

**The Doctrine of the Trinity:
The Revolution of Christian Thought**
Frank D. Macchia

The unity in diversity of communion among people has its anchor in the life of the Triune God. The Triune God, the one God who is eternally three, makes both the unity and diversity of divine persons absolute. The diversity of Triune persons is not to be dissolved into divine unity (as with modalism, which denies the relations of persons in God). Neither is the unity of persons to be dissolved for the sake of diversity (as with Subordinationism which views the Father alone as divine and the Son and the Spirit as separate natures not “truly” divine). Communion in fact requires both unity and diversity and embraces both as essential to personal existence. As John Zizioulas noted, to “be” is to “be in communion.”¹ No one is an island. Alienation is how we define sin. Communion is salvation, having its source and end in the Triune God. Of course, unity and diversity in the Triune life is unique; our communion (unity and diversity) is at best analogous. Exploring this concept of Triune communion opens up the doctrine of God as a delightful mystery that allows us to view God as a revolutionary concept, utterly unique in the history of religious thought.

The Great Revolution of Christian Thought

Take note of John 17:21: “. . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (NIV 2011). This prayer of Jesus to his Father refers to his being in the Father and the Father’s being in him in an intimate sharing of life. John tells us elsewhere that the Spirit is the Spirit of communion that causes God to be “in us” and “we in God” (1 John 4:13). In this larger context of Johannine theology, the simple prayer of John 17:21 signals what may be called the great revolution in Christian thought. The doctrine of the Trinity is the astounding idea

¹John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1997), 17.

that God is an intimate *communion of love*. There is nothing quite like it anywhere else in religious thought.

The idea that God is a communion of love that creates and then opens up the divine communion to creation contextualizes all of the divine mysteries in an excitingly new way. Juan Luis Segundo rightly calls this idea of Triune communion the “omega point” or ultimate destiny intended by God for humanity, for the Triune God created humanity to share in the timeless communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He writes, “God opened up the mystery of his being to us in order to show us a total and intimate collaboration in a history of love that is our own history.”²

John Zizioulas even provocatively maintains that communion is essential to existence itself, for no one is an island, noting, “it is communion that makes beings ‘be;’ nothing exists without it, not even God.”³ It is from the Triune communion that all things were created in the context of John’s Gospel, for it is through the Word of the Father, who was with the Father already at the beginning, through whom all things were made (John 1:1-4). John tells us later that the Father loved the Son (the Word) since before the worlds were made (17:24). In the hovering Spirit, the creation comes to be as a gift of the love shared between the Father and the Son (see also Gen 1:1-2 in the light of John 1:1-4).

The doctrine of the Trinity as a communion of love in fact sets forth the trajectory for the entirety of Christian thought and practice. Where would Christian prayer and liturgy be without the insight into God as Father, Son, and Spirit? Humanity was made for this communion. This is why sin is viewed as isolation and alienation from the manifold blessings opened up by this communion, not only with God, but in God with one another.

Jesus spoke the words of John 17:21 to his heavenly Father near the time when Jesus offered his life on the cross out of devotion to the Father’s love for humanity. John tells us earlier that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son to save it (3:16). In this Johannine context, John 17:21 grants us an open window into that divine love that sent the divine Son into the world from the heavenly Father, and, through the Son, the Holy Spirit. This text depicts an intimate sharing of life between him and his Father: “You are in me and I am in you.” This intimate sharing of life becomes available to humanity through Christ’s death and resurrection and his impartation of the Spirit on all flesh. The Spirit incorporates

²Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God: A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*, 3, trans. John Drury (New York: Orbis, 1974), 63.

³Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 17.

believers into the embrace of Triune communion: “May they also be in us.” In other words, Jesus is asking that his followers inhabit the wide-open space of the communion shared between the Father and the Son in the circle of the Spirit.

