



Peters, Dan (2018) *Communion and the Trinity: distinct relations with Father, Son and Spirit*. MTh(R) thesis.

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# Communion and the Trinity: Distinct Relations with Father, Son and Spirit

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## Introduction

Writing about the Son of God, Donald Macleod makes this striking statement: ‘I have a relationship with him which I do not have with God the Father.’<sup>1</sup> The sentence appears in a volume on Christology, hence its focus on the Son. If correct, however, its logical corollary is that *I have a relationship with the Father which I do not have with the Son*. Then, assuming the existence of a tri-personal godhead, there is no reason to preclude similar statements regarding the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the same author concludes a few pages later: ‘We have an experience of each which is different from our experience of the other. There is an “Abba, Father!”; a “Lord Jesus!”; and a “Come, Holy Spirit!”’<sup>2</sup> Macleod does not use the phrase, but his remarks exemplify the concept of *distinct communion with the divine persons*. That concept will be the theme of this study.

Macleod’s remarks are striking because of the particular proclivities of Western Christianity. Its stress on God’s single, undivided essence has hardly been fertile soil for the concept of distinct communion. I shall at points reference a number of modern writers who are amenable to the concept; until recently, however, it has appeared infrequently and fleetingly in Western literature. According to Robert Letham only one Western theologian has grappled with the subject extensively. That theologian is the Puritan, John Owen. Actually, Letham mentions two Western theologians with ‘a distinctly “Eastern” feel to them’; writers whose tendency to ‘strongly stress the distinctness of the three persons’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 138.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing), 409.

connects them more with John of Damascus than with Augustine of Hippo. The other is John Calvin. However, in Calvin this tendency is largely confined to his doctrine of God, and expressed in the way that he argues for each person's full possession of deity. In Owen, on the other hand, it stretches into his practical (or experiential) theology. It is expressed in his 'arguing forcibly for the distinct worship of the three.'<sup>4</sup>

It is primarily in Owen's work, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*, that this is apparent. Here the Puritan genuinely addresses the believer's relationship with God; the work is not a polemic against modalism dressed up as a treatise on communion. Yet the dissimilarity between Owen's and other ostensibly comparable works is stark. Henry Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, for instance, is another seventeenth-century work whose aim is to demonstrate 'that true religion is a union of the soul with God', a 'Divine life [which] continueth not always in [the] same strength and vigour'.<sup>5</sup> As we shall note at the beginning of chapter one, Owen is more careful than his contemporary to distinguish between union and communion; but, regardless of Scougal's choice of terms, it is clearly the believer's communion with God with which he, too, is concerned. However, whereas Scougal's work is structured around different aspects of communion,<sup>6</sup> Owen's is structured around

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 409.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962), 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> Its main sections have titles like: *We should meditate often on the Joys of Heaven; Thoughts of God give us the Lowest Thoughts of Ourselves*; etc.

Scougal is not atypical. Brian Kay's is probably a fair assessment: 'The substantial trinitarian emphases of the Reformed scholastics...often were inadequately translated in any sustained way to the otherwise elaborate Puritan devotional models. The doctrine of God was failing to connect to spirituality.... The real weakness of some Puritan devotion is not that it was too doctrinal, but that it was not doctrinal enough' (Brian Kay,

communion's three hypostatic foci, Father, Son and Spirit. At the most, distinct communion might be inferred from passing references in Scougal; in Owen it is explicit and inescapable. Letham is warranted in singling out this particular theologian. And as the preeminent Western contribution to our theme, Owen's treatise will be frequently referenced in this study.

The more fleeting expressions of distinct communion that have surfaced within historic Western literature are mostly too insubstantial to be considered in the chapters that follow.<sup>7</sup> They are insubstantial in the sense that they lack the sustained supporting argumentation which one finds in Owen. In a few cases, however, despite – or perhaps *because of* – that omission, these fragments exhibit a rare elegance and incisiveness. One of the best examples of this is found in Thomas Goodwin, another seventeenth-century Puritan. It is while discussing justifying faith that he suddenly expresses a passionate plea for distinct communion:

There is communion and fellowship with all the persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and their love,<sup>8</sup> severally and distinctly.... Do not...stint yourselves here, that it sufficeth that you know the Father. No; Christ putteth you upon labouring after a distinct knowing of, and communion with all three persons. ...not only...to have fellowship with the one in the other implicitly,<sup>9</sup> but distinctly with the one and with the other, and distinctly with the one as with the other.... As the three angels that came to Abraham were all entertained by him, so for a man to converse with, and

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*Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion* [Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007], 56-57).

<sup>7</sup> An exception is a brief excursus located in James Durham's commentary on Revelation. I shall engage with some of its content in chapter three.

<sup>8</sup> The relationship between divine attributes and distinct communion will be explored in chapter three. It is interesting that Goodwin sees no need to apportion attributes along hypostatic lines; a *single* attribute (love) is relevant to the believer's communion with *all* the persons. That is consonant with my own later conclusions.

<sup>9</sup> The issue of implicit (or *de facto*) communion will be discussed in chapter three.

entertain into his heart...all three persons, and to have the love of them all distinctly brought home to his heart, and to view the love of them all apart, this is the communion that [the Scriptures] would raise up our hearts unto. ...hast thou had the love of the Father brought home to thee? Rest not in that; get the love of the Son brought home to thee too, and then rest not until all three persons manifest their love to thee.... Sometimes a man's communion and converse is with the one, sometimes with the other; sometimes with the Father, then with the Son, and then with the Holy Ghost; sometimes his heart is drawn out to consider the Father's love in choosing, and then the love of Christ in redeeming, and so the love of the Holy Ghost, that searcheth the deep things of God, and revealeth them to us.... And this assurance [of love] is not a knowledge by way of argument or deduction, whereby we infer that if one loveth me then the other loveth me, but it is intuitively, as I may so express it, and we should never be satisfied till we have attained it, and till all three persons lie level in us, and all make their abode with us, and we sit as it were in the midst of them, while they all manifest their love unto us.<sup>10</sup>

In the same category is a single sentence from yet another seventeenth-century theologian, Samuel Rutherford: 'I know not which divine person I love the most, but this I know, I need and love each of them.'<sup>11</sup> Even more than in Goodwin's remarks, one senses here that distinct communion is more than merely legitimate, and more than merely a duty. It is rather an irrepressible passion in the believer who has properly understood the irreducible triuneness of his God. According to A.W. Tozer distinct communion took this form in the life of Frederick Faber. Tozer asserts of the nineteenth-century hymnwriter:

His love for God extended to the three Persons of the Godhead equally, yet he seemed to feel for each One a special kind of love reserved for Him alone. Of God the Father he sings: *...Father of Jesus, love's reward! What rapture will it be, Prostrate before Thy throne to lie, And gaze and gaze on Thee!* His love for the Person of Christ was so intense it threatened to consume him.... Faber's blazing love extended also to the Holy Spirit.... He literally pressed his forehead to the ground in his eager fervid worship of the Third Person of the Godhead.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Goodwin, *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), 8:376-379.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 435.

<sup>12</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Bromley: STL Books, 1981), 40-42.

Indeed, it is not only in the work of Faber that distinct communion has assumed a hymnic form.<sup>13</sup> A number of Isaac Watts' pieces at least move in the direction of engaging distinctly with Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>14</sup> This hymn by Edward Cooper (1770-1833), however, is particularly noteworthy:

Father of heaven, whose love profound  
a ransom for our souls hath found,  
before thy throne we sinners bend,  
to us thy pardoning love extend.

Almighty Son, incarnate Word,  
our Prophet, Priest, Redeemer, Lord,  
before thy throne we sinners bend,  
to us thy saving grace extend.

Eternal Spirit, by whose breath  
the soul is raised from sin and death,  
before thy throne we sinners bend,  
to us thy quickening power extend.

Thrice Holy! Father, Spirit, Son;  
mysterious Godhead, Three in One,  
before thy throne we sinners bend,  
grace, pardon, life to us extend.

Western piety, then, has not been devoid of this emphasis on communion with the Three. Owen's *tour de force* has had its echoes amongst his contemporaries and successors. Nevertheless, a theological milieu has remained in place within which the claim, *I have a relationship with God the Son which I do not have with God the Father*, is arresting and far from axiomatic. It is a claim which merits exploration and, in my view, vindication.

The first chapter of this study will engage with the Scriptures. Distinct communion with the divine persons is not really a Cappadocian concept, nor an Owenian one. Its notable

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<sup>13</sup> Although Letham's sobering verdict is basically sound: 'Examine any hymnbook or chorus book you can find, and search for compositions that are clearly Trinitarian. You won't find many' (Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 410).

<sup>14</sup> Examples are 'We give immortal praise' and 'To Him who chose us first' by Isaac Watts (1674-1748).



expressions — whether in the East or West, the fourth century or the seventeenth — are all derivative, for it is *a New Testament concept*. This becomes apparent when the New Testament's range of devotional language and imagery is properly appreciated. I shall demonstrate that such language and imagery are used by the inspired writers in richly Trinitarian, hypostatically-specific ways. However, it must be noted that communion with God in the New Testament is not *always* hypostatically specific, and the implications of that will also be considered.

In the second chapter a theological framework will be sought that makes distinct communion intelligible. It will be argued that it is in the narrative of redemption that such a framework emerges, for the narrative presents us with three highly differentiated persons. Moreover, the different redemptive activities of the Three give colour and depth to the believer's communion with each. However, this emphasis on Trinitarian *actions* attracts a volley of penetrating questions. Is the immanent Trinity being rejected in favour of the economic? Is propositional revelation being rejected in favour of a revelatory drama? Do the divine persons assume redemptive roles which reflect deeper, more ontological realities, so that communion based on those roles is not arbitrary and artificial? These matters will be considered in the course of the chapter.

The third chapter will address three issues pertaining to the actual practice of distinct communion with the divine persons. Two of these issues are thrown into relief by the discussions of older writers: Owen in one case; James Durham in the other. The third issue represents a more obvious concern that many believers might have in relation to distinct communion.

This study proceeds from the conviction that these themes matter enormously. It is of no merely academic interest whether Macleod's statement (with which I began) is true or not. 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.'<sup>15</sup> Any study, therefore, which relates to communion with God has a *de facto* gravity to it. It bears upon man's chief end. If God intends the believer's devotional life to be boldly tri-personal in its shape, nothing is more important than that this be recognised and implemented. Moreover, I share Letham's view 'that a recovery of the Trinity at ground level, the level of the ordinary minister and believer, will help revitalise the life of the church and, in turn, its witness in the world.'<sup>16</sup> Such a recovery of ground level Trinitarianism cannot be merely creedal and intellectual. It must involve an emphasis on distinct communion with the divine persons. It must culminate in 'the ordinary minister and believer' exulting in the truth, *I have a relationship with each which I do not have with the others.*

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<sup>15</sup> WSC, Q. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 7. Cf. George Smeaton: 'As this doctrine [of the Trinity] is believed on the one hand, or challenged on the other, Christian life is found to be affected at its roots and over all its extent.' He also refers to 'the doctrine of the tri-personal God...as the most fundamental, vital, and practical of doctrines' (George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* [London: Banner of Truth, 1958], 5-6).

## CHAPTER ONE

### Distinct Communion: Its Biblical Foundation

#### Communion with God

What is communion with God? Owen says it ‘consisteth in his communication of himself unto us, with our returnal unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him.’<sup>1</sup> That definition contains a crucial distinction. By distinguishing *communion* from *union*, Owen directs our thoughts to a particular dimension of the believer’s relationship with God. *Union* (with Christ) signifies the fixed, static dimension of the relationship. It remains constantly intact, irrespective of moral, emotional and circumstantial vicissitudes. *Communion*, Owen says, is not that. It flows from it, but is different. It is the dynamic, variable dimension of the believer’s relationship with God. Whereas *union* is about the existence of the relationship, *communion* is about its maintenance and cultivation. Kelly Kopic uses the illustration of marriage as he expounds Owen on this point:

Distractions may cause a husband to neglect intimate relations with his spouse, just as a Christian may neglect fellowship with God. Although such neglect does not nullify the union between the parties, it deeply affects the level of intimacy experienced between them.<sup>2</sup>

Owen’s definition, then, helpfully locates us in the relevant dimension of the believer’s relationship with God. It highlights that with communion we are not talking about ‘the

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<sup>1</sup> John Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation* (1657), in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), 2:8-9.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly M. Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 153.

union between the parties' (to use Kopic's terms), but 'the level of intimacy experienced between them.' We are not talking about something that simply *is*, but something that must be actively pursued.

Some of Owen's subsequent phrases reaffirm this concept of communion. He describes it, for instance, as 'God and the saints...walk[ing] together in a covenant of peace'.<sup>3</sup> The covenant of peace between God and the saints is not a bare, minimal reality that merely denotes the absence of enmity and conflict. This divine-human peace passes from the realm of blood-secured, objective fact into the realm of meaningful day-to-day expression. The two parties walk together. That is communion.

The sections of the book where Owen offers his 'directions' display the same emphasis. The directions on communion with the Father stress the meditative aspect: Owen uses the language of 'eye[ing]' the Father, 'look[ing] on him', entertaining a particular 'notion' of him; he says it is 'in the multitude of their thoughts [that] the comforts of God their Father refresh [believers'] souls.'<sup>4</sup> The directions on communion with the Spirit stress the doxological aspect: Owen speaks of 'returning praise, and thanks, and honour, and glory, and blessing to him'.<sup>5</sup> Such meditation and doxology are not *facts* intrinsic to the believer's relationship with God. They are *activities* which the believer must deliberately choose in order to develop that relationship.

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<sup>3</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:32, 39.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:271.

## The Biblical Data

But is communion with God, defined in this way, a biblical theme? Do the Scriptures look beyond that fixed *union* (with Christ) which is the constant, unchanging possession of every believer? Do they point also to a dynamic engagement with God, marked by intimacy and passion? We must give an affirmative answer. The New Testament employs a range of terms, metaphors and even prepositions to express this reality. A brief survey of some of the material will provide a useful basis for subsequent developments in this chapter.<sup>6</sup>

The obvious starting point is the New Testament's use of the word *κοινωνία*. 'Participation' is the word's basic meaning, and it admits of a range of applications. In some cases two human parties are in view, and there is a specific, non-personal entity in which they mutually participate: in Philippians 1:5 Paul and the Philippian church mutually participate in the apostle's gospel ministry; in Acts 2:42 the new converts in Jerusalem mutually participate in each other's material possessions.<sup>7</sup> In at least one case, a believer and a divine person are the parties in view, and again there is a specific, non-personal entity in which they mutually participate: in Philippians 3:10 it is mutual participation in suffering. However, a handful of texts employ the term when believers and divine persons are the parties in view and no non-personal entity is mentioned (1 Cor. 1:9; 10:16; 2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1; 1 Jn. 1:3). The two parties simply participate *in each other*. These texts are describing intimate relations.

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<sup>6</sup> The issue of communion with God in the Old Testament will be considered later in the chapter.

<sup>7</sup> That this is the nature of the *κοινωνία* is not immediately obvious in Acts 2:42. It becomes so as Luke elaborates in vv. 44-45.

Only slightly less obvious as a starting point would be the γνῶσις word group. The nouns γνῶσις and ἐπίγνωσις essentially both mean ‘knowledge’; the verb γινώσκω, ‘I know’. In most New Testament uses, however, the knowledge in view is not merely cerebral. In Matthew 1:25 and Luke 1:34 it signifies sexual union; and while the word does not usually have such a specific reference as that, it rarely shakes off altogether the connotation of intimate relationship. There is no reason to think the numerous texts which speak of believers *knowing* divine persons (Jn. 17:3; Eph. 1:17; 3:19; 4:13; Phil. 3:8, 10; Col. 1:10; 2 Pet. 3:18; 1 Jn. 2:13-14; 4:7) should be read differently. By using this language the New Testament authors were taking a risk. Among their readers were (usually) former pagans only too familiar with the concept of divine-human sexual relationships.<sup>8</sup> For these Christian writers that concept was the height of blasphemy, and one might have expected them to avoid terminology with such potential for misunderstanding. We can only conclude that they persisted with the γνῶσις word group, rather than opting for a blander, safer alternative, because they considered its sense of intimate relationship to be indispensable. Owen recognises this connotation when he cites 1 John 2:4 (“Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar”) and then offers as his own paraphrase: ‘Whoever says “I have communion with him”....’<sup>9</sup>

A third group of communion texts is bound together conceptually rather than lexically. It comprises texts which speak of a divine *indwelling* experienced by the believer. In the latter part of Ephesians 3 Paul tells the Ephesian believers what his concerns are when he prays

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, Gordon Fee refers to a ‘story narrated in Josephus about the lady Paulina, who “after supper” at the temple had nightlong sex with Mundus, thinking he was the god Anubis’ (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987], 455).

<sup>9</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:39.

for them. From the outset of the epistle he has been emphatic about their union with Christ; it has underpinned all the theology of Ephesians 1:3 – 3:13. Yet, remarkably, he now tells them that the great concern in his prayers is ‘that Christ may dwell in your hearts’ (verse 17). He cannot be praying that Christ will enter their hearts for the first time, establishing that *union* which constitutes a person a Christian. They are already Christians; already united to Christ. The indwelling for which he prays must be a deepened experience of *communion*.

The same idea seems to be present in John 14:23, where Jesus describes the indwelling in the striking language of *making a home*. Importantly, he says that this divine homemaking occurs whenever ‘anyone loves me [and] keep[s] my word’. It is triggered by the Christian’s love and obedience. It is clear within the New Testament that while faith necessarily exists from the inception of the Christian life, moral virtues like love and obedience emerge subsequently and gradually.<sup>10</sup> If the indwelling of John 14:23 is triggered by this gradually emerging love and obedience then, again, it cannot be that initial divine entrance into an individual’s life that constitutes the person a Christian. The indwelling of which Jesus speaks must be a deepened experience of *communion*.

The same kind of indwelling is likely to be in view in those texts which use temple language to refer to the believer. The outstanding text of this kind is 1 Corinthians 6:19.<sup>11</sup> It

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<sup>10</sup> Hence Paul writes of ‘faith working through love’ (Gal. 5:6). ‘Love, according to the New Testament, is not the means of salvation, but it is the finest fruit of it; a man is saved by faith, not by love; but he is saved by faith in order that he may love’ (J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991], 214).

<sup>11</sup> Although Paul says specifically that ‘your body is a temple’, he clearly does not mean that the divine indwelling is a purely somatic reality. His remarks presuppose that the believer’s *person* is the object of the indwelling; he simply wants to stress to his Corinthian readers, with their low view of the somatic realm, that the body is part of that indwelt person. Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:1 where Paul’s reference to ‘a house not made with hands’ is also probably temple language, this time applied to the believer’s body in its resurrected state.

is evident, particularly in the book of Psalms, that the divine indwelling in the Jerusalem temple during the old covenant was oriented towards communion. In Psalm 42 the writer ‘thirsts for God’ and asks, ‘when shall I come and appear before God?’ (verse 2). What sort of thirst-quenching appearance before God does he have in mind? It soon becomes clear: ‘These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to *the house of God...*’ (verse 4, italics mine). The temple is presented as the locus of communion. Psalm 27:4 is even more explicit: ‘One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.’ It seems reasonable to infer, then, that when in the New Testament the believer is described as a temple, the divine indwelling in view is oriented towards communion. The believer is a temple because in his life there is a gazing upon the beauty of the Lord and a seeking of him.

There is a fourth class of communion texts not dissimilar to the one just considered. This one, too, emphasises proximity, but from an alternative perspective. If the indwelling passages present God as being close to the believer, these passages present the believer as being close to God. The New Testament uses two verbs to convey the idea of approaching God, entering his presence, drawing near to him: one is ἐγγίζω (Heb. 7:19; Jam. 4:8); the other, προσέρχομαι (Heb. 4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 11:6; 1 Pet. 2:4). Interestingly, like γινώσκω, προσέρχομαι can have a sexual meaning: in the LXX it is used of Isaiah’s ‘approach’ to his wife which resulted in the conception of their son (Isa. 8:3). Once again, in using this language the writer of Hebrews is clearly not making a blasphemous suggestion about the Christian believer’s relationship with the true God. But at the same time this author, who



was familiar with Isaiah 8,<sup>12</sup> may have wanted *some* of the intimacy of the prophet's usage to spill over into his own.

This reality of the believer dwelling close to God is in fact the theme of some of the New Testament's grandest declarations. 1 Peter 3:18 summarises the whole of redemption in terms of people being brought 'to God'. Ephesians 2:18 has a similarly epic quality when it states that, with respect to God, 'we...have access'.<sup>13</sup> Declarations like these portray the Christian life as a deeply God-ward life, a life of communion.

A fifth group of communion texts is very small but significant enough to merit inclusion in our survey. It centres upon the theme of ingestion. These texts describe the believer eating and drinking God. D.A. Carson explains how this trope works:

We must appropriate him into our inmost being. Indeed...we are more familiar with this...metaphor than we may realise: we devour books, drink in lectures, swallow stories, ruminate on ideas, chew over a matter.... Doting grandparents declare they could eat up their grandchildren.<sup>14</sup>

In fact the first readers of the New Testament would not have found it so necessary to invoke the idioms of their culture in order to interpret the ingestion passages. They were familiar with the Old Testament, accustomed to the kind of language used in Psalm 63:5 and Psalm 34:8. In the former David anticipates bouts of nocturnal meditation on God (verse 6), and predicts that his 'soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food'. In the other text he urges Yahweh's goodness as something not merely to be heard of or acknowledged but actually *tasted*. When these first readers came to an ingestion statement like 1 Corinthians

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<sup>12</sup> Hebrews 2:13 cites Isaiah 8:18.

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 3:12 uses the same language.

<sup>14</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to St John* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 279.

