

## TOWARD A BIBLICAL MODEL OF THE SOCIAL TRINITY: AVOIDING EQUIVOCATION OF NATURE AND ORDER

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Classical Christian faith is agreed around the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.<sup>1</sup> Although the Creed in its variations never explicitly gives the formula, it has been summarized with Tertullian's simple description of *tres personae, una substantia*—or, in Greek theology, three *hypostaseis* and one *ousia*. Of course, the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople intended as much to protect the mystery of God as to delimit and define catholic belief. Thus, in guarding divine mystery, the Creed provides a certain latitude regarding how God as Trinity is to be perceived, evidenced by the two streams of Eastern and Western trinitarianism. Extraordinary carefulness should and does mark divergencies around this central dogma of Christian faith. Nevertheless, conceptions of how God is God in “Godself” have often been distant from Scripture and effectually created an immanent Trinity discussed among theologians quite different from that to which the average Christian relates.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to how we think about God by tightening the relationship between the economic and the immanent images of the Trinity. An introductory discussion of background issues and terms lays foundations for a three-part paper. Offered in Part One is a basic presentation of a social model of the Godhead, observing especially divine reciprocity in Scripture. Part Two, after tracing current issues in social trinitarianism, investigates biblical evidences for eternal order in the Godhead. Part Three attempts a synthesis of the biblical evidences arguing for an “eternally ordered social model” of the Godhead. My definition of *social model* of the Trinity is that *the one divine Being eternally exists as three distinct centers of consciousness, wholly equal in nature, genuinely personal in relationships, and each mutually indwelling the other*. I define an *eternally ordered social model* as the social model that, while insisting on equality of the divine nature, affirms *perpetual distinction of roles within the immanent Godhead*. Broadly conceived within the metanarrative of biblical revelation, this entails something like the generous preeminence of the Father, the joyous collaboration

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<sup>1</sup> While of problematic origins, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed is the received text from Chalcedon in AD 451, cited as the Creed “(of the 318 fathers who met at Nicaea and that of) the 150 who met at a later time.” Differing from the Nicene Creed of AD 325, “the symbol of the Council of Constantinople” already appears in AD 374 in Epiphanius, *Ancoratus* 118. Oddly, the Acts of the Council of Constantinople (AD 381) do not mention the Creed nor do extant official documents from the Constantinopolitan See through the following decades until the mid-fifth century.

(subordination)<sup>2</sup> of the Son, and the ever-serving activity of the Spirit. I will argue that while hundreds of biblical texts affirm the *monarchia* of the Father, no text sufficiently stands against it; such a view corresponds in the deepest way with God's own self-disclosure as immanent Trinity.

## I. TWO INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND ISSUES

1. *Revelation and the infinite.* A key question in all discussion of divine ontology is whether biblical revelation can be taken as adequate to who and what God ultimately is.<sup>3</sup> While experiential and ecclesial-traditional arguments for the doctrine of the Trinity are helpful, neither sort can be ultimately decisive. Most evangelicals will insist that biblical revelation corresponds to who and what God truly is.<sup>4</sup> While there may be hiddenness, incomprehensibility, and even (in apophatic theology) *darkness*, there are no masks—as the incarnation and the cross powerfully demonstrate. God is honest, true, and genuine in communicating himself. I presuppose that the economic Trinity as revealed in the Bible accurately represents to finite creation who and what God is, but that the economic Trinity is by no means all that is God. As classical theology confesses, language serves as *analogia entis*, inadequate for any exhaustive correspondence to the infinite. An evangelical trinitarian hermeneutic, therefore, will hold the primacy of revelation together with intellectual humility before God's mystery that has explanation of its own—what Rahner termed its own “ontic logic.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As discussed later, I hesitate to use the term “subordination” in that it is entirely freighted with overtones of patriarchy and heresy. Although inadequate, it remains the language of modern discussion and, therefore, is included.

<sup>3</sup> Nearly every recent theological discussion returns to Karl Rahner's assertion that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, and the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity (*The Trinity* [new ed.; New York: Crossroad, 1997] 80–120, esp. 99–103). See the helpful division of modern trinitarianism around Rahner's formula in Fred Sanders, “Entangled in the Trinity: Economic and Immanent Trinity in Recent Theology,” *Dialog* 40/3 (2001) 175–82.

<sup>4</sup> If biblical revelation is primary, it is surprising that among the hundreds of works on the Christian God relatively few have been attentive to textual evidences for trinitarian doctrine. Works with substantial treatment of Scripture include: George A. F. Knight, *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1953); Arthur W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962); Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John: A Thematic Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 226–62; Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 159–210; Peter Toon, *Our Triune God: A Biblical Portrayal of the Trinity* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint/Victor, 1996); Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2000) 11–82; John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001) 443–71; and, as an explicitly biblical theology, Ben Witherington III and Laura M. Ice, *The Shadow of the Almighty: Father, Son and Spirit in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Rahner, *The Trinity* 50–55, explains that “although a logical explanation can become for us an unchangeable dogma, we see that even then it differs qualitatively from Scripture. Furthermore, not only insofar as it validly binds our faith, but also for its meaning and interpretation, such a formula always looks back to the words of Scripture (or of the original tradition)” (p. 54).

2. *Person and nature.* Definitions of “person” and “nature” are enormously problematic, all the more as related to God. These are metaphysical terms attempting to describe what is discerned in Scripture. For my purposes, the English words “person” and “nature” parallel the Greek terms *hypostasis* and *ousia* and the Latin *persona* and *substantia*—the latter being classical trinitarian terms deemed equivalent for the East and West by Pope Damasus (AD 366–84). The *divine nature* may be defined as *the generic essence, universal property, attributes of Godness manifest equally in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.* The term *homoousios* originally meant “of the same stuff” but it was adapted in most trinitarian usage to denote “of one substance.” But what is “one substance”? The “nature” of the divine nature, so to speak, was understood in two primary senses.

a. *The Eastern Church.* Eastern Fathers placed the *hypostaseis* as primary and *ousia* in abstraction or on a secondary level. Within this distinction, two subsets regarding the origin of *nature* are evident, even among the Cappadocians themselves. (1) The Greek church both inherited and corrected aspects of second-century Logos Christology and Origen’s eternal generation of the Son. Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus located the one divine nature, not in a unipersonal monad “in the manner of Aristotle,”<sup>6</sup> but in God the Father, the Unoriginated Origin and *fons totius divinitatis* who eternally begets the Son and from whom the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in this first Eastern understanding of the divine nature, there are three *hypostaseis* that may each be called *God*; yet there is only one God, the Father, from whom the other *hypostaseis* forever derive their divine nature. The deity of the Son and the Spirit, eternal and full as it may be, is received from the Father. (2) The second Eastern conception of *nature* is defined by Gregory of Nyssa as a transcendent essence that itself unifies the Godhead; that is, rather than the Son and the Spirit’s deity being derived from the Father, each member of the Godhead equally and eternally shares in this divine nature. Nevertheless, in *Not Three Gods* Gregory argued that *no* term attempting to describe the divine nature signifies this nature in itself, as it remains utterly beyond human comprehension. We only know of the *ousia* by way of the divine operations through the three *hypostaseis* and their effects in finite creation. But a real divine nature exists, albeit indescribable and unknowable. Similarly, Cyril of Alexandria, John of Damascus, and many subsequent Eastern trinitarians deny origination of the Son and the Spirit from the Father, even though the language of “beginning” (*archē*), “source” (*pēgē*), and “root” (*riza*) appears frequently. As refinement continued, the Greek Church assumed the term *perichōresis*, that is, the personal

<sup>6</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 23.2.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 29.2: “a one eternally changes to a two and stops at three—meaning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In a serene, non-temporal, incorporeal way, the Father is parent of the ‘offspring’ and originator of the ‘emanation’—or whatever name one can apply when one has entirely extrapolated from things visible.” Nevertheless, Gregory struggled with the implications of his theory (cf. n. 26). See also Thomas Hopko, “The Trinity in the Cappadocians,” *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (ed. Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq; New York: Crossroad, 1989) 263–70.

