THE SOCIAL TRINITY

If discussion of the Trinity in the contemporary evangelical church is any indication, this credo on the Trinity will be quite short. Apart from the recognition that there is a Father, Son, and Spirit and that together they in some way represent one God, there is little discussion of the Trinity in today's evangelical churches. Even when evangelical stalwarts chastise those on the fringe who do not take the orthodox Trinitarian position, they give little reason as to why the Trinity is so sacrosanct other than to say that to think otherwise is heresy. Oh certainly, they offer shallow and even misleading analogies (God is like water, ice, and steam), but nothing that adds to any meaningful understanding of who God is and how that understanding of God should shape our lives. As might be surmised, I think such a state of affairs is at best unfortunate, particularly when contemporary theological thought provides us with something much more. This 'much more' is a model of the Godhead as a social Trinity. To explain both the essence and ramifications of this model, I have explained its place in the history of theological thought, its basis in Scripture, and its application in the life of the church.

I.   The Social Trinity in the History of Christian Theology

Judaism distinguished itself in its Middle Eastern context by its belief in one God who was not just responsible for a specified region but was creator and sustainer of the entire universe. Jesus' teaching confirmed such a theology, but also added a dimension (or two) to monotheism by announcing and demonstrating his own deity and by introducing the Spirit. The early church fathers were thus faced with the question of how to explain that God is one, but that Christ Jesus was worthy of highest worship and that the Spirit was nothing less than the indwelling presence of the Divine. Tertullian authored one of the first responses in writing,

> All are one, by unity (that is) of substance; while the mystery of the dispensation is still guarded, which distributes the Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: thee, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God.[1]

While such a statement recognized both triune and singular notions of the Godhead, it is not surprising that it did not satisfy those who were bothered by the inherent illogic of Tertullian's description of divine ontology. And thus it was not long until Sabellius and later Arius offered their views on the Trinity and set church leaders to deciding orthodoxy on the matter. But although the creedal process of the Cappadocians defined what orthodoxy is not by rejecting both Sabellianism and Arianism, there was still plenty of murky water, or so it

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[1] Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville: Westminister John Knox, 1991), 31.

seemed,[2] that stood between modalism (the error of Sabellius) and subordinationism (the error of Arius). For if it is true that God does not just appear as if he is three, and if it is equally true that Jesus and the Spirit are eternally divine as is the Father, then how is one to conceive of the Trinity?

For Augustine the answer, at least in part, was found by looking inward. He argued that God left an imprint upon his creation, and since humankind is the apex of his creation, we should look to humanity to understand the Trinity.[3] Drawing from his Neoplatonic worldview, Augustine saw the essence of personhood lying within the triadic human structure of mind, knowledge, and love or memory, understanding, and will. While Augustine recognized the inadequacy of these analogies, he nonetheless pushed Trinitarian thought towards abstract substanstialism wherein God is a unified whole and each person of the Trinity is identical with the divine essence.[4] The monist and modalist direction of his theology would mark the centuries through the Middle Ages (Aquinas) and into contemporary Christian thought (Barth) and rarely faced any serious challenge.

Although monist leanings outweighed truly trinitarian perspectives, there was an uneasiness among even those who supported the trend that it should rest on human psychology. Alternative frameworks, however, did not galvanize theological thought until the work of Karl Rahner. Rahner, himself more a modalist-monist[5], nonetheless recognized that the classic psychological model of the Trinity was speculative and that we ought to look at the economic Trinity as its source of understanding.[6] Rahner's rule—"The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity

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[2] Gregory of Nazianus, one of the Cappadocian Fathers, did recognize the social Trinity proposed in this paper by suggesting that the terms of "Father", "Son", and "Holy Spirit" do not refer to essence or action, but to relation. Justo L. González, *History of Christian Thought*, v. 1 (New York: Abingdon, 1970), 321. The social model, however, was largely forgotten, ignored, or unheard from Augustine until the last century with but a few exceptions such as Richard of Saint Victor.

[3] Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 333.

[4] Cornelius Plantinga Jr., "The Perfect Family: Our Model for Life Together Is Found in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit," *Christianity Today* v. 32 (1988), 24.

