the two opposing sides of the conversation, with the believer speaking through prayer and God speaking through His Word. Such an understanding is inadequate, however, because God speaks directly to His children through extra-biblical avenues (as well as the Bible itself), and prayer should be understood to include both sides of the conversation. However, to clarify each, here I am treating prayer as our side of the conversation and listening, in the next section, as God’s side of the conversation.

¹⁶⁰ Robert J. Morgan, *Reclaiming the Lost Art of Biblical Meditation: Find True Peace in Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017), x.

Prayer, then—the speaking side of prayer—is described by the mnemonic device, A.C.T.S., which stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. When we come to God in prayer, incorporation of any or all these four elements is appropriate. We adore Him for who He is, taking time to allow our spirits to gaze at His beauty. We confess sin, posturing ourselves to hear where we are lacking, and humbly repenting. We give thanks for every good gift. We bring before the Lord our own needs and the needs of others.

Beyond this simple formula, prayer should also express a desire to know God more. Prayer is our opportunity to “remind” God that we want to see revival in our time, first in our own lives, then in the lives of those around us, and then at a global level. E.M. Bounds notes the distinction between praying for relationship’s sake and praying for religion’s sake. He writes, “It is necessary to iterate and reiterate that prayer, as a mere habit, as a performance gone through by routine or in a professional way, is a dead and rotten thing;” instead, “we lay stress on true praying ... which springs from the deep ... a consuming zeal for the glory of God.”¹⁶¹ Through prayer we ask, seek, and knock, knowing He will give us the desires of our heart.

Listening

If prayer is a conversation between the believer and God, then listening is a critical part of prayer, since listening is the part of prayer where we have the privilege of hearing God’s side of the conversation. God has always spoken to his children, from Adam and Eve to Noah to Abraham to Moses to Samuel, all the way to the New Testament and beyond. Jesus said that He did nothing of His own accord, but only what He saw the Father doing (John 5:19). Then He told the people that they could not hear God’s voice because they did not have His Word abiding in them because they did not believe (John 5:37-38). The implication is that to those who do

¹⁶¹ E.M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 44.

believe, we do have His Word abiding in us, and we can hear His voice. In another place, Jesus makes the point more explicit: “the sheep hear [the Shepherd’s] voice” (John 10:3).

Listening for the voice of God takes practice and dedication. One of the most helpful principles to remember when practicing listening is that there are only three voices: the voice of the Lord, the voice of the enemy, and the voice of self. The voice of the enemy and the voice of self become fairly easy to identify in a short time. The voice of the enemy sounds like accusation, condemnation, and temptation. It leads one to feelings of despair, helplessness, and a lack of self-worth. The voice of self sounds like your own desires and weaknesses. It is filled with ambition. It will tell you to put yourself before others and before God and His established commands. The voice of the Lord, then, is the voice that remains when the other two have been filtered out. The voice of God encourages, affirms, and comforts. It sounds like a good Father, expressing pride and lovingkindness. At times, the voice of God brings rebuke, conviction, and correction. Yet, as opposed to the voice of the enemy, that correction always comes with a path forward. It brings a feeling of freedom and joy. When we hear the correcting voice of God, we always feel that if we only obey and change course, everything will turn out just right. There is love in the tone of God’s correcting voice.

Listening in prayer should also have as a goal the receipt of direction from God. Answers to life’s big questions and little questions are found in listening for God’s voice. Derek Prince emphasizes the importance of not restricting God to a timeline when listening for His voice.¹⁶² He relates an anecdote about a time when he and his wife received direction from God after seeking Him for five and a half months. “If we had allotted the Lord only five months to hear

¹⁶² Derek Prince, *Hear God’s Voice* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2020), 15.

from Him, we might not have received the answer to our questions,” he admits.¹⁶³ He is a jealous God (Exo 20:5), and one of the things He is jealous for is our time. God is more interested in receiving our attention than He is in giving us answers. He has His priorities straight, and it is incumbent upon us to follow Him in the way He prioritizes.

Fasting

Fasting is another spiritual discipline within the prayer “family.” Its purpose is to increase our sensitivity to God and supercharge our prayer life. Interestingly, Jentezen Franklin frames fasting in terms of *relationship*. “When we don’t do what it takes to stay sharp and sensitive to the Holy Spirit,” he writes, “our praise, worship, offerings, and even preaching can become heartless routines;” “our *relationship* with the Lord” suffers.¹⁶⁴ Elmer Towns rightly notes that the point of fasting is not to receive the greatest answers to prayer, but rather to know God as never before.¹⁶⁵

As opposed to listening, for which the recommendation is that no timeline is set, in fasting the recommendation is that a timeline *is* set. The length of the fast, the nature of the fast (i.e., total fast, Daniel fast, etc.), and other elements of pre-planning are important factors, as they help the one fasting to be able to follow through.

