

Making Room

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Though never raised to creedal status, the term “perichoresis” has been used to describe the relations of the Persons of the Trinity from the patristic period. First used to describe the relations of the two natures in the one Person of Jesus, the word derives from a transliterated Greek verb (*perichorein*) that means “to contain” or “to penetrate,” and describes the three Persons of the Trinity as mutually “indwelling,” “permeating,” or “interpenetrating” one another. Within the Trinity, each Person both wholly envelops and is wholly enveloped by the others. Each Person is both the dwelling place, and is indwelt by, each of the others.

In his treatise *On the Trinity*, Hilary of Poitiers expresses his astonishment at the mystery of God’s perichoretic fellowship:

It seems impossible that one object should be both within and without another, or that (since it is laid down that the Beings of whom we are treating, though They do not dwell apart, retain their separate existence and condition) these Beings can reciprocally contain One Another, so that One should permanently envelope, and also be permanently enveloped by, the Other, whom yet He envelopes. This is a problem which the wit of man will never solve, nor will human research ever find an analogy for this condition of Divine existence. But what man cannot understand, God can be (3.1).

Perichoresis is the common inheritance of East and West. As John of Damascus describes it in his *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, the three Persons

dwell and are established firmly in one another. For they are inseparable and cannot part from one another, but keep to their separate courses within one another, without coalescing or mingling, but cleaving to each other. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit: and the Spirit in the Father and the Son: and the Father in the Son and the Spirit, but there is no coalescence or commingling or confusion. And there is one and the same motion: for there is one impulse and one motion of the three subsistences, which is not to be observed in any created nature (1.14).

As John makes clear, there are two sides to the perichoretic union of the Persons of God. They exhaustively indwell one another, containing and being contained. At the same time, the differences between them remain absolute. The Father never becomes the Son, no matter how thoroughly He dwells in and is indwelt by Him.

Widespread as this notion is in the patristic literature, it sometimes appears to be a confusing and pointless exercise in mystery-mongering. As if confessing that the Christian God is both Three and One were not enough of a test of rationality, we add that each of the three is indwelt by and indwells, contains and is contained by, each of the others. Why multiply the mystery?

Theologians have recently given a great deal of attention to perichoresis, prompting a reaction of a different sort. Princeton's Bruce McCormack protests the "uncritical expansion of the concept of perichoresis today on the part of a good many theologians." McCormack recognizes the value of the term in limited contexts. It "is rightly employed in trinitarian discourse for describing that which is dissimilar in the analogy between intra-trinitarian relations among the divine 'person' on the one hand and human to human relations on the other."

Today, he complains, theologians promiscuously employ the term in contexts where it doesn't fit: "we are suffering from 'creeping perichoresis.'" Strictly, the word describes the "purely spiritual relations" of the three Persons, who all share one substance. Theologians are abusing the term when they apply it to human relations, since human beings "remain distinct individuals even in the most intimate of their relations." To speak of the believer's relation with Jesus as "perichoretic" is also invalid, for Jesus and the believers are not absorbed into one entity.

McCormack's is a salutary caution against overinflating terminology. And it is always essential to remember that any analogy between the life of God and the life of man is interrupted by an apophatic disanalogy.

Yet, Jesus clearly highlights the *similarities* between divine perichoresis, the church's relationship with Him and the Father, and Christians' relations with one another on the other. What else are we to make of John 17:21ff: "that they all may be one, even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in us"?

This is a classic statement of the "mutual containment" of the Father and Son. The Son is "in" the Father, and yet at the same time the Father is "in" the Son. Jesus prays that the unity of the disciples would be like – "even as" – the unity of the Father and Son, a unity already described as perichoretic. The mutual relations of the human persons who make up the church are to form an earthly image and likeness of the mutual relations of the Persons of the Triune fellowship.

Further, Jesus prays that the disciples would be brought into the perichoretic fellowship of the Father and Son. Our unity with the Father and Son is also an "in/in" relationship. On the one hand, it is "them" (the disciples) in "Us" (the Father and Son); on the other hand, it is also "I (Jesus) in them (the disciples),

and Thou (Father) in Me (Jesus).” McCormack to the contrary, Jesus emphasizes the analogy rather than the dissimilarity.

Doubts remain. Is saying “Them in Us” and “I in them” anything more than mystical metaphorizing? What practical difference does it make if the Father is in the Son, the Son in the Father? As Paul would say, Much in every way.

II.

For John especially, the gospel in a fundamental sense depends on the reality of divine perichoresis. The good news is only good news if the Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father.

John begins his gospel by stating that “no man has seen God at any time” (John 1:18). This is a problem. For John, seeing is knowing (6:40; 11:45; 14:7), and knowing/seeing the Father and Son is eternal life (John 17:3). If the Father is hidden, then there is no way that leads to life. We need some way to behold Him. For John, the good news is that there is such a way, and that the name of that Way is Jesus.

When John speaks of the invisibility of God the Father, he is not primarily making a philosophical claim. God is invisible (see Colossians 1:15-16; 1 Timothy 1:17), but John’s main point has to do with the progress of salvation in history. The Father has been invisible, until *now*.