12:13 or John 7:37 (in both of which the focus is on drinking), or the repeated ingestion statements of John 6 (verses 51, 53-58; the focus is on both drinking and eating), they would have sensed immediately that Paul and Jesus, like David, were describing that deep, inner appropriation of God that may be designated *communion*.

Finally, there is another metaphorical description of communion which occurs once in the New Testament: *walking* with God (Rev. 3:4). We have already noted Owen's usage of this trope. Like the concept of ingesting God, the concept of walking with him is rooted in the Old Testament, particularly the remarkable epitaph to Enoch in Genesis 5:22, 24. Its occurrence in Revelation 3:4 is in the context of a promise to faithful believers in Sardis, and almost certainly has an eschatological thrust. That, however, does not lessen the relevance to us of the concept itself. It conjures the picture of two persons enjoying one another's company as they move along together arm in arm, each striding in unison with the other. It points to communion with God.<sup>15</sup>

This survey is not exhaustive. It is sufficient, however, to present an incontrovertible case. Through the language and imagery of *participation, knowledge, indwelling, proximity, ingestion* and *walking*, the New Testament indicates that there is a dimension of dynamic communion to the believer's relationship with God. By itself the concept of *union with God* is inadequate to accommodate this substantial vein of biblical material. The additional concept of *communion with God* is necessary.

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<sup>15</sup> With reference to the seminal expression in Genesis 5:22, 24, Gordon Wenham remarks: 'The phrase suggests a special intimacy with God' (Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 1, *Genesis 1-15* [Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987], 127).

## Communion with the Triune God

At this point, however, we must probe more deeply. It is not enough to conclude that the believer communes with God. The God with whom the believer communes is a Trinity. He exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is *the* fundamental truth about him; the truth affirmed at the initiation of every Christian life (Matt. 28:19). How, then, does that basic reality affect the believer's communion?

Owen's answer is emphatic: 'The saints have distinct communion with the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit (that is, distinctly with the Father, and distinctly with the Son, and distinctly with the Holy Spirit)'.<sup>16</sup> The parenthesis in that sentence may appear unnecessary, but Owen clearly will not have this emphasis on *distinctness of communion* overlooked or blunted. It is probably for the same reason that, whenever he subsequently restates the concept, he does so in almost unvarying terms (the substitution of 'severally' for 'distinctly' being a rare deviation at one point).<sup>17</sup> Owen is less concerned about literary flair than that his model of tri-personal communion remain undiluted.

Again, then, we must relate this to the Scriptures. We have established that Owen is thoroughly biblical in his distinction between the believer's union and the believer's communion. Is he also biblical in these further distinctions *within* the believer's communion — these *Trinitarian* distinctions? Again, we may give an affirmative answer. If we revisit our earlier survey with this new question in mind, we discover that our results were in fact richly Trinitarian. Admittedly, it is not the case that all six expressions of communion we identified

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<sup>16</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:10.

are explicitly connected with all three divine persons. It certainly is the case, however, that when the six expressions are taken together, all three persons are amply represented. The following brief summary makes that clear.

(i) The believer's *participation* is in the Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1), in the Son (1 Cor. 1:9; 10:16) and, according to 1 John 1:3, in the Son and the Father. (ii) Sometimes the object of the believer's *knowledge* is said to be the Father (Eph. 1:17; Col. 1:10; 1 Jn. 2:13; 4:7), sometimes the Son (Eph. 3:19; 4:13; Phil. 3:8, 10; 2 Pet. 3:18) and, in John 17:3, the Father and the Son. (iii) The *indwelling* is connected in one place with the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19),<sup>18</sup> in another place with the Son (Eph. 3:17) and, in John 14:23, with the Son and the Father. (iv) The state of *proximity* into which the believer has been brought is with respect to the Father (Eph. 2:18; Heb. 7:19, 25; 10:22; 11:6; Jam. 4:8; 1 Pet. 3:18), with respect to the Son (1 Pet. 2:4) and, according to Hebrews 4:16, with respect to the Father and the Son.<sup>19</sup> (v) The metaphor of *ingestion* is applied to the believer's relations with the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13; Jn. 7:37) and to the believer's relations with the Son (Jn. 6: 51, 53-58). (vi) Finally, it is the Son with whom the believer is said to *walk* (Rev. 3:4).

Clearly, then, the believer's communion is with all three divine persons. Owen's Trinitarian boldness in the realm of Christian devotion is warranted by the New Testament's Trinitarian boldness in that realm. Actually, the New Testament's boldness becomes even more apparent if we approach from a different angle the data we have amassed.

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<sup>18</sup> The reader is reminded that the indwelling in view here is that which constitutes communion. There are other texts which speak of the Spirit's indwelling but where the emphasis is not on the believer's communion with him.

<sup>19</sup> It is actually 'the throne of grace' to which the believer 'draws near' in this verse, but in the theology of Hebrews that is a throne on which the Father sits and where the Son is at the 'right hand' (1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). In the context of 4:16 the Son at the right hand is certainly in view, and the seated Father is implied.

Several of the communion texts mention more than one divine person. In a number of those texts the point is simply that we commune with each of the persons mentioned. In others, however, there is a subtle distinction in the ways that the divine persons are involved: the communion is only *with* one (or possibly two) of the persons mentioned. Whichever other persons are mentioned serve as *facilitators* of that communion. They make it possible. An example of this is Ephesians 2:18: 'For through [Christ] we...have access in one Spirit to the Father.' Here the communion is actually with the Father. It is facilitated, however, by Christ (probably a reference to his atoning work on the cross) and by the Spirit (probably a reference to his assuring ministry in the heart; Rom. 8:15-16). Their operations are indispensable: without Christ, guilt would preclude communion with the Father; without the Spirit, fear would stifle it. But the communion is not actually *with* either of those persons. In this text the Father is in the foreground as the person with whom the believer is engaging; the Son and Spirit are in the background effecting that engagement.

We are now ready to approach our texts from the 'different angle' that I mentioned. Our earlier question was, 'which divine persons may be the object of the believer's communion?' An alternative question presents itself: 'which divine persons may facilitate the believer's communion with another divine person?' We have established that in Ephesians 2:18 the Son and the Spirit facilitate the believer's communion with the Father. That arrangement may appear unsurprising. We might assume that it is normative. However, our New Testament data yield some intriguing insights. For one thing, we discover that to the Father, too, the facilitating role may be attributed.

In John 6 Jesus' use of ingestion imagery is extensive and varied. At points the flesh and blood motif dominates. At other points manna typology is to the fore. In that latter

connection he makes this statement: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven' (Jn. 6:32). In this text, then, communion is with the Son (feeding on the bread from heaven), and it is brought about by the Father (giving the bread from heaven). The question of whether the Father's bread-giving refers here to his activity in the *historia salutis* or to his activity in the *ordo salutis* is probably foreign to the concerns of the text. But the point is clear: the Father facilitates this Son-focused communion.

The same arrangement is explicit in 1 Corinthians 1:9: 'God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son.' In most New Testament instances, the 'call' of the Father is not a mere invitation but an irresistible summons. He calls 'according to his purpose' (Rom. 8:28). This call can no more be refused than God's purpose can be frustrated. In the language of Reformed soteriology, it is 'effectual'. It unfailingly makes something happen. In this text it is *a state of communion with the Son* that the call makes happen. If that communion-creating call issues from the Father, then to the Father is attributed a communion-creating role.

But our data yield other unexpected configurations. The Father and Son do not merely facilitate *each other's* communion with the believer; they also perform that role in relation to the Spirit's communion with the believer. In 2 Corinthians 13:14 Paul's prayer for his readers is that 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.'<sup>20</sup> The Son's grace and the Father's love are elsewhere

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<sup>20</sup> Phil. 2:1 appears to be a close parallel with this text: 'If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit....' 'In light of their linguistic similarities to 2 Cor 13:13 (14)...these three clauses very likely also reflect an intentional Trinitarian substructure' (Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995], 179).

associated with the accomplishment of redemption: the former in 2 Corinthians 8:9, where ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’ is his becoming ‘poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich’; and the latter in, for example, Romans 5:8, where the manifestation of ‘God[’s]...love for us [is]...that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’ It is likely that these associations are present in 2 Corinthians 13:14. Paul is referring specifically to the self-giving grace of the Son and the Son-giving love of the Father. There appears, then, to be a redemptive ‘flow’ to the text: the work of the Son and the Father in redemptive history *leads to* the believer’s present communion with the Spirit. That communion is the climax of a redemption grounded in the great events of incarnation and atonement. The grace and love of the Son and Father, exhibited in those events, were securing for the believer this intimate fellowship with the Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

A final text that deserves attention is 1 Corinthians 12:13. Irrespective of any ethnic or social distinctions between them, the Corinthian believers were ‘all made to drink of one Spirit.’ Like John 6 this is a passage where the believer’s deep appropriation of a divine person is expressed in terms of *ingestion*. Here, however, the Spirit rather than the Son is in view. One aspect of Paul’s statement can easily be missed: the verb (ἐποτίσθημεν) is in the passive voice. The Corinthian believers have not simply drunk of the Spirit; they have *been*

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<sup>21</sup> My use of this text assumes that ἡ κοινωνία τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος is an objective genitive. It seems to me unlikely that a reference to interhuman fellowship, effected by the Spirit, is intended. As noted earlier, when κοινωνία has two human parties in view there is normally an indication of a specific, non-personal ‘entity’ in which they mutually participate. John alone refers to horizontal fellowship without mentioning any such entity (1 Jn. 1:3, 7). If 2 Cor. 13:14 contains such a reference, it is unparalleled within the Pauline corpus. When Paul writes about κοινωνία without identifying a non-personal entity, believers and divine persons are the parties in view, and it seems best to assume that meaning here. Mark Seifrid interprets the text in this way: ‘Paul’s final reference — to the “fellowship” or “communion” of the Holy Spirit — brings a decisive reminder of his message to the Corinthians; namely, salvation consists not of the possession of gifts but of communion with the Giver’ (Mark A. Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* [Nottingham: Apollos, 2014], 499).

*made* to drink of him.<sup>22</sup> The undisclosed subject of the verb — the one who effects the drinking — is presumably one (or possibly both) of the other divine persons. As in 2 Corinthians 13:14, Spirit-focused communion is here facilitated by the Father and/or the Son.<sup>23</sup>

The significance of all this may appear more clearly if we briefly narrow our focus to a single divine person. We shall consider the Spirit. According to Romans 8:15-16 the Spirit exercises an *assuring* ministry within the believer (he ‘bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God’), and that enables the believer to commune with the Father (‘by [him] we cry “Abba! Father!”’). According to Ephesians 1:17 the Spirit exercises an *enlightening* ministry within the believer (he is the Spirit ‘of wisdom and of revelation’), and that too enables the believer to commune with the Father (he is the Spirit ‘of wisdom and of revelation *in the knowledge of him*’; italics mine). According to Ephesians 3:16-17 the Spirit exercises a *sanctifying* ministry within the believer (his strengthening ‘with power...in your inner being’ would appear to have that moral sense), and that enables the believer to commune with the Son (‘strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being *so that Christ may dwell in your hearts*’; italics mine). In these texts, then, an act of divine-human communion *arises out of* the Spirit’s background activity, but *culminates in a* different divine person. That is the direction of travel.

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<sup>22</sup> The passive of ποτίζω is not easily translated into English. The ESV’s translation, adopted here, could convey a sense of coercion which is entirely lacking in the Greek. ‘Given...to drink’ (NIV) is something of an over-translation, but at least avoids that other connotation.

<sup>23</sup> The verse as a whole seems to make the drinking of the Spirit a consequence of baptism in the Spirit. On the basis that the Son is the one who baptises believers with the Spirit (Lk. 3:16), he is probably also the one who makes believers drink of the Spirit.



In other passages, however, the opposite is the case. The Spirit is ‘the blessing of Abraham,’ released to the believer through the Son’s accursed death (Gal. 3:13-14). He is the believer’s thirst-quenching drink (1 Cor. 12:13; Jn. 7:37). Believers are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). In these texts the direction of travel is reversed. The Spirit is now at the other end of the act of communion: in the foreground; at the point where it culminates; at the interface between God and the believer. ‘The Spirit is nothing other than God in his saving presence in communion with...the human being.’<sup>24</sup>

This, then, is the full boldness of the New Testament’s devotional Trinitarianism. First, it is not the case that Christian communion is *with* one or two divine persons; it is with them all. Nor, secondly, is it the case that Christian communion is *effected by* one or two divine persons; all contribute ‘behind the scenes’ to each other’s divine-human relations.<sup>25</sup>

Christian devotion may not be reduced to rigid formulae which hierarchise the believer’s three-way relationship. It is too pervasively Trinitarian for that.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Seifrid, *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 499.

<sup>25</sup> A stimulating remark by Donald Macleod may be relevant here: ‘One may...ask...whether the persons of the godhead do not seem to vie with one another for the privilege of serving. The gospels indicate not only a service performed by the Son for the Father but also a ministry...on the part of the Father for the Son’ (Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* [Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998], 88).

<sup>26</sup> It is arguable that Owen makes Ephesians 2:18 — with its flow *from* the-Spirit-in-the-background to the-Father-in-the-foreground — too normative (he terms it ‘that heavenly directory’ [*Works*, 2:269]). This is despite the fact he structures his entire thesis around 2 Corinthians 13:14, interpreted as above, with its flow in the opposite direction (‘[Communion with] the Spirit alone is mentioned [in] 2 Cor. xiii. 14’ [*Works*, 2:11]). It is possible that Owen had a methodological bias toward finding a single biblical ‘directory’, and this made Ephesians 2:18 disproportionately endearing to him. At least one Owen scholar, Brian Kay, wishes the Puritan had adopted more of a ‘cumulative evidence’ approach in his marshalling of biblical texts (Brian Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion* [Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007], 121-122). But whether or not an unhelpful methodology is the problem, in my opinion Owen’s privileging of Ephesians 2:18 is not entirely consistent with his overarching argument that the believer’s communion is actually *with* (not merely *related to*) three divine persons.

## What about the 'God' Texts?

However, having established that Christian devotion is so pervasively Trinitarian, we must confront a further question. How are we to interpret biblical texts which do not present communion in terms of distinct divine persons? When New Testament authors address 'God', to whom exactly do they refer?

In some cases the answer is obvious. In a number of Pauline Trinitarian texts, 'God' is an alternative title for the person of the Father (2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; Rom. 15:30; in each case the Son is designated 'Lord'). It might appear a confusing alternative, calculated to undermine the deity of the other two persons. But Paul is not in fact challenging the co-equality inherent in the (more Johannine) Father-Son-Spirit vocabulary. He is simply viewing the godhead from a different vantage point. In the words of B.B. Warfield:

Paul is thinking of the Trinity...from the point of view of a worshipper.... He designates the Persons of the Trinity...rather from his relations to them than from their relations to one another. He sees in the Trinity his God, his Lord, and the Holy Spirit who dwells in him.<sup>27</sup>

But what about communion texts that do not feature, alongside the reference to 'God', references to the Lord and the Spirit? Several passages mention prayer offered 'to God' while lacking any contextual hints of other divine persons from whom this recipient of prayer may be distinguished (Rom. 10:1; 1 Cor. 11:13; 2 Cor. 13:7).<sup>28</sup> Should we interpret

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<sup>27</sup> B.B. Warfield, 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,' in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), 50.

<sup>28</sup> I shall subsequently refer to these as Paul's 'God' texts. They represent an important body of biblical data, as is evident from the use that has been made of them. Michael Haykin cites an eighteenth-century Socinian, Paul Cardale: 'Had it been possible for St. Paul to entertain the doctrine of a Trinity, he would no doubt have directed his own prayers...to the Sacred Three, as is the common language of the present age' (Michael A.G. Haykin, 'To Devote Ourselves to the Blessed Trinity,' in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction*

these texts in the light of the Trinitarian ones mentioned above? If 'God' denotes the Father when other persons are mentioned, does it also denote the Father when other persons are not mentioned?

Karl Rahner would have us think so. While leaving aside the issue of authorial intent in these texts, he considers it a useful discipline for the reader to equate 'God' with 'Father'. He encourages us to 'feel ourselves into this mode of speech'. Doing so will yield the following benefit:

The Trinitarian structure of our whole religious life will become more vital, and our consciousness of Christ's mediation with regard to the Father become more sharp, than if the word 'God' merely calls to mind in our prayer to God the God of natural theology and the Trinity in general (and hence indistinctly).<sup>29</sup>

Undoubtedly Rahner has a point. The title 'God' can be thoughtlessly overused in a way that conflicts with the rich Trinitarianism our biblical survey uncovered. The kind of mental discipline advocated by Rahner is certainly calculated to do more good than harm. But the question must be asked: however undesirable it may be as a devotional norm, is it conceptually possible to relate to 'the Trinity in general'? Could that be what Paul is doing as, for instance, he prays for the salvation of his compatriots in Romans 10:1?

### **Help from the Old Testament**

Perhaps the Old Testament can help us here. Communion with God is clearly urged and described in the old covenant Scriptures. Owen's tone as he discusses this point seems unduly reluctant:

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*of Persons, Implications for Life*, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke [Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015], 184). For Cardale Paul's prayers to 'God' were an argument against the Trinity itself.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1961), 129-130.

Communion and fellowship with God is not in express terms mentioned in the Old Testament.... Though [Old Testament saints] had communion with God, yet they had not παρρησίαι - a boldness and confidence in that communion.<sup>30</sup>

Owen appears to privilege a theological assumption above a plain reading of the Old Testament. Because Jesus had not yet entered heaven as our λειτουργός, he reasons, human-divine relations were necessarily flaccid during that dispensation. Yet when David refers to his joy basking in 'the light of [Yahweh's] face' (Ps. 4:6-7), and when he describes feasting 'on the abundance of [Yahweh's] house' and drinking 'from the river of [Yahweh's] delights' (Ps. 36:8), the language and imagery do not suggest flaccidity. It is also difficult to explain how the psalms could have assumed such a prominent role in Christian worship (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) if Old Testament communion was so inferior.<sup>31</sup>

It seems, rather, that Old Testament communion — exemplified in the psalms — was full-blooded. Yet Old Testament communion made little acknowledgement of personal distinctions in God. That, at least, has been the default position of Reformed orthodoxy.

Geerhardus Vos is typical:

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<sup>30</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:6.

<sup>31</sup> It is interesting that Owen himself, when expounding communion with the Son, finds his biblical material, more than anywhere else, in an Old Testament book (Song of Solomon)! While he does not disclose his hermeneutical assumptions, he seems to approach that book as though the rich communion with God (the Son) which he identifies therein were its primary, authorially-intended meaning. (Certainly, he makes no attempt, even in passing, to reference a different primary meaning. The reader does not come away from Owen with the impression that the Song is an inter-human love story with a gospel antitype.)

Moreover, it is an important principle of covenant theology that a distinction exists between the history of redemption and the application of redemption; that in the unfolding of salvation, benefits can be subjectively experienced which have not yet been objectively secured. John Calvin refers to 'the Fathers under the Law' having benefits 'transferred to them from another source...transferred to the Law from the Gospel' (John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 10, *Jeremiah 20-47*, trans. and ed. John Owen [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003], 131). Supreme amongst those transferred benefits was intimate communion with God.

The supreme interest at that time was to engrave deeply upon the mind of Israel the consciousness of the oneness of God. Premature disclosure of the Trinity would in all probability have proved a temptation to polytheism.<sup>32</sup>

While typical, however, Vos' approach is not universal. One recent detractor is Paul Blackham. Because the nature of Old Testament communion is important to our argument, his perspective is worth a brief consideration.

In discussing the presence of Trinitarian theology in the Old Testament, Blackham moves well beyond the conventional language of 'hints', 'intimations' and 'traces'. He prefers to speak of 'the profoundly Trinitarian theology of the Hebrew Scriptures'.<sup>33</sup> He means that it is not merely the germ of Trinitarian theology that exists in the Old Testament. It is not a latent presence, languishing well beneath the surface, to be teased out by later interpreters. Rather, the doctrine of the Trinity was known and believed by the Old Testament church.

His thinking is influenced, in part, by the ease with which the New Testament writers ascribe deity to Jesus. This suggests to Blackham that they were already familiar with the concept of the Trinity before Jesus appeared. There existed in their minds a pre-prepared Trinitarian framework within which Jesus could straightforwardly be placed. Blackham is struck, too, by the Trinitarian exegesis of Old Testament texts found in the first chapter of Hebrews. But, supremely, it is to Moses, 'that most brilliant and careful Trinitarian theologian',<sup>34</sup> that he appeals. For Blackham, the Pentateuchal distinction between Yahweh

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<sup>32</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 73.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Blackham, 'The Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures,' in *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*, ed. Paul Louis Metzger (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 46. According to Warfield, the fifth century Isidore of Pelusium shared Blackham's respect for Moses' theological understanding. However, he took the opposite stance to Blackham with regard to Moses' actual writings, holding that although he 'knew the doctrine of the Trinity well enough, [he] concealed it through fear that Polytheism would profit by it!' Warfield (following his contemporary, Paul Kleinert) dismisses as

and El Elyon is a profound one. The former is *the God who appears*, the latter *the God who cannot be seen*; a distinction so stark that hypostatic differentiation would have been inferred from the start.<sup>35</sup>

Blackham's approach is fascinating. In my view, however, he does not provide compelling evidence that Old Testament worshippers were significantly conscious of their God's triune being. It is true that first-century Jewish apostles venerated Jesus as though it were the most natural thing in the world, a point that has been noted by theologians who would not accept Blackham's conclusions. Once the Son and Spirit had manifested themselves in the events of redemption, the New Testament writers found it easy to conceive of Yahweh in terms of personal distinctions. But that does not mean that they and their forefathers were already conceiving of Yahweh in those terms apart from the persons' manifestations. 'Their enlarged conception of the Divine Being'<sup>36</sup> could have seemed to them natural, congruent and fitting, while still being, in fact, an *enlarged* conception!<sup>37</sup>

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'pragmatic' the idea that Moses possessed but masked a Trinitarian consciousness, while adding: 'But we may safely affirm this of God the Revealer, in the gradual delivery of the truth concerning Himself to men' (B.B. Warfield, 'The Spirit of God in the Old Testament,' in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968], 153-154).