indwelling of each member in the other, as the center of divine unity.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in the East, either the divine *ousia* is directly derived from the Father, or it describes the sum of the attributes held in common by the Godhead, without necessarily denying a single substance. In both cases, the three persons are primary, each wholly manifesting the DNA of deity. They are three who are God and one God. One or the other perspective of the divine nature is fundamental to a social theory of the Trinity.

b. *The Western Church.* The typically Western understanding of the divine nature begins with a single divine essence expressed in the subsistent relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is, the divine essence, or single nature, has a reality concurrent with its manifestation in the three persons—this without admitting a quaternity. One might imagine two dimensions of a single divine reality, both the real substance of God and the real relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Such a perspective is reflected in nearly all Western theology from Athanasius, Augustine, and especially Aquinas to John Paul II.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, Western theology proper traditionally begins with a defense of the existence of God followed by long discussions regarding the divine attributes before any mention of the Holy Trinity. Colin Gunton has been especially acute in criticizing Augustine and Aquinas, with their stress on the divine nature, as having lost the three in the one—or so philosophizing about the *one* God as to have lost true trinitarian faith and, consequently, setting the stage for European deism and atheism.<sup>10</sup> However perceived, the traditional Western view has been that the divine nature is not merely a unifying set of properties, but something very close to an actual substance that is primary in uniting the three persons of the Godhead.

If the term “nature” is difficult when we speak of God, the term “person” is all the more complex.<sup>11</sup> Theologians such as Tertullian, the Cappadocians,

<sup>8</sup> One modern Orthodox theologian with quite a lot to say about the divine essence is Dumitru Stanilaoe, *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (2 vols.; Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994) 1.141–244. See additional discussion in William P. Alston, “Substance and the Trinity,” in *The Trinity* (ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 179–201.

<sup>9</sup> Many trace the philosophic backdrop of the meanings of *ousia/substantia* to Aristotle’s *On the Heaven*, cf. i.279a19–30. Pope John Paul II, while an articulate defender of trinitarian theology, remains essentially Thomistic in his view of persons as relational subsistencies of the divine essence. See Antoine E. Nachez, *The Mystery of the Trinity in the Theological Thought of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999) 171–98.

<sup>10</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 129–222. Various recent commentators adduce their critiques of Augustine as less than balanced.

<sup>11</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, “On the Concept of Person,” *Communio* 13/1 (1986) 18, comments, “Few words have as many layers of meaning as person. On the surface it means just any human being, any countable individual. Its deeper senses, however, point to the individual’s uniqueness that cannot be interchanged and therefore cannot be counted. The complexity of the word’s history, almost impossible to unravel, corresponds to this multiplicity of meanings, and almost from the beginning this history reflects the word’s various aspects of meaning that cannot be synthesized.”

Augustine, and Aquinas differ in their concepts of person, even as modern and postmodern conceptions vary even more.<sup>12</sup> Most will agree that the architecture of human personhood is grounded in the absolute personhood of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But as the Trinity exists in partial hiddenness and mystery, so the *imago dei* entails aspects that are not reducible to mere rationality and volition, as some traditionalists would have it. It seems to me that the Bible suggests a plurality of perspectives as to what constitutes a person, human or divine. Perhaps it is best to define “person” in the divine and ideal sense as *a center of self-consciousness existing in relationship to others*.<sup>13</sup> In light of trinitarian revelation, four specific aspects help fill this out, each divine person constituted by: (1) generic nature of deity (“the Word was God”), that is, the attributes that distinguish God from creation; (2) full self-consciousness (“I am”), the actual reality of self distinct from other persons, which presupposes distinct mental properties and internal relations; (3) unique relatedness (“the Word was with God”), distinguishing each member of the Godhead from the others in I-thou relationships; and (4) *perichōresis* (“I am in the Father and the Father in me”), the mutual indwelling of each in the other without confusion of self-consciousness. Such a definition entails both ontological characteristics—i.e. those intrinsic to the divine nature and to individual self-consciousness—together with relationality and reciprocal real presence of each in the other. Rather than the either/or of the West’s Boethian individuality (*persona est naturae rationalis individual substantia*) or the somewhat Eastern and postmodern perspective that “person” is a mere knot of relationships with no substance or nature in itself, it seems that both ontological and relational perspectives must be held together when we think of the tripersonal God. And I suspect, as well, these four categories parallel what is central to *human* personhood as intentioned by God.

With definitions of “nature” and “person” in place, situated within their historical variations, we proceed to a kind of dialectic discussion, first observing the equality of trinitarian relations, then noting the differences. The work concludes with an effort to bring the two biblical sets of evidence together in order to correlate more adequately the economic with what can be said of the immanent Trinity.

<sup>12</sup> See the extraordinary study by Stephen A. Hipp, *“Person” in Christian Tradition and in the Conception of Albert the Great: A Systematic Study of Its Concept and Illuminated by the Mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2001); and regarding postmodern conceptions, see Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Here I speak of God’s personhood and only in a derived sense its ideal meaning for humanity. This is not to deny that an embryo or a patient dying of dementia is a person, or to suggest that she or he is less a person than another. It does, however, imply that neither is ideal or fulfilled as *imago dei*. The material reality of human personhood continues through all of life, but its experiential and relational fulfillment may vary. Biblically, every person is designed for self-consciousness and relationship.

## II. PART ONE: TOWARD A BIBLICAL SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM

1. *Contemporary divergence.* With Eastern Orthodox influence growing in France in the 1930s through the influence of Orthodox spirituality and theologians like Vladimir Lossky<sup>14</sup> together with the “social trinitarianism” of Leonard Hodgson and others in the 1940s,<sup>15</sup> social models of the Christian God have had some presence in North Atlantic Protestantism, at least in the twentieth century. Far more dominant in the past two centuries, of course, were either Schleiermacher’s functional trinitarianism (reducing Trinity to Christian experience) or Karl Barth’s conception of the Godhead as three “modes of being” with his resistance to the terminology of “three-persons.”<sup>16</sup> The past twenty-five years, however, have seen an extraordinary renewal of social trinitarian studies, notably through Jürgen Moltmann, and the chorale has grown swiftly with many strong voices. The chorus crescendoed around social model themes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Zizioulas, Moltmann, Boff, Gunton, LaCugna, Swinburne and many others wrote of God as three distinct persons, united as one through mutual indwelling.<sup>17</sup> With the popularity of the community model, however, recent cautions have been raised concerning social trinitarianism in light of both patristic studies and philosophic concerns.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke, 1957).

<sup>15</sup> Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity, Croall Lectures, 1942–1943* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944).

<sup>16</sup> However, Gary W. Deddo in *Karl Barth’s Theology of Relations: Trinitarian, Christological and Human: Towards an Ethic of the Family* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001) 18–35, argues (I think convincingly) that although Barth resists the language of three “persons” he *de facto* strongly implies “persons” by his discussion of the divine relations and the *perichōresis*.

<sup>17</sup> Although they vary considerably, social trinitarians include: John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Wellwood, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1988); David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1985); Catherine Mowery LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (2d ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997); John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993); Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994); Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Ted Peters, *God—The World’s Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000); Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002); and William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), esp. 586–95.

<sup>18</sup> Critiques of the social model are found in Claude Welch, *In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952); T. W. Bartel, “Could There Be More Than One Lord?” *Faith and Philosophy* 11/3 (July 1994) 357–78; Sarah Coakley, “Persons’ in the ‘Social’ Doctrine of the Trinity: A Critique of Current Analytic Discussion,” in *The Trinity* 123–44; Brian Leftow, “Anti-Social Trinitarianism,” in *The Trinity* 203–49; and Richard Cross, “Two Models of the Trinity?” *HeyJ* 43/3 (2002) 275–94.