The Spirit’s role in this intimate sharing of life between the Father and the Son requires elaboration. Let us take a closer look at 1 John 4:13 (ESV): “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” The Spirit may be described as the Spirit of communion who opens the divine communion to us (“we abide in him and he in us”) by causing God to be in us and us to be in God. For good reason, theologians have suggested that the same Spirit who is the principle of communion between us and God plays an analogous role within the Triune life. He encircles the love between the Father and the Son as its delight and witness, overflowing that love (from the Father and through the Son) to draw us into it. In this light, it is no coincidence that the Father’s declaration of his love for Christ as his beloved Son at his baptism is accompanied by the outpouring of the Spirit from the Father upon the Son (Matt 3:16-17).

The Spirit is essential to the love of the Father for the Son and the other way around (the Son’s return devotion to the Father). So also with us! Romans 5:5 thus tells us that the love of God is poured into us through the Holy Spirit given to us so as to unite us to Christ and draw us into his communion with the Father. Indeed, we belong to Christ in belonging to the Spirit (Rom 8:9). And we will be raised one day from the dead by the Father as Christ was, if we have the Spirit within (Rom 8:11). The Spirit is the “down payment” and “guarantee” of the fullness of life to come in the embrace of the Triune God (Eph 1:13-14).

John 17:21 NIV 2011 (“... just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us”) is thus also the key to understanding our eternal life in God, sharing communion in him with one another (the communion of saints). John 14:1-3 begins with Christ telling his disciples that he will go to prepare a place for them in his Father’s “house” so that they can be where Christ is when they leave this earth as he will soon leave it. It is obvious from the context that Christ is referring to heaven, where he is going after he leaves to rejoin his Father. He will indeed prepare a place for his followers there, presumably by giving his life for them. Interestingly, Christ adds: “In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” (John 14:20 ESV) Here again that intimate sharing of life in God is described as a major Johannine theme. The earlier wish for the believer to be with Christ in his Father’s “house” (14:3) becomes the Father and Christ making *their shared home* with the believer: “We will come to him and make our home with him” (14:23

ESV). The Father's "home" that we will share with Christ one day is referred to as the home Christ shares with the Father!

Can this shared "home" between the Father and the Son refer essentially to anything else than their shared love and communion in the circle of the Spirit? It seems that our eternal life in God will occur in the wide-open space of the love shared between the Father and the Son in the Spirit. *This will indeed be the essence of heaven as well as the new creation yet to come!*

As Segundo said, this destiny is willed by the Triune God for all of humanity—and for the entire creation! In the Spirit of communion, it is the Father in the Son, the Son in the Father, and we in them! They are in us and we in them; the communion of saints is in the embrace of the Triune God! Everything else about heaven is secondary. This is the communion that we currently inhabit by faith. In eternity, we will experience it "face to face" and directly, in a way that we could not now currently imagine (1 Cor 13:12).

Only God Can Save: The Deity of the Son and the Spirit Revealed

The doctrine of the Trinity assumes that not only the Father but also the Son and the Spirit are divine. Naturally, unless these three, Father, Son, and Spirit, share equally and eternally in the one divine nature, there is no Trinity. Early in the history of the church, some denied the deity of Christ by regarding him as nothing more than an anointed prophet. They thought that Christ was "adopted" as the Son of God at his baptism when he received the Spirit (much like we are adopted into the family of God by receiving the Spirit). This heresy, which came to be called "Adoptionism," denied that the Son of God was divine. If this idea were true, there would be no Trinity, even if we believe that the Father and the Spirit are divine. It would then be possible to view the "Father" as referring to God as transcendent and the "Spirit" as God near to us. No communion of love within God would necessarily exist. *One needs a divine Son who relates differently to the Father and to the Spirit to understand the necessity of relationality in God!*

Another heresy early in the history of the church came to be called "Subordinationism." It held that the Son of God (the Logos or Word of the Father, John 1:1) was not of the same nature as the Father. Thus, though Christ could be regarded as "semi-divine" or God-like, he was not to be referred to as the "True God," who was the Father alone. The Spirit was also thought to be of a different nature from the Father, and like the Son of God, a lesser deity. Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria, Egypt, was an extreme Subordinationist. He taught that the Son of God –

before his incarnation in flesh and before the creation of the world – was created by the Father “out of nothing.”