<sup>35</sup> Blackham quotes some striking words from Margaret Barker, describing 'the LORD of the Hebrew Scriptures as the Second God, the Son of El Elyon.' She continues: 'The one whom [the earliest Christians] recognised in Jesus had been the LORD, and so they declared "Jesus is the LORD"' (Blackham, 'Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures,' 37).

<sup>36</sup> Warfield, 'Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,' 31.

<sup>37</sup> James Denney, discussing the apostles' development of the doctrine of God, captures well this combination of profound modification on the one hand, and seamless spontaneity on the other. He refers to 'the change in the conception of God which...was necessitated by the...conception of Christ and His work.' He continues: 'The apostles were all Jews,--men, as it has been said, with monotheism as a passion in their blood. They did not cease to be monotheists when they became preachers of Christ, but they instinctively conceived God in a way in which the old revelation had not taught them to conceive Him. The Word which was in the beginning, which was with God, which was God; the pre-existent One, who subsisted in the form of God, and did not think equality with God a thing to be held fast; the Lamb who is so supremely exalted that the heavenly throne is

And, necessarily, an enlargement of their conception of God would have coloured their exegesis of Old Testament passages like the ones featured in Hebrews 1. Blackham refers mockingly to the idea that Hebrews' author was engaging in a "Christian" eisegesis, claiming to find (whether by the Spirit or a new perspective) a "meaning" that the original authors knew nothing of'.<sup>38</sup> The issue, however, is not exegesis versus eisegesis. The issue is that exegesis never operates within a vacuum; it is never a simple meeting of reader and text. It always occurs within a wider framework of knowledge. As Donald Macleod puts it, 'each text must be seen in the light of the whole system of revealed truth.'<sup>39</sup> This was true for the Old Testament saint exegeting Psalm 45, and it was also true for the author of Hebrews exegeting Psalm 45 (Hebrews 1:8-9). The difference is that the latter's 'whole system of revealed truth' included the mission of Jesus Christ. He could say that 'in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son' (Hebrews 1:2); the Old Testament saint could not.<sup>40</sup>

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described as the throne of God and of the Lamb; all these conceptions reacted on the idea of God, and gave it a new content. Distinctions were recognized in what had once been the bare simplicity of the divine nature. The distinction of Father and Son was the most obvious, and it was enriched, on the basis of Christ's own teaching, and of the actual experience of the Church, by the further distinction of the Holy Spirit. Not consciously, not reflectively, but instinctively and spontaneously these distinctions find expression in the New Testament' (James Denney, *Studies in Theology* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1895], 70-71).

<sup>38</sup> Blackham, 'Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures,' 36.

<sup>39</sup> Donald Macleod, 'Preaching and Systematic Theology,' in *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 248.

<sup>40</sup> This idea that the New Testament authors exegeted *on the basis of their fuller revelation* is not the same as the concept of *sensus plenior*. The latter suggests that concealed beneath the surface of Old Testament texts there resides another layer of meaning — an assumption which can easily become a license for very arbitrary 'interpretation'. Douglas Moo helpfully distinguishes a New Testament author's exegetical method: 'His is not an appeal to a meaning deliberately hidden in the text by God but to the meaning that that text can now be seen to have in the light of the significance of Christ. ...later revelation provides the basis to draw out further meaning from the text' (Douglas J. Moo, 'The Problem of Sensus Plenior,' in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge [Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1986], 207, 210).

It is actually very difficult for us to reconstruct — as Blackham attempts — an ancient Israelite’s understanding of his available data. Can we really be sure that he would have detected anything more than an unexplainable strangeness in the God-yet-other-than-God character of the Angel of the LORD? Are we sufficiently conversant with Jacob’s thought-processes to be able to say (on the basis of Gen. 48:15-16) that he ‘*self-consciously* confess[es] the divinity of the God who is sent by God’?<sup>41</sup> And then, if one does attempt a Trinitarian reading of the Old Testament, there is the problem of arbitrariness; of ‘decid[ing] which member of the Trinity is speaking or visible at any time in the Hebrew Scriptures.’<sup>42</sup> Having mentioned that problem (and how, apparently, it greatly concerned Augustine), Blackham does not address it.<sup>43</sup>

Despite Blackham’s thesis, then, my former observations remain tenable: Old Testament communion was full-blooded; yet Old Testament communion made little acknowledgement of personal distinctions in God.<sup>44</sup> Of course, at no point has God changed: he was a Trinity in

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<sup>41</sup> Blackham, ‘Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures,’ 42 (italics mine).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>43</sup> Even if Blackham is correct that ‘the title “Most High”...is one of the most common Hebrew titles that is reserved for God the Father’ (ibid., 46-47), ‘Yahweh’ cannot possibly always refer to ‘the Second God, the Son of El Elyon’ (see fn. 35). The title ‘Angel of the LORD’ proves that. Blackham describes the Angel as ‘the One who mediates the Unseen God Most High’ (ibid., 42). Why, then, is he not called ‘Angel of the Most High’? As the ‘Angel of *the LORD*’ it is clearly Yahweh whom he mediates! Yahweh, here, is (in Blackham [and Barker]’s terms) the First God. So the possibility of Yahweh being First or Second God is a significant aspect of this arbitrariness to which I refer.

<sup>44</sup> It is arguable that many approaches to the Old Testament that are considerably more restrained than Blackham’s still display an overzealous, exegetically untenable Trinitarianism. Andrew Malone has demonstrated this in an article on third-person self-references in the bible. He argues convincingly that this is a standard rhetorical technique (‘illeism’), present in many ancient texts, which theologians have illegitimately loaded with Trinitarian significance. Writing from an evangelical standpoint, Malone is not averse to the concept of Trinitarian adumbrations in the Old Testament; his concern is with the abuse of this particular literary device. ‘That the “two Gods” texts of Scripture hint at the plurality of God is an interpretation identified and promoted primarily by those...who defend the unity of the two Testaments, and who search



the Old Testament epoch as much as he is in the New Testament epoch. So was Old Testament communion idolatrous? No one can seriously entertain that idea. As the earlier quote from Vos suggests, the initial concealment of the doctrine of the Trinity was probably due to the danger of it being misinterpreted in a polytheistic way. It is hardly conceivable, then, that God would have kept his people from one form of idolatry by allowing them to foster another! To put the matter more precisely (and in terms of the Decalogue): it is unlikely God would have deterred a violation of the first commandment (worshipping other gods besides Yahweh) by encouraging a violation of the second commandment (worshipping a distortion of the real Yahweh).

There is, then, in the communion of the Old Testament a loose precedent for what Paul is doing in those 'God' texts. I say 'loose precedent' because the correspondence is not exact. James Torrance has a helpful summary of three models of Trinitarian worship. They are not alternatives to choose or reject, but complementary, interwoven approaches to God. The first is praying 'to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit.' The second is praying 'to each of the three persons.' The third is 'glorify[ing] the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit'.<sup>45</sup> It is surely correct to infer that Paul, in the handful of texts which we are considering, is employing that third model. Although addressing 'God' he is consciously engaging in Trinitarian worship, and in that sense this is significantly different from the worship of the

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both OT and NT for what the one triune God has personally revealed of himself therein.... I myself am enthusiastically committed to such evangelical doctrines, yet am reluctant to accept the lengths to which some of the linguistic data is pressed... a recognition of the prevalence of illeism [does not] deny either the existence of the Trinity in the OT nor the possibility of direct or indirect revelations of it there. I am simply challenging whether this particular syntactic phenomenon can bear the weight which some continue to place upon it' (Andrew S. Malone, 'God the Illeist: Third-Person Self-References and Trinitarian Hints in the Old Testament,' *JETS* 52/3 [2009]: 503, 518).

<sup>45</sup> James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 36.

psalms.<sup>46</sup> This is where Rahner, in the words quoted above, is amiss. He conceives of only two categories of communion: addressing 'God' as 'the God of natural theology and the Trinity in general'; and addressing the persons distinctly. But there are in fact three categories: addressing 'the God of natural theology'; addressing 'the Trinity in general'; and addressing the persons distinctly. The New Testament's communion is normally that of the third category (see the survey earlier in the chapter), but it can be that of the second category (the 'God' texts). Old Testament communion, therefore, being in the first category (for the purposes of our discussion),<sup>47</sup> is not identical to those instances of undifferentiated communion in the New Testament. But it does at least establish the precedent of non-idolatrous communion with a focus that is both *singular* and *hypostatically non-specific*. Paul's focus in these texts is also singular (the object of his devotion is a 'him', not a 'them'); and yet, for him too, *it is not because a specific member of the godhead is in view* that the focus is singular. The correspondence may be inexact, but it constitutes a substantial enough precedent to provide exegetical reassurance: we are not bound to interpret Romans

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<sup>46</sup> Paul Blackham, horrified by theologians like Thomas Watson who begin 'with a definition of a single divine essence before later...dealing with the three divine persons' (Blackham, 'Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures,' 35), seems to assume that any undifferentiated approach to God necessarily conceives of him as an impersonal substance. It may, of course, be true that within post-canonical history that has often been the case. But it is not *necessarily* the case. He correctly writes: 'How can God be encountered other than encountering one or more of the Persons? God is nothing other than these Three Persons' (ibid., 44). Yet Torrance's third model *is* an encounter with the persons, not with a divine essence: it is 'glorifying the one God, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*.' But it is an undifferentiated approach for all that: it is '*glorifying the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit*.' In a similar vein is Gregory Nazianzen's statement: 'When I say God, I mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' (Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 38.8, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978], 347). Indeed, it appears to be one of the triumphs of the Cappadocian theologians that they could speak freely of a divine *ousia*, and yet in their thinking that *ousia* was never *separate from* or *prior to* the three persons. Again, then, Torrance and the Cappadocians surely give us a window on what Paul is doing in that handful of 'God' communion texts. He, like these later thinkers, has no notion of an impersonal essence.

<sup>47</sup> Of course, it is not really accurate to describe Old Testament communion as belonging in the realm of natural theology (or general revelation). It was based on a considerable body of special divine revelation, even if that revelation did not include the doctrine of the Trinity.

10:1, 1 Corinthians 11:13 and 2 Corinthians 13:7 in the light of other texts in which 'God' denotes the Father.

### **The Complexities of Old Testament Communion**

While making use of Old Testament communion in this way, I am aware that the whole topic is replete with complexities. It confronts us with the strange paradox that to commune with God without conceiving of him as triune was not idolatrous *then*; whereas, of course, to commune with God without conceiving of him as triune *now* would constitute an idolatrous distortion of the real God. Furthermore, Warfield, expounding Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity, excludes non-Trinitarian worship on the basis of deeper considerations than simply New Testament revelation. He argues that 'according to Calvin...the idea of multiformity enters into the very notion of God.' The Reformer's rejection of non-Trinitarian worship was not 'purely *a posteriori*...so that he means to say that since the only God that is, is, in point of fact, a Trinity, when we think of a divine monad we are, as a mere matter of fact, thinking of a God which has no existence.' We are rather 'to understand that in Calvin's view a divine monad would be less conceivable than a divine Trinity, and...that to him the conception of the Trinity gave vitality to the idea of God.'<sup>48</sup> These words are so uncompromising that one might wonder whether my construal of Old Testament communion (with which Warfield, elsewhere, appears to agree; see fn. 34) is tenable.

Perhaps, however, the problem of Old Testament communion may at least be eased. While the saints of that period did not approach God as a plurality of persons, they approached him in a highly distinctive way *such as is only possible because he is in fact a*

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<sup>48</sup> B.B. Warfield, 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity,' in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 5, *Calvin and Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003), 191-192.

*plurality of persons*. As mentioned earlier, Old Testament communion was not flaccid; it was vibrant and intimate. It was evidently predicated on the idea that God is an intensely relational being, a God of love. Yet that idea was implausible in terms of their most basic theological tenet — divine unipersonality. As Dumitru Staniloae puts it, ‘A unipersonal god would not have within himself that eternal love or communion into which he would wish to introduce us too.’<sup>49</sup> How would a monadic deity possess the wherewithal to initiate and maintain the kind of divine-human relationships exhibited in the psalms? So Old Testament communion is not unrelated to the doctrine of the Trinity. Indeed, we can say more than that the object of that communion was *in fact* — if unbeknown to its human participants — a Trinity. We can say that their communion, by its very strength and depth, actually *attested to* the doctrine of the Trinity. It is a line of thought which lessens (even if it does not remove) the awkwardness of Old Testament communion.

A further complexity is the matter of Christian appropriation of Old Testament texts. We mentioned earlier that the psalms were part of New Testament worship (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). But, while using the same words, the Christian must invest them with a different meaning than his Old Testament forebears did. Singing them with no thought of personal distinctions in God is, in the New Testament era, an idolatrous anachronism. Letham, while contending that the psalms ‘should feature strongly in the worship of the NT church,’ only has a place for the ‘use of the Psalter *in praise to the Father*.’<sup>50</sup> This approach does

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<sup>49</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Experience of God* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), 249. Cf. C.S. Lewis: ‘The words “God is love” have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons’ (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* [Glasgow: Collins, 1956], 147).

<sup>50</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing), 422 (italics mine). Douglas Moo appears to share Letham’s approach when, commenting on a

transpose the psalms into the New Testament era through its acknowledgement of personal distinctions, but it seems both hermeneutically arbitrary and liturgically odd (we go to the psalms in order to worship the Father; we go elsewhere in order to worship the Son and Spirit!). It is surely preferable to apply to the divine names and titles in the psalms the same principle for which I have argued in relation to the New Testament 'God' texts: we read into them *the Trinity in general; the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit*.<sup>51</sup>

So I am aware of these complexities. It remains the case, however, that Old Testament communion provides a useful precedent for Paul's 'God' texts. The lengths to which I have gone to defend those texts in the second half of this chapter should not be misconstrued. It has not been my intention to undermine my earlier focus on *distinct communion with the distinct persons*. The latter is far more pervasive within the New Testament, whose communion texts are predominantly hypostatically specific in their purview. *Deliberate engagement in an irreducibly three-way relationship* is the devotional norm for the believer, and its theological foundations and practical dynamics will be the burdens of the ensuing chapters. 'The Trinity in general' (to use Rahner's phrase for the final time) is not, customarily, the believer's focus. However, integrity requires us to say that it can be. There are texts to that effect. Gregory's words may conceal the disparity of biblical attention to which I have just alluded, but the experiential interplay to which they point is real:

This I give you to share, and to defend all your life, the One Godhead and power, found in the Three in Unity, and comprising the Three separately.... No sooner do I

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passage in the book of James, he refers to 'God the Father, the OT Yahweh' (Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* [Leicester: Apollos, 2000], 205).

<sup>51</sup> Except, that is, for texts in which it is clear from the context that the Father only is in view. When using those psalms in which Yahweh interacts with the messiah, whom we know to be God the Son (E.g. Psalms 2, 45, 110), it is appropriate we conceive of Yahweh as God the Father.

conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One. When I think of any One of the Three I think of Him as the Whole, and my eyes are filled.... When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the Undivided Light.<sup>52</sup>

We *do* relate to the three persons in their co-inherent unity, as well as in their distinctness.

It is not the case that God's oneness is simply a structural consideration, a theological parameter, while his tri-personality is a devotional consideration. Amid cries of 'My Jesus I love Thee'<sup>53</sup> and 'Thank you O my Father'<sup>54</sup> there is a place, too, for Gregory's 'My Trinity'.<sup>55</sup>

The concerns of these chapters being what they are, that must not be forgotten.

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<sup>52</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 40.41, 375. Kelly Kacic perceives the same interplay in Owen's writing: 'Owen's stress on distinction allows him to freely use the third-person plural pronoun "they" ...when referring to the Father, Son, and Spirit. However, at other times Owen may refer to the three by employing the third-person singular pronoun "he."... In other words, Owen's language moves between the three persons and the one divine nature without hesitation' (Kacic, *Communion with God*, 159).

<sup>53</sup> From the hymn, 'My Jesus I love Thee', by William Ralph Featherston (1842-70).

<sup>54</sup> From the hymn, 'There is a Redeemer', by Melody Green (born 1946).

<sup>55</sup> These words featured, for instance, in Gregory's announcement of his resignation from the bishopric of Constantinople. His election to that post was being challenged by those who, in fact, disliked the boldness of his preaching. According to Philip Schaff, he stepped down with the following words: 'Whatever this assembly may hereafter determine concerning me, I would fain raise your mind beforehand to something far higher: I pray you now, be one, and join yourselves in love! Must we always be only derided as infallible, and be animated only by one thing, the spirit of strife? Give each other the hand fraternally. But I will be a second Jonah. I will give myself for the salvation of our ship (the church), though I am innocent of the storm. Let the lot fall upon me, and cast me into the sea. A hospitable fish of the deep will receive me. This shall be the beginning of your harmony. I reluctantly ascended the episcopal chair, and gladly I now come down. Even my weak body advises me this. One debt only have I to pay: death; this I owe to God. But, O my Trinity! for Thy sake only am I sad. Shalt Thou have an able man, bold and zealous to vindicate Thee? Farewell, and remember my labours and my pains' (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity*, vol. 3 [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1884], 919).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Distinct Communion: Its Theological Framework

We have established that communion with God is presented in the New Testament as tri-personal. We must now probe the New Testament for a theological framework that makes sense of its tri-personal communion. If distinct relationships with Father, Son and Spirit are possible, that possibility must have an underlying rationale. Where should we go to find that rationale?

Some of the New Testament's key Trinitarian statements are not very promising in this regard. On three occasions in John's Gospel Jesus claims that the Father is in him and he is in the Father (Jn. 10:38; 14:11; 17:21).<sup>1</sup> Two concepts at the heart of historical Trinitarian theology flow from this claim.

One is the concept of *perichoresis*.<sup>2</sup> The divine persons live within one another. Each enfolds and contains the others within himself. It is this concept that holds together the divine oneness and the divine three-ness. Robert Letham comments that 'there is nothing more of God than there is in the Father' (he proceeds to make the same statement of the

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<sup>1</sup> The language is almost identical on each occasion. 14:11 differs from the other two in placing Jesus' indwelling of the Father before the Father's indwelling of Jesus; 17:21 differs from the other two in being part of a prayer, so that the Father is referred to in the second rather than the third person.

Strictly speaking, of course, it is not a 'Trinitarian statement' as the Spirit receives no mention. It is reasonable to assume, however, that the Spirit's relations with the Father and Son are comparable to the Father and Son's with each other.

<sup>2</sup> John of Damascus is widely credited with giving this term its Trinitarian meaning. According to Douglas Kelly, however, it was by St. Hilary, three and a half centuries earlier, that the word 'was taken...to apply to the relationship in which the three divine persons mutually dwell in one another' (Douglas F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity* [Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2008], 489).

other two persons).<sup>3</sup> This affirmation of God's oneness seems vulnerable to the objection: 'there *is* more of God than there is in the Father; there is the Son and the Spirit!'

*Perichoresis* answers the objection. The Son and the Spirit are themselves in the Father. The tri-personal God can genuinely be one through this 'unity of interpenetration'.<sup>4</sup>

A second inference, building on the first, is the concept of *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* ('the external works of the Trinity are undivided').<sup>5</sup> If, ontologically, the persons are inseparable, then the persons-in-action must be equally so.<sup>6</sup> They must create, rule and redeem together. A person inhering within another person cannot remain uninvolved in any of the latter's activities. There can be no separation of labour among a Father, Son and Spirit who mutually indwell each other. Actually, this is no mere inference from Jesus' claim cited above. It is also recognisable in the New Testament's tendency to attribute the same actions to different divine agents in different passages. The final resurrection of the dead, for instance, is variously linked with the Father (1 Cor. 6:14), with the Son (Jn. 5:28-29) and with the Spirit (Rom. 8:11).

So Jesus' claim, and these inferences that derive from it, seem to leave us a long way from a theological framework for distinct communion. They appear to preclude rather than

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing), 177.

<sup>4</sup> B.B. Warfield, 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,' in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), 38.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of the development of Trinitarian dogmatics, James Mackey traces this concept back to Gregory of Nyssa and his formula: 'The oneness of their nature must needs be inferred from the identity of their operations.' If Mackey is correct, then the concept originally functioned as a supporting argument for *homoousios* (James P. Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity* [London: SCM Press Ltd., 1983], 151).

<sup>6</sup> 'If the persons mutually indwell each other, it follows that they produce each other's actions as well.... A perichoresis of action follows from a perichoresis of persons' (Adonis Vidu, 'Trinitarian Inseparable Operations and the Incarnation,' *JAT* 4 [2016]: 107, 116).



warrant a communion with God which distinguishes between the persons. How can the believer have a relationship that is distinctly with the Son, for instance, when the Son is in fact never experienced apart from the Father and the Spirit? In view of these Johannine texts we might question whether there is a solid basis for tri-personal communion. We might conclude that the New Testament simply describes such communion while offering nothing that explains or justifies it. We might decide that there is nothing more to say beyond Letham's wise words: 'Worship of the Trinity is a reality that transcends the purely didactic and argumentative;...recognition and communion have precedence over logic.'<sup>7</sup>

### ***Appropriations***

There are other avenues, however, which hold more promise. Donald Macleod acknowledges the reality of distinct communion with the three persons when he writes, 'we have an experience of each which is different from our experience of the other.' But, for him, this does not conflict with the Johannine statements and their inferences. The *opera ad extra*, for instance, while of indubitable importance, is not to be interpreted in an unqualified sense. He contends that 'the external acts of the triune God...are indeed common to all three persons, *but that does not mean that each acts in the same way*'.<sup>8</sup>

That certainly softens the seeming non-negotiability of Jesus' claim, and is an attractive caveat. It suggests, at least, that interpenetrative unity does not eliminate meaningful hypostatic particularity. But is it a biblical caveat? On revisiting our earlier

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Letham, 'John Owen's Doctrine of the Trinity in its Catholic Context,' in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic and Mark Jones (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2012), 196.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 142 (italics mine).

example — the final resurrection — Macleod’s nuance immediately looks doubtful. There is no obvious distinction in the way that the divine persons raise the dead. If there are differences within this threefold resurrecting activity, they are too imperceptible to register on the pages of Scripture.