Fasting is a tremendous spiritual discipline for helping us develop our relationship with God. When we come to Him with a pure heart and demonstrate through fasting our level of seriousness for getting to know Him better, it gets His attention.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Jentezen Franklin, *Fasting: Opening the Door to a Deeper, More Intimate, More Powerful Relationship with God* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2008), 69.

¹⁶⁵ Elmer Towns, *The Beginner’s Guide to Fasting* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2001), 61.

Gratitude

Gratitude, in and of itself, is not exactly a spiritual discipline. It is the intentional practicing of a lifestyle and posture of gratitude that becomes a potent spiritual discipline. Especially in the West, in the 21st century, it is so easy to wane in gratitude. Ironically, the more we have, the less likely we are to be grateful, and the more likely we are to begin to take things for granted. The discipline of gratitude requires continual humility and fresh recognition that all that we have has been given to us, not because we deserve it but because He is good.

Paul warns us of the danger in not being grateful; he says it is the first step in the descent toward the kind of depravity that eventually culminates in the Lord giving them “over to a debased mind” (Rom 1:21-28). Commenting on another of Paul’s writings—this one on the interconnectivity of thanksgiving, joy, and fighting anxiety (Phil 4:4-7)—James Gills ties us back to the concept of relationship: “A personal *relationship* with God counteracts the destructive power of anxiety in our lives.”¹⁶⁶

The practice of gratitude defines a relationship, in that the one who assumes a heart of gratitude places oneself in the lower position with respect to the object of the gratitude. When one is grateful to God, one recognizes and operates within the proper relationship structure: He is God and we are not. When one is grateful to others, one develops relationship by endearing oneself to the other. Of course, in Christianity, to humble oneself and assume the lower position is a mark of honor. Jesus Himself was our model in this when, “taking the form of a bondservant ... He humbled Himself” (Phil 2:7-8).

¹⁶⁶ James P. Gills, *A Journey to Gratitude: 30 Days to Discovering the Life-Changing Dynamic of Appreciation* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2019), 5.

Praise

Praise is the expression that arises from a heart of gratitude. The more we practice gratitude, the better our praise will become. Praise is commanded and emphasized throughout the Old Testament and the New. Several Hebrew and Greek words are translated *praise*, and their combined multifaceted meaning gives us real insight into what praising our God should look like. According to Scripture, to praise is “to give thanks, sing, confess, adore, shout, make music with instruments, lift our hands, bless, kneel, laud, commend, cast our sin and guilt, point out, profess, shine, act like madmen, boast, and glow for God!”¹⁶⁷

The theme of *relationship* is addressed specifically by Andrew Wommack in his discussion of the benefits of praise: “God desires to have relationship with every believer, and we develop that relationship through studying His word and spending time communing with Him. Praise is a part of that.”¹⁶⁸ Like practiced gratitude, praise helps define and strengthen relationship, because it necessarily puts the praiser in the low position with respect to the one being praised. When we praise God for who He is and what He has done for us, we immediately exalt Him to the high and exalted position He deserves. Maintaining the proper perspective of Who is high and who is low in the relationship is crucial for its healthy development.

Service

Serving God and serving people are critical components of the Christian walk. Service is another discipline that requires the subjugation of the selfish desires of the flesh. Even Jesus “did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45). We are called to follow His example in this.

¹⁶⁷ Miller, *The Worship of God*, 50-51.

¹⁶⁸ Andrew Wommack, *The Effects of Praise* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 2012), 1.

“Whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all” (Mark 10:43-44).

Serving people naturally builds relationship. When people are served, when they recognize that someone has honored them enough to put their needs (or even wants) first, they are valued, and will likely return value. Similarly, when we serve God we are demonstrating to Him that we value Him and the relationship we are attempting to develop. Service is worship, according to Romans 12:1, and, as previously discussed, worship is the demonstration of commitment to relationship.

Authentic Community

The modifier “authentic” is important here because many Christians engage in community that is neither a spiritual discipline nor terribly beneficial. Christian community must go beyond the surface-level engagement of tea parties, interest groups, and even small-group Bible studies in which everyone discusses “‘what this passage means *to me*,’ as if it could mean something different to someone else.”¹⁶⁹ Christian Community that is authentic includes elements of true discipleship, accountability, and guidance. Believers in community need to be able to receive counsel and direction from their peers and their oversight. Modeling of the Christian walk from generation to generation should be a hallmark of the church. More than mere confession, true accountability brings a level of consequence as well as assistance in the ongoing struggle against sin. Authentic community, then, is a spiritual discipline in which real relationships are formed and cultivated, and in which believers in unity bring glory to God.