The great Council of Nicea in 325 CE refuted Arius and the entirety of Subordinationism by calling Christ: “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father.” Notice that Christ is called “true God” (not just a god or God-like) who was not created (but rather eternally begotten without beginning) and, most importantly, is of the same nature (*homoousios*) as the Father. The end of the Nicene Creed adds that they believe also in the Holy Spirit as they believe in Christ, implying that the Spirit is equally divine as well. This point was clarified at the Council of Constantinople nearly fifty years later, with an addition to further identify the Spirit: “the Lord, the giver of life. He proceeds from the Father, and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.

There is indeed in the eternal, Triune communion one divine being (nature or life) but three persons in intimate communion. In other words, the Son and the Spirit are regarded as essential to the deity of the Father and essential to the divine communion that is extended to us and that saves us. But is this idea biblical?

The New Testament shows us that Christ and the Spirit are essential to the deity of the Father. The Gospels record how the disciples of Jesus came to understand that Jesus and the Holy Spirit reveal themselves as essential to God’s self-giving to the world in salvation. Only God can save: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12); cf. “You shall acknowledge no Savior but me” (Hos 13:4). God does not save us from a distance but by imparting himself to us and opening his life to us. So, if it can be shown that the Son and the Spirit are absolutely essential to God’s self-impartation to save us, they must also be regarded as essential to God. We learn from the New Testament that salvation rescues us from alienation in sin and death. It also incorporates us into the embrace of God, who is not a solitary figure but rather a communion of love!

Thus, in our key text in John 17:21, salvation comes by being incorporated into the love shared between the Father and the Son: “... as you are in me and I am in you; may they be in us.” Christ is irreplaceable in the love that saves us and absolutely essential to it. No one can access the Father’s love without him: “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). We thus believe in God *and* believe in the Son for salvation: “You believe in God, believe also in me” (John 14:1). 1 John 4:13 makes the Spirit equally necessary to the divine love that saves us.

That love is eternally shared among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three are essential to the divine self-giving of the God who alone can save us. Little wonder that John's Gospel starts (1:1) by referring to the Word of the Father (who is named the Son in 1:18) as the "God" who is distinct from God the Father. The Son shared glory with the Father before the worlds were made (17:5), was loved by the Father from eternity (17:24), and is addressed by Thomas with the words, "My Lord and my God" (20:28).

As noted above, the initial revelation of the Triune God occurs at Jesus' baptism. Matthew records: "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased' (Matthew 3:16-17 NIV 2011)." Here the Father declares his love for the Son, a love that was shared between them from before the time the world began (as in John 17:24). At this declaration of the Father's love for the Son, the Spirit is poured forth from the Father upon the Son. The timing of the Spirit's outpouring in this text is not coincidental. The gift of the Spirit upon the Son as the Father declares his love for the Son functions to express and reveal the love shared between them.

The Spirit in this event may be said to deepen Christ's human awareness of his sonship as well as empower him to move forward to fulfill the mission of the Father's love for the world. He shares this love with the Father in the Spirit and will open it to those who believe. Indeed, John tells us that the Father sent the Son in the power of the Spirit out of this very love to save humanity (John 3:16). The Son goes forth in the Spirit out of devotion to the Father as well as to the leading of the Spirit.

To reprise: the Triune love for humanity is a shared love among the three, a communion opening up to the world through their cooperative work. Only God can save (Isa 43:11; Hos 13:4). The fact that the Son and the Spirit are essential to this salvation and the Father's gift of love for the world shows that the Son and the Spirit are essential to the Father's deity. God saves by opening himself to us and bringing us into his Triune embrace. Therefore, if Son and the Spirit are shown to be essential to the salvific opening up of the divine communion to us, they are shown to be essential to God.