For T.F. Torrance that imperceptibility presents no problem. Like Macleod, he argues that the persons ‘operate together...in ways peculiar to each of them’. In his view, however, ‘it is not possible for us to spell that out in terms of any demarcations between their distinctive operations’.<sup>9</sup> So we should not expect to be able to distinguish between the resurrecting activity described in 1 Corinthians 6:14, John 5:28-29 and Romans 8:11. But that does not mean that no distinction exists. The ‘ways peculiar to each of them’ constitute a mystery which we do not *observe* but simply *assume*.

Macleod, however, does not appeal to the resurrection of the dead, but to a different divine activity: ‘The triune God creates; but the Father creates as Father, the Son as Son...and the Spirit as Spirit. Each works in his own proper way.’<sup>10</sup> God’s work of creation affords an interesting case study. Like the final resurrection, it is linked in the Scriptures with all three persons. In this case, however, the persons’ distinctive contributions may be more recognisable. In Genesis 1 the Son’s role is not highlighted, but those of the Father and the Spirit are.<sup>11</sup> And these roles appear to be quite different. The distinction does not reside in a

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2006), 198.

<sup>10</sup> Macleod, *Person of Christ*, 142.

<sup>11</sup> I am assuming here that *ruach elohim* in Gen. 1:2 means ‘the Spirit of God’, not ‘a mighty wind’ as has been suggested. My reasons may be summarised as follows:

- i. Everywhere else in Genesis 1 *elohim* unambiguously refers to ‘God’.

mere preposition:<sup>12</sup> the Spirit is presented as *hovering* (Gen. 1:2); the Father as *speaking* (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). B.B. Warfield helpfully elaborates:

To the voice of God in heaven saying, Let there be light! the energy of the Spirit of God brooding upon the face of the waters responded, and lo! there was light. Over against the transcendent God, above creation, there seems to be postulated here God brooding upon creation, and the suggestion seems to be that it is only by virtue of God brooding upon creation that the created thing moves and acts and works out the will of God.... God's thought and will and word take effect in the world, because God is not only over the world, thinking and willing and commanding, but also in the world...*executing*.<sup>13</sup>

It seems, then, that 'distinctive operations' are not only to be assumed, as Torrance suggests. At points the Bible clearly identifies them. In creation the Father acts in a transcendent, commanding manner; the Spirit in an immanent, executing manner.

So this principle of *appropriations*<sup>14</sup> — different aspects of a divine work being appropriated to different persons — represents a more promising avenue as we pursue a

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- ii. There are other expressions available for 'mighty wind' less open to misunderstanding (cf. Jonah 1:4).
  - iii. *Hovering* is elsewhere in the Old Testament depicted as a divine activity (cf. Deut. 32:10-11; Isa. 31:5).
  - iv. The presence of the Spirit in Gen. 1:2 helps makes sense of the divine utterance in Gen. 1: 26.  
    'It can be argued that recognizing the presence of the divine Spirit in Gen. 1:2 would provide the "missing link" in the interpretation of the "Let us make make..." in Genesis 1:26-27. The Spirit of God would then be the only possible referent of this address *within the structure of the account itself*. In this case, the engagement of the Spirit in the work of creation would mark the beginning and end of a literary *inclusio* in Genesis 1' (Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* [Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996], 20-21 [italics his]).

<sup>12</sup> As, for instance, the distinction between the creative roles of Father and Son in 1 Cor. 8:6: 'there is one God, the Father, *from* whom are all things...and one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through* whom are all things...' (italics mine). The precise meaning intended by the prepositional distinction is hard to determine.

<sup>13</sup> B.B. Warfield, 'The Spirit of God in the Old Testament,' in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), 134 (italics his).

<sup>14</sup> It seems to have been in the thirteenth century that the language of *appropriations* started to become prominent. Mackey finds it in the writings of Thomas Aquinas (and understands it to perform there exactly the kind of concessional role I discuss below) (Mackey, *The Christian Experience*, 182). Richard Muller finds it in the work of Aquinas' contemporary and compatriot, Bonaventure. Bonaventure addressed 'the problem of the "multiplicity of appropriations" ...which seem to be predicated more "appropriately" to one divine person than

framework for distinct communion. The inseparableness of Father, Son and Spirit is never less than true, but that bare concept does not exhaust the truth of God's Trinitarian existence. There is within the inseparableness a real and perceptible distinction of activity. And that *distinction of activity* might conceivably find its counterpart in a *distinction of communion*, as the believer relates to God.

## Two Problems

However, we must proceed with caution. Like the concepts of *perichoresis* and *opera ad extra, appropriations* has a long history; and the way it has been used within Trinitarian debate presents two problems. The more minor of these is its element of ambiguity. In the example that I used earlier it is merely a different aspect of one activity (creation) that is appropriated to each person. That is how the concept is often applied, especially by more modern theologians. In older writers, however, what is appropriated to each person is frequently broader and more discrete. According to both Owen and Goodwin *the work of creation itself*, rather than any of its aspects, is appropriated.<sup>15</sup> That is a substantial divergence. It is one thing to say with Warfield that in creation the decretive dimension is

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to the others.' Muller describes a subsequent renewal of interest amongst the Puritans, and concludes: 'This is one of the points of more detailed, even speculative, elaboration of the doctrine of the Trinity that the Reformed orthodox share with the medieval scholastics' (Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *The Triunity of God* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 2003], 41, 268).

I shall use the language of *appropriations* rather than the alternative phrase one also encounters in historical Trinitarianism, *terminus operationis*. According to Vidu: 'The language of appropriation and of terminus are [sic]...interchangeable. An action is appropriated to one divine person if that action terminates in that person. Conversely, an action which is appropriated to a person...is also said to terminate in that person' (Vidu, 'Inseparable Operations,' 115).

<sup>15</sup> John Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation* (1657), in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), 2:18; Thomas Goodwin, *An Exposition of the First Chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), 1:439.

the Father's prerogative; it is quite another to say that creation *per se* is the Father's prerogative! This ambiguity may not be fatal to the principle of *appropriations*, but it is unsatisfactory nonetheless.<sup>16</sup>

The second problem is more serious. The idea of *appropriations* appears to function within Trinitarian theology as an afterthought. It is a concession to, rather than a statement of, personal distinctions. It merely qualifies the seemingly more fundamental realities of unity and indivisibility. According to Torrance, it was 'brought in by Latin theology to redress an...essentialist approach to the doctrine of the Trinity'.<sup>17</sup> If Torrance is correct, the concept of the oneness of God's being and the concept of *appropriations* did not begin on an equal footing; the latter was a subsequent appendage intended merely to nuance the former.

Robert Jenson, who resents the influence of Augustinian essentialism on Trinitarian theology, is particularly dismissive: 'The tradition tries to mitigate the damage with the

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<sup>16</sup> In his discussion of the principle, Karl Barth refers approvingly to one of the 'rules...of Catholic dogmaticians' that 'the appropriation must not be arbitrary, but must take place intelligently.' He explains that 'not each and every triad, however sensible in itself, is suitable' (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.T. Thomson [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963], I/1: 429). Behind that latter comment may lie a similar sense of frustration to the one I am expressing. It is doubtful, however, whether the 'rule' Barth advocates is concrete enough to really improve matters.

<sup>17</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 200. Torrance is not averse to *appropriations per se*, only the redressive role for which the concept was formulated. He approves of the way Barth 'restated' it (*ibid.*, 200). For Barth, *appropriations* was the 'dialectical counterpart' of *perichoresis*, 'the other form of the dialectical completion of the concept of three-in-oneness' (Barth, *CD*, I/1: 429, 431). Others, however, are less persuaded that Barth operates outside of the 'essentialist approach' which Torrance is criticising. Alan Spence is one of these, although the paragraph of Barth's which he cites is in its context an objection to an intra-Trinitarian 'covenant of redemption'; it is not the more sweeping objection to 'the reality of the relations between the Father, Son and Spirit in the economy of salvation' which Spence alleges (Alan Spence, 'John Owen and Trinitarian Agency,' *SJT* 43 [1990]: 171). For Douglas Kelly, on the other hand, Barth's doctrine of *appropriations* is undermined by his construal of Father, Son and Spirit in inadequately personal terms: 'The concepts involved in his reworking of the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of *Seinsweisen* or Modes of Being, in place of interpersonal communion, do tend to lead him at times in a certain modalist direction' (Kelly, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 503).

doctrine of “appropriations” .... But this is no help: the doctrine is either empty or modalistic.’<sup>18</sup>

Even if Jenson overstates the case, *appropriations* must at least be accounted, in Brian Kay’s language, a ‘nervous’ concept. Tracing its role within the development of Trinitarian dogmatics, he writes that ‘The doctrine of appropriations...made some allowance for the distinction of divine activity, even if in its nervousness about tritheism it cast those divisions merely in terms of how, from the human vantage point, one may *ascribe* primary authorship to an individual divine person in contrast to the others.’<sup>19</sup> The doctrine has never shaken off that nervousness; the ‘human vantage point’ caveat, to which Kay refers, still surfaces. For instance, Stephen Holmes’ treatment of *appropriations* includes this qualification: ‘What *from our perspective looks like* several discrete activities is one single inseparable work in divine intention and execution’.<sup>20</sup> Similarly Roger Olson and Christopher Hall make the following statement: ‘The functions of the Trinity must be wholly unified so that all three persons are involved in each, but individual persons of the Trinity may be *said to be* especially at work in certain activities’.<sup>21</sup>

That last citation is of particular pertinence because its authors subsequently proceed to the matter of communion. They write: ‘This principle of appropriation-attribution connects

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<sup>18</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 113.

<sup>19</sup> Brian Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 188 (italics his).

<sup>20</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, ‘Trinitarian Action and Inseparable Operations: Some Historical and Dogmatic Reflections,’ in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014), 74 (italics mine).

<sup>21</sup> Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 58 (italics theirs).

with spiritual life because one may contemplate the grace of a particular person of the Trinity and praise him for it without implying any separation of the being of God.’<sup>22</sup> So for Olson and Hall this is where the theological framework for distinct communion is to be found: in the principle of *appropriations*. Yet their principle of *appropriations* — framed in terms of semantic possibility rather than objective reality — seems too flimsy to support the bold tri-personal communion that we uncovered in the New Testament (chapter one). Vidu also connects distinct communion with the principle of *appropriations*, and he removes the latter even further from the realm of objective reality: ‘The language of appropriation, is not intended as a univocal way of parsing out the ontological structure of divine actions, as much as it is a heuristic device to facilitate our communion with distinct persons’.<sup>23</sup> Here the whole edifice of tri-personal communion is made to rest on a mere ‘heuristic device’!

### **The Narrative or Drama of Redemption**

If, then, the doctrine of *appropriations* is too insubstantial, where can we find a robust counterbalance to the formula, ‘I am in the Father and the Father is in me’? Perhaps we need to recognise the context within which that formula emerges. The one claiming such interpenetrative unity with the Father is standing on Palestinian soil as he does so; he is Jesus of Nazareth, an adult Galilean man. The Father with whom the claimed unity exists, on the other hand, is ‘in heaven’ (Matt. 6:9); he ‘is spirit’ (Jn. 4:24); he is beyond the reach of human sight (Jn. 1:18). The Johannine statement ought not to be considered abstractly. It emanates from a particular moment in an unfolding redemptive project; a moment when God the Father and God the Son inhabit strikingly different situations. Certainly, it is a

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>23</sup> Vidu, ‘Inseparable Operations,’ 116.

statement of *perichoresis*, and it has rightly been emphasised as such throughout centuries of Trinitarian debate. But, concurrently, it is a statement whose very setting implies profound hypostatic distinction.

That may appear an obvious point. However, its apparent simplicity can conceal the huge epistemological issues at stake. To ask the question, ‘how are the divine persons involved in our redemption?’, and on that basis to make inferences about the Trinity — that is a momentous choice. It is choosing as our source for the knowledge of God ‘the storytelling of the gospel’ above ‘the metaphysical principles of the Greeks’<sup>24</sup>; ‘covenantal narrative’ above ‘scientific induction’<sup>25</sup>; or, in more traditional terms, the economic Trinity above the immanent Trinity.

Of course, the language of *choosing the economic Trinity above the immanent Trinity* is vulnerable to misunderstanding. I do not mean *choosing the economic Trinity as a truer concept than the immanent Trinity*. The concept of the immanent Trinity is vital. Without the idea of God’s independent, inherent, eternal Trinitarian existence we are left with a feeble deity, ontologically tied to the gospel story and with no reality beyond it; his very being contingent upon time-and-space considerations. The biblical vision of the unchained, self-existent Yahweh is imperiled when the immanent Trinity is demeaned or denied.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 112.

<sup>25</sup> Kay, *Spirituality*, 39, 43.

<sup>26</sup> A downplaying of the immanent Trinity is often associated with Karl Rahner and his apparent aversion to the *ad intra/ad extra* distinction. It ought to be noted, however, that Rahner’s motive was not pantheistic. His desire was rather to salvage bold, full-blooded Trinitarianism. As Peter Robinson writes: “‘Rahner’s Rule’ overturns the assumption that, while the three hypostases are true to God *ad extra*, God *ad intra* is a simple undifferentiated essence or *ousia*.... [It] forced us to recognize the way in which the Trinitarian affirmation of the One and the Three became confused with the distinction between *theologia* and *economia*’ (Peter M.B.



So I do not mean choosing the economic Trinity as a truer concept. I mean choosing it as *the point of revelation*. 'There is very little in the Bible that allows us to peer into the life of the immanent Trinity.'<sup>27</sup> The disclosure we have been given of God the Trinity is a disclosure of God the Trinity in redemptive action. God as he is in redemptive action must, of course, correspond to God as he simply is; otherwise we must reckon with a disingenuous and deceptive deity. But the fact remains that this is our window on the triune Lord: his work of saving sinners. The Bible contains no separate, 'purer' unveiling of the Trinity. Much Trinitarian discussion has assumed that it does, and that the real *distinctions* between the persons reside in such concepts as begottenness (or generateness) and procession.<sup>28</sup> The respective roles performed by the persons in redemption, on the other hand, exist at a more superficial level; they are mere *appropriations*. It is a mistaken assumption. Scripture does not comprise the record of redemption *and* the revelation of the triune God. The record of redemption *is* the revelation of the triune God. As Warfield puts it:

We cannot speak of the doctrine of the Trinity, therefore, if we study exactness of speech, as revealed in the New Testament, any more than we can speak of it as revealed in the Old Testament.... The revelation...was made not in word but in deed.... This is as much as to say that the revelation of the Trinity was incidental to, and the inevitable effect of, the accomplishment of redemption.<sup>29</sup>

In another place he writes similarly:

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Robinson, 'The Trinity: The Significance of Appropriate Distinctions for Dynamic Relationality,' in *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*, ed. Paul Louis Metzger [London: T & T Clark, 2006], 53-54; Robinson himself, while helpfully exonerating Rahner's underlying concerns, maintains the immanent/economic distinction — 'God's being is not encompassed by his engagement with the world' [ibid., 56]).

<sup>27</sup> Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 403.

<sup>28</sup> Macleod is critical of this tendency when he writes: 'The problem...is that although we know that the Son is distinguished by the fact that he is begotten, we know little or nothing of what divine begottenness is.... How does generation differ from procession?... The truth is, we are lost' (Macleod, *Person of Christ*, 137-138).

<sup>29</sup> Warfield, 'Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,' 32-33.

The revelation of the Trinity was...incidental to the execution of [the] plan of salvation, in which the Father sent the Son to be the propitiation for sin, and the Son, when he returned to the glory which he had with the Father before the world was, sent the Spirit to apply his redemption to men.... The doctrine of the Trinity...simply recognizes in the unity of the Godhead such a Trinity of persons as is involved in the working out of the plan of redemption.<sup>30</sup>

This requires clarification. Paul Helm has written a vigorous defence of propositional revelation. In it he challenges the dominance of Biblical (as opposed to Systematic) Theology in the contemporary church, and the resulting idea that our doctrine of God is to be derived from the narrative of his redemptive accomplishments. He does not exclude that avenue of revelation, for 'central to the Christian faith are the *actions* and words of God'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, he sees the covenant theology of Herman Witsius as a commendable *via media*: 'Such theology has a "redemptive historical" character', but at the same time 'creation, fall, and redemption...is [*sic*] clearly set within the framework of systematic theology, employing its conceptuality.'<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Helm gives precedence to abstract biblical statements regarding the being and character of God.

In arguing for propositional revelation he makes several important points. Two are particularly noteworthy. First, narrative revelation lacks absoluteness. From the fact that something is true of God in one situation it cannot logically be inferred that it is always and essentially true of God. Helm uses the example of faithfulness. A sinful human being may

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<sup>30</sup> B.B. Warfield, 'God,' in *Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. 1, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2001), 72-74. Cf. Dumitru Staniloae who writes of 'the revelation of the Trinity, *occasioned by the incarnation and earthly activity of the Son*', and comments that 'for this reason the Fathers take all their proofs for the Holy Trinity from the work of salvation accomplished in Christ' (Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Experience of God* [Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994], 249 [*italics mine*]).

<sup>31</sup> Paul Helm, *Faith, Form, and Fashion: Classical Reformed Theology and Its Postmodern Critics* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2014), 13 (*italics mine*).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

demonstrate this quality on occasions without it being an essential, ever-present personal attribute. The same could be true of God if all we have is narrative. Secondly, the Bible does in fact contain an abundance of abstract propositions regarding the being and character of God (what Helm terms its 'one-liners'):

God asserts what his nature is, but the presence of such assertions in Scripture need not be, and sometimes are [*sic*] not, an intrinsic part of any narrative.... They interrupt it, but at the same time they must control it. They are statements, assertions, which physically intrude into the narrative telling us who the God of the narrative is.<sup>33</sup>

What should we make of Helm's thesis? How does it relate to our claim that God's Trinitarian being is revealed in the drama of redemption? First, it provides a helpful reminder that this claim must not be made in an unbalanced way. Propositional revelation is always necessary — even in those areas where God discloses himself most narratively. We know that God is triune because of the incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Spirit; in that overarching sense the Trinity is revealed narratively. Yet we know that the incarnation of the Son *is* the incarnation of the Son because of the angelic declarations to Mary and Joseph; and we know that the outpouring of the Spirit *is* the outpouring of the Spirit because of Jesus' statements in the upper room. So the narrative gives us the doctrine of the Trinity; but each episode in the narrative is partly dependent on propositional material.

Indeed, at a deeper level than this the revelation of the Trinity is dependent on propositions. Helm's point about God's self-disclosure requiring absoluteness is a valid one. From the fact that God is Father, Son and Spirit in his acts of salvation, it could not be inferred that God is eternally and essentially Father, Son and Spirit. But we know from the

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 85, 90.

Bible's propositions that faithfulness is a divine characteristic (Ex. 34:6; Ps. 100:5). This means God cannot act in a way that is inconsistent with his own nature; he cannot be untrue to himself. Thus, because of the divine faithfulness that is revealed propositionally, other truths revealed narratively *do* have absolute status. If *the God who is faithful* redeems his people in a tri-personal way, then he must be, essentially and always, a tri-personal God. His redemptive activity cannot be misleading, an unreliable representation of his being. In these ways, then, Helm's thesis helpfully nuances the concept that the drama is the sphere of God's Trinitarian disclosure.

Secondly, however, it does seem to me that Helm overstates the case. While dependent on propositional material in the ways I have just mentioned, the revelation of the Trinity is served little by the Bible's 'one-liners'. At least, it is served little by the Bible's one-liners as Helm conceives of them. From the sample he provides, it appears that these one-liners all conform to a rather fixed formula. Biblical propositions which reveal truths about God *indirectly* do not qualify; the disclosure of a divine characteristic must be the express purpose of the statement. Such propositions are of the following kind: 'God is spirit'; 'God is one'; 'The Lord looks on the heart'; 'the Father has life in himself'; 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.' Because there is no biblical verse whose sole function is to assert that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the doctrine of the Trinity is not covered in Helm's selection.<sup>34</sup> That troubling omission is surely suggestive: it indicates that our commitment to propositional revelation must be accommodating enough to recognise with Warfield that in the case of the Trinity *it plays a supporting role to the drama*. Where

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<sup>34</sup> Although Helm's list of one-liners is accompanied by the unelaborated comment that 'other statements could be added, having to do with *his Trinitarian nature*, and his moral and spiritual character' (ibid., 93 [italics mine]).

propositional revelation is narrowly defined and privileged inflexibly, the outcome will be a de-emphasis on God's tri-personal being and an emphasis on impersonal attributes (like those found in Helm's one-liners).

## The Incarnation

So it is proper to derive our doctrine of the Trinity from the biblical narrative of redemption. And, as I have already suggested, the Trinity we encounter in this narrative of redemption is a Trinity of profound hypostatic distinction. Robert Jenson refers to 'eventful differentiation'.<sup>35</sup> He means that with respect to (redemptive) *events*, differentiation within the Trinity is conspicuous. I hinted earlier at one such event: the incarnation of God the Son, a development which propelled him into a markedly different situation to any that God the Father was experiencing, had experienced or ever would experience.