[5] Rahner would likely have bristled at the idea of being called a 'modalist-monist' since he himself decried monotheism (10). But the fact that he fears the idea of separate centers of consciousness and activity (56-7), and instead concludes that "the one God subsists in three distinct manners of subsisting" (113) does little to separate himself from 'modalist-monist' leanings of historical theology. See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1997). Moltmann came to the same conclusion regarding Rahner's 'modalist-monist' leanings (as he does for Barth). See Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 139-148. Suggesting that Rahner or Barth are 'modalist-monists' is not to say that they did have their reasons (mainly the fear of tritheism), but since tritheism has never been a real threat to Christian orthodoxy, one must wonder if maintaining an essentially Augustinian perspective is warranted.

[6] Ibid, 119.

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and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity"[7]—challenged theologians not to look inward to understand God's three-in-one-ness, but rather to his work in the world.

Rahner could have hardly anticipated the reshaping of Trinitarian theology that would occur via recognition of his rule. From all corners of Christendom, the focus on describing the immanent God by examining his work in the world unleashed an avalanche of thinking on the Trinity unseen since the development of the early church creeds. And most of this thinking tended in one direction—towards a model of a social Trinity. Never far from Rahner's Rule, evangelical, liberation, feminist, process, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox theologians have argued[8] that if we look to God's relational work in the world, we must conclude that God at the very least should be defined as both social and relational. In near unison, they echoed the words of Catherine LaCugna: "We ourselves should abandon the self-defeating fixation on 'God *is se*' and be content with contemplating the mystery of God's activity in creation, in human personality and human history, since it is there in the economy and nowhere else that the 'essence' of God is revealed."[9] And this 'essence' say the social Trinitarians is that three members of the Godhead, though distinct, relate in such personal, interdependent, and mutually inclusive ways that they are but one God.

What is one left with then if the social model is adopted? Moltman says there is a *perichoresis* among the Father, Son, and Spirit that dispenses with "both the concept of the one substance and the concept of the identical subject."[10] Davis writes that there are three divine persons who embrace each other such that they can be said to interpenetrate each other.[11] Zizioulas takes it even farther by concluding only in communion can God be God at all.[12] In essence, what modern theologians have embraced is that the relationality of God is not predicated on some underlying ontological condition, but that a social dimension is part and parcel of his make-up. God has existed in eternal relationship apart from creation, and in acting with creation is doing nothing more and nothing less than who he is as a relational God.

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[7] Ibid, 22.

[8] John L. Gresham Jr., "The Social Model of the Trinity and its Critics," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993), 325.

[9] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 225.

[10] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 149-150.

[11] Stephen T. Davis, "Perichoretic Monotheism: A Defense of a Social Theory of the Trinity," In *The Trinity: East/West Dialogue,* ed. Melville Y. Stewart, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 37-8.

[12] John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Press, 1984), 49.

Evangelicals like myself might be wary of a social trinity model considering the ecumenical support it receives, but I am hard pressed to dismiss the claim. No doubt there might be ulterior motives to championing such a cause (such as furtherment of a particular social agenda or an acquiescing to a postmodern culture that emphasizes relationship[13]), but if we cannot look to the economic Trinity to define the immanent Trinity where can we turn? All else it seems is but speculation. God clearly has demonstrated his love to the world and desire for sustained relationship. Unless I am to say that God has acted outside of his own character in doing so, or come up with some fanciful idea of intermediary action, then I must arrive at the thesis that *God is best defined not by a substantialist, modalistic-leaning model stemming from Augustinian thought, but by a thoroughly Trinitarian perspective wherein the Father, Son, and Spirit have their being at least in part by their interdependent relationship with one another.* This is not to say that everything God is may be defined by what we see as each member relates to one another and to creation, but it is to say that we can only have confidence in that which derives itself from what we see each do and say.[14]