Note that Jesus refers to his heavenly Father as "Lord of heaven and earth (Matt 11:25). Two verses later, Jesus teaches that the only way to know the Father is through him as the Son (v. 27). In other words, Christ is essential to salvation. There is no salvation, no gift of love from the Father, without *him*. He is thus essential to God and God's self-giving.

This point is abundantly clear in Matt 28:18, where the risen Christ tells his disciples, “all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.” The Son shares fully in the Father’s sovereignty and reign over all. Bear in mind that the Son in Matt 11:25 referred to his *Father* as Lord of heaven and earth. Now, the *Son* is to be viewed as Lord of heaven and earth too (28:18). Christ shares fully in the Father’s divine Lordship.

The Triune love that saves us also frees us for joyous self-giving in the power of the Spirit and in the image of Christ. The loving God reigns, and commands us to serve in this love. Christ says that his disciples will follow all that he has commanded them (Matt 28:20). This admonition recalls Deut 4:39-40 (NIV 2011), “that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands.” Matt 28:18 declares that *Christ* is this Lord in heaven and earth, and it is *his* commands that we follow! The Triune God who loves and reigns liberates us to serve and *commands* us to serve! This shared Lordship mean the commands are ultimately granted by the three (from the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit). No wonder Christ claims that disciples are to baptize believers in the “name” (authority or sovereignty) of “Father, Son, and Spirit” (v. 19). The Triune God, who appeared at Christ’s baptism in Matthew 3:16-17, is now the reality into which believers are to be baptized by faith.

John 5:26 and the Divine Processions

The Father is never sent. The Son and the Spirit are sent into the world from the Father (John 15:26; 20:21-22). Christ moves forth in the power of the Spirit sharing fully in the authority or Lordship given to him from the Father (Matt 28:18). How are we to understand this? We cannot assume that the Son and the Spirit become divine after not having been before. God is by nature eternal: “From everlasting to everlasting, you are God” (Ps 90:2). So how are we to understand the biblical implication that the deity of the Triune God has its eternal source in the *Father*?

The key text in answering the above question is John 5:26 (ESV): “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.” The Son as the “Word” of the Father (John 1:1-4) has the life of God in himself. That qualifies him to two divine prerogatives: to mediate creation on behalf of the Father and to be the light that the darkness cannot overcome on behalf of creation (John 1:3-5).

So, in interpreting John 5:26, if the Son is granted to have “life in himself” as the Father does, how does the Father have “life in himself?” The Father’s possession of the divine life is eternal, sovereign, and the

only hope for salvation. John 5:26 says that the Father grants that the Son has this life in himself *as the Father does*. This can only mean union eternally (without beginning or end), sovereignly (having a full share in the Father's Lordship), and redemptively (having the divine life so as to be essential to the divine self-giving that saves us, mediating it to the world). Thus, Jesus says "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me will live" (John 11:25). The life that will raise us up is shared equally between the Father and the Son; thus, we believe in both.

We believe in the one God as Father, Son, and Spirit to be saved. The Spirit also is granted to have life in himself as the Father and the Son do by proceeding from the Father through the Son (John 15:26) to give us life (John 4:13-14). Indeed, Jesus said that if he casts out demons *by the Spirit of God*, the liberating reign or Kingdom of God has come upon the people (Matt 12:28). Jesus and the Spirit do not just bear witness to the coming of the Kingdom or reign of God that saves us, they bring it! Thus the Son and the Spirit share fully in the sovereign love of the Father that is overthrowing the darkness and opening up salvific love to creation.

In interpreting John 5:26, how do we describe the Father's "granting" the Son (and the Spirit) to have life in himself as the Father does? We have life in ourselves if the Spirit dwells within, but we do not have life in ourselves as the Father does. The Son and the Spirit have divine life in themselves *as the Father does*, eternally and sovereignly in a way essential to their very being.