2. *Biblical evidence.* Interestingly, the NT includes the three divine persons together in at least seventy passages.<sup>19</sup> Scripture is in the language of finite humanity, and therefore in one sense all biblical language is economic. At the same time, the Bible brings us revelation “from above” as well as “from below”—albeit the clarification as to how far the language of Scripture can be projected to the eternal trinitarian relations is not easy. But I think we have to say that the terms used for the relationships between the members of the economic Godhead provide our most penetrating vista for understanding the immanent Trinity. I earlier defined the *social model* of the Trinity as *the one divine Being eternally existing as three distinct centers of consciousness, wholly equal in nature, genuinely personal in relationships, and each mutually indwelling the other.* Evidence for a distinctly tripersonal God is abundant and needs only a brief but important review as foundational for further assertions.

a. *Distinct centers of consciousness.* Hundreds of OT passages record God speaking in the first person: “I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior” (Isa 43:10–11). So it is revealing that the NT records the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each speaking as the divine “I” (Mark 1:11; John 10:30; 17:4; Acts 13:2).<sup>20</sup> How do OT and NT declarations of the “I” of God fit together? Evidence includes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each exercising intelligence (creating, instructing), volition (choosing, commanding), even emotion (joy, grief, anger), sometimes in relation to one another as well as to creation. Of the members of the Godhead, the least distinctly personal is the Holy Spirit. Yet the “other Counselor” (John 14:16) inhabits (1 Cor 6:19), comforts (Acts 9:31), and intercedes for believers (Rom 8:14)—all profoundly personal acts. Perhaps equally telling is that, while blasphemy against the Father or the Son might be forgiven, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:31) will not be forgiven. As Calvin observed, all the attributes of God are ascribed to the Holy Spirit as also to the Son.<sup>21</sup> The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit appear as all that is God by nature yet also all that is personal as distinct centers of self-consciousness.

b. *Genuinely personal relationships.* Not only is the personal reality of each member of the Trinity discernable, but the divine persons also appear in unique relationship with one another. John’s gospel is particularly revealing.

*The Son and the Spirit were “with God.”* Jesus sees the Father (John 1:18; 3:11, 32; 5:19, 29, 37; 6:46; 8:38), hears the Father (3:32, 34; 5:30, 37;

<sup>19</sup> Arthur W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962) speaks of about forty instances of the Godhead together mentioned in the NT. In fact there are considerably more.

<sup>20</sup> See (Father) Mark 1:11; John 1:33; Rev 1:17; (Son) John 8:58; 10:30; 14:20; 17:4; Acts 9:5; Rev 1:17; 22; 13; (Spirit) Acts 10:20; 13:2. I am indebted to Klaus Issler on this point as well as Michael O’Carroll, *Trinitas: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Holy Trinity* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987) 179; also Erickson, *God in Three Persons* 209–10, for cautions regarding the “I am” texts as proof of deity.

<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.13.14.

7:17; 12:49–50; 14, 10), and does what the Father does (5:19–20; 6:38). The Spirit speaks what he hears, and gives what is the Son's (and the Father's) to the disciples (16:13–15; cf. 1 Cor 2:10–13). Whatever "seeing," "hearing," and "doing" may imply regarding the immanent Trinity, the terms at least convey dynamic relationship each with one another.

*They know and testify of each other.* "You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me" (John 7:29; cf. 3:34; 8:55; 10:15; 17:25). Jesus knows the Father not because he is the Father, but rather because he enjoys deep affiliation with the Father. In a similar way "the Spirit of God" knows the Father and is known by the Father (cf. 1 Cor 2:11–13; Eph 2:18), just as the same "Spirit of Christ" both knows the Son and is known by the Son (John 14:26; 15:26; Rom 8:9). Thus the Father testifies of the Son (John 5:36–37; 8:17), the Son of the Father (3:11, 32; 17:6, 26; 18:37), and the Spirit of the Son and the Father (15:26; 1 Cor 2:10–13; Gal 4:6). As the Spirit alights upon the Son to testify of him at his baptism (John 1:32–33) and will later be his witness (16:8–15), so the Son presents the Spirit (3:5–8), testifies of his coming (7:39; 14:16, 26; 16:7–11, 13), and sends the Spirit (15:26; 16:7; 20:22). Each desires to make the other known.

*Free personal choice.* Intra-trinitarian relationships appear neither obligatory nor mechanical but rather deliberate acts of volition on the part of each of the three persons. Jesus' prayers, for example, reflect distinctly "I-Thou" dialogue and free submission:<sup>22</sup> "Father, I thank you that you have heard me" (John 11:41); "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" (12:27–28). Although the evidence is less obvious regarding the Holy Spirit, and while complex trinitarian dynamics are in play, it seems every member of the Godhead acts personally and freely (3:7–8; cf. 1 Cor 12:11).

*Self-rendering love.* The Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20; 15:9; 17:23–26) and the Son loves the Father (14:31). Jesus declares, "I seek not to please myself but him who sent me" (5:30), "I always do what pleases him" (8:29), "the reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life . . . I lay it down of my own accord" (10:17–18). Likewise, the Father delights in glorifying the Son (8:50, 54; 13:32; 17:1, 5, 22, 24), the Son delights in glorifying the Father (13:31–32; 14:12; 17:1, 4; 18:19), and the Spirit delights in glorifying the Son (16:14) and thereby the Father. Far from the selfish role sometimes assigned to the Father, the Father honors the Son (5:23; 12:26), and the Son honors the Father (5:23; 8:49), so that their honor and glory are inextricably bound in one another and overflow to all who believe (12:26; 13:31–32; 17:1, 22, 24). As Moltmann convincingly argues in *The Crucified God*, it is Jesus' suffering and death on the cross that splits open the very idea of the Hebrew God and no longer makes tenable a uni-personal God, much less one who is impassible in most classical interpretations.<sup>23</sup> The gospel

<sup>22</sup> See also John 5:17, 22, 26; 8:26; 14:3.

<sup>23</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1974) 200–290; see Richard Creel's, *Divine Impassibility*



rolls back the heavens for humanity to peer into the self-giving love between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. With the reciprocity of self-giving love, however, are other dynamics that seem noticeably dissimilar as related to the Trinity—as will be observed in Part Two.

*c. Each mutually indwells the other.* On occasion in John's Gospel, Jesus declares, "the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (John 10:38; cf. 14:20; 17:11, 21–23). A striking passage is John 14:7–12 when Philip asks to see the Father, to which Jesus responds, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father . . . Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?" So present is the Father in Jesus that, without confusing the persons, Jesus can declare that to see him is to see the Father. Likewise, the Spirit is in Jesus and will later be described as the Spirit of the Son, the Spirit of Christ. Yet the Son is distinct from the Spirit (4:10–14; 7:37–39; 14:16; 20:22), as the Spirit is from the Father (1 Cor 2:10–13). Although the idea appears in the Cappadocians and Maximus the Confessor, it is John of Damascus who explicitly employs the term *perichōresis* to describe the co-inherence or mutual indwelling of the members of the Trinity—a concept expressed also by the Latin term *circumincessio*.<sup>24</sup> To presuppose that on rational grounds, as some moderns contend, one person cannot inhabit another seems to fall short of the biblical portrayal not only of the Godhead, but also of the indwelling of a human being by either the Holy Spirit or, for that matter, a malignant spirit. It is *perichoresis*—the personal interpenetration of each member of the Godhead in the other through mutual activity of invitation and indwelling—that most adequately explains how three self-consciousnesses can also be one in consciousness, thought, will, and action. So intrinsic is this perichoretic unity that God acts as the one and the three. While each person ever possesses distinct mental properties and unique relation to the others, the entire Holy Trinity co-exists in corporate, exhaustive harmony.<sup>25</sup> Although

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) for discussion of eight historical interpretations of divine impassibility.

