

# **Understanding “Relationality” From A Trinitarian Perspective**

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to survey classical and contemporary understanding of trinitarian theology as foundational to a theological/theoretical discussion on

“relationality” in terms of individual/unity, multiplicity/diversity, and relationship/context.

Classical trinitarian study generally seeks to explain the concept of the Trinity, whereas contemporary authors have sought to both explain the Trinity and derive principles from that study which can be applied to human life.

To the Jewish people, grounded as they were in the elegant simplicity of Deuteronomy 6:4, the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ appeared to be glaringly contrary to monotheism. That this is so may be seen in the reaction of the Israelites to Jesus when, for instance, He was threatened with stoning for using language which equated Him with God (John 10:33). As Jesus’ ministry continued on through His death, resurrection and ascension, and then as the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit became an obvious reality (Acts 2), the apparent discrepancy grew between Old Testament monotheism and the recognition of divinity in Jesus Christ and the Spirit.

Though New Testament authors did not specifically analyze the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, they did recognize each as God. Thus, for instance, baptism is enjoined in the name (singular) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). Pauline literature also equates the Three, for instance in the benediction of 2 Corinthians, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14).

The New Testament church was left with an academic and practical problem. As Moreland and Craig phrased it.

In short, the New Testament church was sure that only one God exists. But they also believed that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while personally distinct, all deserve to be called God. The challenge facing the postapostolic church was how to make sense of these affirmations. How could the Father, Son and Holy Spirit each be God without there being either three Gods or only one person? <sup>[1]</sup>

## **Classical Trinitarian Theology**

Biblical texts include two types of trinitarian reference. There are passages which equate the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (as, for instance, 2 Cor. 13:14 and Matt. 28:19). The second type of trinitarian reference is comprised of passages which demonstrate the deity of any one of the three. <sup>[2]</sup> Those proofs of deity are in various forms; for instance, by direct statement, by demonstration of divine attributes by the person, by worship given to and received by the person, or by statements which show the person performs actions that only God can do.

The word “Trinity” is not found in the Bible. It is believed to be an abbreviation of the more cumbersome term, “tri-unity.” <sup>[3]</sup> The word “Trinity” was first used in the writings of Theophilus of Antioch (A.D. 188). <sup>[4]</sup> Tertullian, a theologian who was trained as a

lawyer, was the first to have used the word specifically to describe the relationship of one God who is three.<sup>[5]</sup> Tertullian wrote on the Trinity in his *Against Praxeas* in approximately A.D. 215.<sup>[6]</sup>

### **A. The doctrine of Trinity in the Early Church Period**

In the course of the first centuries of the church age, various attempts were made to resolve the apparent contradiction of one God who is three. Some of those attempts began with one God and attributed to Him the creation of the other members of the Godhead.<sup>[7]</sup> This stress of the one at the expense of the three led to the error now known as Arianism.<sup>[8]</sup> Other attempts at resolving the relationship of the one with the three stressed the three at the expense of the one, leading to the error of tritheism.<sup>[9]</sup> Still other attempts at understanding the conundrum led to errors of Sabellianism, also known as modalism, in which one God was seen to simply appear in three representations.<sup>[10]</sup>

Into this environment, two helpful approaches to the problem of three and one were developed. The first of these approaches came through Tertullian. As he struggled to understand and describe the relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit he developed the language of “one substance and three persons.”<sup>[11]</sup> As Moreland and Craig have pointed out, this language was not meant to demonstrate a “singularity of number, but unity of essence, likeness, conjunction, affection. . .”<sup>[12]</sup>

Tertullian attempted to find a formula which would distinguish between the three distinct, self-conscious members of the Godhead, and yet contain them in one unity as well. The second helpful contribution of the early church came through the language developed in various councils and creeds. Of particular interest are the creedal statements which grew from the councils of Nicea (A.D. 325) and Constantinople (A.D. 381) and the theological formulation known as the Athanasius creed.

The Arian controversy provided the occasion for the first ecumenical council, convened in Nicea in A.D. 325 with Emperor Constantine presiding. Three hundred eighteen bishops attended. The purpose of the Council was to decide between the teachings of Arius, who understood the unity of God by denying the deity of Christ, and Athanasius, who maintained that biblical exegesis would not permit the idea of a created Christ. In his summary of the Nicene Creed, Philip Schaff explained that, “The Nicene Creed. . . is the Eastern form of the primitive Creed, but with the distinct impress of the Nicene age, and more definite and explicit than the Apostles’ Creed in the statement of the divinity of Christ and the Holy Ghost.”<sup>[13]</sup>