How has the Father granted this to the Son and the Spirit? The early church Fathers wrote of the eternal divine "processions:" the Father is the eternal source of deity for the Son and the Spirit. Specifically, the Son is eternally "begotten" or generated from the Father, coming forth without beginning from the Father in a way that makes him analogous to a "Son" or to one who is beloved of the Father. The fathers said the Spirit "proceeds" eternally from the Father in a way that is analogous to a "breathing forth" or a spiration (as the overflowing power, delight, and witness of the shared love between the Father and the Son, participating fully in that love).⁴ These "processions" make God an eternally flowing fountain of divine love that has no beginning and no end. The Father must have determined from all eternity to be a communion of love, to be the Father of a beloved Son, breathing forth the Spirit of communion that will encircle their love and be its overflowing delight. So, this

⁴For an excellent treatment of the significance of John 5:26 for understanding of the eternal generation of the Son and eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father, see Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

communion of love is an intimate sharing or communion among the three divine persons. It overflows the Triune life to create and to open this communion to creation.

To examine further, why is the Son's participation in the reign of divine love not revealed until his resurrection? Not until then does Christ announce he is Lord as the Father is Lord (of heaven and earth) and that we now follow Christ's commands (Matt 28:18). First, we recognize that the Son who took on flesh in the power of the Spirit for our salvation always shared the Lordship of the Father. In Matthew 3:1-3, John the Baptist is the messenger who prepares the way for the coming of the "Lord," which in this text is clearly *Christ*. But Matt 3:3 (about the coming of the "Lord") is taken from Isa 40:3, which makes *God* the coming of the Lord! The meaning is clear. The coming of Christ is the coming of God's very Lordship into the world. The Son of the Father enters the world as the coming Lord!

So, why does Jesus imply in Matt 28:18 that he is "granted" Lordship in the victory of his resurrection? In his resurrection, Christ attains or wins that Lordship over creation *in his flesh* for all flesh, or to save all flesh from bondage to sin, death, and the devil. The Father's sovereign love that the divine Son already shared eternally is exercised in time by Christ as our representative. He wins the Lordship of divine love *for us* as our Redeemer. Similarly, in John 17:5, Jesus asks the Father to give him the glory that he always had with the Father before the worlds were made. Why would Jesus ask for a glory that he always had? He asks for that eternal glory to be won and revealed in his flesh *for us*. The Son bore the poverty of flesh so as to glorify it on our behalf. But he had to win that glory in his flesh for us first. To use technical language, the divine Lordship and glory that was shared fully by the Son from the Father in eternity (in the divine *processions*) is to be revealed in time and in Christ's flesh (in the divine *missions*) for our salvation. His resurrection is that climatic point.

We need to probe the divine processions in eternity more fully. The Triune God is one because deity comes from one source, the *Father*. As Colin Gunton wrote: ". . . the Father unifies the Godhead by virtue of the fact that he is Father of the Son and breather of the Spirit, and is therefore eternally the 'cause' of the *being* of the Son and the Spirit. One particular person is the principle being of the other two; but because he is not himself without them, it is not an individualistic conception."⁵

⁵Colin Gunton, "Personhood and Personality," in *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and Church*, ed. Douglas H. Knight (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), (97-107), 100.

The Father is the source of deity in the Triune life but the Father is not alone. The term *Father* is a *relational* term. The Father is the Father of something, like a Son. How can the Father be the *Father* without his *Son*? In a sense, the Son (and the Spirit for that matter) are as necessary to the personhood of the Father as his personhood is to theirs. As John Zizioulas showed us so wonderfully in his book, *Being as Communion*, the source of deity we know as the Father in the Bible determines from eternity past to be a *Father* precisely by eternally generating a *Son* as his beloved who in the Spirit of communion would fully share in divine Lordship and glory throughout eternity, but also in time, in the context of the poverty and alienation of creation, so as to incorporate creation into the embrace of the Triune God.⁶

One may ask, why would the Father need the divine Son to be a Father? Why couldn't the Father be the Father fundamentally in relation to creation? If he were only the Father in relation to creation, he would need to create to be the Father. God would be dependent on creation for the fulfillment of his very deity. But if he is the Father in relation to the eternally divine Son and Spirit, God's fundamental identity would be dependent on the divine sufficiency alone. God remains sovereign and self-determining as God even apart from creation. God's fundamental identity as God would not be dependent on the creation.