At this point it is appropriate to return to John Owen. He, too, looks to the events of redemption for his knowledge of the triune God. He writes:

The great work whereby God designed to glorify himself ultimately in this world was that of the *new creation*, or of the recovery and restoration of all things by Jesus Christ.... That which God ordereth and designeth as the principal means for the manifestation of his glory must contain the most perfect and absolute *revelation* and declaration of himself.... In particular, in this new creation he hath revealed himself in an especial manner as *three in one*.... And this was done not so much in express propositions or verbal testimonies unto that purpose...as by the declaration of the mutual, divine, internal acts of the persons towards one another, and the distinct, immediate, divine, external actings of each person in the work which they did and do perform, — for God revealeth not himself unto us merely doctrinally and dogmatically, but by the declaration of what he doth for us, in us, and towards us....<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 113.

<sup>36</sup> John Owen, *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* (1674), in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), 3:157-158.

And Owen, too, finds in the events of redemption a Trinity of profound distinctions.<sup>37</sup> And Owen, too, particularly highlights the one event of the Son's incarnation. For him, 'the susception of the human nature by the Son, and all that he did therein' is an example of 'a peculiar condescension of [a divine] person unto a work, wherein the others have no concurrence but by approbation and consent.'<sup>38</sup>

I proposed earlier that the 'nervous' principle of *appropriations* provides an insufficient counterbalance to the great dogmas of *perichoresis* and the *opera ad extra*. Some have felt that Owen's 'redemptive storyline' approach tends to the other extreme and provides more than a counterbalance! According to Alan Spence, 'his theology...requires a modification of the *opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*.'<sup>39</sup> That is a controversial proposition, and it has not gone unchallenged.<sup>40</sup> Owen himself cites the traditional formula in approving terms. Spence attributes this to a desire 'to avoid the charge of novelty'.<sup>41</sup> It seems equally possible, however, that he saw the tension between *the inseparableness of the persons*'

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<sup>37</sup> 'Each person...becomes a distinct principle of operation' (Owen, *Works*, 2:407). In view of the Augustinian language of 'inseparableness of operation' (see, for example, Augustine's *Sermon on Matthew 3:13*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978], 262), that is a suggestive phrase from Owen.

<sup>38</sup> Owen, *Works*, 3:94.

<sup>39</sup> Alan Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 144.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Tyler R. Wittman, 'The End of the Incarnation: John Owen, Trinitarian Agency and Christology,' *IJST* 15 (2013): 'This picture of Owen is not only inaccurate, but also premised on a misunderstanding of...the traditional doctrine of inseparable operations.... For the Reformed tradition...the doctrine of inseparable operations is perfectly consonant with the fact that only the Son assumed human nature. [The tradition] upheld the doctrine of inseparable operations in the incarnation by appealing to the distinction between an act's *principium* and its *terminus*.... Owen is in basic continuity with the...tradition.... Owen maintains the incarnation was an undivided act of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which had its appropriative *terminus* on the Son alone' (287, 297, 298, 300).

<sup>41</sup> Spence, 'Trinitarian Agency,' 167.

*operations* and *the exclusiveness of the Son's incarnation* not as a question mark over the former, but as an aspect of divine mystery. As he so eloquently points out:

Many things are *above reason*...which are not at all *against it*.... There is no concernment of the being of God, or his properties, but is absolutely above the comprehension of our reason.... It is the highest reason in things of pure revelation to captivate our understandings to the authority of the Revealer.<sup>42</sup>

But, regardless of Owen's precise position in relation to the *opera ad extra*, the important point to emerge from his comments is this: in the narrative of God's saving acts, we find divine persons assuming such different roles that the distinctions involved can no longer be presented in provisional, concessive or perceptual terms. As Kay puts it: 'The work of redemption...stretches the...boundaries of the doctrine of appropriations.... Only by attending to the drama of redemption will the believer see how her God is an irreducible Trinity.'<sup>43</sup>

### **Other Aspects of the Drama Which Highlight Trinitarian Distinctions**

It is worth noting that that drama involves pronounced hypostatic distinction at more than one point. While the Son's assumption of human nature is an obvious moment to

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<sup>42</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:412. It seems to me undeniable, however, despite Wittman's protestations, that Owen's relationship to the *inseparable operations* dogma was unconventional within his tradition. That reference to the Son's incarnation as an act 'wherein the others have no concurrence but by approbation and consent' may be contrasted illuminatingly with another Puritan's comments on the same theme. According to Richard Sibbes: 'When I deal with Christ, and think of Christ, I must think I have to deal with the Father. Christ was incarnate; it was as much as if the Father had been incarnate; for it was by his authority' (Richard Sibbes, *A Christian's Portion; or, The Christian's Charter*, in *The Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983], 4:36). Both men are agreed on the nature of the Father's involvement in the incarnation: the event proceeded from his 'consent' or 'authority'. Sibbes, working within the parameters laid down by the dogma, enthusiastically *affirms* that involvement as tantamount to the Father entering the virgin's womb and becoming incarnate himself! Owen, on the other hand, merely *concedes* the Father's involvement as a qualifying factor — as if to say, 'he is almost a bystander in the incarnation *apart from this one matter of consent*.'

<sup>43</sup> Kay, *Spirituality*, 104.

highlight, another moment has arguably been underemphasised in this debate: the Son's work of atonement on the cross. I do not simply mean that the Son was crucified whereas the Father was not. That, of course, is true, but is really just an extension of the fundamental point that the Son assumed human nature whereas the Father did not. Indeed, it could be said of every one of the incarnate Son's experiences: he did it whereas the Father did not (hence Owen's allusion, cited above, to 'the susception of the human nature...*and all that he did therein*'). I am referring, rather, to a particular facet of the Son's atoning work. The New Testament attributes to the dying Jesus the words, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). There is no exegetical reason to interpret the cry in an exclusively subjective way, as attesting *a sense of abandonment* but not *an actual abandonment*. An actual abandonment fits with the biblical emphasis that the sins of men had been imputed to Jesus (Isa. 53:6; 2 Cor. 5:21), and he was enduring the penalty due to them. It is true, of course, that the Son was loved by the Father throughout his crucifixion (Jn. 10:17). It is also true, however, that, for one phase of it at least, he was forsaken by the Father. And that represents another detail of the redemptive story — of a different kind to the Son's assumption of human nature — that bears on Trinitarian theology. Not only must the divine unity have within it enough 'room' for two divine persons to experience diverse situations (one *ensarkos*, on earth; the other *asarkos*, in heaven); there must also be sufficient room for wrath to come between those persons. Bearing his people's damnation on their behalf, the Son must have been, momentarily, as far removed from the Father as the damned will be eternally. Their fate is to be 'outside' (Rev. 22:15), to be 'cast out' (Lk. 13:28), to 'go away' (Matt. 25:46), to be consigned to 'outer darkness' (Matt. 25:30). His



fate must have been the same. Of course, in their case the removal is not absolute,<sup>44</sup> and nor was it in his. But it is real. From the original Edenic expulsion, through Cain's banishment and Babylonian exile, to the supreme cleavage of the *eschaton*, the concepts of *removal* and *distance* repeatedly accompany the concept of divine wrath. If Calvary involved a genuine eruption of intra-Trinitarian divine wrath, then the persons involved must be sufficiently distinct that this wrath could have its normal and necessary separating effect.<sup>45</sup>

It is notable that Adonis Vidu and Bruce McCormack, two theologians whose commitment is primarily and inflexibly to the doctrine of inseparable operations, both feel the challenge that this redemptive moment poses to their system. Vidu, however, makes the following repudiation: 'The Father does not...punish the incarnate Word, since this involves an action of God terminating in a created effect (the human nature of Jesus). But

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Goodwin points out that if the inhabitants of hell remain in a biological sense alive, they must be sustained by God. He speaks of 'a double expense of power'. 'At the same instant (and that lengthened out for ever) God sets himself by his power to destroy the creature utterly, in respect of its wellbeing; whilst yet again, on the other hand, as great a power is requisite to uphold it in being and sense, and to prevent its sinking into its first nothing, or from failing before him, in respect of being [able] to bear it' (Thomas Goodwin, *An Unregenerate Man's Guiltiness before God, in Respect of Sin and Punishment*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* [Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865], 10:499).

<sup>45</sup> Macleod has a stimulating comment on the 'impossibility' of what transpired between the Father and the Son at Golgotha. Taking his cue from John's description of sin as ἀνομία (1 Jn. 3:4) — the defiance of all logic and meaning — he offers this interpretation of the cross: 'Here is the final anomalousness of sin. Impossible in itself, its existence immediately creates the possibility of further impossibilities, climaxing in the accursedness of the Son and the pain of the Father' (Macleod, *Person of Christ*, 177). There is, however, a limit to the impossibilities which even sin can create. It cannot change the deepest 'structures' of the Trinity, making the divine persons more distinct than they otherwise were. Certainly, the passing of *wrath* between the persons is a peculiarly postlapsarian notion; it is the 'impossibility' which, at Calvary, was actualised. The degree of hypostatic distinction necessary for wrath to pass between them, on the other hand, must be intrinsic.

any such action of God...must be actions common to the three.’<sup>46</sup> McCormack pursues that thought further, and describes the atonement in these terms:

The subject who delivers Jesus Christ up to death is not the Father alone. For the trinitarian axiom *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* means that if one does it, they all do it.... And that also means, then, that the Father is not doing something to someone other than himself. The triune God pours his wrath out upon himself.<sup>47</sup>

He makes these comments in an essay concerned with the ‘decided lack of interest in “ontological” questions within the realm of dogmatics.’<sup>48</sup> That may be a legitimate concern, but his interpretation of the cross appears to veer to the other extreme in its insensitivity to the simplicity of the biblical testimony: ‘He...did not spare his own Son’ (Rom. 8:32). The New Testament’s moving story of a tender Father with paternal reluctance yet redemptive resolve dealing severely with a beloved Son becomes, in McCormack’s reconstruction, a stilted and cumbersome one involving the Trinity pouring its wrath on the Trinity! It is a clear example of a tendency identified by Kay: ‘An over-emphasis on divine unity, among other things, is a drama killer, for three actors are reduced to one, and the moving interplay between them in their enacted conspiracy to redeem their people is lost.’<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Adonis Vidu, ‘The Place of the Cross Among the Inseparable Operations of the Trinity,’ in *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2015), 40.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, ‘The Ontological Presuppositions of Barth’s Doctrine of the Atonement,’ in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 364.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>49</sup> Kay, *Spirituality*, 41.

It is interesting that McCormack sees his model as key to defending the doctrine of penal substitution against charges of immorality: ‘A well-ordered penal substitution theory (one that gets its ontological presuppositions right) does not portray this event in terms of a violent action of God (conceived of as one individual) upon his Son (conceived of as a second distinct individual). ...and the moral charge against penal substitution cannot finally be sustained’ (McCormack, ‘Ontological Presuppositions,’ 365). Surely, however, the fact that the Son

There is another detail in the redemptive drama that is worth noting, one that is more pervasive than the Son's work of atonement. It is his praying. Prayer appears to have been a prominent feature of his life on earth (Matt. 26:36; Mk. 1:35; 6:46; Lk. 11:1; 22:32; Jn. 17; Heb. 5:7). But to whom did he pray? An over-zealous allegiance to Trinitarian indivisibility at this point will yield an unsettling answer. Even the fleeting thought of the incarnate Son praying to the three divine persons ought, at the very least, to drive us to Karl Rahner's conclusion: 'Kerygmatically it would be incorrect to dwell on the fact that Jesus worshipped the Son of God.'<sup>50</sup> But the charge of kerygmatic incorrectness seems too lenient. To entertain the possibility of Jesus praying to the Son is not merely a failure 'to orientate ourselves by references to modes of expression current in the New Testament'.<sup>51</sup> It is a descent into Nestorianism; a denial of the existential unity of the Saviour. But the exclusion of that possibility, on the other hand, implies a remarkable measure of hypostatic particularity within the Trinity. If the God-man prayed to God without rupturing the theanthropic union in his person — without creating an I-thou relationship between his two natures — then his prayers must have been highly person-specific. Certainly, he worshipped divine persons who were *homoousios* with, and perichoretically related to, the Son; and yet his worship was sufficiently discriminating that he did not violate the basic parameters of the incarnation by worshipping the Son. The mysteries involved in this are too great to properly account for. But that intercessory specificity inescapably presupposes a Trinity of significant personal differentiation.

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had, willingly, become the bearer of his people's sins sufficiently counters the moral charge. The vindication of penal substitution resides in the very fact that it is *penal substitution* (not the arbitrary infliction of suffering)! De-emphasising the participants' individualities is unnecessary.

<sup>50</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1961), 129.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

So whether the Son's assumption of human nature is in view, or his endurance of the Father's judicial anger on the cross, or his daily experiences as a pious worshipper, the story of redemption testifies abundantly to profound hypostatic distinction. The point is well summarised by Macleod:

There can be little doubt, if we take Scripture as our guide, that the distinctions within the godhead are analogous to those which obtain between individual human beings. The Father, the Son and the Spirit act not only *with* each other but *on* each other. Each is both conscious and self-conscious, and each plays a distinctive and unique role in redemption. That at least is the impression we gain from the New Testament, particularly from the synoptic gospels.... We must not let an *a priori* fear of tritheism come between us and the biblical data.<sup>52</sup>

And here, then, we have at last an answer to the question with which this chapter is concerned. Here in the drama of the gospel we have the counterbalance to those formidable Johannine statements; here we have a robust theological framework within which the bold tri-personal communion we discovered in the New Testament (chapter one) makes sense. For it is entirely logical that our communion with each person should be as distinct as that person's involvement within redemption. To return to my earlier language, there must be as much 'room' within the divine unity for a threefold relationship with the believer as there is for the centrifugal events of incarnation and atonement.

### **Communion's Emphases Derived from the Drama**

Perhaps we may go further. Yes, the bare fact that our redemption is a story featuring three distinct persons theologically justifies the believer holding communion with three distinct persons. But it may also be true that the ways in which the persons feature in the

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<sup>52</sup> Macleod, *Person of Christ*, 126.

redemption story *shape the emphases* of the believer's communion with each. Owen has some helpful comments on this:

There were [in the accomplishment of redemption] many acts of the will of the Father towards the Son — in sending, giving, appointing of him; in preparing him a body; in comforting and supporting him; in rewarding and giving a people unto him.... *And in these things is the person of the Father in the divine being proposed unto us to be known and adored.* ...The Son condescendeth, consenteth, and engageth to do and accomplish in his own person the whole work which...was appointed for him.... *And in these divine operations is the person of the Son revealed unto us to be honoured....*<sup>53</sup>

So for Owen our communion with each person is not merely *justified* by the drama of redemption but also *informed* by the drama of redemption. The drama imposes certain parameters when we are considering *how* tri-personal communion works. We relate to the Father specifically as the one who assumed the role *he* did in redemption; the Son as the one who assumed the role *he* did in redemption; and the Spirit as the one who assumed the role *he* did in redemption.

That is interesting. In any intimate relationship, authenticity is necessary. Genuine communion with a spouse or friend involves engaging not with an artificial persona, but with that which is most true and real about the other. In this communion, then, the believer must engage with that which is most true and real about the Father, about the Son and about the Spirit. Owen's comments assume that what is most true and real about each is his work in redemption. If the persons' redemptive activities were only loosely and arbitrarily related to their hypostatic identities — 'a kind of forecourt', in Barth's memorable language<sup>54</sup> — Christian devotion would need to push beyond those activities. It would be in

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<sup>53</sup> Owen, *Works*, 3:158-159 (italics mine).

<sup>54</sup> Barth, *CD*, IV/1: 196.

the deeper realities of his being — not his sending of the Son — that ‘the person of the Father...[is] to be known and adored.’

Rahner, bemoaning the demise of Trinitarianism, demonstrates an affinity with Owen’s assumption. He laments the tendency to present the incarnation in non-specific terms, as merely *God* becoming man. But he also sees this tendency as unsurprising:

No wonder, since starting from Augustine...it has been among theologians a more or less foregone conclusion that each of the divine persons (if God freely so decided) could have become man, so that the incarnation of precisely this person can tell us nothing about the peculiar features of *this* person within the divinity.<sup>55</sup>

For Rahner, then, each of the divine persons could *not* have become man. The Son’s mission is closely connected to his essential identity. He could not have assumed a different role in redemption. He could not have offloaded his activities to one of the other persons.

Becoming incarnate and bearing sins are not simply activities assigned to the Son. They are, at a deep, ontological level, Son-like activities.<sup>56</sup>

This is a delicate matter. As I stated earlier, the concept of an immanent Trinity must be jealously preserved. We must insist that the Son did not *need* to take human nature and die on the cross in order to fulfil the terms of his existence. God’s whole redemptive project is discretionary. The three persons’ identities as Father, Son and Spirit are complete apart

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<sup>55</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Burns and Oates, 1970), 11. James Mackey also criticises Augustinianism in similar terms. It is that tradition which he has in mind when he writes: ‘A flat and undifferentiated formula, if rigidly applied in accordance with its own logic, will yield only the sense that the one God “creates” voices, clouds, fire, or human flesh, to make visible one of the “persons”...but no visible means of manifestation has, or could have, any intrinsic relationship to any particular “person”’ (Mackey, *Christian Experience*, 157-158).

<sup>56</sup> Letham writes similarly that ‘there is something *appropriate* in the Son *qua* Son becoming incarnate.’ In view of my overall purpose in this chapter, Letham’s next sentence is noteworthy: ‘We might ask whether this irreducible distinctiveness lends sharpness to our worship’ (Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 418).

from redemption, and they would have remained eternally so had there never been redemption. At no point is the life of the Trinity dependent on created realities.

So, upholding *the immanent Trinity* means that the Son's redemptive activities cannot be themselves essential to his person, and that he would still have been the Son had they never transpired. However, upholding *the correspondence between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity* means that, once those redemptive activities do transpire, they must reflect what is essential to his person. Barth's explanation is again couched in memorable terms: 'When we have to do with Jesus Christ we do have to do with an "economy" but not with the kind of economy in which His true and proper being remains behind an improper being'.<sup>57</sup> The events at Bethlehem, Gethsemane and Golgotha do not present us with an improper, artificial version of the Son. For all that those events are freely chosen and ontologically unnecessary, they present us with the Son at his truest. They are 'fitting' (Heb. 2:10). They accord with his peculiar hypostatic identity. In Christian devotion we do not need to push beyond that redeeming Son in order to commune with the Son as he really is. In communing with the persons in terms of their redemptive roles, as Owen describes, we are engaging with that which is most true and real about them.<sup>58</sup>

Mention ought to be made of a distinction highlighted by some theologians who, like Owen, have advocated communing with the persons according to their redemptive roles.

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<sup>57</sup> Barth, *CD*, IV/1: 198.

<sup>58</sup> It must also be true that in the other *ad extra* works of God beside redemption the persons are not 'improper beings'; there, too, they act in ways that are consistent with their essential identities. This fits with the hints of correspondence we find between the persons' creative and redemptive roles. The Spirit performs an *executing work, operating from within*, in both creation and redemption. Likewise, the Son performs a *mediatorial work* in both these spheres: 'The Scriptures make it clear that the Son began his work of mediation in the work of creation itself' (Paul Blackham, 'The Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures,' in *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*, ed. Paul Louis Metzger [London: T & T Clark, 2006], 45).

Although not necessarily articulated by them in this way, the distinction may be summarised in terms of the prepositions *as* and *because*. We draw near to a divine person *as* the one who performed the role he did in redemption. However, we draw near to a divine person *because* of his inherent deity.<sup>59</sup> To phrase it more technically, the person in his redeeming work is the *objectum materiale* of Christian devotion; the person in his divine identity is the *objectum formale* of Christian devotion. Francis Cheynell's explanation, referring to the worship of the Son, is typical:

The Material Object of worship is Christ, who is both God and man, the Son of David, the Son of Mary...the Mediator and Saviour of his people from their sins. The Formal Object...[is] the Coessential and Eternal Son of God, who is one and the same God with the Father and the holy Spirit.<sup>60</sup>

This distinction might appear to challenge what I have just been espousing. Does it not encourage a devotional bifurcation quite contrary to the emphasis of Owen, Rahner and Barth? However, the rationale for the *objectum formale* must be properly understood. It was not intended to undermine the worship of the persons in their redemptive roles; it was not designed to encourage a deeper engagement with Father, Son and Spirit beneath and behind their saving operations; it was not meant to distinguish their 'proper beings' from their 'improper beings'. Christian worship, for Cheynell and others who highlighted the distinction, was unreservedly the worship of the electing Father, the atoning Son and the regenerating Spirit. Experientially, the *objectum materiale* was all that mattered. The *objectum formale* functioned as a background theological safeguard. Their concern, as Reformed theologians, was to distance their worship of the Son from any suggestion of

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<sup>59</sup> The fact that this deity is the (numerically) one deity commonly possessed by all three persons, and the implications of that for communing distinctly with them all, will be considered in the next chapter.

<sup>60</sup> Francis Cheynell, *The Divine Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (London: T.R & E.M. for Samuel Gellibrand, 1650), 338-339.



*communicatio idiomatum*.<sup>61</sup> When worshipping him for a series of redemptive activities accomplished in his humanity, they were not worshipping his humanity. While adoring him for acts which his human nature alone made possible, they affirmed that his human nature — being ‘without conversion’<sup>62</sup> — remained an illicit object of adoration. The *because* of their worship always resided in his deity. That was the significance of the *objectum formale*. It did not stifle their communion with the Christ of the economy, the Son in his salvation role. Having an underlying safeguard actually freed them to be unapologetic about such communion.