Over the decades from A.D. 325 until the Council of Alexandria in A.D. 362, the error of Arianism was debated in terms of “hypostasis” (person) and “ousia” (substance). The two terms were seen as synonymous by Latin-speaking theologians, but as quite different expressions by the Greek-speaking scholars.<sup>[14]</sup> The final word choice, developed in Alexandria, was that of Three Persons who share one nature. As Moreland and Craig explained the word choices, orthodox Christians maintained both the equal deity and personal distinctness of the three persons. Moreover, they did so while claiming to

maintain the commitment of all parties to monotheism. There exists only one God, who is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>[15]</sup>

Arianism was defined as heretical in the council of Nicea, but the controversy did not disappear. In the years after the council, Emperor Constantine wavered in his support for Athanasius and gave increasing support for the Arian camp. Athanasius himself shifted from favor to disfavor with the Emperor.<sup>[16]</sup>

To resolve this lingering uncertainty, Emperor Theodosius summoned the council of Constantinople. The resulting creed, called the Nicene-Constantinople creed, upheld the Nicene creed and marked the end of Arian popularity.<sup>[17]</sup>

In the eighth century, a creed that is thought to have arisen from Augustine and his followers was circulated, also dealing with the Trinity. This creed, called the Athanasius creed (though clearly not written by the hero of the Arian controversy in Nicea), is stronger than either the Apostles or Nicene creeds in that it condemns those who fail to believe in the trinitarian formula. Salvation, according to the Athanasius creed, is limited to those who believe in the Trinity. Even if the Trinity is not fully understood, it must be believed if one is to receive the blessing of eternal life.<sup>[18]</sup> Concerning the precision of the language in the Athanasius creed, “If the mystery of the Trinity can be logically defined, it is done here.”<sup>[19]</sup>

## **B. Fundamental Issues in Trinitarian Theology**

The doctrine of the Trinity was defined in a crucible of confrontation and controversy. Arianism defined the relationship of the three persons by considering that Jesus was derived from the Father in both His person and His essence. Semi-Arianism allowed that Christ as a person was not derived from the Father, but concluded that His essential being was derived from the Father.<sup>[20]</sup> In light of the frequent use of these terms of person and essence, William G. T. Shedd wrote that, “The clue to the right construction of the doctrine of the Trinity, lies in the accurate distinction and definition of Essence and Person.”<sup>[21]</sup>

Shedd summarized the significance of these two words in two propositions. The first of these is that, “God is one in respect to Essence.”<sup>[22]</sup> The English term “essence” is related to the Greek οὐσία and to the Latin *essentia* (also translated as *substantia*, or *natura*). The Latin term, which is broader in its meaning than is οὐσία, was also the term used to translate the Greek ὑπόστασις. This ambiguity lasted from the Nicene council until the Alexandrian council of A.D. 362.

According to Shedd’s explanation of the development of this doctrine, Athanasius came to the conclusion that ὑπόστασις and οὐσία are interchangeable, “and mean nothing but simply being.”<sup>[23]</sup> The question, to use twenty-first century phraseology, is one of ontology.

Shedd’s consideration of the terms “person” and “essence” led to his conclusion that the word “essence” is etymologically related to the concept of energetic being. Another term, “substance,” is more impersonal and less active. Therefore, Shedd preferred to speak of

God's acts by use of the word "essence." There are, according to Shedd, two areas in which this divine essence is visible: in the realm of internal acts within the Trinity, and in the realm of eternal generation, having to do with the subordination of the members of the Trinity.<sup>[24]</sup>

Of Shedd's two propositions, then, the first is that the three share one essence. This may be re-stated in more modern language to say that the three share a common being. The results of the Nicene, Alexandrian, and Constantinian councils, as well as the Athanasius creed, would agree that this proposition is of fundamental importance to our understanding of the "Three-One God."

Shedd's second proposition is that "God is Three with respect to persons."<sup>[25]</sup> This is a difficult premise to understand because illustrations are difficult to find, particularly in the light of his first proposition. The term found in the Bible that speaks of the three persons is the word *ὑπόστασις* (Luke 12:56, Phil. 2:6, Heb. 1:13). That word carries the idea of "substantial nature, essence, actual being."<sup>[26]</sup> The idea is that God is three actual beings, but not in the sense of modalities. The term "hypostatic persons" is used to describe these three forms in a way which avoids Sabellianism. The word "hypostasis" is commonly used in the phrase "hypostatic union" to discuss the union of divine and human qualities in Jesus Christ.<sup>[27]</sup> However, the term "hypostatic person" is not limited in reference only to Jesus. It may be correctly used to discuss any of the three members of the Trinity. Thus, Shedd's second proposition can be rephrased, "God is Three Hypostatic Persons." The spiritual nature of God allows for this sharing of essence within three hypostatic persons.<sup>[28]</sup>

That there are three and not just one can be seen grammatically and also through the relationships between the members of the Trinity. Grammatically, were there only One person, then in John 10:30, Jesus would have said "I and the Father am One" rather than "I and the Father are One."<sup>[29]</sup>