<sup>24</sup> The trinitarian sense of *perichōresis* is also found in the late fifth-century Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Name* 2.4. John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa* 1.8: "For, as we said, they are made one not so as to commingle, but so as to cleave to each other without any coalescence or commingling. Nor do the Son and the Spirit stand apart, nor are they sundered in essence . . ." See also Verna Harrison, "Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 35/1 (1991) 53–65; and O'Carroll, "Circumincession," *Trinitas* 68–69. *Circum-inession* (from *insedere*) emphasizes abiding reality and rest; *circumincession* (from *incedere*) captures the dynamic circulation of trinitarian life from each to the others: "The first appeals more to the Latin mind which thinks first of the divine essence, the second to the Greek which begins from the persons, borne to each other eternally, irresistibly, by their very identity as subsistent relations" (p. 69).

<sup>25</sup> The Athanasian Creed reads, "The Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty, and yet they are not three Almighty's but one Almighty." It might also read, "The Father is omniscient, the Son omniscient, and the Spirit omniscient, and yet they are not three Omniscient's but one Omniscient." Omniscience pertains to the divine nature, yet each member instantiates that attribute. So three persons are both self-conscious (each has a mind) and omniscient (knowing all things), and this mutually and exhaustively without confusion of persons (the self-consciousness of each).

not resolving the mystery, the doctrine of *perichoresis* helps explain the unity of the divine mind and will without slipping into either modalism or tritheism, into which it seems other solutions fall.

In summary, as rooted in the NT, a *social model* of the Trinity is that in which *the one divine Being eternally exists as three distinct centers of consciousness, wholly equal in nature, genuinely personal in relationships, and each mutually indwelling the other.* Today most biblical and systematic theologians have abandoned phrases such as Barth's three divine "modes of being" or Rahner's "manners of subsistence" because they prove inadequate to describe the complex, vivid relationships between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If a social theory of the Holy Trinity fits the biblical pattern, as argued above, how are we best to understand the apparently ordered personal relations within the Trinity? Frequently a social model is presumed to include a democratic or egalitarian conception of the immanent Trinity. Indeed, such an assumption is almost endemic in many circles today. But does such a theory find sufficient mooring in Scripture itself?

### III. PART TWO: BIBLICAL EVIDENCES FOR ETERNAL ORDER IN THE GODHEAD

In Scripture, neither the ontological equality of the members of the Godhead nor the reciprocal indwelling of each in the other necessarily precludes an eternal relational order among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Social trinitarians who largely concur with the model established in Part One divide around several issues that are helpful to review prior to evaluating biblical evidences for eternal divine relational order.

1. *Contemporary divergence among social trinitarians.* Social trinitarianism can be variously categorized. Almost all concur that the divine unity should be understood especially in terms of perichoresis, a fairly uncontested historical consensus in the West as well as the East (although often understood differently). Contemporary social models of the Godhead divide around three major questions, albeit not always neatly.

a. *The Father as origin.* First is the issue of the *essentialist* monarchy of the Father: Does the divinity of the Son and of the Spirit derive from the Father? Such a position is suggested in the Nicene Creed's description of the Son as "of the substance of the Father [*ek tēs ousias tou patros*], God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." Yet outside of Cappadocian Orthodoxy and a few contemporary trinitarians like Richard Swinburne, the great majority of trinitarians insist that the answer is "no." If deity is ontologically derived from another, then it cannot be ultimately equal to that of the unoriginated Originator.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Gregory Nazianzen struggled with the implications of his own position, particularly before the Arianism he was fighting: "I should like to call the Father the greater, because from Him flow both the equality and the being of the equals . . . but I am afraid to use the word Origin, lest I

b. *Ontological equality and social order.* The second question is related to the first and the most significant in terms of both the history of trinitarianism and the present discussion. Even if the Son and the Spirit are not *essentially* derived from the Father, is there a sense in which the persons of the immanent Trinity possess eternal social order—a characteristic way of experiencing divine *koinonia*? Is the Father somehow characteristically central (though ever-bestowing)? Is the Holy Spirit ever-glorifying in his activity (even as he is Lord)? Is the Son forever co-laborer alongside the Father (even as co-regent)? That creedal Christendom has always confessed the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit *implies*, but does not oblige, a subordinational order in the Godhead. From the Cappadocians to John Owen, from Karl Barth to Avery Cardinal Dulles, some form of eternal divine order is frequently defended and may arguably be the dominant perspective of how the Godhead, even the immanent Godhead, has been understood by most Christians in history.

The converse position is ascribed to Augustine by Peter Lombard in the *Sentences*: “As the Son was made man, so the Father or the Holy Spirit could have been and could be now.”<sup>27</sup> Many have interpreted the statement to indicate that the parity of the divine subsistencies is absolute both as to nature and to order; that is, either the Father or the Spirit could have become man, alternative to the incarnation of the Son. For egalitarian trinitarians, eternal social differentiation in the Godhead is perceived as ultimately incompatible with triune equality. A leap of theological perspective, therefore, is justified from the economic revelation, which suggests hierarchy, to the immanent Godhead, which cannot admit hierarchy if there is to be true equality. Various theologians, even evangelical theologians, have questioned the traditional biblical proof texts for *eternal generation* and *procession*, arguing instead their relevance (at most) to the economic Trinity.<sup>28</sup> But whether the specific terms of “begottenness” and “procession” are themselves exegetically applicable—although all classical Christianity has assumed them—is I think somewhat beside the point. The greater issue is whether or not the revelation of the economic Trinity historically perceived as hierarchical in fact reflects ultimate ordered relationship in the immanent Trinity. While this article affirms eternal order, obviously many have concluded that historical, if not biblical, evidence suggests the opposite.

c. *Trinity becoming in time.* A final issue in our overview of social models of the Godhead is whether one can properly even speak of an immanent

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should make Him the Origin of inferiors, and thus insult Him by precedencies of honour. For the lowering of those who are from Him is no glory to the Source.” *Oration 40* [On Holy Baptism].43, in Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* 63. See Swinburne, *The Christian God*; and Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1.110–14, who speaks of the *ousia* as the one “person” of God and redefines the *hypostaseis* as ever-distinguished divine “identities” by employing Western categories of corporate identity.

<sup>27</sup> *Sentences* 3.1.3 cited in Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1.112.

<sup>28</sup> For example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–1997) 1.305–7; Erickson, *God in Three Persons* 309; Feinberg, *No One Like Him* 488–92.

Trinity. Is God truly three persons in eternal transcendence? Or is God triune only in relation to creation? Is the concept of God as Trinity inextricably bound up in cosmic or human history? Or does the divine Being come to self-fulfillment as Trinity in time—for example, in the eschaton or “omega point”? Or, again, as various modern theologians contend, can one simultaneously affirm a truly *immanent* Trinity and yet also interpret God as *becoming* Trinity? Assuming a paradigm shift in perceiving God’s relation to time, not a few theologians today conceive of God’s own self-identity as defining itself in history—indeed, rather remarkably, in the history of our tiny planet called earth.<sup>29</sup>

Our specific concern is with the second question: Can the persons of the immanent Trinity possess complete ontological equality yet also eternal social order? What might biblical testimony indicate?

2. *Biblical evidence for eternal order in the Godhead.* As mentioned earlier, some seventy texts in the NT present the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (or equivalent terms) together. Unquestionably the members of the Trinity have different primary functions relating to the world, for example, in creation and salvation. My efforts are directed to NT teachings that seem to be windows opening beyond the economy of the incarnation. In no sense is my treatment full-orbed;<sup>30</sup> rather, it is admittedly selective within the perichoretic social model of Part One.

a. *Divine giving.* A helpful vision of intra-trinitarian relationships is seen in the Greek verbs translated “to give” (*didōmi* and *paradidōmi*). These occur 378 times in the Greek Testament, about thirty times pertinent to trinitarian relations.<sup>31</sup> The pattern of the NT is expressed in James 1:17,

<sup>29</sup> The following works affirm some form of an immanent Godhead but tie it to God’s “becoming” as economic Trinity with fulfillment (or divine self-actualization) in the eschaton: Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity. God’s Being Is in Becoming* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1976); idem, *God as the Mystery of the World. On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*; idem, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); idem, *Systematic Theology*; Bruno Forte, *The Trinity as History: Saga of the Christian God* (New York: Alba House, 1989); Boff, *Trinity and Society*; LaCugna, *God for Us*; Ted Peters, *GOD as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993); idem, *God—The World’s Future*.