The investigations of this chapter have yielded several important conclusions. First, the drama of redemption provides a satisfactory theological rationale for distinct communion with the divine persons. Secondly, the dominant emphases in our communion with a given person are determined by that person’s contribution to the drama. In Kay’s words:

The Christian’s devotional duty is to speak to the divine persons in the corresponding way that each person is himself active in the Godhead’s project of redemption.... The more a believer sees distinct acts of each person of the Godhead as it executes the plan of salvation, the more she is aware of how she has been loved by each person, and can return that love in equally *hypostasis*-specific ways.<sup>63</sup>

And thirdly, such communion involves no artificiality because each person contributes to the drama in a way that accurately reflects his essential identity. The caveat that we worship a divine person *because of* his divine status does not alter the fact that we worship a divine person *as* a redemptive actor, foregrounding in our worship the role he thus performed.

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<sup>61</sup> That is obvious from comments like this one: ‘Some Lutherans are very much to blame in this point; for they say, that the Divine Majesty, Worship, Glory, Omnipotence, Omnipresence of the Son of God are communicated to Christ *as man*’ (ibid., 332-333).

<sup>62</sup> WCF, 8.2.

<sup>63</sup> Kay, *Spirituality*, 106, 112-113.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Distinct Communion: Issues Relating to Its Practical Outworking

We have established (i) that communion with God is presented in the New Testament as tri-personal, and (ii) that in the drama of redemption we have a theological framework within which that tri-personal communion makes sense. We must now ask, what will this tri-personal communion look like? In answering the question there are three issues I intend to address: first, the relationship between divine activities and divine attributes in redemption and, consequently, in communion; secondly, the concept of communion being *de facto* Trinitarian when not overtly so; and thirdly, the specific matter of communion with the Spirit.

#### What about Attributes?

Turning to the first issue, then, it is arguably one of the practical advantages of redemption-driven Trinitarian communion that the believer has abundant devotional 'material' to hand. Any Trinitarian communion whose content is shaped by the persons' immanent existences will find its scope limited. As Kay puts it, 'A theology of God that is not...eschatological, plot-driven, redemptive-historical...has none of [the] resources that are so necessary to make devotional anchor-points for the believer.'<sup>1</sup> Armed with the gospel,

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 41. Cf. Macleod: 'If asked, Who is Jesus Christ? it cannot be enough to answer, "The eternal Son of God!"...because such an answer omits the most important facts we know about him.... The real answer is, He is "the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). In the last analysis, form and colour are given to the only begotten by the fact that, as the Son, he did things, and suffered things, which were not done or suffered by God the Father.... It is...in terms of his peculiar role in redemption...that the Son's unique personality is defined for Christian faith and experience' (Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* [Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998], 138).

however, the believer has a wealth of appropriate foci when approaching the Father, when approaching the Son and when approaching the Spirit. Letham has a fine summary:

We worship the Father, who chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, who planned our salvation from eternity, who sent his Son into the world and gave him up for us. We worship the Son, in filial relation to the Father, who willingly 'for us and our salvation' was made flesh, who submitted himself to life in a fallen world, who trod a path of lowliness, temptation, and suffering, leading to the cruel death of the cross. We worship him for his glorious resurrection, for his ascension to the right hand of the Father, for his continual intercession for us, and for his future return to judge the living and the dead and to complete our salvation.... We worship the Holy Spirit, who...grants us the gift of faith, who sustains us through the difficulties of life as Christians in a world set in hostility to God, and who testifies of the Son.<sup>2</sup>

But in highlighting their redemptive *activities*, does such communion find itself also highlighting *attributes* of the three persons? It is Owen's approach in *Communion with God* which confronts us with this question. He argues there that the believer's relationship with a given person of the godhead centres upon its own peculiar divine attribute. We have already noted Owen's insistence that it is in his redemptive activities that, for instance, 'the person of the Father in the divine being [is] proposed unto us to be known and adored.'<sup>3</sup> This other emphasis on attributes, therefore, must concur with that one. For Owen the Father's redemptive *activities* must all be expressions of, and reducible to, the particular *attribute* that mediates the believer's relationship with the Father.

But is there value in making redemptive *attributes* as well as redemptive *activities* an emphasis in tri-personal communion? In its defence Owen's own biblical starting-point, 2 Corinthians 13:14, with its references to the Son's grace and the Father's love, would appear

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing), 419.

<sup>3</sup> John Owen, *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* (1674), in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), 3:158.

to offer some support for this approach. As argued in chapter one, there is a redemptive ‘flow’ to this text which suggests that Paul could sometimes analyse salvation in terms of particular divine persons manifesting particular attributes.

### **Misgivings**

However, other considerations must make us question the helpfulness of emphasising attributes. First, it risks undermining the basic Trinitarian principle of *shared attributes*. The principle is expressed well by Wayne Grudem:

There are no differences in deity, attributes, or essential nature between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person is fully God and has all the attributes of God. *The only distinctions between the members of the Trinity are in the ways they relate to each other and to the creation.*<sup>4</sup>

Those ‘distinctions...in the ways they relate to each other and to the creation’ are crucial, and it was for those that I argued in the previous chapter. I tried to demonstrate that such distinctions provide a sufficient basis for significantly differentiated communion with God. But Grudem’s word ‘only’ in that sentence is equally crucial. Trinitarian distinctions belong in the realm of *relationships* alone, and we must not extend them where they do not belong. They must not be projected into those other areas of God’s being that Grudem mentions: ‘deity, attributes [and] essential nature’. Here there is Trinitarian uniformity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 250 (italics his).

<sup>5</sup> At some points in the history of Trinitarian debate the line between relationships and attributes has been blurred. Gerald Bray highlights this flaw within fourth-century Cappadocian theology: ‘The Cappadocians tended to make abstractions of words like “begotten” and “proceeding”, thereby revealing a mental outlook basically foreign to that of Scripture. They turned relationships into attributes, and so invented qualities which do not exist. There is no such thing as “unbegottenness”; it is a category of thought which does not correspond to any observed reality distinct from the eternity which is shared by all three persons alike’ (Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* [Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993], 163).

Regarding attributes, indeed, it requires only a cursory reading of the Bible to conclude that power, holiness, wisdom, etc. are ascribed to all the persons indiscriminately. This is true of love and grace, the two attributes emphasised in Owen's scheme. The Spirit is not excepted: Hebrews 10:29 refers to 'the Spirit of grace'; Romans 15:30 to 'the love of the Spirit'.<sup>6</sup> In biblical Trinitarianism the Spirit is as gracious and loving as the Father and Son, just as the Father and Son are no less holy and powerful than the Spirit. Actually, it is an inconsistency of Owen's approach that no single attribute is conspicuously connected with the Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Owen, of course, would not deny the truth of *shared attributes*. He prefaces his work with this caveat: 'When I assign any thing as *peculiar* wherein we distinctly hold communion with any person, I do not exclude the other persons from communion with the soul in the very same thing.'<sup>8</sup> But there does appear to be a tension between that brief disclaimer, on the one hand, and the subsequent, unrelenting exhortations to commune with the Father in love and the Son in grace, on the other. At the very least there is a danger of

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<sup>6</sup> While it is grammatically possible and theologically unobjectionable to interpret this as the believer's love of the Spirit, or, indeed, the love created in the believer by the Spirit, the concept of the Spirit's love of the believer makes better exegetical sense. Paul, requesting intercession on his behalf from the Roman Christians, is underlining the dignity of intercessory ministry. When he mentions 'the Lord Jesus Christ' he likely has in mind his intercessory ministry (as described in 8:34). And when he mentions 'the love of the Spirit' he likely has in mind that love expressed specifically in *his* intercessory ministry (as described in 8:26-27). His point is: 'if you Roman Christians will pray for me you will find yourselves in the best possible company; you will be participating in the same ministry as God the Son and God the Spirit!'

<sup>7</sup> Consider, for instance, the concessive, anti-climactic way in which the following sentence concludes: 'It is by the Spirit alone that we have fellowship with Christ in grace, and with the Father in love, *although we have also peculiar fellowship with him*' (John Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation* (1657), in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004], 2:20 [italics mine]).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:18.

misunderstanding; of the reader receiving the impression that the divine attributes are unevenly distributed among the persons.

My second misgiving relates to the actual attributes Owen has chosen to encapsulate, respectively, the Father and Son's redemptive activities. Owen is arguably at his best when treating communion with the Father, and few would dispute his emphasis on the Father's love as the fountainhead of redemption:

This love [Paul] makes the hinge upon which the great alteration and translation of the saints doth turn.... [We were] all naught, all out of order, and vile. Whence, then, is our recovery? The whole rise of it is from this love of God.<sup>9</sup>

But is Owen equally convincing when he connects the Son with grace?

It is customary to detect a specific nuance in the New Testament concept of grace. Grace is exactly contrary to what is deserved; it is receiving that to which one has forfeited the right. While this nuance may not always be present, the word is not infrequently used in salvation passages particularly concerned with human inability and divine agency, a context in which the traditional interpretation makes good sense (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 2:5, 8; Tit. 3:7). Indeed, defining grace like this provides the main way of distinguishing it from love.<sup>10</sup>

Turning, then, to the Son, certainly there are texts which connect him with this attribute of grace. In itself, however, that is unremarkable. We have already noted the principle of *shared attributes*: if grace is a divine attribute at all, then we would expect it to be

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2:22.

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting that in Gerald Bray's arrangement of the divine attributes grace is not included as one of his five 'communicable attributes of God's personal character'. Love is included, and it is accompanied by an asterisk directing the reader to the comment: 'including grace, mercy and patience' (Bray, *Doctrine of God*, 214). For Bray, then, grace is subsumed under love; it is *love-with-a-nuance*. Cf. D.A. Carson: 'It appears that grace is a loving response when love is undeserved' (D.A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984], 23).

connected sometimes with the Son.<sup>11</sup> But the real question is this: is the ‘undeserved’ nuance peculiarly pronounced in the Son’s redemptive role? Do his particular activities of incarnation and death have a more striking association to *unmerited beneficence* than the other constituent activities of God’s redemption do?

It is difficult to answer such questions in the affirmative. It is true that all the Trinity’s redeeming grace comes to us through the Son’s actions. Thus, for instance, the Spirit’s saving operations within us are ‘because of righteousness’ (Rom. 8:10): it is the righteousness-securing work of the Son which makes possible the life-giving work of the Spirit. But that does not mean that the Son is the gracious person who really desires our salvation, while the Spirit is more reluctant, contributing begrudgingly once obligated to do so by the cross. Owen himself is clear on this in relation to the Father. He laments that ‘Many think there is no sweetness at all in him towards us, but what is purchased at the high price of the blood of Jesus.’<sup>12</sup> Of course, the blood of Jesus is necessary: it enables the Father to justly adopt us as his children.<sup>13</sup> But Owen’s point is that the Father’s sweetness toward us was antecedent to — and, indeed, the origin of — the cross of Calvary. The

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<sup>11</sup> Literary considerations must be taken into account when treating these texts. In 2 Corinthians 13:14 the Son’s redemptive role is encapsulated as ‘grace’ not because that encapsulation is sacrosanct but because Paul has earlier in the epistle described the Son’s saving mission in terms of grace (2 Cor. 8:9). And that earlier description of the Son’s saving mission in terms of grace has its own contextual rationale. It is because Paul wants the Corinthian believers to ‘excel in [an] act of grace’ (2 Cor. 8:7) — the collection of a monetary gift for the saints in Jerusalem — that he singles out the gracious dimension of the Son’s work.

<sup>12</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:32.

<sup>13</sup> In another place Owen refers to ‘adversaries we have to do with’ who imagine divine justice ‘to be so free and dependent on the mere free motion and good pleasure of the divine will, that should not that oppose, God might by his nod, by his word, without any trouble, by other modes and ways besides the satisfaction of Christ, if it only seemed proper to his wisdom, take away, pardon, and make an end of sin, without inflicting any penalty for the transgression of his law’ (John Owen, *A Dissertation on Divine Justice: Or the Claims of Vindictive Justice Vindicated* (1653), in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004], 10:506-507).

Puritan will not tolerate the idea of a disinclined Father being obligated by a gracious Son to deal with us in a friendly manner.<sup>14</sup> At the forensic level, then, the whole of salvation may turn on the Son's sacrifice at the cross; but the gracious urge to save an undeserving people was a shared urge. In the words of a hymn, 'Father, Son, Spirit in blessing agree'.<sup>15</sup> The Son does not have a stronger connection to redeeming grace than the other persons do.<sup>16</sup>

Emphasising attributes, then, within redemption-driven tri-personal communion is problematic: it threatens the principle of *shared attributes*, and it also involves unconvincing associations of particular roles and attributes. However, there is a simple and tenable way in which it can be done, as exemplified by Warfield in one helpful sentence. He refers to the believer's 'threefold relation to the saving God, experienced...as Fatherly love sending a Redeemer, as redeeming love executing redemption, as saving love applying redemption'.<sup>17</sup> It is not that in redemption love is associated with the Father while other attributes are associated with the other persons. It is rather that *redeemer-sending love* is associated with

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. J.I. Packer's colourful reference to 'the tritheistic fantasy of a loving Son placating an unloving Father and commandeering an apathetic Holy Spirit in order to save us' (J.I. Packer, Introduction to *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, vol. 1, by Herman Witsius [Escondido, California: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990], no pagination).

<sup>15</sup> From the hymn, 'God of the Covenant', by Jessie F. Webb (1866-1964).

<sup>16</sup> It ought to be noted that for Owen 'grace' has more than one meaning (Owen, *Works*, 2:47). Certainly, he recognises the concept of 'free favour' as one of its 'eminent significations'. But he argues that grace can also mean 'comeliness'. So, *communion with the Son in grace* includes the idea that in this particular divine-human relationship the *beauty* of the divine person is especially prominent. Owen's linking of the Son with this strand of grace — 'personal grace' as he terms it — is not without warrant. The Old Testament texts he references (Ps. 45; The Song of Solomon) do admit of a Christological interpretation, and when thus interpreted do present the believer's communion with the Son in terms of attraction to a beautiful suitor. Both communion with the Father and communion with the Spirit lack that marital dimension, and so there *is* a 'personal grace' particularly relevant to the believer's relationship with Christ. However, that strand of grace is not the one intended in Owen's primary text, 2 Corinthians 13:14. Moreover, it is difficult to think of a single New Testament text where the word 'grace' is used in that way in connection with the Son.

<sup>17</sup> B.B. Warfield, 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,' in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), 56.



the Father while other expressions of love are associated with the other persons. And the same could be said of grace, and of other attributes. Owen's desire to include a focus on divine attributes within the realm of Christian devotion is a healthy one. Redemptive actions become dry and incoherent when divorced from the love, grace, wisdom, righteousness, etc. that impel them. Warfield's sentence envisages a redemption-driven communion that does not neglect attributes, but nor does it misconceive them. The stretching of a single attribute (like *love*) to take account of each person's redemptive activities is a felicitous move.<sup>18</sup>

### **James Durham and *De Facto* Trinitarianism**

We shall turn now to the second issue with which this chapter is concerned: the concept of communion being *de facto* Trinitarian when not overtly so. In his commentary on Revelation the seventeenth-century theologian James Durham includes a stimulating discussion *concerning the Holy Trinity and object of worship*.<sup>19</sup> In this short treatment Durham writes in favour of distinct communion with the persons. He says plainly, 'We worship the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.'<sup>20</sup> For Durham, however, because a Trinitarian person's 'adorability' resides only in his possession of godhead, and because there is only one godhead common to all the persons, all are worshipped when one is worshipped. We

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<sup>18</sup> A more lyrical counterpart to Warfield's expression may be found in this verse from Frances Ridley Havergal:

O Love that chose, O Love that died,  
O Love that sealed and sanctified,  
All glory, glory, glory be,  
O covenant Triune God, to thee! (From the hymn, 'Jehovah's Covenant Shall Endure', by Frances Ridley Havergal [1836-1879].)

<sup>19</sup> This work was first published in 1658, just one year after Owen's *Communion with God*.

<sup>20</sup> James Durham, *A Learned and Complete Commentary upon the Book of Revelation, Delivered in Several Lectures* (Glasgow: David Niven, 1788), 25.

are not to think (regarding the persons) that 'he, who is not named, were less worshipped than he who is named.'<sup>21</sup>

This thought surfaces in Owen's writing, too. He writes:

The divine nature is the reason and cause of all worship; so that it is impossible to worship any one person, and not worship the whole Trinity.... In the invocation of God the Father we invoke every person; because we invoke the Father as God, every person being so.... When...we are led to worship...any person, we do herein worship the whole Trinity; and every person, by what name soever, of Father, Son, or Holy Ghost, we invoke him. ...when any work of the Holy Ghost (or any other person), which is appropriated to him...draws us to the worship of him, yet he is not worshipped exclusively, but the whole Godhead is worshipped.<sup>22</sup>

However, whereas for Owen this functions as a caveat qualifying his main argument that 'the saints have distinct communion with the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit',<sup>23</sup> for Durham it seems to be the dominant concern. And this concern appears to be the basis for two distinctive features within his discussion.

One is Durham's aversion to hypostatic transitions within prayers. He comments that 'By naming one person after he hath named another...[the worshipper] doth not vary the object of worship, as if he were praying to another than formerly; but...still it is the same one God.' He then adds: 'Because our imagination is ready to foster such divided conceptions...it is safest not to alter the denomination of the persons in the same prayer'.<sup>24</sup> So, irrespective of the worshipper's hypostatic focus, Christian praise always has in fact the same single object.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>22</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:268-269. Cf. Gregory Nazianzen: 'The adoration of One is the adoration of the Three, because of the equality of honour and Deity between the Three' (Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 5.12, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978], 321).

<sup>23</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:9.

<sup>24</sup> Durham, *Revelation*, 28.

This means that it is *unnecessary* to ‘alter the denomination of the persons’; indeed, such a practice is *undesirable* because of its potential to obscure the singularity of the object.

The other distinctive feature is his application of the *objectum considerationis* in Christian devotion. This he defines as ‘the consideration that the worshipper hath of [the] object in worshipping of him; and is as a motive thereto...whereby the heart of the worshipper, by taking up the object worshipped under such a consideration, is warmed with love and thankfulness’.<sup>25</sup> He offers this example of the principle:

The relations that God took on him to be the Redeemer of his people from Egypt...did give no new object of worship: yet did they give some external denominations or specifications of that object, God, to them: the consideration whereof, in their worshipping, did much qualify the object to them; so that, with the more thankfulness and confidence, they might approach to him.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, then, when the believer, on a given occasion, prays to the Son rather than to the Father, that constitutes ‘no new object of worship’. However, addressing the Son might give the believer a more vivid impression of the Son’s redeeming acts than he would otherwise entertain, and result, therefore, in *the one object of Christian worship* being more fervently invoked than he might otherwise have been. That, for Durham, is the value of distinct communion. He proposes a prayer in order to illustrate his point: ‘O Advocate, plead for me’.<sup>27</sup> That, obviously, is a prayer to the Son. It is a prayer which accords well with my earlier argument for redemption-driven communion with the persons: it centres on one aspect of the Son’s redemptive work, his present intercession for the saints before the Father. According to Durham, however, ‘It must be one in the matter, as if, in different

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 31.

expressions, by naming the Father, we should pray, “O Father, make me partaker of all the benefits of Christ’s intercession””.<sup>28</sup> In *objective* terms, then, it is immaterial whether one sometimes, always or never addresses the Son directly when prayerfully contemplating his redemptive acts. So is there anything to be gained by invoking the Advocate himself (rather than the Father) when his intercession is the theme of one’s prayer? Yes, there are *subjective* benefits: ‘that expression is...made use of for strengthening of faith, without any new, or different act of faith, but such as is used with other expressions.’<sup>29</sup>

For Durham communion simply *is* Trinitarian even if it is not overtly so. The two features of his discussion which I have highlighted both, in their own ways, are calculated to restrict overt Trinitarianism in Christian communion. The first explicitly commends a mono-personal focus (albeit in the context of a single act of prayer); the second, for all its apparent amenableness to tri-personal invocation, moves it in the direction of mere psychological expedience.

### **Worshipping the Son to the Glory of the Father**

Of course, Durham’s underlying premise is unquestionable. The interpenetrative unity of Father, Son and Spirit precludes the idea that a worshipper must work his way through all the persons in order to worship the whole God. Moreover, in exclusively addressing one person a worshipper may still be highly mindful of — and, indeed, make plentiful third-person references to — the other persons; he is thus absolved of any reversion to Old Testament worship (as discussed at the close of chapter one). Is Durham, in his downplaying

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 31.

of overt devotional Trinitarianism, more true to his underlying premise than Owen is?<sup>30</sup>

More importantly, is there not at least one biblical text which indicates the automatic reception of worship by a divine person *when a different divine person is actually being invoked?*

The text to which I refer is Philippians 2:11. This verse forms the conclusion to Paul's Christological 'hymn', his lyrical description of the Son's abasement and subsequent glory. Throughout the hymn Paul's grammar reveals a tight logic, and this becomes particularly pronounced as the thematic focus shifts from humiliation to exaltation. It is clear, for instance, that Christ's exaltation was not a self-contained phenomenon: it was predicated on the obedience which preceded it (*'Therefore God has highly exalted him...'*). But Paul's grammar takes us further than that. The exaltation was not an end in itself, either: it was with a view to widespread worship through bowed knees and confessing tongues (*'so that at the name of Jesus...'*). That is a sublime scenario, and one with which the hymn might be expected to end. Fascinatingly, however, it does not end on that note of universal Christological doxology. It concludes instead with the acknowledgment that this worship of Jesus is 'to the glory of God the Father.' Ostensibly, it is not to *the Father* that these worshippers are bowing, and it is not the Lordship of *the Father* that they are confessing. Apparently, however, they are glorifying the Father even when he is not the immediate focal point of their praise. A different divine person is the stated object of the adoration, and yet it somehow redounds to his glory, too. Is that not a biblical testimony to the intrinsic

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<sup>30</sup> Kopic summarises well the rather different direction in which Owen was led by the same premise: 'Since he believes that in worshipping any one divine person, the Christian is worshipping the whole Trinity, *he does not hesitate to endorse the view that prayers may be made to each divine person*'! (Kelly M. Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007], 163-164 [italics mine]).