In terms of relationship, the three hypostatic persons relate to one another in at least twelve ways. Shedd discussed each of these twelve in his description of the following relationships that are seen in the Scriptures:<sup>[30]</sup>

- One person loves another (John 3:35)
- Persons dwell in one another (John 14:10, 11)
- One person suffers for another (Zach. 13:7)
- One person knows another (Matt. 11:27)
- Persons address one another (Heb. 1:8)
- One person is the way to another (John 14:6)
- One person speaks of another (Luke 3:22)
- One person glorifies another (John 17:5)
- The persons confer with one another (Gen. 1:26, 11:7)
- The persons make plans with one another (Isa. 9:6)
- One person sends another (Gen. 16:7, John 14:26)
- One person rewards another (Phil. 2:5 – 11, Heb. 2:9)

Clearly, there is no way that one being can logically have those sorts of relationships with himself. There must be a plurality of persons. And so, Shedd's summary of the work of the councils is well expressed in his second proposition.

### **C. Historical Importance of Trinitarian Theology**

The issues at the heart of the councils and creeds were more than academic debates. Not only were these theological constructions important in denying the heresies that brought them about, but these creeds have had significant impact on the history of Christianity. Of particular significance is the *filioque* controversy. The Toledo council of A.D. 589 was convened among the Western (Rome) church leaders. Starting with the text of the Nicene-Constantinople creed, the Western theologians added the word *filioque*, meaning "and the Son" to the section dealing with the procession of the Spirit. The original wording of the Creed stated that the Spirit was sent from the Father. The addition of the word "and the Son" by the Western church gave the indication that the Spirit was sent by both the Father and the Son, thus reinforcing the equality of the Father and the Son. The Eastern church objected to this change in the creed. Some objected simply because no Eastern theologians were involved in the discussions. Others, though, saw this change as substantially affecting the understanding of the relationship between the hypostatic Persons. Particularly Photius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, objected to the addition of the word on theological grounds. One hundred sixty three years after the Council of Toledo, in the year A.D. 1054, this *filioque* difference (along with differences of opinion concerning the role of the pope) led to the Great Schism between the Eastern and Western churches.<sup>[31]</sup>

Whereas Shedd saw two propositions as sufficient for understanding the Trinity, Charles Hodge added a third which is closely related to the controversies of the *filioque*. In his summary of classical trinitarianism, Hodge stated, "We have here the three essential facts involved in the doctrine of the Trinity, namely, unity of essence, distinction of persons, and subordination without any attempt at explanation."<sup>[32]</sup> Hodge's first two elements are reflected in Shedd's two propositions; Hodges' third essential fact draws attention to the roles, procession, and subordination between the hypostatic persons. In twenty-first century vocabulary, Hodge draws attention to the relationships between the three persons of the Trinity.

## **Contemporary Trinitarian Theology**

Orthodox Christian doctrine over the centuries between the Council of Alexandria and the middle of the twentieth century did little to extend the language of three persons who share a common being. Biblical exegesis continued to observe that all three persons deserve recognition as God. Theological formulations of christology, pneumatology, and theology proper used the designations of the councils and creeds. But the content of the doctrine was not frequently made practical to individual or ecclesiological life. Thus, for instance, Colin Gunton related an anecdote in which J.A.T. Robertson expressed his dislike of preaching on Trinity Sunday because of the feeling that the Trinity is a boring example of mathematics that do not explain what they seek to explain.<sup>[33]</sup>

In A.D. 1932 Karl Barth explored the concept of the Trinity with an eye to understand God over against the thought patterns of modernity.<sup>[34]</sup> After Barth's renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity, Claude Welch wrote his volume, *In This Name*, in A.D. 1952<sup>[35]</sup> in an effort to revive discourse on the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>[36]</sup>

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, trinitarian studies have developed along several distinct lines, mostly (but not entirely) outside of evangelical schools of thought. Within the general category of trinitarian theology are efforts at re-phrasing feminist theology into terms of Trinity.<sup>[37]</sup> Others have built upon, to one degree or another, trinitarian theological methodology to develop elements of process theology.<sup>[38]</sup> Brazilian Catholic theologian Leonardo Boff wrote of the Trinity in his approach to liberation theology.<sup>[39]</sup> Among Evangelical authors, there has been relatively little contribution to the study of the Trinity as Ralph Smith pointed out when he wrote, contrary to what one might expect, among evangelical Christians the doctrine of the Trinity seems not to be considered an important part of the Christian worldview – if, that is, we are to judge their faith by the place the doctrine of the Trinity holds in published studies of the Christian worldview.<sup>[40]</sup>

Classical trinitarian theology, seen in the councils, creeds, and theological writings of the first twenty centuries of the church age, provided a technical definition to guide our understanding of the Trinity. That technical definition included three elements, summarized by Hodge: The Trinity reflects unity in essence; distinction between the three hypostatic persons; and a revealed relationship between the persons which demonstrates equality of being and, at the same time, subordination of roles.<sup>[41]</sup> These technical definitions, growing first from the legally-trained mind of Tertullian, have proven durable over the centuries as trustworthy guides to avoid the errors of tri-theism, modalism, and Arianism.