Others prefer not to speak in ontological categories of a Trinity, at least in any classical sense, but ascribe some meaning to threefold revelation in history: Norman Pittenger, *The Divine Trinity* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1977); Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> For discussion and contrary views, see Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, “The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (ed. Samuel G. Craig; Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1952) 50–55; Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* 137–47; Erickson, *God in Three Persons* 291–310; and Giles, *The Trinity and Subordination*, who amazingly dismisses the possibility of biblical exegesis as adequate for an evangelical understanding of trinitarian relations (p. 25).

<sup>31</sup> *Didōmi* and *paradidōmi* occur 78 times in John’s Gospel (17 times in ch. 17), 18 percent of all uses in the NT; another 58 times in Revelation; and 7 times in 1 John. I am indebted here to the work of my former graduate student Jimmy Taylor.

“Every good and perfect *gift* comes down from above, from the Father of Lights.” If the Father is the Giver, what does he give? In brief, God the Father gives the Son his name (John 17:11–12; Phil 2:9–11), his words and works (John 5:36; 12:49), authority (Matt 9:6; 28:18; John 17:2), “life in himself” (John 5:26); judgment (5:22, 27), his rule or kingdom (Luke 1:31–33; Acts 13:34), “all things” (Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22; John 3:35; 13:3), suffering (Matt 26:39–40; John 18:11), glory (John 17:22), the disciples (10:29; 17:6–12; 18:9), all believers (6:37–39; 10:27–30; 17:24), and the Revelation (Rev 1:1). What does the Son “give” to the Father? Jesus gives the Father thanks (Luke 10:21; Matt 26:27–28; 1 Cor 11:23–24); his own spirit/life (Luke 23:46); and the eschatological kingdom (1 Cor 15:24). As for the Holy Spirit, nowhere are the verbs about used of the Father or the Son giving to the Spirit; nothing is said about him *receiving*. Nevertheless, Jesus says of the Spirit, “He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you” (John 16:14). We see, too, that both the Son and the Spirit are “given” by the Father to the world and/or believers (Luke 11:13; John 3:16; Rom 8:11, 14–17). While other words might also be studied, *didōmi* and *paradidōmi* exemplify fairly typical NT language of intra-trinitarian activity, language evidenced not only of the incarnate Christ of the Gospels but of the resurrected and glorified Son as well. One concludes that the economic relationships between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are as patently *unlike* (or non-egalitarian) as they are personal.

b. *Johannine language.* The brevity of this paper does not allow extended commentary on the traditional language of “begetting” and “procession.” Whereas the primary meaning of the related passages likely concerns the economic Trinity,<sup>32</sup> the Church fathers were attempting to describe with biblical language the greater movement in the eternal God that they were seeing in Scripture. Two of the most repeated phrases in John’s Gospel are that the Son “comes/came from” (22 times) the Father and again is “sent by/from” (44 times) the Father, above, or heaven.<sup>33</sup> Not only does the Son “come” from the Father, the Spirit of truth also “comes” from the Father (15:26; 6:7–8, 13), described as one who “goes forth” or “proceeds” (*ekporeuetai*) from the Father (15:26). While *ekporeuetai* seems most properly to indicate the sending forth of the Spirit to believers by the Father,<sup>34</sup> it was extrapolated as

<sup>32</sup> Various times the Bible records the Father’s voice, “You are my Son,” and often adds the phrase, “today I have become your Father,” in the present tense; see Ps 2:7 in Matt 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; 9:35; Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5; 2 Pet 1:17, 18. In John’s Gospel, God is designated the Father (121 times) and Jesus the Son. One thinks of a father *generating* or *begetting* a son; thus it might be natural that *monogenēs* (“one of a kind”) was confused by the Fathers with *monogenetos* (from *gennaō*, “beget, bear”).

<sup>33</sup> See key texts for “sent”: John 5:23–24, 37–38; 6:38–39; 7:28–33; 8:16–18; 12:44–45, 49; 14:14, 16; 16:5, 7; 17:21–25; 20:21; “comes/came,” 5:31; 6:38–42, 50–51; 8:39, 42; 15:27–30; 18:38. Added to this are the twelve times when the same idea is implicit as Jesus enters “into the world,” etc. The Counselor also is “sent by” the Son (15:26; 16:7) and by the Father in Jesus’ name (14:26). Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1.307–19, observes that, although these terms are particularly economic, Rahner’s formula strongly suggests eternal distinctions and mutually dependent order, a task Pannenberg attempts to fulfill.

<sup>34</sup> Carson, *John* 529, observes concerning John 15:26: “It would be easy to dismiss the debate as much ado about nothing, since it is almost certain that the words ‘who goes out from the Father,’

scriptural language to fit a larger pattern of Spirit-Father relatedness—one who is always going forth from the Father, as well as being promised, sent, or breathed out by the Son. Very well, some may argue, but all this evidence merely speaks of the economic Godhead. My point, simply, is that no texts indicate any other order, such as, for example, the Father being sent by the Son. God the Father repeatedly is presented as the *fons divinitatis*, the divine fountainhead from which all else flows in the divine economy and, hence, within the trinitarian activities as a whole.

c. *The Apocalypse*. Arius wished to exclude the book of Revelation from the corpus of Scripture not only due to difficulties of authorship and the text but well aware that it presents the Son with the titles of almighty God. The book moves toward revealing the glory of the Son (cf. John 17:5). Nevertheless, the Apocalypse begins with peculiar language that stands in abrupt contrast to the high ascriptions of Jesus' deity in the Gospel of John: "The revelation of Jesus Christ which *God* gave him to show his servants . . ." More striking still is the language of Rev 1:5b–6: "To him [Jesus Christ] who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve *his God* and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen." In the book of Revelation, the testimony to Christ's absolute deity is ambiguous at first and crescendos only at the end (Rev 22:13). The central place of "the Lord God Almighty" (Rev 4:8) is retained throughout as "the one who sits on the throne." The study of *thronos* in the book is instructive. The term appears as the reigning place of the Father about thirty-five times. Yet as the Overcomer, Jesus Christ speaks of "my throne" (Rev 3:21a) and, again, as having "sat down with my Father on *his* throne" (Rev 3:21b). Twice he is seen "in the center" of the divine throne (Rev 5:6; 7:17).<sup>35</sup> And the divine presence on the new earth is described as "the throne of God and the Lamb" (Rev 22:1, 3; cf. 21:5?). What might this indicate? In that titles of the Father are ascribed to Jesus (Rev 22:13) together with his reign with God, the deduction of the Church fathers seems justified: Jesus is "very God from very God." At the same time, while "God and the Lamb" share glory, power, and authority, the role of the Father continues as "the Lord God Almighty" (Rev 21:22). Behind the Son sits the Father who cedes highest honor to his Son—innately worthy, now fully glorified in and by all creation. While surely the Apocalypse continues the *economic* revelation of God in "heaven" and on earth, one must ask to what extent is it

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set in synonymous parallelism with 'whom I will send to you from the Father,' refer not to some ontological 'procession' but to the mission of the Spirit. But if the theological debate is divorced from the meaning of this one clause and allowed to stand on its own, then it becomes clear that tremendous issues are at stake after all, but were mistakenly connected with the interpretation of this clause. . . . In short, the elements of a full-blown doctrine of the Trinity crop up repeatedly in the Fourth Gospel; and the early creedal statement, complete with the *filioque* phrase, is eminently defensible, once we allow that this clause in 15:26 does not itself specify a certain ontological status, but joins with the matrix of Johannine Christology and pneumatology to presuppose it."