Trinitarianism of Christian worship? Does it not indicate that an act of praise is necessarily Trinitarian whether or not that is patent in the expressions and formulae employed?

Certainly, there are commentators who explain the verse in terms of the principle which so concerned Durham: the persons' shared possession of the one divine essence. Matthew Harmon, for instance, sees it as the perfect complement to the foregoing verses. There the particularity of the Son (as the one who, in contradistinction to the Father, experienced humiliation) is emphasised, so that 'we see...the bankruptcy of any Sabellian or modalistic doctrine of God which confuses the persons of the Deity.' But the hymn's ending balances that emphasis by conflating the Son's glorification with the glorification of the Father, 'whom Paul clearly sees as one in essence with the Son, while yet being a Person distinct from Him.'<sup>31</sup> For Harmon, then, the Father's indirect reception of worship in Philippians 2:11 results from his essential unity with the Son, a theme Paul wants to include in his hymn for the sake of theological completeness.<sup>32</sup>

However, this is not the only possible interpretation of the text. Donald Macleod, for instance, understands the Father's inclusion not in ontological terms but in terms of the Son's 'mind' (verse 5). That is the great theme of the hymn's first half: the self-renouncing mindset which took Christ from his native situation 'in the form of God' all the way to 'the point of death, even death on a cross.' It might be assumed that this mindset disappears from the hymn as Christ's exaltation becomes the focus of attention. Macleod does not think so. In his view it is the reason for this concluding clause. The point is that 'even his

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<sup>31</sup> Matthew Harmon, *Philippians* (Fearn, Tain: Mentor, 2015), 234.

<sup>32</sup> Markus Bockmuehl appears to be thinking in similarly essentialist terms when he understands this verse to be 'securing the unequivocally monotheistic orientation of Paul's thought' (Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* [London: A & C Black, 1997], 148).

exaltation is not to be used for his own purposes.’<sup>33</sup> The ascended Christ is now ‘dedicating his exalted state to giving glory to God the Father’.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the Father is not glorified in an automatic way, simply because he is *homoousios* with the Son. Rather, he is glorified by a conscious decision of the Son who, as instinctively self-renouncing now as at Golgotha, redirects his own adoration toward the Father.

Macleod’s interpretation is attractive because of its contextual sensitivity. However, it does not seem the most natural reading of the verse itself. The movement in the text *from* the worship of Christ *to* its consequence (the glorification of the Father) is seamless; there is no suggestion that the process depends on a radical, voluntary decision of the exalted Christ. It seems to me, moreover, that there is another interpretation which *is* consistent with the verse’s seamlessness and which at least reflects the hymn’s contours (if not its ‘mind’ motif). We have already noted the ‘so that’ at the beginning of verse 10. Equally important is the stress on the Father’s agency in verse 9: ‘*God* has highly exalted him’. The combined force of those two details is this: *it was (and is) the Father’s express desire that the Son, through his exaltation, should be universally worshipped*. In his jealousy for the honour of his obedient Son, the worship of Jesus is what he demands of every human being. Bowing the knee to Jesus is ‘*the obedience of faith*’ (Rom. 1:5, italics mine); it is a faith which the Father commands. Whenever it occurs there is an implicit acknowledgement of the Father’s arrangement,<sup>35</sup> and compliance with his wishes, and in that sense he, too, is

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<sup>33</sup> Macleod, *Person of Christ*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Donald Macleod, *Christ Crucified: Understanding the Atonement* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 250.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Gerald Hawthorne: ‘Whenever and by whomever the confession is made that “Jesus is Lord,” God...is glorified...for he has planned that this be so’ (Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians* [Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983], 94).

glorified. Like Macleod's, this interpretation locates the intra-Trinitarian sharing of worship in the functional rather than the ontological realm. This means that it would be illegitimate to extrapolate the shared worship of Philippians 2:11 to other hypostatic configurations; to infer from it, for instance, that the Son indirectly receives worship that is offered to the Father.

At first sight Philippians 2:11 appears to encourage a relaxing of our commitment to overt devotional Trinitarianism. If worship extends automatically from the divine person being addressed to the others who are not addressed, hypostatic inclusiveness need not be high on the worshipper's agenda. A closer analysis of the text, however, suggests that this may not be its meaning. In my opinion it provides no grounds for de-emphasising overt devotional Trinitarianism.

### **Hypostatic Transitions in Prayer**

But what should we make of those two previously-discussed features which in Durham's work buttress that de-emphasising trend. Do they have any intrinsic merit? In the first place, should we at least agree with him on the questionableness of hypostatic transitions within prayers?

I do not think we should. Durham is correct, of course, that 'our imagination is ready to foster' erroneous conceptions of God. But that is always the case; it is not unique to one particular form of praying. The danger is equally present if we do *not* 'alter the denomination of the persons in the same prayer'. If one practice tempts our imaginations with tritheism, the other tempts them with Unitarianism. There is no reason to single out the first of those temptations as more pernicious than the second.



It is worth noting that Owen rejects one version of invocational movement between the persons. He refers disparagingly to ‘that way of praying to the Trinity, by the repetition of the same petition to the several persons.... as though we first should desire one thing of the Father, and be heard and granted by him, then ask the same thing of the Son, and so of the Holy Ghost’.<sup>36</sup> But the problem there is not hypostatic transitions *per se*; it is rather the threefold repetition of *the same petition*. Such a practice may well betray that ‘divided conception’ of God which Durham is so anxious to avoid. It betrays, too, a severance of the connection between communion and redemption. The believer immersed in the redemptive plotline will have certain requests for which he feels his ‘indulgent Father’<sup>37</sup> the naturally appropriate audience; others for which he feels his interceding mediator the naturally appropriate audience; still others for which he feels his sanctifying Spirit the naturally appropriate audience. In the practice which Owen describes, these instincts seem to be absent. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are three bare objects of invocation, not the three actors in the drama of salvation.

The threefold repetition of a single petition is a practice which Owen rightly dismisses as ‘groundless, if not impious.’<sup>38</sup> However, the use of hypostatic transitions in prayer need not take that form. It might be helpful to note two historical examples, representing quite different traditions. The first is *The Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England* (1662). Its *Te Deum Laudamus*, for instance, begins, ‘We praise thee, O God: we acknowledge thee

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<sup>36</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:268-269.

<sup>37</sup> The term is Calvin’s (John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 21, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, trans. William Pringle [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003], 207).

<sup>38</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:268.

to be the Lord. All the earth doth worship thee: the Father everlasting.’ There then follow about ten clauses addressing the Father, reflecting on the worship he receives from angels, apostles, prophets and martyrs in heaven, and from his church on earth. This opening section of the prayer references the ‘only Son’ and ‘the Holy Ghost’, but in the third-person as those also worshipped with ‘thee’. However, that section then gives way to another which begins, ‘Thou art the King of Glory: O Christ.’ This is followed by about seven clauses addressing Christ on the themes of his sonship, incarnation, death, resurrection, heavenly enthronement, future return and present ministry.

The other example is the extemporary public praying of Charles Spurgeon in the nineteenth century. Some of his Trinitarian prayers resemble the one just cited from *The Book of Common Prayer*: like it, they feature a large section addressing one divine person, followed by a large section addressing another divine person. Others, however, move much more quickly between the persons. This one, for instance, is an appeal for divine preservation:

We now commit ourselves again to Thy keeping, O faithful Creator; to Thy keeping, O Saviour of the pierced hand; to Thy keeping, O eternal Spirit, who art able to keep us from falling, and to sanctify us wholly that we may be made to stand among the saints in light.<sup>39</sup>

Another pleads with the triune God to come amongst his people as they worship him:

O Lord, we wait upon Thee now, and ask the overshadowing of Thy presence! Jesus of Nazareth, pass by just now! Divine Spirit, rest upon us now! Holy Father, look upon Thy children now; and make this place to be glorious at this good hour!<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *The Pastor in Prayer: Being a Choice Selection of C.H. Spurgeon’s Sunday Morning Prayers* (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1971), 76-77.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-84.

But even these faster-moving prayers exhibit theological care. It might appear that Spurgeon desires the same thing from all three persons and so commits the error described by Owen. However, while he does desire the same blessing from all the persons, he desires from each a form of that blessing which accords with the person's particular redemptive role. In the first prayer, he desires from the Son a 'keeping' that is of a piece with his willingness to be 'pierced' for his people; from the Spirit a 'keeping' that addresses specifically the potential in the believer for moral self-destruction. In the second prayer, he desires from Jesus that he should come among the congregation with healing power, just as he once 'passed by' a blind beggar (Luke 18:35-43); from the Father that he should come with paternal affection to the 'children' he has adopted by grace.

It is also noteworthy that these prayers with hypostatic transitions commonly contain other expressions which emphasise the divine unity. Spurgeon's prayer for divine preservation ends with this doxology: 'And now, unto the Father, the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, Israel's one God, be glory throughout all the world.' The prayer for God's presence amongst his worshippers contains, at an earlier point than the petition cited above, this expression: 'Blessed God [singular], Father, Son, and Spirit, our whole spirit would reverence Thee [singular]'. One prayer in which Spurgeon's hypostatic foci are more protracted features these introductory words:

O Lord, we feel as if we must just stand before You in adoration. Glory be unto the Triune God, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, "the God of the whole earth shall He be called." Let Jehovah be worshipped everywhere. Creator, Preserver, Redeemer, the Friend and Helper of man: unto His name be glory for

ever and ever. You have revealed Yourself unto us in trinity as well as in unity, and we adore You as You reveal Yourself.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, the item I quoted from *The Book of Common Prayer*, having addressed the Father and the Son, moves into a concluding series of petitions featuring the repeated 'O Lord'. These appear to be addressing God in his undifferentiated unity. Accompanied, then, by acknowledgements that the three persons are one God, hypostatic transitions in prayer are not calculated to encourage tritheistic notions.

We referred in chapter one to the experiential interplay described by Gregory Nazianzen: the worshipper's constant, organic movement between the one and the three. The 'equal ultimacy'<sup>42</sup> of these two realities about God — his essential oneness and his hypostatic threeness — makes this oscillating approach the most fitting devotional model. In those moments, however, when the oneness recedes from view, and the believer is 'illuminated by the Splendour of the Three',<sup>43</sup> another 'equal ultimacy' comes into the equation: the equal ultimacy of Father, Son and Spirit. This equal ultimacy, too, is best served by an oscillating devotional model; this time an interplay between the persons, as exemplified in Spurgeon's prayers. In this context Gregory's words could be adapted along these lines: 'No sooner do I conceive of the Father than I am illumined by the splendour of the Son; etc.' There is perhaps a hint of this in the language of Calvin's Catechism: 'Our intelligence is not able to

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<sup>41</sup> *Spurgeon's Prayers Personalised*, <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/spurgeon/Spurgeons%20Prayers.pdf>; accessed 24/03/2017.

<sup>42</sup> The term is Letham's (Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 381), although probably borrowed by him from Cornelius Van Til.

<sup>43</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 40.41.

conceive the Father without at the same time comprehending the Son in whom His living image is repeated, and the Spirit in whom His power and virtue are manifested.’<sup>44</sup>

### ***Objectum Considerationis***

How should we respond to the other distinctive feature in Durham’s discussion? Is it proper to place person-specific praying in the category of *objectum considerationis* — to view it merely as a luxury which enriches our experience of communion? Certainly, we must be careful to avoid a formulaic approach to prayer, as though it constitutes valid or invalid worship depending on which persons are addressed at which points. Durham is surely correct when he writes:

We grant, that sometimes, de facto, [an invocatory expression] may be used in sincerity, and accepted by God, when there is much confusion in reference to...the person: because it may have what is essential, viz. an adoring of God, and an exercise of faith in Christ, under that expression.... Thus, no question, many prayers of the saints, where faith hath been in the Mediator, have been accepted, although there hath been much indistinctness, as to the object, in many things.<sup>45</sup>

This corresponds with Paul’s outlook as he discusses corporate worship in 1 Corinthians 12-14. He writes: ‘Earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues’ (1 Cor. 14:39). Here we have one aspect of worship which Paul commends (prophesying), and

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in B.B. Warfield, ‘Calvin’s Doctrine of the Trinity,’ in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 5, *Calvin and Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003), 192.

<sup>45</sup> Durham, *Revelation*, 31-32. Kay makes a similarly wise comment: ‘The New Testament model is that trinitarian theology inform the believer’s worship and prayer, but without regimenting any particular form of prayer or meditative structure — the trinitarian character of Christian devotion should be so deeply rooted as to manifest itself spontaneously in different degrees of complexity’ (Kay, *Spirituality*, 33).

another which he does not commend but cannot condemn (speaking in tongues). There is a difference of desirability between the two, but not of legitimacy.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, we have biblical examples that are comparable with Durham's petition, 'O Father, make me partaker of all the benefits of Christ's intercession.' In Ephesians 1:17 Paul asks *the Father* that the Ephesian believers might partake of the benefits of the Spirit's wisdom and revelation. Likewise, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit being given to those children who ask their *heavenly Father* (Lk. 11:13). As Kay points out, all benefits conferred by the Spirit 'have been purchased by the Son, through the design of the Father [so that] the believer may directly appeal to the Father and the Son to send these gifts through the Spirit.'<sup>47</sup> No redemptive privilege is the preserve of a single divine person. Any person whom we address necessarily has some relationship to the particular blessing we seek.

However, while it may be *legitimate* to only ever address the Father, for instance, it does not follow that praying also to the Son and/or the Spirit<sup>48</sup> yields benefits of a purely subjective kind. The *objectum considerationis* is no doubt real: addressing the persons themselves concerning their distinct contributions to redemption may well excite our

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<sup>46</sup> My comments regarding the Corinthian situation may require clarification. It is my understanding that the components of valid Christian worship are those instituted by God, and that there are only a few of them. Each of those divinely instituted components, however, admits of different forms of administration, and it is among those different forms of administration that there exists a range of desirability. It is my understanding that prophesying and speaking in tongues were, during the foundational stage of God's new covenant people, two different forms of administering a divinely instituted component of worship: the communication of God's word. Similarly, the practice of addressing always the same divine person, and the practice of altering the divine persons addressed, are different forms of administering a divinely instituted component of worship: prayer.

<sup>47</sup> Kay, *Spirituality*, 173. Kay, however, does not infer from this that direct appeal to the Spirit is unnecessary. He advocates a both/and approach: 'Both prayer *to* the Spirit and prayer *for* the Spirit are appropriate, in their own ways' (ibid., 173).

<sup>48</sup> I do not now mean in a single act of prayer, necessarily, but in one's praying considered as a whole.

imaginings and deepen our appreciation of the saving acts of God. That is good. But it is possible that such prayer, taking so seriously the personhood of each divine subsistence, is also more pleasing to the triune God. There may be an *objective* preferableness about it; a greater capacity to glorify the Holy Trinity. It is presumably such a conviction that impels Owen — despite believing with Durham that the worship of one entails the worship of the three — to insist so strongly on overtly distinct communion with Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>49</sup>

### **Invoking the Spirit**

The third main concern of this chapter is the worship of the Holy Spirit, arguably the most vexed dimension of the believer's tri-personal relations. Primarily, it is the absence of a biblical precedent that makes the invocation of the Spirit a controversial issue. There is not a single New Testament prayer which has the Holy Spirit as its stated addressee. Should we take our cue from that biblical silence? Should we conclude that there are only two divine persons with whom direct communion is appropriate? Several considerations argue against such a conclusion.

First, there is the mere fact that the Spirit is a divine person. It would appear self-evident that a basic prerogative of deity is the reception of worship. As Macleod puts it, 'Whatever reasons we have for believing that the Spirit is God are also reasons for worshipping him.'<sup>50</sup> That logic might be overridden if it could be proven that a divine person inheres within the

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<sup>49</sup> The reader is reminded that Goodwin — in the words quoted in my introduction to this study — will not countenance 'fellowship with...one [divine person] in the other *implicitly*, but distinctly with the one and with the other, and distinctly with the one as with the other' (Thomas Goodwin, *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* [Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865], 8:377 [italics mine]).

<sup>50</sup> Donald Macleod, *Shared Life: The Trinity and the Fellowship of God's People* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1999), 93.

other divine persons in a way which precludes him being worshipped in his own right. We saw in chapter two, however, that no such case may be made. The Bible's drama of redemption, with its three highly-distinguished actors, is just as determinative for Trinitarian theology as the Bible's assertions of *perichoresis*. If, then, there are no ontological reasons for eschewing the worship of the Spirit, Macleod's principle stands. We ascribe deity to the Spirit; worship comes with the territory.<sup>51</sup> If blasphemy — which is effectively anti-worship — comes with the territory (Matt. 12:31), then worship must as well.

Secondly, the Bible may not use the language of prayer in connection with the believer's communion with the Spirit; we have established in chapter one, however, that this communion itself is a biblical concept. The most obvious reference is in 2 Corinthians 13:14. If Kelly Kopic is correct that 'Prayer is the appointed means of maintaining communion with God', then prayer to the Spirit is implicit within that Pauline text.<sup>52</sup>

Thirdly, the nature of the New Testament scriptures means that the absence of a precedent cannot be decisive. Warfield, explaining why the New Testament's doctrine of

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<sup>51</sup> It is at least arguable that an unwillingness to worship the Spirit will eventuate in a weakened commitment to the truth of his deity. The defence of a person's deity is unlikely to retain its vitality where it is an end in itself. It is when liturgy is at stake that the theological arguments assume relevance and urgency. This is the assumption behind the ancient principle, *lex orandi legem statuat credendi* ('the rule of prayer establishes the rule of faith'). According to Paul Avis the phrase was coined by Prosper of Aquitaine (390-455 A.D.) (Paul Avis, 'The Book of Common Prayer and Anglicanism: Worship and Belief,' in *Comfortable Words: Polity and Piety and the Book of Common Prayer*, ed. Stephen Platten and Christopher Woods [London: SCM Press, 2012], 142).

<sup>52</sup> Kopic, *Communion with God*, 201. Cf. Warfield: 'The sacred idea of prayer *per se* is...to put it sharply, just communion with God, the meeting of the soul with God, and the holding of converse with Him. Perhaps we would best define it as conscious intercourse or communion with God. God may have communion with us without prayer; He may enter our souls beneath consciousness, and deal with us from within; and because He is within us we can be in communion with Him apart from prayer. But conscious communion with Him is just prayer' (B.B. Warfield, *Faith and Life* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974], 152).



the Trinity so seldomly 'comes...to expression in more or less completeness of statement', makes an important point:

It should be recognised that the formal collocation of the elements of the doctrine naturally is relatively rare in writings which are occasional in their origin and practical rather than doctrinal in their immediate purpose.<sup>53</sup>

The New Testament is not a handbook. In terms of Warfield's argument, this means that we must not expect the doctrine of the Trinity to be presented in the New Testament as it might be presented in a theological handbook. But the principle also applies to the argument I am making. We must not expect prayer to be modelled in the New Testament as it might be modelled in a liturgical handbook. The prayers we encounter in the book of Acts, for instance, are not there because Luke is constructing a theology of prayer. They are there because Luke is compiling a selection of historical events which demonstrate the gospel moving from Jerusalem via Judea and Samaria to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8), and some of those historical events featured notable prayers. If an event in the middle of the first century, integral to the advance of the gospel, had featured a notable prayer addressed to the Holy Spirit, that prayer would doubtless have been included in Acts. It is similar with the prayers of Paul in his epistles. Those prayers are shaped by the pastoral situations with which he is engaging. His concern is not to restrict subsequent generations of praying Christians to a certain hypostatic range.

Indeed, the inappropriateness of making the New Testament's prayers a devotional straitjacket can be easily demonstrated. The prayers of the New Testament are predominantly addressed to the Father, with only a small appendage of Son-directed intercessions. But the helpfulness of those proportions is thrown into doubt within the New

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<sup>53</sup> Warfield, 'Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,' 36.

Testament itself. Several texts effectively define Christianity in terms of *calling on the name of the Lord Jesus*. Paul refers to ‘all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor. 1:2). In another passage he states that ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’ (Rom. 10:13). In Acts 9:14 Ananias tells Jesus that Saul of Tarsus ‘has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.’ According to Acts 22:14-16 he subsequently informed Saul that the latter’s encounter on the Damascus road had been with the Righteous One, before then instructing Saul to ‘be baptised and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’ Andrew Fuller explains the significance of these references to ‘calling on his name’:

These modes of expression (which if I be not greatly mistaken, always signify divine worship) plainly inform us, that it was not merely the practice of a few individuals, but of the great body of the primitive christians, to invoke the name of Christ; nay, and that this was a mark by which they were distinguished as christians.<sup>54</sup>

If invoking the name of Christ was their distinguishing mark, those primitive Christians must have done it much more than the New Testament’s featured prayers suggest. Those prayers cannot be representative. To exclude the invocation of the Spirit on the basis of those prayers is therefore inadvisable.

### **Is the Spirit an Unsuitable Object of Worship?**

The absence of a biblical precedent is perhaps not the only reason that worshipping the Spirit is deemed problematic. The feeling can also exist — even when his deity and distinctness are acknowledged — that the Spirit is constitutionally unsuited to receiving worship. Few have expressed this feeling more baldly than Hans Urs von Balthasar:

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<sup>54</sup> Andrew Fuller, *The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems Examined and Compared, as to Their Moral Tendency: In a Series of Letters, Addressed to the Friends of Vital and Practical Religion* (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1815), 123.