Yet classical trinitarian theology is perhaps as significant for what it does not say as for what it does say. While careful to accurately define the relationship between the one God and the three persons, classical trinitarian theological reflection does not ask application questions. That is, while an understanding of the Trinity as a subject for our study is visible in classical literature, there is no attempt at discovering implications of this doctrine for human life. It is precisely in the realm of practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity that theologians began probing in the middle of the twentieth century. Practical ramifications that grow from the modern renaissance of the doctrine of the Trinity will be considered in detail in the first part of Chapter Five. The ontological implications will be discussed in that chapter, specifically related to how the concept of Trinity relates to human life and being. In the light of those theological implications, pastoral and missiological applications will also be developed. Of particular interest to this dissertation is the relationship between the doctrine of the Trinity and the training of new candidates for mission.

Cunningham's first point is that trinitarian theology is not simply an invention of the Church Fathers. It is an accurate and necessary element of any description of the God

revealed in the Bible. The trinitarian formulations are important because they force us to struggle with comprehending God's revelation of Himself.

Secondly, Cunningham points out that trinitarian study is also important because of the centrality it places on the concept of relationality. In defining the concept of personhood, for instance, modernity has assumed an autonomous individual while a trinitarian understanding of "person" sees the one in constant relation to the many (or the three).<sup>[42]</sup> A trinitarian understanding of personhood will include both the individual and the others with whom that person is involved.

Cunningham's third point is that there are practical ramifications which grow from this relational view of the members of the Trinity. Specifically, it is important to develop an understanding of how the members of the Trinity relate to one another (Immanent Trinity) and how those three relate to creation (Economic Trinity).

Poythress also summarized the important elements of trinitarian theology, arriving at a list which differs slightly from Cunningham's. In Poythress' work, the important issues to consider are contained in three aspects of the Trinity which he called the instantiational aspect, the classificational aspect, and the associational aspect.<sup>[43]</sup>

It is these three ideas that I will use to summarize theological implications of trinitarian theology, although I will rephrase those ideas so as to speak of individual/unity, multiplicity/diversity, and relational/contextual aspects of the Trinity.

### **Theological/Theoretical Discussion on "Relationality"**

Based on the theological foundation and the historical review of Trinitarian, we come to the theological/theoretical discussion on "relationality" in terms of individual/unity, multiplicity/diversity, and relationship/context.

#### **A. Individuality/Unity**

Two levels of individuality or unity can be seen in the Trinity. At the level of the individual hypostatic persons, we can say that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Classical trinitarian theology has long understood each of the three to be distinct from one another and yet simultaneously each is understood to be fully God. The Spirit is not the Father nor is He the Son. He is uniquely individual; distinct from the other two persons. Likewise the Father and the Son are unique, distinct persons. J. Scott Horrel summarized this level of individuality within the Trinity when he stated that, "The Father, Son and Holy Spirit appear as all that is God by nature and also all that is personal as distinct centers of self-consciousness."<sup>[44]</sup>

And yet there is another perspective in which unity is seen. As phrased in Deuteronomy 6, "The Lord is One." There is unity in the classification called "God." Unity can be seen at both the level of each individual person, and unity can be seen in the hypostatic union of



the three. They are neither more nor less unified as the Triune God than they are as the three persons.

## **B. Multiplicity/Diversity**

That God is one is as essential to correctly understanding Him as is an understanding that He is three. There is a classification that is called “God.” The three, though distinct individuals, are also unified in one. All share in that classification, sharing attributes of deity and equally deserving recognition, honor and worship as deity.

As scholars have viewed the three from the perspective of their shared unity, implications in terms of ontology, anthropology and theology proper have developed. What does it say of being when one is three, and three are one? Modernity, with its dichotomistic epistemology (“either/or” cognitive patterns) views either three or one. Yet the Trinity forces us to admit that there is a “both/and” element to understanding the Person of God. He is one, and He is three. Wan picked up on this question when he called for a Sino-Theology – an understanding of God that draws on Oriental yin/yang (both/and) cognitive patterns.<sup>[45]</sup>

Another symbol that is used to develop this concept of the three who are each fully God is that of unity in diversity. Both the one and the three are true. In theological terms, Van Til considered this issue when he wrote that unity and diversity are equally ultimate.<sup>[46]</sup> Both the individual nature of each of the three is true, and equally true it is that the three are united in one God. Neither the individual members of the Trinity nor the categorical grouping of the three as God take precedence. Though intellectually challenging, the doctrine of the Trinity calls us to understand life in terms of both the unity of the group and the diversity of the individual members.