In siding with those who have ascribed to the social Trinity model, I must nonetheless differ from those who do not recognize an eternal order among its members. Classical notions of the Trinity recognized order with terms such as origin, generation, and procession as is clearly seen in the likes of the Nicene creed. But some modern theologians such as Moltmann[15] build social models in which Father, Son, and Spirit are said to be immanently equal in their roles and functions and that any subordinate activity suggested in the incarnation was temporary at best. If we are, however, to say that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, must we not also conclude that there is order among the Trinity? This order should not be presented as some demeaning hierarchy, but rather as a collaboration among the members of the Godhead. As I have already admitted the economic Trinity may not tell us everything about God, but to suggest an egalitarian social model divorced from the economic Trinity has us enter into the very speculation that the social Trinitarians sought to escape in the first place.

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[13] This is not to suggest that any particular social agenda or that postmodernity's emphasis on relationship is negative in part or whole, but only to say that if we are concerned that previous concepts of the Trinity have roots in past cultural frameworks that were not necessarily biblical, should we not be wary that modern thinkers may simply be shaping theology to their times as did those of another era. See Plantinga, "The Perfect Family: Our Model for Life Together Is Found in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit," 26.

[14] J. Scott Horrell, "Toward a Biblical Model of the Social Trinity: Avoiding Equivocation of Nature and Order," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* v. 47, no. 3 (2004), 400.

[15] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 157.

II. The Biblical Basis for the Social Trinity

If we are to say that what we know of God can only be derived from what God does and says in and to the world, then as an evangelical I must find myself looking to Scripture to see if the social Trinity is indeed the model that best fits what we have recorded of the Godhead. As there are variety of twists on the social trinity model, I will consider how Scripture speaks to my concept of the social Trinity, which is as follows: *God is the one divine and eternal being who exists as three distinct centers of consciousness* (for lack of a better term) *with three distinct roles, all of whom are equal in nature, relate with the others in a personal, interdependent manner and mutually indwell one another.*

A. *One divine and eternal being.*   Regardless of how people have framed the ontology of the Trinity, Christian theologians have always avoided tritheism and asserted that God must from at least some angle be described as one divine and eternal being. And this for good reason, since from the days of Moses ("Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" Deut. 6:4) Scripture has recorded this to be the case.   David (2 Sam 7:22), Asaph (Ps 83:18), and Isaiah (43:10; 44:6) all point to God's oneness, something that Jesus affirms when he quotes Deut. 6:4 (Mark 12:29).   Even after Jesus was fully revealed as the Christ and worthy of glory, worship and praise, and the Spirit had been manifest in the church, God's oneness was still declared by Paul as he wrote to the Corinthians, "There is no God but one" (1 Cor 8:4). This oneness is particularly noted by the relational connections between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and is seen particularly in Jesus' final words to his disciples as found in John's epistle:

- Jesus is going to prepare a place for his disciples in his Father's house (John 14:2-3)

- Relational knowledge of Jesus equates to knowledge of the Father (John 14:6-7)

- The Father is glorified in the Son, not apart from the Son or above the Son (John 14:13)

- Both Father and Son will make their home with those who love Jesus (John14:23), because the Father loves those who love Jesus (John 14:21)

- To hate Jesus is to hate his Father as well (John 15:24)

- All that belongs to the Father's is Jesus' and is taken by the Spirit (John 15:14-15)

- The Spirit is sent by Jesus from the Father to testify about the Son (John 15:26)

B. *Three individual persons or centers of consciousness.* Numerous Old Testament passages record God speaking in first person as the divine "I" (Gen 46:3) and exercising his will (Gen 18:14; Isa 1:15), intelligence (Pro

3:19), and emotion (Exo 34:6-7; Isa 5:25). It is telling then, when in the New Testament both the Son and the Spirit are found doing the same (Mark 14:62; Acts 13:2; John 7:6-8; Matt 13:54; Luke 2:40, John 11:35; Eph 4:30). This even so for the seemingly less personal Spirit, who in Acts 13:2 instructs the leaders at Antioch, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them," and elsewhere is said to comfort (John 14:16), intercede (Rom 8:26-27), be grieved (Ephesians 4:30), and even be blasphemed apart from the Son (Mark 3:29). That the conscious centers of the Trinity are distinct is emphatically portrayed in Jesus' words to the Father ("Not my will but yours", Matt 26:39) and his words to the disciples about the Spirit ("And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor," John 14:16). Unless one is to admit to some conflicted personality on the part of God, or at least to a God who talks to himself in the mirror, one must conclude that the One God is made up of nothing less than three "persons" or "centers of consciousness", albeit these phrases have their limitations.