God ends up creating out of divine freedom and not necessity. God does not *need* us to be God, though he delights in being God with us. The oneness of God, anchored in the Father but involving the communion of the three, is a beautiful concept. God as one is indeed the "one and only" Lord, the incomparable one who alone is Lord of creation and of salvation and loves unconditionally and eternally. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God; the Lord is one!" (Deut 6:4).

God is *one* in essence because deity proceeds from one source, the *Father*. The Father's deity is shared fully and eternally with the Son and the Spirit. The *Father grants* the Son to have life in himself eternally as the Father does (John 5:26).

But the God who is one in essence is also *three in person*, because the three are involved in the eternal processions *differently*: the Father as source, the Son as generated, and the Spirit as breathed forth. The Father is eternally the source of divine love, the Son is eternally the beloved, and the Spirit is eternally the ecstatic delight and overflowing fullness of divine love. So, God is one and three in different ways, one being or essence and three persons and relations. The two concepts define each other inseparably because God is *one* in essence *diversely*,

⁶John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, especially 27-65.

and in *communion*. God is one as three and three as one, for the deity that proceeds from the Father proceeds differently in the cases of the Son and the Spirit. The one divine life is shared in communion.

Both subordinationism (that rejects the oneness of God, claiming instead that the three persons are of different natures) and modalism (that affirms the oneness of the divine nature but denies differences of persons and relations in God) are to be rejected. There is no threeness of persons without the unity of life that proceeds from the Father diversely. There is no oneness of divine essence or life without the difference involved in how the Son and the Spirit proceed from the Father in communion.

A debate that divided the churches of the East (Eastern Orthodox) and the West (Catholic and Protestant) is the filioque controversy. Briefly put, the term “filioque” means “and the Son” and refers to the procession of the Spirit from both the Father *and the Son*. This clause (“and the Son” or filioque) was added to the Nicene Creed. From the Council of Constantinople (381 CE) forward, it said that the Spirit “proceeds from the Father” (following John 15:26). Eventually, as an effort to bolster the belief in the Son’s deity against the Subordinationists, the churches of the West added “and the Son” (filioque) to the clause: the Spirit is said to proceed from the Father *and the Son*.

The churches of the East rejected the addition of the “filioque” to the creed, not only because an ecumenical council is required for such additions but also because of the justifiable belief that the Father *alone* is the source of deity in the Godhead. This exclusive role of the Father as source of deity explains why God is *one*.

There is also the danger that the Spirit can be viewed as in “third place” beneath the Son in significance, causing an emphasis on Christology that towers over pneumatology. This is ironic since the “Christ” (meaning anointed one) is not the Christ without the Spirit! As a compromise, I like what the early church fathers were prone to say, namely, that the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father *through the Son* (the Father alone still being the only source).

In the fifth century, St. Cyril (and recently Thomas Weinandy) proposed that the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father alone but also *through* the Son (and back to the Father in a circle of love). The Spirit ends up eternally the Spirit of the Father and the Son! But it may also be said according to Weinandy that the Son is generated eternally from the Father alone *through the Spirit* so that the Son is begotten eternally from

the Father alone *in the Spirit* unto communion! In a sense, the eternal Son was always in eternity the anointed *Christ!*⁷

The division between East and West over the filioque can be exaggerated, since, as Walter Kasper notes, it was typical in the West in accepting the filioque to assume that the Son has the power to spirate the Spirit ultimately from the Father. Consequently, the Spirit proceeds *principaliter* from the Father, the importance of the Father as uniquely the source of the Spirit is preserved.⁸

We have been speaking of the divine processions in eternity—the so-called immanent Trinity. In history, under the conditions of creaturely life, especially human flesh, we speak of the divine missions—the economic Trinity. God always acts from the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit. The Father is source in sending the Son and the Spirit. The Son is mediator in incarnation, death, resurrection, and mediating the Spirit. The Spirit is the one who perfects divine love in us in sanctification and glorification.