## **C. Relationship/Context**

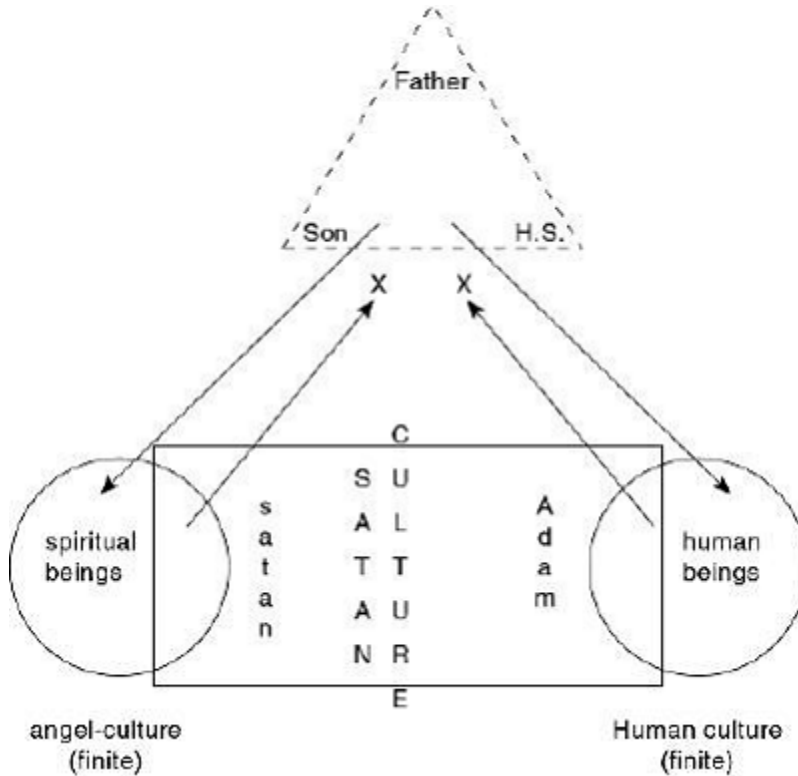
Granted that the biblical data lead to the conclusion that God is one God, and that God is three persons, each one equally God, the issues that loom large in contemporary trinitarian studies seek to understand how those three relate to one another, how created order relates to this Triune God, and what implications this has for understanding the correct relationship among created beings. The term “relationality” as seen in David Cunningham’s work will be used to discuss these levels of relationship which grow from an understanding of the Trinity.

One starting point for understanding trinitarian relationality is the idea that there are really only two categories of existence. There exists the category of God, who is Creator; and there exists the category of creature, to which all other spiritual and physical beings belong. As Vern Poythress phrased this concept, according to the Bible, the Creator-creature distinction is fundamental. There are two levels of being, two levels of existence: the self-sufficient, original existence of God the Creator, and the dependent, derivative existence of creatures.<sup>[47]</sup>

This fundamental distinction is seen in Enoch Wan's figure<sup>[48]</sup> which describes all of existence in terms of Beings/beings (See figure A).

**Figure A:**

**Three Cultures in Relation to Each Other**



Following close upon this fundamental distinction between Creator and creature is the realization that the creature only knows that which is revealed in some form or other by the Creator. As Ralph Smith phrased it, “The truth that defines a Christian as a Christian, our faith in the triune God, is *revealed* truth” (emphasis in the original).<sup>[49]</sup> That which we know of the Trinity is that which the Trinity has chosen to reveal.

Two frames of reference are used to capture the revelation of the Trinity to creatures. Theologians have coined the terms “Immanent Trinity” and “Economic Trinity” to refer to these two concepts.

The phrase, “Immanent Trinity” refers to the self-revelation of just how the members of the Trinity relate to one another. The concept of “Economic Trinity” derives from the Greek word used to describe the organization of finances within a household and, by extension, within the state.<sup>[50]</sup> Thus to speak of the “Economic Trinity” is to speak of the interaction between God the Trinity and creation. The “Immanent Trinity” refers to the inner life of God within the relationships of the Trinity, while the “Economic Trinity” refers to God as revealed and active in the world.<sup>[51]</sup>

Karl Rahner, as he has grappled with the relationship between the Trinity and creation from the perspective of Vatican II Catholicism, coined what is referred to as Rahner's rule: "The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity."<sup>[52]</sup> Rahner equated God as He is within Himself and God as He has revealed Himself, specifically in the context of a discussion of the human/divine relationship in salvation.