C. Three distinct roles. Classical models of the Trinity recognize an order in the Trinity with terms such as origin, generation, and procession, and thereby point to distinct and eternal roles for the Father, Son, and Spirit. Although, as mentioned earlier, such distinction is not readily received by some social Trinitarians, the biblical record of the economic Trinity suggests otherwise. The Father sent Jesus (John 3:16) and commits to him "all things" (Luke 10:22);; the Spirit will take what is Jesus' to bring glory to Christ (John 14:14); Jesus asks the Father for the Spirit to come (John 14:16), Jesus acknowledges that the Father is greater than he (John 14:28); Jesus obeys the Father (John 14:31); the glory that Jesus enjoys, and will enjoy, is given to him by the Father (John 17:24); and Jesus does not know when the end will come, but the Father does (Mat 24:36).   The illustrated subordination does not demean nor devalue any member of the Trinity, but only highlights the collaboration of ever loving leadership and service within the Godhead, and avoids the temptation to obliterate biblical distinctions in the economic Trinity in order sustain modern social concerns. As David Cunningham writes:

> Social Trinitarians are right to insist on the equality within the Trinity, but they are wrong to model this equality on democratic imagery or abstract accounts of friendship that tend to obliterate (or at least, to obscure the relations as orientations of activity) within God. The Three are equal because they are all characterized by free gift and superabundant love. The Three are ever subordinate to one another; this is not because they all have "equal rights" within the Godhead, but because they are always about the business of giving themselves to one another – completely and absolutely.[16]

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[16] David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Madden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), 294.

D. Equal in nature. To say that Father, Son, and Spirit have distinct roles but are equal in nature can be as difficult to grasp as the idea that God is both one and three. If, however, we understand nature not to be that which mandates functional equality, but rather that which gives rise to the intentional and free act of the Godhead to maintain and empower collaborative roles that flow from a single unified purpose and ethos, we can receive Scriptures teaching on the Trinity wherein:

- the disciples are called to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (Mat 28:18-20)

- the Spirit is said to exhibit fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23), all of which are also exhibited by the Father and Son

- the work of the Godhead to foreknow, sanctify, and prepare for obedience are shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (1 Pet 1:2)

- the pleasure of the Father rests in the Son and the Spirit (Mark 1:10-11);

- believers are called to sustenance from each member of the Trinity (1 Cor 13:14).

E. Each center personally relates in an interdependent manner with the others. The Father, Son, and the Spirit are said to 'see', 'hear', 'speak', and 'act' in relationship to one another (Matt 3:17; Luke 23:46; John 1:19; 5:19, 30; 11:41; 16:13-15) as well as to 'be with' one another (John 1:2; Matt 3:16; Rev 4:2-5; 5:6). Whatever these terms mean in regards to the immanent Trinity, they at the very least point to a dynamic relationship[17] in which each knows and testifies of the other (John 5:36-37; 7:29, 1 Cor 2:11; Gal 4:6), depends upon the other (John 5:19, 22; 6:37, 44, 8:28; 1 Cor 2:12; 1 Pet 1:2), loves one another (John 3:35; 14:31; 17:23-26), and glorifies one another (John 8:49-50; 13:32; 14:12; 17:1; 16:14) as free, non-coerced centers (John 3:7-8; 10:17-18; 1 Cor 12:11). What is perhaps most telling and supportive of the social Trinity model is that Scripture much more clearly presents the interdependent and personal relationship of the members of the Trinity then it does an ontological comparison.