One may even speak of the Son and the Spirit as the left and right hands of the Father in creation and salvation. But they are these hands in different ways, both in relation to the Father (in communion with their eternal source) and in relation to one another (in mutual communion and work). In relation to us, the Father (as lover) is source, the Son (as the beloved) is redeemer, and the Spirit (as the one who overflows and perfects love in us) is sanctifier and glorifier. We may also reverse this when describing our response to God (especially in praise), so that the Spirit is impetus, the Son the mediator, and the Father the object (if the Son is the object, it is to the ultimate glory of the Father) (Phil 2:11).

The fundamental motion is from God to us. The Father sends the Son and the Spirit into the world. The Son by the Spirit takes on flesh and goes to a cross. He rises in the fullness of the Spirit, so as to pour forth the Spirit on us. Therefore, God willed or elected in eternity not to be a closed circle of divine communion but to create and to self-impart or open the divine embrace to others who are caught in the throes of sin and death. The Triune God always determined not to be God without us and to take into himself our sin, condemnation, and death so as to overcome them in self-giving love. Divine joy overcomes despair on Easter morning. Through the Spirit, such joy will be the final word of history.

⁷Thomas Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1995).

⁸Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* new ed. (London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2012), 297.

The Victory of Triune love

The processions of the Son and the Spirit from the Father are eternal. The missions of the Son and the Spirit from the Father occur in time as divine self-disclosure and self-giving.

What about Trinitarian ends? Where is the Triune communion headed eschatologically? Segundo stated that the Triune communion is the “omega point” or ultimate destiny of humanity and all of creation. Paul approaches this issue concerning Christ: “Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Cor 15:24-26 ESV).” The purpose is given at the end of verse 28: “that God may be all in all.” The Triune ends consist of the Son delivering the kingdom of God (or the creation liberated by the reign of God) to the Father. Christ conquers all opposing forces (“every rule and every authority and power”) to liberate the creation from their destructive grip (see Matt. 12:28). Sin, death, and the devil are overthrown, and death is named as the final enemy eliminated. Then the Son as High Priest offers up the glorified creation to the Father fully liberated and sanctified without blemish. Implied is that the Spirit has sanctified and glorified the creation in Christ’s image; then Christ offers this up to the Father’s glory.

The Father sent the Son and the Spirit into the world to make all things new. And after the task is completed, the Son offers up the creation to the Father’s glory. And the goal? “That God may be all in all” or, that God may indwell the new creation as his temple so that the creation enjoys the liberty of reflecting his glory in the embrace of Triune communion.

At creation, God “stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in” (Isa. 40:22 ESV). In the future, God will dwell in the new heavens and new earth, for all things are made new for this purpose (Rev 21:1-4).

The role of the Father as the source of the deity of the Son and the Spirit has been qualified by so-called “social” Trinitarians. They speak instead of deity as arising in the mutual communion of the three. I have been influenced by both streams and do not view them as mutually exclusive.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, a prominent social Trinitarian, stresses the Trinitarian ends depicted in 1 Cor 15:24-27. It highlights the robust relationality of the Triune communion. The Father grants sovereign love to the Son; the Spirit and the Son and the Spirit offer it back to the Father

with the gift of the glorified creation. Though deity is granted by the Father to the Son and the Spirit, these two also contribute to the deity of the Father by fulfilling the divine love in eternal communion. In other words, the Father in this text is dependent on the Son and the Spirit for the fulfillment of his very deity, as the Son and the Spirit are on the Father as their source.⁹

However, does belief in the mutual dependence of the divine persons on one another undercut their divine sovereignty? After all, divinity is self-sufficient, having no dependence on anything to be divine. Acts 17:25 states that God as God “does not need anything.” Yet, Pannenberg is not proposing that God is dependent on anything *besides* God to be God. He maintains that the divine persons are dependent on each other to be God: God is *self-dependent* but not dependent on anything besides God to be God.