John first brings out a contrast of the Old and New in 1:14. As everyone who has heard a sermon on John 1 knows, the word normally translated as “dwell” can be translated as “tabernacled” or “pitched a tent.” The eternal Word moved into our neighborhood by taking human flesh, and in so doing He has shown the glory of God. But notice: When the glory came into the tabernacle in the Old Testament, everyone,

including Moses and the priests, evacuated the tent (Exodus 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:10-11). Now, the Word of glory descends in the flesh and “we beheld His glory” (1:14).

John describes the same contrast in different terms in 1:17-18. John’s statement that “no one has seen the Father” refers back to the experience of Moses on Mount Sinai. When Moses asked to see God, the Lord responded, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live” (Exodus 33:20). Moses was therefore shown the “back” of God’s passing glory, but not His face (Exodus 33:22-23).

Having become flesh, the Word expounds the Father to us (1:18; see 2 Corinthians 3). It is no longer true that “no man has seen God.” On the contrary, Jesus says that those who have seen Him have seen the Father (John 12:45; 14:9), and claims that His words and works display the Father’s words and works (John 5:19; 12:49). In Jesus, the invisible God has become visible, audible, tangible (cf. 1 John 1:1).

In chapter 14, Jesus explains that His “exegesis” of Father is rooted in His eternal relation to the Father. The issue that dominates the discussion at the beginning of chapter 14 is the “way.” Jesus has said He is returning to the Father (13:33; 14:2), and tells the disciples they know “the way where I am going” (14:4). Jesus Himself is “the way” to the Father (14:6) because the Father, the destination, is already and has always been “in” the way, that is, in the Son (14:7, 9-11). In Jesus, way and destination unite. Jesus can “show us the Father” because the Father is eternally in Him and He is eternally in the Father. The good news that the Father has shown Himself depends on the good news that the Father is in the son. This is the perichoretic gospel.

What Jesus says about the “dwelling places” that He is preparing in His “Father’s house” reinforces this point. Though often taken as a reference to heavenly dwelling places, but “Father’s house” in John refers to the temple that is the body of Jesus (2:16-22), which is the “Father’s house” in the sense that it is the place where the Father resides (14:10-11). The Son is the permanent and eternal “home” of the Father, as

the Father is the eternal home of the Son. When the Son comes into the world, we get a glimpse of the “home life” of the Father.

The Father’s house is also a home for believers. Jesus goes away to prepare a place in His Father’s house, in the temple of His body, for believers (14:2-3). The word for “dwelling places” is used elsewhere only in John 14:23, where it describes the *believer* as the place where Father and Son take up residence. Jesus is the dwelling of the Father, and becomes the dwelling place for believers. As a result, Jesus becomes the meeting place of the Father and His people. “In Him,” in the house that is the Son, we have family fellowship with the Father.

Jesus also talks about the mutual penetration of Father and Son in John 17, and extends the notion in an ecclesiological direction. Jesus offers a prayer for “those who believe in Me through their word”: “[I ask concerning] those who believe in Me through their word that they may be one even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they may be in us, that the world may believe that Thou didst send me” (vv. 20-23).

The text moves from the scattered hearers of the word, gathering them into a unity that reflects the perichoretic unity of the Father and Son and is rooted in the disciples’ dwelling-in the Father and Son, which unity manifests Jesus’ identity and mission to the world. As noted above, the unity of the church is modeled on the unity of the Father and Son (“just as”). Jesus prays that disciples will indwell one another in a way that dimly mimics the exhaustive eternal indwelling of the Divine Persons.

More, the church is unified in this way because she has become a participant in the mutual indwelling of Father and Son. The church is not merely image of the eternal dance of Triune life, but is introduced to the dance as the bridal partner. This perichoretic unity of the church, further, is integral to the church’s mission. If the church is not a place where the members “dwell within” one another’s lives, the world will not believe that the Son “dwells within” and “came forth from” the Father.

For John, then, the good news is that the Father who has *not* been seen has *now* been seen in the Son, in whom the Father dwells. The Father who is not known has made Himself known in Jesus. Beyond this, the Father has not only shown Himself in the Son, in whom the Father lives, but has also brought us into the fellowship of Father and Son. The good news is that through the Son the Father has made room for us in Himself, through His Son.

Nor is Paul's a different gospel. One of Paul's most characteristic phrases is "in Christ." It is "in Christ" that we have life, forgiveness, justification, access to the Father, the Spirit, and so on and on. At the same time that we dwell in Christ, He dwells in us through His Spirit, for "Christ in us" is the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). For Paul as much as for John, our salvation is dwelling in Christ, the Christ in whom the Father reconciles the world to Himself.

III.

The Triune life of God is utterly unique, but Jesus' prayer in John suggests that the church's life is to be an image of the Triune life. We are to be "in" one another "just as" the Father is in the Son, and the Son in the Father.

The Orthodox theologian Khaled Anatolios has pointed out that this demand runs counter to our sinful tendency is to view others as obstacles to our own projects: We meet "what is not part of the self-generated (and self-generating) project with refusal or a sense of defeat." If I can't turn another person to my own purposes, they become a roadblock for me, something to be plowed over and plowed under.