F. Each center mutually indwells the others. In describing the interdependence of the members of the Trinity as well as their equality of nature, Scripture illustrates the oneness of the three by suggesting a mutual indwelling of one another. Jesus is said to be in the Father (John 10:38; 14:20, 17:21), the Father is said to be in the Son (John 10:38; 17:21,22), and the Spirit is said to be both in the Son and of God (Isa 42:1, Luke 4:14, 18; 1 Cor 2:11; 2 Cor 3:17). This indwelling does not obliterate the separateness of each member as seen by Jesus' declaration that the Father had forsaken him (Matt 27:46) and his declaration that it was good that ascend to the Father, so that the

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[17] Horrel, "Toward a Biblical Model of the Social Trinity: Avoiding Equivocation of Nature and Order," 406.

Spirit might come (16:7). While difficult to comprehend, at the very least the ancient idea of mutual indwelling[18] suggests that the being of each member of the Trinity is not separate from the being of the others, so much so that each could be said to be who he is only because of and in relationship to the others. This is why it can be said that the Father, Son and Spirit "are related in such a way that they lovingly permeate one another so radically and so completely, that they constitute a single God.[19]

III. Implications of the Social Trinity Model

Roger Olsen writes, "The Trinity thus becomes a model of creaturely love and fellowship. In the end, it is not an esoteric idea, but a supremely practical doctrine for the guidance of Christian thought."[20] Catherine Lowry LaCugna suggests that a relational Trinitarian perspective is "the proper source for reflection on theological ethics, spirituality, ecclesiology, and liturgical and communitarian life of the church."[21] And many others have recognized that the idea that God is a social God and exists in a relational triunity has considerable implications. Here I will explore the potential implications of the social Trinity in understanding of the nature of the Christian life, the nature of the church, and ministry in the contemporary North American context.

A. View of God. Understanding God as a social Trinity calls one to see God's interaction with the world as something that is within his character. God need not remain distanced from humankind in order to maintain his ascetic property, as interaction with humankind is an expression of his relational nature—a relational nature that existed well before the creation of the world. Musings of God as a distant watchmaker who has left the world to run on its own or as hidden treasure that only the most holy find must therefore be replaced with a picture of One who is both purposely revealing himself and actively wooing humankind. Finding God then is not a futile hunt in the dark, but as simple as opening one's ear to his call and seeing him work in the world. Furthermore, when God's call is heard and work is seen, it can be anticipated that his voice will not be that which harkens the listener to a list of prescribed principles and precepts but rather is one that invites us to enter into relational unity with the Trinity. A social model of the Trinity can then be said to help us view God not only as one who calls for

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[18] The concept of mutual indwelling (also described through terms like perichoresis, interpenetration, or circumincession) is not new and can be traced back to Gregory of Nazianzus, St. Maximus the Confessor, Pseudo-Cyril of Alexandria, and St. John of Damascus. Verna Harrison, "Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* v. 35, no. 1 (1991), 53-65.
[19] Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity: Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988), 61.
[20] Roger E. Olson, and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002): 4.
[21] LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 1.

obedience or allegiance simply to manifest the reality of his reign, but as one who guides, directs, and comforts us that we might enjoy him.

    B. The Nature of the Christian Life. Much of Christianity can be described as pragmatic 'do-ism' wherein the believer acts with the understanding that if she behaves in a certain way God will respond in a predictable (or as some would say, a faithful or unchanging) manner. It is as if God has left his Word, and it up to us to live out the principles that he has laid before us. Such a perspective belies the frequent evangelical stanza, "Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship" as well as the relational nature of the Trinity prescribed here. The result is that much of Christianity is either anemic or loveless, or both. Anemic in the sense that there is little reliance on the indwelling life of God and loveless in that the Christian life is lived by the book and not heart to heart.