¹⁶⁹ Miller, *Idol Worship*, 71.

Submission

God is the only autonomous authority in existence. All other authority has been delegated by God to others. Submission to authority—to God’s personal authority, to God’s Word, in which His authority is most explicitly expressed, and to God’s delegated authorities on earth—is, therefore, an indispensable spiritual discipline. God, as Creator, is, by definition, the absolute Authority for His creation. Every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess (Phil 2:10-11). Isaiah depicts the ridiculousness of rebelling against such clear-cut authority:

You have turned things around,
as if the potter were the same as the clay.
How can what is made say about its maker,
“He didn’t make me”?
How can what is formed
say about the one who formed it,
“He doesn’t understand what he’s doing”?

-Isaiah 29:16

As asinine as it is to consider a pot undertaking an examination and accusation of the potter, in the same way, it is asinine to say “no” to God. It follows, then, that if we are to say “yes” to God, we will be a people who also say “yes” to every command God has given us in His Word.

This brings us to the question of submitting to authorities on earth. Unfortunately, the American church has a woefully inadequate view of the need for submission to delegated authorities. Many people believe that we are only required to submit to those authorities that are righteous, or who do right. Nothing could be further from the truth. Writing to the Romans, who were being tortured and executed under Nero, Paul admonishes: “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves” (Rom 13:1-2). “The danger of not being

submitted,” says Jeff Crawford, “is iniquity, which means, ‘I want to do it my way,’ which is, in effect, rebellion; and justifying it by calling it the Lord’s work is not an excuse.”¹⁷⁰ Watchman Nee offers an important insight: “Submission is a matter of attitude, while obedience is a matter of conduct.”¹⁷¹ In other words, submission to authority is a heart posture, and from this proper posture, the righteous actions of obedience will flow.

Submission, even more so than gratitude and service, places the believer in the low position with respect to the authority. One may serve without being submitted. Submission requires the crucifixion of the flesh. In other words, the battle for submission is the ultimate test of Christianity. A submitted spirit endears the believer to employers, pastors, government leaders, law enforcement officers, etc. The submitted person is primed and ready to be a relational person.

Self-Examination

Living a lifestyle of service, dedication to gratitude and praise, submission to authorities, devotion to prayer and the Word, and authentic Christian community will go a long way in developing proper relationship to God and others. This final spiritual discipline, self-evaluation, then serves as the last gate, the opportunity to catch anything that has escaped the other refining processes. Paul exhorts us, “Examine yourselves,” (2 Cor 13:5). Taking nothing for granted, the believer should approach God in humility, asking whether anything remains that He desires to root out, repenting when those things are revealed, and trusting God to do the continuing work of sanctification.

¹⁷⁰ Jeffrey Crawford, “Authority,” Sermon delivered at All Peoples Church, Lynchburg, VA, 2016.

¹⁷¹ Watchman Nee, *Spiritual Authority* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, Inc., 1972), 107.

Self-examination should not be confused with “paralysis by analysis” or a distorted fear of “losing one’s salvation.” Rather, self-examination should be approached from a posture of a simple desire to please the Father, and a sincere effort to maintain purity before Him. Through the spiritual disciplines covered above, culminating with the final sieve of self-examination, we may rest assured that our relationship with God and our relationships with others will continue to grow into the pleasing pursuits God wants them to be.

“It’s All About Relationship”

This thesis has asserted that *the purpose of life is to fellowship with God and with others, and the origin of that purpose is found in the interpersonal fellowship of the Triune God*. Three research questions have been answered:

1. What do the church fathers and modern scholars on the Trinity have to say about the nature of the relationships between the Father and the Son, the Son and the Spirit, and the Spirit and the Father? (Answered in Chapters 1 and 2.)
2. What gaps remain in terms of defining these relationships? (Answered in Chapter 3.)
3. How are the interpersonal Trinitarian relationships projected onto humanity, defining proper biblical relationships between humans and God and between humans and other humans? (Answered in Chapters 4 and 5.)

This thesis has, thus, advanced a more robust understanding of the phrase “It’s all about relationship.” We have come to understand that the necessity and preeminence of relationship in the human life flows out of God’s own nature as a relational Being. We have examined several aspects of His self-relationship, and we have carefully made application to human relationships only where such applications are appropriate and scripturally based. We concluded by exploring twelve spiritual disciplines through which the believer may develop a true relationship with God at a very practical level. This thesis, thus, offers the Christian world a more comprehensive set of

concepts and expressions for describing our faith as *relational*. As such, I commend it to the Church and pray the Lord blesses it and empowers it to do its intended work.

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