God is an eternal communion of love, from the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit. However, if God is self-fulfilled in a way that causes him to be “all in all” throughout the creation, is not God dependent on the renewal of creation to be God? This is a potential problem in Pannenberg’s theology. But this problem can be fixed by adding that the eschatological destiny of Triune communion in time in renewing creation *reveals* in time the perfect and infinitely fulfilled love and communion of the Triune God in eternity. God as “all in all” in the eschatological victory of God’s Kingdom in time mirrors the perfection of divine love as shared within God eternally. Yes, God willed in eternity to be “all in all” in time within the creation he willed to make. In doing so, God was willing that the embrace of his perfect love take in and bear our imperfection and suffering so as to overcome and heal it.

Does talk of mutual dependence of the persons separate them too much from each other? Does it imply three separate consciousnesses and undercutting divine unity? Two issues are worth exploring. The first is “perichoresis” which means interpenetration. In our key text (John 17:21), Jesus refers to his being in the Father and the Father being in him. This implies an intimate sharing of life within the Godhead, an infinite interpenetration of divine life and love among the three divine persons. The diversity of communion among the three divine persons can be described as distinct but certainly not separate.

The three divine persons are in some sense aware of one another in eternal communion. There is a sense in which three eternal

⁹His entire discussion, which is quite provocative, is found in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 300-327.

consciousnesses are at work in divine communion. It is perhaps better expressed as a three-fold divine consciousness that is distinctly and diversely experienced among the three divine persons—which is still one consciousness. Walter Kasper put it this way: “we are dealing with three subjects who are reciprocally conscious of each other by means of one and the same consciousness which the three subjects ‘possess’, each in his own proper way.”¹⁰

Talking about the Triune communion certainly stretches our language! How else can it be, when we have at our disposal a language shaped by human relationality and experiences. It is significantly different from the relationality internal to the Triune God.

The good news is that our current involvement in the Triune communion looks with hope for the coming victory of divine love over the forces of sin, death, and darkness. We do not simply hope for this victory. We groan under the burden of sin for the fullness of liberty to come. Not only the creation groans for the liberty that the children of God will show forth in resurrection (Rom 8:18-22), but “we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23).

The Spirit of communion grants us a degree of liberty in the here and now and urges us on towards greater fullness in Christ to the glory of the Father. In this community of love, the Spirit seeks to fashion us more and more in the image of the crucified Christ to the glory of the Father. This communion takes us out of ourselves, conforming ourselves more and more into the cruciform image of Christ. Paul writes that he is crucified with Christ, yet he lives. “And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20 ESV).

The love that we receive from Christ is mediated from the Father and perfected in us by the Spirit. The self-giving communion of the Triune God is indeed the omega point of humanity. It is the most revolutionary idea we can have of God. If we yield to it, it will revolutionize our lives and, in God’s eschatological victory, the world.

¹⁰Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 289.

References Cited

- Giles, Kevin. *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012.
- Gunton, Colin. "Personhood and Personality." In *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and Church*, ed. Douglas H. Knight. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007.
- Kasper, Walter. *The God of Jesus Christ*, new ed. London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2012. Originally published as *Verlag Herder GmbH*. Freiburg im Breisgau, 2008.
- Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Segundo, Juan Luis. *Our Idea of God: A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*, 3, trans. John Drury. New York: Orbis, 1974.
- Weinandy, Thomas. *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1995.
- Zizioulas, John. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1997.