    The predominant phrase used to address Christians in the New Testament is not 'Chrisitian', but 'in Christ' (Rom 8:1, 16:3; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 1:22). Furthermore, there is considerable mention of the indwelling life of Christ (Col 1:27) and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer (John 14:17; 1 Cor 2:12; 3:16; 2 Cor 1:22). This is telling in that the richness of the interdependence and unity of the Trinity is also described as a mutual 'in' relationship, wherein the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indwell each other and find their being in the being of the others.   It is proposed then that the most radical implication of redemption is the placement of one within the relational circle of the Trinity, wherein the very nature of God indwells the believer (Col 1:27; 2 Pet 1:3) and one's standing is as one who is seated in the heavenlies with the Triune God (Eph 2:6).   With such a perspective the Christian life should cease to be principle- or even purpose-driven and instead become person-driven. This was Paul's reminder to the Galatians who had replaced living by the Spirit with 'Christianized performance' (Gal 3:1-5). It was also Jesus' reminder to the Sadducees and Pharisees when he told them the greatest commandment was to "*Love* the Lord your God will all your heart, mind, soul, and strength," as it was to the church at Ephesus who had rigorously upheld doctrinal purity to the exclusion of loving him (Rev 2:1-7).   How much the Christian West needs to escape its formulaic religiosity and return to the hope of glory and love expressed in the Trinitarian prayer of Paul:

> For this reason I kneel before the Father, *from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name*. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power *through his Spirit in your inner being*, so that *Christ may dwell in your hearts* through faith. And I pray that you, *being rooted and established in love, may have power*, together with all the saints, *to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ*, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--*that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.* (Eph 3:14-19, NIV, italics added)

C. *The Nature of the Church.* The greatest implications for the doctrine of the social Trinity just might be found in ecclesiology. In fact, because it has been neglected, the church has probably only appropriated a small part of the possibilities for developing a proper theology of the believing community.[22] Among his final words, Jesus prayed that believers throughout history would be 'one' just as he was in the Father and the Father was in him (John 17:21). As discussed previously, the 'in' nature of relationship between the members of the Trinity is at the very least reflective of deep and loving interdependence wherein the being of one is integrated in the being of others. Jesus' words, therefore, call the church to be a body that consists of members with undying, loving commitment to one another. The apostle Paul in both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 writes that those who are 'in Christ' have been placed into a circle that not only includes the Trinity but one another as well, and as such each member of the body belongs to the other and should be devoted to each other in love. Such love and self-giving should not be surprising for it is what is exhibited within the Godhead.

Inclusion in the perichoresis of the Trinity means that each believer is of equal value regardless of gender, ethnicity, economic advantage, age, education, or physical or mental gifting (1 Cor 1:26-29; 12:13, Gal 3:28; 1 Tim 4:12; Jas 2:5), and that those in the church should thus honor each other (1 Cor 12:21-25) to the point of rejoicing with those who rejoice, mourning with those who mourn (Rom 12:15; 1 Cor 12:26), and helping those in need (Rom 12:13, Gal 6:10). It does not mean, however, that each member will be equal in function (Rom 12:4) or that there will be no subordination in church governance. This is clear by the instruction that different believers will be given different gifts (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-11, 27-30; Eph 4:11) and by the recognition of overseers (1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9). Once again equal value, but different function should not be surprising for it too is what is exhibited in the Godhead. Such a framework might be unsavory to those who have been subject to relegation or oppression by the church, but the answer to this grievance is not egalitarian function, but a self-giving spirit that seeks the common good (1 Cor 12:11, Eph 4:12). This stance is both indicative of the Trinity itself and is the manner by which the church itself is able to become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13).

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[22] Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2ed (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1997), 117.

D. Ministry in the North American Context. Much of evangelicalism has decried the ever-growing post-modern mindset, and yearns for a return to modernism's absolutes. There is good reason for such a stance considering post-modernism's bankrupt philosophical position. But although Christians should not fall for post-modernism's relativity, the dialogue it has furthered about community and relationship (albeit a shaky one) is one in which the message of the Triune God might bring real meaning. What better than to make the relational nature of the Trinity the basis for a relational concept of personhood rather than some shifting and undefined societal construct. Indeed in the current cultural milieu, it seems incumbent upon believers to communicate a God who is all about relationship because he himself is a God who has been in relationship for all eternity. Such communication must include not only a declaration of God's desire to indwell all humanity for the sake of God-human relations but a demonstration of God's unifying and empowering work in the community of the church. As Jesus said:

> My prayer is not for [the disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23, NIV)

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