<sup>35</sup> The terms are ambiguous (*en mesō, ava meson*) and could denote the middle of the throne area; in both texts there is immediate activity of the Lamb in relation to the One-who-sits-on-the-throne.

appropriate to shift away from the implications of such language for the Son in relation to the Father when conceptualizing the immanent Trinity? Surely some discontinuity regarding the subordination of the Son is necessary. But the absolute discontinuity of egalitarian trinitarian theology seems not to be justified.

4. *The ends of all creation.* Insofar as I can see, the last window from cosmic history to what might be glimpsed of the immanent Godhead is 1 Cor 15:24–28:

Then the end will come, when he [the Son] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

Although some have interpreted “that God may be all in all” as trinitarian, it is well known that *theos* in Paul almost always designates the Father, and there is little exegetical evidence to suggest otherwise in this passage. As implied in previous texts on divine mutuality, there is a sense of *both/and* rather than *either/or* in the Son’s relationship to the Father: in the community of the Godhead, the Son is both equal to yet submissive to the Father. Pannenberg comments, “The lordship of the Son is simply to proclaim the lordship of the Father, to glorify him, to subject all things to him. Hence the kingdom of the Son does not end (Luke 1:33) when he hands back lordship to the Father. His own lordship is consummated when he subjects all things to the lordship of the Father and all creation honors the Father as the one God.”<sup>36</sup> In my judgment, the reign of the Son under the monarchy of the Father visible in 1 Corinthians 15 reflects in some sense the immanent trinitarian relations. The bookends of the entire created order are constituted on one end by the command of the Father for creation itself through the Son and the Spirit (John 1:3; Col 1:16; Heb 1:3; Ps 33:6; etc.) and, on the other end, by the consummation of the created order through the Son and the Spirit (Rev 22:17) and its return to God the Father.

In summary, social models of the immanent Trinity vary substantially, the greatest historical tension existing around whether there is eternal monarchy under God the Father or whether the trinitarian persons exercise ultimately equal communal roles. Since the Cappadocian father’s eternal

<sup>36</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1.313. Yet having affirmed the eternal “begottenness” of Son by the Father, in my judgment, Pannenberg then without biblical warrant presses divine mutuality too far: “By handing over lordship to the Son the Father makes his kingship dependent on whether the Son glorifies him and fulfils his lordship by fulfilling his mission. The self-distinction of the Father from the Son is not just that he begets the Son but that he hands over all things to him, so that his kingdom and his own deity are now dependent upon the Son. The rule of the kingdom of the Father is not so external to his deity that he might be God without his kingdom” (ibid.).

Origin-Generation-Procession, Augustine's social analogy of Lover-Beloved-Love itself (or for that matter all of his psychological models), and Barth's Revealer-Revealed-Revealedness, Christian history has repeatedly formed analogies of trinitarian relations with immanent implications. The biblical evidence moves us this way by repeatedly affirming divine hierarchy through which the Godhead has made itself known. It seems nearly everything confirms trinitarian order and nothing appreciably suggests otherwise.

#### IV. PART THREE: AN ETERNALLY ORDERED SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM

I have defined an *eternally ordered social model* as the social model that, while insisting on equality of the divine nature, affirms *personal distinction of roles within the immanent Godhead*. The proposal of an *eternally ordered social model* of the Trinity attempts to maintain the relational dispositions evidenced between the members of the Godhead together with the biblically witnessed *koinonia* of the eternal Trinity (John 1:1). In all classical Christian theology, normative trinitarian language includes designations of origin, generation, and procession—although the terms themselves lead to mystery (as well they might, God being God). Within especially modern trinitarian theologies, however, some argue that these terms must *only* be taken as economic and cannot be taken to imply anything of divine ontology. This latter perspective, from my vantage, does not adequately assess the plenitude and seriousness of the entirety of God's self-revelation. A stronger correspondence between economic revelation and our understanding of the immanent Godhead suggests the generous preeminence of the Father, the joyous collaboration of the Son, and the ever-serving activity of the Spirit—again, all within the self-givingness of the divine fellowship. Such a proposal attempts to respect the complexity of God's own self-description in Scripture, even though it is most difficult for us philosophically to hold full equality of nature together with eternal differences in communal order. But all speculation of what God is like in transcendent otherness is perilous even *with* the only sure foundation of the Bible, and all the more so without it.

Within the framework of orthodoxy, numerous versions of ordered social models have been proposed through Christian history, some emphasizing considerable asymmetry between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, others little if any personal distinction at all. It should be observed that the human, practical *implications* of the nature of the immanent trinitarian relations are not patently easy to discern and lie outside the scope of this paper.<sup>37</sup> As

<sup>37</sup> Implications of trinitarianism for conjugal, familial, ecclesial, and societal order are frequent themes, from Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 248–58 and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: A Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992) 283–360, to feminist Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001) 35–131; Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*; and Gavin D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: Gender,*



controversial as the applications might be, the issue at hand is our actual perception of God himself. This is sacred ground. Together we plead the Holy Spirit's grace in granting understanding of the triune God, lest we prove Ludwig Feuerbach true by forming God in our own ideal.

Parts One and Two have established both the loving relationality of the social Trinity as well as the hierarchical order of the Godhead that characterizes the economic Trinity in all relations to creation. Several concluding observations are in order.

1. *Heeding the metanarrative of social trinitarian revelation.* Of the six dozen texts that mention the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in various combinations, not many appear intentionally arranged as a theology proper (e.g. Matt 28:19; 1 Cor 8:4–7; Eph 1:3–14). Most seem casually expressive of the bountiful tri-fold experience with God of the early church. Nonetheless, although the chronologies of divine persons vary from text to text, and whereas all three persons may in some sense be present in every divine act, the Bible seems never to admit an inversion of the order. Certainly enough is said in Scripture to affirm the equal deity of the Son and the Spirit to the Father. But the hierarchy of the economic Godhead appears largely inviolable in the Bible itself. God the Father reflects generous preeminence. The Father loves the Son and gives everything to him, yet the Father is not left empty or without lordship for having given all things out of infinite fullness. Behind the *monarchia* of Jesus Christ the King of Kings looms the *monarchia* of God the Father Almighty. While co-regent, the Son is collaborator, taking up what is given from the Father, and rejoicing in the communion of the Father. The Son, too, is fully God and exercises that deity, but there are no hints of the Father's retirement.

"The fellowship of the Holy Spirit" appears more complicated when turned Godward. Augustine's designation of the Spirit as *gift* and *love* in the Godhead seems appropriate, if taken as actively personal, yet this Spirit is also *holy* and *ever-serving* to glorify the Son and the Father. While the Holy Spirit may be "the Spirit of YHWH," "the other *paraklētōs*," and the revealer (or the "revealedness" of Barth) of the deep truths of God, there is no evidence anywhere, to my knowledge, that the Spirit would *ever* exercise authority over the Father.

The flow seems steadily from the Father through the Son and the Spirit, then back toward the Father through the Son and in the Spirit. Surely, if personal order is ultimately contingent or external to God's very being, then Scripture would provide telling evidence, but this is elusive. Before the abundant metanarrative of all divine revelation, the burden of proof rests with those who contend something other than a social order in the Godhead.

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*Culture and the Divine* (London: SCM, 2000). Among those who affirm the eternal subordination of the Son yet deny its relatedness to gender order in family and church is Craig S. Keener, "Is Subordination Within the Trinity Really Heresy? A Study of John 5:18 in Context." *TrinJ* 20/1 (1999) 39–51. Conversely, others like William Lane Craig deny any eternal subordination of the Son but affirm complementarianism.