Catherine LaCugna, writing sympathetically as a fellow Roman Catholic, pointed out that Rahner developed his ideas in the environment of Vatican II. In that context, when neo-scholasticism was losing its unquestioned privilege as the foundational epistemology of Catholic theology, Rahner was attempting to close the gap between theology and practice. In LaCugna's 1997 introduction to a re-printing of Rahner's work, she wrote, "However scholars choose to amend Rahner's axiom, this much must be preserved: the essential connection between the doctrine of God and soteriology, and the unacceptability of the long standing isolation of the doctrine of the Trinity from the rest of theology."<sup>[53]</sup> This helpful reminder of the context in which Rahner wrote notwithstanding, there are still theologians who are not willing to equate the economic and the immanent Trinity. J. Scott Horrell of Dallas Theological Seminary is one author who objected to that equivocation. Horrell wrote that the economic Trinity gives an accurate though not necessarily complete representation of the immanent Trinity. In his words, "I presuppose that the economic Trinity as revealed in the Bible *accurately* represents to finite creation who and what God is, but that the economic Trinity is by no means all that is God [emphasis in the original]."<sup>[54]</sup>

The nature of our knowledge of the Divine, that such knowledge depends on revelation, would tend towards Horrell's viewpoint. Further, though it is entirely correct to say that no contradiction or falsehood would corrupt the accuracy of God's self-revelation, at the same time we are nowhere given an indication that He has told us all that there is to know about Himself. For these reasons, the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity will not be seen as equal in this study. Rather, any given relationship between members of the Trinity will be depicted by the biblical revelation touching that relationship, realizing that any given relationship might go beyond what has been revealed.

What does mankind know of the relationship between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit? Several elements of the immanent Trinity will be discussed in the section below.

*Perichoresis* is a term coined by the Latin fathers to convey the idea that the members of the Trinity are mutually involved in personal and dynamic ways. A less attractive term, *coinherence*, suggests the same sort of relationship but in a more static form. *Perichoresis* is described by Gunton when he stated, "It would appear to follow that in eternity Father, Son and Spirit share a dynamic mutual reciprocity, interpenetration and interanimation."<sup>[55]</sup> An approximation of this concept can be seen in the indwelling of the Spirit in the life of a believer. In the same way, the Father, the Son and the Spirit are referred to as being in a mutually indwelling relationship.

Ralph Smith provided a simpler definition of *perichoresis*, and at the same time offered a helpful discussion of what that in-dwelling entails. According to Smith, “When biblical writers speak of being ‘in’ someone or something, they employ the analogy of physical space to convey the intimacy of covenant union.”<sup>[56]</sup> Though perhaps overstating his agreement with covenant theological frameworks, yet Smith’s explanation that *perichoresis* refers to a dynamic, mutually-intimate relationship is helpful. The Gospel of John, particularly (but not exclusively) the seventeenth chapter, demonstrates that the Son and the Father have this sort of mutually in-dwelling relationship.

A second relational element that is seen in the interaction between the members of the Trinity is what David Cunningham called “polyphony.”<sup>[57]</sup> This concept reflects the fact that to pay attention to one member of the Trinity does not diminish the value of others. As harmony in music augments the beauty of diversity, so in trinitarian studies there are indeed points of time where one member of the Triune God is in focus for a period of time. But that focus on one member does not imply a diminution of the others’ involvement.

Another significant aspect to the relationship between the members of the Trinity has to do with roles that are assumed by the various persons. Horrell called attention to the fact that within the Triune God there are identifiable roles given to specific persons when he wrote, “I define an eternally ordered social model as the social model that, while insisting on equality of the divine nature, affirms perpetual distinction of roles within the immanent Godhead.”<sup>[58]</sup> This reality is seen for instance in the submission of the Son to the Father’s will and His obedience, even to the point of death on the cross (Phil. 2:1 – 8). Ralph Smith called this differentiation of roles within the Trinity by the name “hierarchy” as seen in his explanation that, “Hierarchy in relationship means that the Father is greater than the Son in His *office* only, not in His *being*” (emphasis in the original).<sup>[59]</sup> The distinction of roles leads to an understanding of how the Father could send the Son, and how the Spirit could be sent to bear witness of the Son. Though equal in being, there are different roles or ministries for each member of the Trinity.

Considering yet another aspect of the relationship between the members of the Trinity, there are key attributes which the biblical text ascribes to those relationships. Three of these attributes were highlighted by Smith, who introduced his discussion by saying that, If words describing the attributes of God require for their understanding both the notion of the covenant and interpersonal relationships, it is reasonable to conclude that at least some of God’s attributes describe first of all the covenantal relationship of the persons of the Trinity.<sup>[60]</sup>

The attributes that Smith discussed are love, faithfulness and righteousness. The three, in their mutual relationship with one another, demonstrate these characteristics. The same attributes are also essential parts of the Triune God’s economic relationships with created beings.

John Dahms of the Canadian Theological Seminary considered the relationships between members of the Triune God from the perspective of emotions. He focused on love, joy

and peace, concluding with the statement that “If, as we have stated, the feelings of love, joy and peace are eternal and fundamental, they must characterize deity, quite apart from His relation to what He has created.”<sup>[61]</sup>

One final element remains to be noted in this discussion of the immanent Trinity. The point bears repeating that the three are personal Beings. These are not simple forces nor manifestations of one another, but are truly personal beings, distinct from one another and yet intimately, dynamically related as well. The personal nature of the relationships between the members of the Trinity led Horrel to write that the three members of the Godhead are “genuinely personal in relationships.”<sup>[62]</sup> This highlights once again the fact that the three are each unique, distinct persons.