By contrast, the gospel calls us to view others, and external circumstances, as doorways of entry into new “dwelling places.” Anatolios says, We are called to “encounter unexpected and even seemingly inhospitable circumstances as not ultimately an intractable impediment to my flourishing, but to encounter these circumstances in hope and trust as a new ‘dwelling place’ for my person.” The church is to be a people that embodies this mutual indwelling. Each is a potential dwelling place, a potential home, for another.

Anyone who has been a conscious church member for more than a few years knows that this is not an altogether pleasant experience, and can be wrenchingly painful. Many lives, even Christians’ lives, are slums, as full of anger, violence, and bitter brokenness, as littered with trash and broken bottles and needles and hopes, as the darkest of America’s inner cities. We don’t want to live there, and we sure don’t want them to move in with us. Refusing is not, however, a Christian option. The eternal Son made His dwelling among us, and in us, making all our misery and wickedness His own. In imitation of Him we are to indwell one another.

Churches must embody this perichoretic life in relation to the world if they are to survive and flourish. As the Father indwells the Son without becoming filial, and the Son indwells the Father without becoming paternal, so the church must be “in the world” and even open room for the world in herself, without ever becoming worldly.

Weak churches are of two sorts. Weak churches may become that way by opening every window and door to welcome whatever wind of doctrine wafts through. That is the way of apostasy. But churches also become weak when they barricade themselves against all outsiders. At some point, such churches that refuse to be indwelt or to indwell cease to be churches.

While Jesus' teaching concerning mutual indwelling applies to the church principally, what He describes is fully human life. The church is the true human community, where the redeemed live as human beings were designed to live, in imitation of the divine communion of Father, Son, and Spirit. Human beings can live fully human lives only if they practice a kind of perichoresis.

Illinois State University sociologist Richard Stivers has suggested that mental illness is almost inevitably the product of loneliness, and particularly the alienated loneliness produced by modern technological civilization. Paradoxically, human persons are capable of maintaining individual integrity only insofar as they are not isolated from others. We can be individuals in the original sense – undivided wholes – only insofar as we “indwell” the lives of others and make room for other to inhabit ours.

Marriage, including sexual union, is perhaps the clearest created vestige of divine perichoresis. Quite literally, a man envelops and encompasses a woman in a loving embrace, while the woman encompasses the man. A man “enters” the woman who has entered him, and in this mutual containment they become “one flesh.”

Perichoretic union in marriage extends beyond the bedroom. Husbands make room for their wives in their lives, their projects, their dreams, their labors. Wives do the same, but husbands have particular trouble with this. Many wives, but few husbands, could echo Portia's pained lament to Brutus: “Dwell I but in the suburbs of your good pleasure?”

Families become dysfunctional when they refuse to live perichoretically. If the members of a family do not make room for one another, but consider each other competitive obstacles to prosperity, there is no family. In my large family, siblings literally have to make room for one another – in the bedroom, at the table, on the toy shelf, in parental time and attention. Siblings who do not go beyond this minimum

never live as genuine brothers and sisters, who mutually share hopes, dreams, secrets, joys, games, perhaps even blood and spit.

Parenting is, often literally, making room. A happy newlywed couple shares a bed, a dinner table, quiet evenings reading or watching a movie. Suddenly, a needy infant is thrust into their space and parents have to make room for him – making room in the house, in the schedule, in affections. The parents' lives are turned inside out to make room.

Parents can try to live on as they were, and refuse to make room. Even the best parents often slip into this this. Think of the last time you were in the middle of an important piece of work and one of your children came to you for a hug. At that moment, the child was not part of your “project” and was probably treated accordingly.

A child who has to force out space for himself in the lives and affections of his parents may become an attention-getting class clown, a juvenile delinquent, a ticking bomb of explosive resentment. Whatever the outcome, a child whose parents have never made room for him is not going to be a healthy child.

A family that refuses contact with outsiders can appear to be “strong” and “close-knit,” but the dysfunctions of such isolated families are well known. Unless a home becomes home to more than the family, unless it opens itself out hospitality and enters into the lives of others, it is not a home but a pathological fortress.

We exist in perichoretic relation not only to other persons but to the world. It goes without saying that we exist “in” the world, but it is not so obvious that the world exists in us. We can live only a few minutes without the oxygen that our bodies don't manufacture, and only a few days or weeks without water or food. This is not obvious, but it should be. After all, though our bodies form a boundary

between inside and outside, it is a permeable boundary, perforated with holes that permit the world to enter and what is inside to come out.

IV.

This could go on and on. Were there world enough, we might meditate on a perichoretic politics, a perichoretic economics, a perichoretic sociology. Enough has been said, though, to suggest how the divine perichoresis into which believers are incorporated extends itself into the corners of human existence, to see how the gospel of the God who makes room for us takes visible shape in the church, in individual lives, in families. Enough has been said, perhaps, to defuse the suspicion that perichoresis is a mental game.

Enough has been said to see a small part of the richness and depth behind the deceptively simple evangelical promise and announcement embodied in perichoresis: The Father who dwells in the Son through the Spirit has made room for us. Go and do likewise.