2. *The epistemological problem.* Although common appeal is to Christian experience and tradition as theological sources, in our confession as evangelicals the only infallible knowledge that God is constituted as Trinity is through Scripture. Without pursuing a rabbit trail, let us say that the Bible provides us with objective data that God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,<sup>38</sup> analogous as such terms may be to the transcendent divine reality. If all infallible knowledge of God comes from Scripture, and if Scripture never *contradicts* the pattern we have seen of trinitarian order, then on what basis does one affirm an immanent Godhead of a different order or no order at all? Put another way, if one demurs that all biblical revelation is economic and thus inadequate alone as a *framework* to contemplate infinite God, then on what basis do we have knowledge of the immanent Trinity? What would be the criteria for its verification apart from the structure of revelation? Reason and language are, of course, essential to understanding. We interpret the text within our human settings, always bound by limitations. The warning here is that we recognize our finitude when forming a speculative trinitarianism disjunctive with the data of the text. Philosophic arguments that a true equality of nature necessitates ultimate equality of social order are neither rationally required nor harmonious with God's self-revelation. When philosophic reasoning divorces a theology of the immanent Trinity from the revelation of the economic Trinity, it may have journeyed to where we dare not go.<sup>39</sup>

3. *Dangers of an egalitarian Godhead: collapse of personal distinctions.* Similar to the Apostles' Creed, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed seems to set forth an economic trinitarian hierarchy. Yet as theology continued to evolve, concepts of the immanent and the economic Trinity became increasingly difficult to hold together. We have seen that Gregory of Nyssa rejected Basil and Gregory Nazianzen's locating the divine *ousia* in the Father, yet the younger Cappadocian did not escape his own continuous language of "origin," "begottenness," and "procession." Likewise Augustine was observed as sometimes stating that nothing tangibly distinguished the three subsistencies of the Godhead, each *identically* possessing the single *ousia*, yet he, too, would return repeatedly to the language of origin.<sup>40</sup> Robert Jenson writes,

<sup>38</sup> Other titles, of course, also describe the three persons of the Trinity, notably the Pauline allocations of "God," "Lord," and "Spirit"; I understand these as complementary to the familial terms favored by Jesus and John, and fully yoked to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For a helpful, cautionary discussion see Erickson, *God in Three Persons* 300–305.

<sup>39</sup> Renewed interest in apophaticism stands against Western modernism with its sometimes swaggering rationalism. See Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds., *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially Rowan Williams, "The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure" 115–35.

<sup>40</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity* 2.3: "not that the Son is less than the Father, but that he is from the Father. This does not imply any dearth of equality, but only his birth in eternity" (2.3); "Coming now to the Father he is called the Father relationship-wise, and he is also called origin relationship-wise, and perhaps other things too. But he is called Father with reference to the Son, origin with reference to all things that are from him" (5.14); "But to return to the mutual relationships within the trinity: if the producer is the origin with reference to what it produces, then the Father

“The Augustinian supposition that there is no necessary connection between what differentiates the triune identities in God and the structure of God’s work in time bankrupts the doctrine of the Trinity cognitively, for it detaches language about the triune identity from the only thing that made such language meaningful in the first place: the Biblical narrative.”<sup>41</sup> Scripture gives no indication that behind the economic hierarchy, there is arbitrary choice of trinitarian roles (although God is surely as free as he is intentional). There is no hint that the three, to put it brashly, “flip a coin” to see who will do what, although each is completely God. There is never indication that in some future eon or in some deep blue past, the Son plays the role of the Father or the Holy Spirit plays the role of the Son, even though we say that each indwells the other. The credal terminology of *origin*, *begetting*, and *proceeding* is admittedly not satisfying, but to strip it away for a kind of democratic triumvirate leaves no distinguishing relations between the divine persons. If each member is foremost in everything, then real differentiation is gone. With intimations of Rahner, Gerald O’Collins comments,

The relational quality of personhood in God entails acknowledging that the three persons are persons in different ways. Because of the intradivine order of origin (in that the Son and the Holy Spirit are not the origin of the Father), there is an asymmetry between them. They are ordered to one another in an asymmetrical way. The self-giving of the Father, which is the condition of the self-giving of the Son, for example, happens in a way that cannot be reversed.<sup>42</sup>

A social model of the Godhead that does not recognize eternal differentiation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit based firmly in divine revelation easily loses all significant distinction. An egalitarian model of the immanent Godhead collapses trinitarian distinctions. Conversely, an eternally ordered social model of the Trinity argues that the *activities* and *roles* of each member visible throughout divine revelation are analogously correspondent with the immanent triune relationships.

4. *Dangers of subordinationism: univocalism and the loss of trinitarian agape.* Classical subordinationism is Arianism and designates the essential inequality between the three persons. This is precluded by my definition of the *divine nature* as the *generic essence, universal property, attributes of Godness manifest equally in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*. Subordinationism of essence constitutes a historical heresy outside our discussion. Nonetheless, an exaggerated *functional subordinationism* can also violate, not the *homoousios* of God, but the generous character of God seen in the many NT

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is origin with reference to the Son, because he produced or begot him. But whether the Father is origin with respect to the Holy Spirit because it is said that He proceeds from the Father (John 15:26), that is quite a question. If it is so, then he will be origin not only for what he begets or makes [the Son], but also for what he gives [the Spirit]” (5.15).

<sup>41</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1.112. Certain passages of Augustine lean against Jenson’s accusation which may better be aimed at Aquinas.

<sup>42</sup> O’Collins, *The Tripersonal God* 179; see Rahner, *The Trinity* 23.

passages affirming divine self-giving and reciprocity (Part One). First, therefore, a functional subordination can overstate hierarchy and minimize divine mutuality, including the deep goodness of the Father in relation to the Son and the Spirit.

Secondly, certain traditional models of a hierarchical Godhead surely minimize, to their peril, differences between the economic and the immanent Trinity. To insist upon *univocal* correspondence of the economic to the immanent Trinity misses the path, because Scripture itself (although economic in nature) opens up beyond creation history. Revelation points beyond *mere* economy to transcendent relationality. Trinitarian theology must secure together what is implied regarding the immanent Godhead while also being faithful to the general pattern of God's revelation in time and space.

Yet, whereas we know of the immanent Trinity through economic revelation, as Urs von Balthasar has observed, it is ultimately the immanent Trinity that grounds and supports the economic: "Otherwise the immanent, eternal Trinity would threaten to dissolve into the economic; in other words, God would be swallowed up in the world process . . ." <sup>43</sup> Too narrow a correspondence between the economic and immanent Godhead can distort a sufficient vision of the triune God—Rahner's Rule gone awry, whether by evolutionary trinitarians who immerse divine self-fulfillment in salvation history or by traditionalists who too tightly interpret hierarchical trinitarian data while disregarding biblical evidence for divine reciprocity. In the end, theories about the immanent Trinity serve as nets by which we seek to better understand the grace and justice of the triune God in human history. As majestic and engaging as some theories may be, they must continually be subjected to and purified by the biblical witness. So while theories of the immanent Trinity will not simply duplicate the economic Trinity, they will reflect the economic Trinity in an embrace macrostructure that is faithful to God's Word.

##### 5. *Toward a deeper sense of trinitarian fullness.*

*a. Nature and person.* Our linguistic distinctions between "nature" and "person" appear artificial before a God who, in Cornelius Van Til's dictum, "eternally chooses to be himself." The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit forever choose to be themselves in relation to the others, this according to each person's distinguishing dispositions, as well as the unifying nature of the Godhead. Not only is each member of the Godhead constituted by nature and by choice, but also in reciprocal relationship: the Father is the Father in relation to the Son, and the Son to the Father. Therefore, God is triune by *relationship*, by *choice*, and by *nature*. So, in one sense, there is no necessity beyond that which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit choose forever to be. In another sense, God is perfect in nature, thus what God chooses corresponds with that divine perfection. We might say God is free to be perfect forever, and this as Trinity.