If the above five elements are a convenient summary of key elements of the immanent Trinity, that is, the relationships between the members of the Trinity, it is also apparent that there are elements of the economic Trinity which should be emphasized. The first of these implications of the economic Trinity is that the Trinity is divine, and the creatures to which He has revealed Himself are not. From this fundamental distinction grows the realization that creatures know what they do by revelation. This realization also leads to an understanding that, while creatures may accurately know some things about the Immanent Trinity, we have no basis upon which to claim complete knowledge. The Trinity relates to the creation through self revelation that is accurate and sufficient, but not necessarily complete (given the infinite nature of the Creator and the finite nature of the creature).

Another important implication concerning the economic Trinity is that the Trinity relates to creatures on a relational, personal basis. Ralph Smith called attention to the relational nature of the covenants of the Bible, noting that “Covenant means relationship, and the essence of the covenant relationship is love.”<sup>[63]</sup> Smith’s emphasis on the relational, personal nature of the Trinity’s interaction with creation is not only biblically justified, but it is also significant in understanding how the Triune Creator interacts with His creation.

This relational, personal nature of the Trinity is not simply an element that allows us to apprehend God in analogy to human relationships. The personal nature of the members of the Trinity stands in stark contrast to ideologies which consider the divine to be impersonal. As Colin Gunton phrased it, the doctrine of the Trinity replaces a *logical* conception of the relation between God and the world with a *personal* one, and accordingly allows us to say two things of utmost importance: that God and the world are ontologically distinct realities; but that distinctness, far from being the denial of relations, is its ground. Such relation as there is is personal, not logical, the product of the free and personal action of the Triune God [emphasis in the original].<sup>[64]</sup>

Whereas the authors discussed so far have examined the economic Trinity in terms of the Trinity’s relationship with creation, other authors focus on the revealed relationship patterns of each individual member of the Trinity. An example is Ajith Fernando who considered the role of the Father, of the Son, and of the Spirit individually. In particular,

Fernando's study pointed to the relationship that each person of the Trinity has with the created order.<sup>[65]</sup> This is an important contribution in that it helps to maintain that "both/and" cognitive pattern. In order to understand the Trinity, one must see both the category of God (the unity) and also the individuality of the persons (the diversity). Granted that *perichoresis* and polyphony do characterize relationships within the Trinity, still a realization that each of the members has particular roles and performs particular activities in relation to created beings is an important truth to bear in mind.

While it is appropriate to discuss relationality in understanding the economic Trinity, a third important implication is that not just any relationship is acceptable to God. There are good relationships and there are bad relationships – whether between creation and Creator, or simply between created beings. David Cunningham spoke to this point when he suggested that relationships are not arbitrarily good; they require content, and in some cases that content can be pathological.<sup>[66]</sup> The question is not simply if one is in relationship with the Creator, but if one has a healthy, appropriate relationship.

This healthy relationship includes the theme of salvation. Writing in a devotional, pastoral style, A.W. Tozer used the vocabulary of relationship to discuss salvation when he wrote, "Essentially salvation is the restoration of a right relation between man and his Creator, a bringing back to normal of the Creator-creation relation."<sup>[67]</sup>

The Bible speaks of both acceptable and unacceptable forms of relationship between man and the Triune God, but interestingly no studies of biblical material on this theme were uncovered in the literature reviewed for this dissertation. Thus, as simple examples of what should be studied in more depth, God demonstrates faithfulness, love, provision, and forgiveness in His relationship with humanity. Looking at the prescribed way in which mankind should relate to the Triune God, man is expected to demonstrate such characteristics as faith, love, obedience, and dependence. Man-to-man relationships are supposed to be characterized by (for example) mercy, compassion, forgiveness, justice and love. There is much to be explored by examining various relationships through the lens of a trinitarian understanding of Scripture. The characterization of what constitutes a healthy relationship is given by revelation, and is worthy of more study in trinitarian terms.

Besides highlighting the fact that God has revealed the defining characteristics of healthy, appropriate relationships, another element of relationality deserves comment as well. Within the immanent Trinity there exists a dynamic mutual indwelling between the persons. By dynamic we refer to a continual mutuality among the three as they interact. Relationships between the Trinity and creation also have that dynamic interchange, but it is different in at least two respects from relationships between members of the Trinity. One difference is that our creaturely relationship with the Triune God is marred by sin, whereas relationships between the three members of the Trinity are not. The effects of sin speak not only of the act of sin but also the effects that sin has on human character and the consequences of sin on human/human and human/divine relationships.