[The] Spirit is breath, not a full outline, and therefore he wishes only to breathe through us, not to present himself to us as an object; he does not wish to be seen but to be the seeing eye of grace in us, and he is little concerned about whether we pray to him, provided that we pray *with* him, 'Abba, Father', provided that we consent to his unutterable groaning in the depths of our soul.<sup>55</sup>

Colin Gunton moves in the same direction, albeit more cautiously, when he concludes that 'it is not in every way a bad thing that we do not speak much about the Spirit.'<sup>56</sup>

What are the reasons for this feeling that the Spirit is not a natural object of attention?

Two biblical concepts, which may or may not have influenced Balthasar and Gunton, have the potential to encourage it. One is the *immanence* of the Holy Spirit.<sup>57</sup> The biblical portrait of the Spirit begins with his activity in creation. Warfield's comments on this are worth citing once more:

To the voice of God in heaven saying, Let there be light! the energy of the Spirit of God brooding upon the face of the waters responded, and lo! there was light. Over against the transcendent God, above creation, there seems to be postulated here God brooding upon creation, and the suggestion seems to be that it is only by virtue of God brooding upon creation that the created thing moves and acts and works out the will of God.... God's thought and will and word take effect in the world, because God is not only over the world, thinking and willing and commanding, but also in the world...*executing*.<sup>58</sup>

This immanence of the Spirit in creation has its counterpart in redemption. Following the Son's ascension, the Spirit executes the Redeemer's will within the world as once he

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<sup>55</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3, *Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 111.

<sup>56</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 80.

<sup>57</sup> I am referring now to the Spirit's immanence within the created order (i.e. in contrast to *transcendence*). Of course, the word can also be used (as I have used it earlier) to refer to what God is within himself (i.e. in contrast to what he is *economically*, in his external relations and activities).

<sup>58</sup> B.B. Warfield, 'The Spirit of God in the Old Testament,' in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), 134 (italics his).

executed the Creator's will within the world.<sup>59</sup> And, certainly, fulfilling these particular roles in creation and redemption entails a degree of hiddenness. The Spirit's work of regenerating a human heart, for instance, is less public in its nature than the Son's work of dying on the cross. But it is one thing to note the relative inconspicuousness of the Spirit's creative and redemptive activities; it is quite another to infer that his reception of worship is a matter of indifference. Calvin's words are relevant here, as he comments on Jesus' analogy between the operation of the wind and the operation of the Spirit (Jn. 3:8):

Christ means that the movement and operation of the Spirit of God is not less perceptible in the renewal of man than the motion of the air in this earthly and outward life, but that the manner of it is concealed; and that, therefore, we are ungrateful and malicious, if we do not adore the inconceivable power of God in this heavenly life, of which we behold so striking an exhibition in this world, and if we ascribe to him less in restoring the salvation of our soul than in upholding the bodily frame. The application will be somewhat more evident, if you turn the sentence in this manner: *Such is the power and efficacy of the Holy Spirit in the renewed man.*<sup>60</sup>

For one thing, Calvin helpfully nuances the Spirit's hiddenness: yes, 'the manner of [his operation] is concealed'; but at the same time, 'we behold [in the human objects of his operation a] striking...exhibition' of 'heavenly life'. And for another thing, Calvin is emphatic that an appreciation of 'the power and efficacy of the Holy Spirit in the renewed man' should lead to adoration.

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<sup>59</sup> This appears to be the significance of Paul's striking statement, 'Now the Lord is the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:17). The apostle cannot be thinking in terms of *being*, in which case the entire doctrine of the Trinity would be plunged into confusion. He is thinking rather in terms of *activity*, and, chronologically, his purview is this present phase of redemption. The exalted Lord now builds his church through the operations of the immanent Spirit; and that instrumentality is so fixed and invariable that, to all intents and purposes, 'the Lord is the Spirit.'

<sup>60</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 17, *Harmony of Matthew, Mark, Luke; John 1-11*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003), 116 (italics his).

The other biblical concept is the Spirit's *glorification of the Son*. Jesus says of the Spirit in John 16:14: 'He will glorify me'. It might be thought, therefore, that to glorify the Spirit is to miss the point of the Spirit; that a proper engagement with the Spirit will lead the believer simply to glorify Christ. While not exegeting the text in precisely those terms, J.I. Packer's interpretation of John 16:14 seems to move in that direction:

This [is] the Spirit's new covenant role. He is, so to speak, the hidden floodlight shining on the Saviour. The Spirit's message to us is never, "Look at me; listen to me; come to me; get to know me," but always, "Look at *him*, and see his glory; listen to *him*, and hear his word; go to *him*, and have life; get to know *him*, and taste his gift of joy and peace."<sup>61</sup>

It appears that for Packer the text reveals not merely the Spirit's attitude to the Son, but also the Spirit's attitude to himself.

For several reasons, however, it is questionable whether John 16:14 has any bearing on the issue of worshipping the Spirit. First, contrary to Packer's comments above, Jesus is not speaking in this text of 'the Spirit's new covenant role'. At least, he is not speaking of a role that the Spirit would perform throughout the new covenant age, but one which he would perform during the new covenant's foundational, apostolic phase. D.A. Carson, reflecting on the verse within its context, makes this comment:

It is important to recognize that the disciples who will directly benefit from these ministrations of the Spirit are *primarily* the apostles.... In two of the other Paraclete passages, explicit reference is made to *reminding* the disciples of what Jesus said during the days of his flesh (14:26) or to the fact that they had been *with Jesus* from the beginning of his ministry (15:27). Both references rule out later disciples.<sup>62</sup>

Sinclair Ferguson, indeed, sees a reference to the authorial responsibilities conferred on the apostles: 'In John 16:13-14, the promise...encompasses the giving of the New Testament

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<sup>61</sup> J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 66.

<sup>62</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to St John* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 541.

Scriptures'.<sup>63</sup> It is true that both Carson and Ferguson are amenable to a secondary, derivative relevance of the text to the post-apostolic situation. However, the primary intention of Jesus' words here must qualify the strength of the applications we make to contemporary Christian experience.

Secondly, within a few verses of Jesus' statement about the Spirit we have his famous 'high-priestly' prayer. The prayer begins with this petition: 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you...' (Jn. 17:1). Clearly, then, the Spirit's possession of a glorifying ministry does not single him out as different from the other two persons. The Father and the Son exercise the same ministry. This is well expressed in William Hendriksen's comments on John 16:14: 'There exists between the persons of the Trinity an eternal...relationship of love and friendship, each working for the glory and honour of the others.'<sup>64</sup> Godet's exposition goes further, highlighting with delightful paradox 'a rivalry of divine humility'!<sup>65</sup> Belonging as it does to a cluster of 'glorifying' texts, the theme of John 16:14 is not *the person and work of the Holy Spirit* so much as *the intra-Trinitarian life of God*.

Thirdly, even if the two preceding points could not be established, and the Spirit *does* possess throughout the new covenant age a peculiarly glorifying ministry, that still would not warrant the sentiments expressed by Balthasar and Gunton. Ferguson is worth quoting at length here:

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<sup>63</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 70.

<sup>64</sup> William Hendriksen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (London: Banner of Truth, 1964), 329.

<sup>65</sup> Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of St John* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1881), 180.

The expression 'communion of the Holy Spirit', if understood to include communion *with* him...implies a bond of fellowship within a context of mutual knowledge. Here we come to a significant hiatus in discussions of the Spirit. It is commonplace to discuss the question of his divine personhood, his work in the application of redemption and in the fruit he produces, or the nature of his gifts and their role in the contemporary church; but communion with him in a developing knowledge of him is much less frequently explored. It might be thought that this hiatus has solid biblical foundations. After all, the Spirit does not draw attention to himself; he has even been referred to as the 'shy' member of the Trinity. His task is to glorify Christ, not to speak of or draw attention to himself (*cf.* Jn. 16:13-15). But to draw the conclusion from this that we should not focus our attention on the Spirit at all, or grow in personal knowledge of him, is a mistake.... He is to be glorified together with the Father and the Son.<sup>66</sup>

### **Owen and Basil on Worshipping the Spirit**

It seems to me, then, that it is proper for the believer to direct worship, prayer and expressions of devotion to the Holy Spirit. Such activity is precluded neither by the absence of a biblical precedent, nor by a constitutional unsuitability belonging to this divine person. The greater emphasis on the worship of the Spirit which one finds in older theologians may suggest that a nervous reaction to Pentecostalist pneumatology has arisen in recent times.<sup>67</sup>

Owen, for instance, is explicit:

The distinction of the persons in the Trinity is not to be fancied, but believed. So, then, the Scripture so fully, frequently, clearly, distinctly ascribing the things we have been speaking of to the immediate efficiency of the Holy Ghost, faith closeth with him in the truth revealed, and peculiarly regards him, worships him, serves him, waits for him, prayeth to him, praiseth him.... Are not...praises and blessings due to him by whom the work of redemption is made effectual to us? who with no less infinite love undertook our consolation than the Son our redemption. When we feel our hearts warmed with joy, supported in peace, established in our obedience, let us ascribe to him the praise that is due to him, bless his name and rejoice in him. And this glorifying of the Holy Ghost...is no small part of our communion with him.

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<sup>66</sup> Ferguson, *Holy Spirit*, 185-186.

<sup>67</sup> Gunton's remark, cited above, that 'it is not in every way a bad thing that we do not speak much about the Spirit', is accompanied by the telling comment: 'We are called to proclaim Jesus Christ, not...to proclaim the Spirit — *and that is perhaps where some Pentecostalist emphases are wrong*' (Gunton, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, 81 [italics mine]).

Considering his free engagement in this work, his coming forth from the Father to this purpose, his mission by the Son, and condescension therein, his love and kindness, the soul of a believer is poured out in thankful praises to him, and is sweetly affected with the duty. There is no duty that leaves a more heavenly savour in the soul than this doth.<sup>68</sup>

Those comments from Owen are a further example of his commitment to basing communion on redemption. It is the Spirit's 'free engagement in this work' that the believer contemplates when glorifying him. In that connection it is worth noting that Owen has a particularly extensive conception of the Spirit's role in redemption. Although in the words just quoted he focuses on the Spirit's operations in the life of the believer (imparting joy, peace and obedience), elsewhere he writes of the Spirit's operations in the life of Jesus. Pages of detailed exposition of this theme can be summed up in this sentence: 'By him was [Jesus] guided, directed, comforted, supported, in the whole course of his ministry, temptations, obedience, and sufferings.'<sup>69</sup> Owen's insistence on this point stemmed from his view of the incarnation. Whereas some might carelessly think that because 'the human nature of Christ...was immediately, inseparably, and undividedly united unto the person of the Son of God, there doth not seem to be any need...for any such operations of the Spirit', Owen perceived that 'the only singular immediate act of the person of the Son on the human nature was the assumption of it into subsistence with himself.'<sup>70</sup> Once that 'assumption' had occurred, there was in the life of Jesus no communication of properties from his divine nature to his human nature, and in the absence of such communication he relied instead on the energising operations of the Spirit. This means that the Spirit's activities in redemption are not confined to its *application* phase, subsequent to Jesus'

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<sup>68</sup> Owen, *Works*, 2:270-271.

<sup>69</sup> Owen, *Works*, 3:174.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.



ascension. He was profoundly involved in its *accomplishment* phase, energising the Son's earthly mission. Perhaps, alongside the other reasons discussed above, a failure to appreciate this extensiveness of the Spirit's redemptive activity has contributed to a de-emphasising of communion with the Spirit. If, in the case of the Spirit, the salvation-drama 'devotional anchor-points' (to reuse Kay's phrase) have been reduced — if we see his as merely a tail-end involvement beginning at Pentecost or, from a more existential perspective, in regeneration — it is unsurprising that devotion to the Spirit has lost its vitality.

But we may go further back than Owen to find help in relating properly to the Holy Spirit. In a stimulating study of Basil the Great's pneumatology, John L.W. James demonstrates that Basil applied the concept of *homotimia* to the Spirit more than the concept of *homoousia*. James argues that Basil's motive was not to de-emphasise the deity of the Spirit, but rather to emphasise the worship of the Spirit: 'The imperative throughout is doxological'.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, in his introduction to *De Spiritu Sancto* Basil explains that practical liturgical considerations have prompted him to write:

Lately when praying with the people, and using the full doxology to God the Father in both forms, at one time *with* the Son *together with* the Holy Ghost, and at another *through* the Son *in* the Holy Ghost, I was attacked by some of those present on the ground that I was introducing novel and at the same time mutually contradictory terms.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> John L.W. James, 'An Examination of *Homotimia* in St. Basil the Great's *On the Holy Spirit*, and Contemporary Implications,' *WTJ* 74 (2012): 263.

<sup>72</sup> Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 1.3, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978). It is clear from the context that the charge of novelty related to the first of the two doxological forms: 'to God the Father *with* the Son *together with* the Holy Ghost.'

These words of Basil's do not simply confirm the antiquity of worshipping the Spirit, and thus form a fitting conclusion to this third section of the chapter. In a way they form a fitting conclusion to this entire thesis. The Greek father's employment of these two doxological formulae, placed side-by-side as equal and complementary, is Trinitarian devotion at its best. It helps resolve a tension I identified in Owen in chapter one. I noted that the Puritan's insistence that we commune distinctly with Father, Son and Spirit risks being undermined by the normativeness he seems to ascribe to Ephesians 2:18 (in which communion is with the Father, facilitated by the Son and Spirit). In Basil's scheme, however, Ephesians 2:18 is not *the* normative form of communion. It is *one* form, and it coexists with that other form in which all the persons are approached. Believers move between the two forms.<sup>73</sup>

Worshipping the Father '*in* the Holy Ghost' allows us to do justice to the Spirit's executive role discussed above. In this mode we acknowledge that 'because we live in the economy of the Spirit, in some ways he is the author rather than the object of our prayers.'<sup>74</sup>

Worshipping the Father '*with* the Holy Ghost', on the other hand, allows us to do justice to the Spirit's personhood and deity. For, as James puts it:

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It is a matter of interest that in 381, two years after Basil's death, the language of the persons being worshipped 'together', 'with' each other, was part of the Constantinopolitan revision of the Nicene Creed. James is confident of Basil's influence on the credal amendments: 'It is likely that Amphilochius...was present at the Council and represented his views. Certainly, when one considers the Niceno-Constantinople creed on the Holy Spirit, it reads as a restatement of Basil's conclusions, with *homotimia* in the foreground, not *homoousia*' (James, 'Examination,' 264).

<sup>73</sup> We noted in chapter one that James Torrance espouses a similar approach, except that alongside Basil's two forms of Trinitarian worship he adds a third: 'We glorify the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* [Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996], 36).

<sup>74</sup> James, 'Examination,' 270.

If we only ever talk about the Spirit as self-effacing, then we give the impression that we bring glory to the Spirit only by bringing glory to the Father and the Son, with serious implications. If the Holy Spirit is divine, but we do not bring him glory together with the Father and the Son, then he must be divine in a different way: he must be a different God.<sup>75</sup>

To put it another way, employing these two modes of communion allows us to ‘distinguish between the *access* to our worship...and the *object* of our worship’.<sup>76</sup> The saving missions of the Son and Spirit make the worship of God possible, and in that sense worship occurs *through* and *in* them. But, being themselves the God who is worshipped, they are also its telos: in that sense worship is directed *to* them. Indeed, all the persons are equally the telos of Christian worship; none is any less the telos of worship by virtue of his particular role in making it possible.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 274. James is critical of ‘contemporary evangelicalism’ in which ‘our doxologies only ever look like Basil’s first’ (by which he means, ‘Glory to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit’), and concludes: ‘A good dose of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed may be just the tonic to relieve our current pneumatological blindness in theology and worship’ (ibid., 273, 276).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 272.

## Conclusion

In my introduction to this study I referenced Letham's desire for 'a recovery of the Trinity at ground level';<sup>1</sup> and I stated that an integral part of that recovery must be an emphasis on distinct communion with the divine persons. Engaging in this study has not weakened my conviction regarding that point. However, it has made me aware of certain factors on which that emphasis depends. I conclude this study by summing up a few of these.

First, *the foregrounding of God's redemptive activity*. Where redemption is not foregrounded, the doctrine of God will become distorted at various points. Donald Macleod, for instance, laments the medieval scholastics' approach to God's attributes (his power, presence, knowledge, etc.): 'Theology lost sight of the redemptive edge of these terms as used in biblical revelation.'<sup>2</sup> This gave rise to a stale concept of cosmic omnipresence, far removed from the intimate, covenantal focus of Psalm 139; and a stale concept of boundless omnipotence, far removed from the saving power celebrated in the New Testament. And the results are similar when the 'redemptive edge' gets lost in discussions of God's triune being. A stale concept of unqualified indivisibility becomes dominant, far removed from the perichoretic unity of salvation's three agents. And just as, experientially, the concept of cosmic omnipresence is unlikely to encourage the fearful believer to be comforted by God's nearness; so the concept of unqualified indivisibility is unlikely to encourage the praying believer to commune distinctly with Father, Son and Spirit. The

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Macleod, *Behold Your God* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1995), 231.

believer may have a meaningful 'threefold relation to the *saving* God',<sup>3</sup> but hardly to a God whose hypostatic distinctions are theoretical and have not been written indelibly into a story of redemption. Healthy devotional Trinitarianism will only occur where God's works of salvation are the focus of significant attention.

Secondly, *the recognition of devotional variation*. One of the most helpful insights expressed in the pages of this study is James Torrance's, that 'Christian worship is trinitarian in three main ways: We pray to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit.... We pray to each of the three persons.... We glorify the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit'.<sup>4</sup> As creatures of habit it is tempting to think in terms of a single, fixed model of Christian devotion. When that happens the default position is likely to be either Torrance's first or third configuration, and the distinct communion enshrined in Torrance's second configuration remains undeveloped. Actually, even if distinct communion were made the fixed model, the situation would still be unsatisfactory: it is the most mentally demanding of the three, and if inflexibly applied might turn prayer into a form of drudgery. Variation is important. Throughout the Bible communion is varied. In different Old Testament psalms the same God is approached quite differently; it reflects the fact that this God is a real, living being. The New Testament then extends the possibilities for variation in Trinitarian ways. Gregory Nazianzen captures well Paul's fluctuating thoughts about his triune God:

Speak of God with Paul...who sometimes counts up the Three Persons, and that in varied order, not keeping the same order, but reckoning one and the same Person

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<sup>3</sup> B.B. Warfield, 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,' in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), 56 (italics mine).

<sup>4</sup> James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 36. We saw in chapter three that Basil the Great also argued for a plurality of Trinitarian devotional models.

now first, now second, now third.... And sometimes he mentions Three, sometimes Two or One.... And sometimes he attributes the operation of God to the Spirit...and sometimes instead of the Spirit he brings in Christ; and at times he separates the Persons saying, 'One God, of whom are all things, and we in Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by Him;' at other times he brings together the one Godhead, 'For of Him and through Him and in Him are all things.'<sup>5</sup>

Of course, living in a relativistic age we must be wary of an 'anything goes' approach to Christianity, and, certainly, the possibilities for devotional variation are not endless. But they are real; and distinct communion is only likely to prosper where believers are at ease with the kind of Pauline fluctuation which Gregory describes.

Thirdly, *the careful handling of Scripture*. The concept of distinct communion can be disadvantaged through various careless approaches to the Bible. For instance, *selectiveness* can be a problem. Someone might attempt to justify a single, fixed model of communion (as discussed above) by privileging certain texts and overlooking others. A text like Ephesians 2:18, in which the Father is the focus of the believer's communion, might be given more prominence than other texts in which the Father facilitates the believer's communion with a different divine person. Then again, biblical remarks can be *severed from their contexts*. The affirmation made by Jesus about the Spirit's glorifying ministry in John 16:14 might be blown out of proportion, and used to single out the Spirit in unhelpful ways, once that text is separated from the nearby John 17:1 which ascribes similar ministries to the Son and the Father. And then there can be a rigid commitment to *proof-texting*. The absence of any commands or precedents regarding prayer to the Spirit might be used to deny the propriety of praying to the Spirit, irrespective of whether 'by good and necessary consequence [it]

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<sup>5</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 34.15, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 338.

may be deduced from Scripture'.<sup>6</sup> It is when the Bible is interpreted with sensitivity and integrity, and these hermeneutical errors avoided, that tri-personal communion with God is calculated to thrive.

Finally, *a knowledge of historical theology*. Inevitably, a rigorous commitment to distinct communion will attract charges of tritheism and of abandoning the Western tradition. But a commitment to distinct communion does not in fact place a person outside the Western tradition. John Owen is a giant within that tradition, a thoroughly orthodox Trinitarian, who nonetheless insists on the tri-personal nature of Christian devotion. Another giant, Thomas Goodwin, is equally insistent in tone, even if his treatment of the theme is more fleeting. 'Nervousness about tritheism' (to cite once more Brian Kay's phrase, used by him in connection with 'the doctrine of appropriations')<sup>7</sup> is dispelled through an acquaintance with these figures of the past: men who were unambiguous monotheists, yet had a relationship with each person of the Trinity which they did not have with the other persons of the Trinity (to allude once more to Donald Macleod's statement with which this study began).<sup>8</sup> Historical theology, then, provides important fuel for the practice of distinct communion in the twenty-first century.

This study has revealed these four phenomena, at least, to be conducive to the believer communing distinctly with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are factors which encourage this devotional practice. In the last analysis, however, God himself must enable us to

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<sup>6</sup> WCF, 1.6.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 188.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 138.

worship him properly. For this reason the psalmist cried, 'O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise' (Ps. 51:15). We, too, must cry heavenwards for the opening of our lips that we might rightly praise — in all the distinctness of their respective hypostatic identities — the three persons of the eternal godhead.



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**Abbreviations:**

*CD* Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963)

*IJST* *International Journal of Systematic Theology*

*JAT* *Journal of Analytic Theology*

*JETS* *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*

*SJT* *Scottish Journal of Theology*

WCF Westminster Confession of Faith

WSC Westminster Shorter Catechism

*WTJ* *Westminster Theological Journal*