<sup>43</sup> Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 3.508.

*b. Ordered collaboration.* In the midst of the social-model euphoria over the last two decades that often emphasized totally equal divine relations, certain theologians continued to ask in what sense does the economy of the Son and the Spirit disclose eternal relations in the immanent Trinity?<sup>44</sup> In a fallen world, the term “subordination” immediately implies hierarchy, top-down authority, power over another, subjugation, repression, inequality. It is a term probably better left abandoned when speaking of the divine relations, particularly if understood as excluding the mutual volition of the Son and the Spirit in any activity of the Godhead. But for the moment I will include it regardless of its negative implications, in the effort to address the historical debate.

The very fact that God became incarnate and as “God-man” obeyed, suffered, and died suggests something beyond mere economy. Our Lord’s revelation plunges deeply into our reality through the incarnation and the cross. The Son shows us the love of God the Father. In Jesus Christ we see the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, yet as one who will assume the Son’s work in the world. Even more precisely, however, the *kenosis* must be taken as the Son’s revelation of himself.<sup>45</sup> His subjection to the Father in economic history (while collaborative), must reflect some sense of eternal relationship with the Father. Likewise, if the activity of the Spirit is ultimately revealing of the very character of the Spirit, then what the Godhead has disclosed in revelation history should align with the intrinsic inclinations of the three persons as immanent Trinity. In the NT, of course, not only does the Father request of the Son but the Son requests of the Father. Moreover, the Son responds to the Spirit, as the Spirit responds to the Son. Yet the great structure of divine relations seems undeniably hierarchical. Every Pauline letter in the NT, for example, salutes the readers with blessings from “God our Father” and the “Lord Jesus Christ”; the same epistles affirm sharp order in the Godhead with phrases such as “the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor 11:3). Therefore, in detecting the central patterns of Scripture, the mutuality and equality of the Godhead (Part One) must be held in tension with trinitarian social hierarchy (Part Two). God is love, and each person of the Godhead is mutually self-giving toward the other. Yet these shared personal relations do not exclude what appears to be an ultimately collaborative pattern.

*c. Trinitarian life.* Could the Holy Trinity eternally experience within its own inner life the call-to-do simultaneous with the doing-response, the giving with the receiving, all in ordered unity and profoundly mutual trust? The call-response is experienced together in the Trinity, yet with different

<sup>44</sup> Rahner, *The Trinity* 21–30, 34–38; Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1.308–27; Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* 86–88; Jenson, *Systematic Theology* 1.108–14; Peters, *God—The World’s Future* 110–14; while answers may vary each sees eternal distinctions in the Godhead.

<sup>45</sup> I think this can be defended whether one understands the incarnation of the Son in the traditional sense of Christ’s two natures functioning in harmony (in a singular person) or in the kenotic sense of possessing full deity but never exercising the divine nature. In either case the Son willingly chose submission, thereby unveiling his disposition in relation to the Father. For the latter view, see Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Dallas: Word, 1991).

roles, as each person freely exercises his innate character and desires. Each loves, each is self-rendering, each serves, but within a harmonious order reflective of the dispositions of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Thus, decree and obedience might be thought of as at once *in* God—a free and cherished ordination and subordination—activity hardly conceivable in a fallen world but profoundly beautiful in the triune confidence. This article submits, then, that the economic Trinity, the Trinity of biblical revelation, points toward an extraordinary abundance in the characteristic relations of the eternal divine *koinonia*. And, to the contrary, by insisting on eternal egalitarian roles that stand in contrast to the divine economy in the Bible, we may, rather than honor the Son and the Spirit, in fact displease them.

## V. CONCLUSION

The present proposal, not at all strange to most Christian faith through history, is an attempt to better conjoin our idea of God outside creation with the revelation of God inside creation. I have defined an *eternally ordered social model* of the Trinity as the social model that, while insisting on equality of the divine nature, affirms *perpetual distinction of roles within the immanent Godhead*. Based in Part Two, such a perspective in simple terms suggests the generous preeminence of the Father (his *monarchia*), the joyous collaboration (subordination) of the Son, and the ever-glorifying activity of the Spirit.<sup>46</sup> As presented in Part One, however, such a definition must stand together with the infinitely rich self-givingness and reciprocity of the Godhead: the *social model* of the Trinity designates that *the one divine Being eternally exists as three distinct centers of consciousness, wholly equal in nature, genuinely personal in relationships, and each mutually indwelling the other*. The two definitions are not contradictory but attempt to better frame the mystery of the trinitarian relations. On the one hand, “egalitarian” trinitarians rightly emphasize the self-giving, perichoretic relations of the Godhead but wrongly minimize the biblical pattern of internal distinctions among the persons, with its implications regarding the immanent Trinity. On the other hand, “subordinationist” trinitarians correctly perceive that the economic relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit carry implications for the eternal Godhead but often error in presuming univocal correspondence with the immanent Trinity or in neglecting biblical witness regarding the benevolent mutuality of the trinitarian persons.

My primary assertion is that the speculations of trinitarian theology are not to supercede revelation. Rather, the divine mystery must be framed within decidedly biblical truth. If Scripture affirms and is not contradictory to an eternally ordered social trinitarianism, then efforts to present an egalitarian Godhead are misguided. Surely radiant truths can be discerned from social models of the Trinity for our understanding of self and interpersonal

<sup>46</sup> The author recognizes that he has not explicitly defended these divine roles but only the structure in which greater refinement can be made; the complexity of biblical data defies simplistic categorization.

relationships. However, philosophic arguments that true equality of *nature* necessitates equality of *order* are an equivocation of the two. To those who would furthermore project Western assumptions regarding equality and freedom to remodel God in democratic ideals, we must insist that God's Word judges culture and not *vice versa*. Conversely, those who on the basis of a hierarchical model of the Trinity justify political oppression or independent masculine rulership in familial and ecclesial settings do not grasp the self-sacrificing nature of the Father as well as of the Son and the Spirit.

The two pictures of the Christian Godhead, the economic and the immanent, often leave believers confused. In Western Renaissance paintings such as Masaccio's *The Holy Trinity* (1425), God the Father is often depicted holding his dying Son from behind the cross with the Spirit coming forth from his mouth as a dove. In the Eastern Church, Rublev's renowned *Old Testament Trinity* (1410–20) portrays three nearly equal figures, each with head deferred slightly to the next around the chalice in the center.<sup>47</sup> Are the divine persons distinguishable or virtually identical? Even when we repeat the declaration of the Council of Florence (1438–1445) that “No one of them either precedes the others in eternity, or exceeds them in greatness, or supervenes in power,”<sup>48</sup> we still likely pray to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The immanent Trinity of theology can seem quite distant from the economic Trinity of the Bible and Christian practice. My effort has attempted to tighten our appreciation for a social model of the Trinity together with the biblical pattern of ordered divine relationships.

<sup>47</sup> The illustration owes in part to Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 305–6. Most would disagree with Moltmann's comment on Rublev's painting that “it is impossible to discover who depicts the Father, who the Son and who the Spirit” (p. 305). At close inspection, each member of the Godhead is quite distinguishable by chronology, colors, and posture, with priority of the Father on the left, the Son above the cup and the Holy Spirit. It should be added that rarely in Eastern iconography is the Father visible at all. Coptic art, however, frequently portrays the Trinity as three identical persons.

<sup>48</sup> In *Concilium Florentinum: Documenta et Scriptores* (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1940–1971) and other sources in O'Carroll, *Trinitas* 112–13. Balancing the oft-quoted Florentine credo above, the papal bull *Laetentur coeli*, July 6, 1439, declares: “. . . all likewise profess that the Holy Spirit is eternally from the Father and the Son, and has his essence and his subsistent being both from the Father and the Son, and proceeds from both eternally as from one principle and one spiration.”