Human/human and human/divine relationships also differ from relationships between members of the Trinity in terms of change and progress. Relationships which include humans will inevitably involve progress, growth, and dynamic change. As physical maturity brings about changes, so too spiritual and relational maturity is accompanied by change. Thus, for instance, John wrote of some Christians as “little children,” and others as “fathers” in the faith (1 John 2:12 - 14). Peter exhorted believers to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Within the Trinity, relationships are dynamic; when humans are involved, relationships are both dynamic and progressive. An interesting approach to the concept of relationality is seen in the work of Catherine LaCugna, who used prepositions as a tool to better understand God and His relationship to creation. Such words as within, through, and for are grammatical terms which describe the relationship between beings or objects. These same words became the windows that LaCugna used to better understand the relationship between God and creation.<sup>[68]</sup> Pazmiño picked up on LaCugna’s prepositional approach in his delineation of a Christian philosophy of education, as he called on Christian educators to teach based on an understanding that God is in, with, for, despite, through and beyond His creation.<sup>[69]</sup>

One final comment about the economic Trinity comes from the work of Enoch Wan. Wan’s model of anthropology began with the Trinity and then followed into the realm of created beings. This all-encompassing model both gave appropriate attention to the distinction between Creator and creature, and also allowed humanity to be understood as being related to the Triune God. This model (see Figure A) gave an elegant description of the types of relationships between Beings and beings.<sup>[70]</sup>

The fact that Wan’s chart included all divine Beings along with all created beings (spirit and physical) is important to this discussion for at least two reasons. Wan, in this model, demonstrated the fact that relationship can occur across that fundamental Creator/creature division. Secondly, Wan also demonstrated how all creation is united in some ways and yet not in others. Wan’s chart provided a representation of a cognitive pattern that allows for both/and diversity in one unified model.

## **Missiological Implications of “Relationality”**

Several missiological implications might be derived from the discussion above.

### **Either/or Cognitive Pattern**

The Trinity demonstrates the appropriate way to think about a wide range of factors in life. The cognitive model that western epistemology favors is dichotomous. The Trinity, though, makes few allowances for “either/or” patterns (though it may be argued that there are some). Rather, trinitarian epistemology sees the individual and the group as equally ultimate, the quality of the relationships between members as a question of great importance, and growth and development of human beings as a process that is expected. Relationships, development, and “both/and” comprehension of the individual and the group are themes that touch virtually every part of human life. Thus Nancy



Pearcey wrote, “The doctrine of the Trinity has repercussions not only for our concept of the family but also for virtually every other discipline.”<sup>[71]</sup> She continued by listing the disciplines of philosophy, ecclesiology, economics, government and social theory. The doctrine of the Trinity has given us not only insight into the nature of God, but also a model by which we may better understand “families, schools, workshops, and neighborhoods.”<sup>[72]</sup>

### **The One and the Many**

If the individual and the group are equally ultimate, then models of organization must give appropriate attention to both the many and the one. This kind of understanding is applicable to gender relationship (i.e. male/female within humanity), ethnic and relationship (i.e. the diverse groups across the line of human race), church relationship (i.e. local congregations and universal Church, etc. at the “micro level.” It is also applicable at the “micro level” in terms of family, civil society, local congregation, etc. (i.e. individual members and the collective entity)

Colin Gunton tackled some of this organizational question when he wrote as quoted below:

According to the New Testament, human community becomes concrete in the church, whose calling is to be the medium and realization of communion: with God in the first instance, and with other people in the second, and as a result of the first. Of course, to bring in reference to the church is immediately to call attention to those institutions which play so ambiguous a part in Western history and society. I believe that it is a piece of foolish romanticism to believe that we can be human without our institutions. But it is also true that for much of our history the church has been an institution rather than a community.<sup>[73]</sup>

Another human endeavor that should be affected in practical terms by the doctrine of the Trinity is in the realm of missions. David Bosch saw mission as a direct outgrowth of the nature of the Trinity. As he reflected on the importance of Barthian influence in trinitarian study, he wrote,

The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expended to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. As far as missionary thinking was concerned, this linking with the doctrine of the Trinity constituted an important innovation.<sup>[74]</sup>

Some missiological themes that arise from trinitarian studies include the individual involvement of each of the members of the Trinity<sup>[75]</sup> in the expansion of the church. Other trinitarian studies include investigations into ethnicity and cultural diversity as part of the pattern of unity-in-diversity.<sup>[76]</sup> Still other fruitful missiological realms for investigation include the nature of the church and the management of church and para-church organizations. .

## Conclusion

A survey of literature on classical and contemporary understanding of trinitarian theology was conducted and followed by a theological/theoretical discussion on “relationality” from a Trinitarian perspective in terms of individual/unity, multiplicity/diversity, and relationship/context. Several missiological implications were derived from the survey and discussion for future study on “relationalist.”

## Endnotes

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