Clark H.
Pinnock

Foreword and Commentary
by **Daniel Castelo**

Flame
of
Love

A Theology of
the Holy Spirit

Second
Edition

InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Spirit and Trinity

IN PRESENTING A VISION OF THE SPIRIT, let us begin with the doctrine of God and focus on the liveliness of the Trinity and the identity of the Spirit within a loving relationality. Let us consider the Spirit as One who bonds the loving fellowship that God is and creates access to the Father through the Son (Eph 2:18). The Spirit reaches out to creatures, catches them up, and brings them home to the love of God.

Almost everything else I will have occasion to say will spring from this ontology. Spirit is essentially the serendipitous power of creativity, which flings out a world in ecstasy and simulates within it an echo of the inner divine relationships, ever seeking to move God's plans forward. The Spirit is bringing God's plans to completion in the direction of new creation and union with God through the participatory journey of Jesus Christ. Spirit also makes Christ's work of redemption universally accessible and fosters unity amidst diversity in the midst of the segmented body of Christ.

We begin with the identity of the Spirit as a divine Person in a social Trinity and with the sheer liveliness of God. According to the gospel the nature of God is a communion of loving Persons, the overflowing shared life that creates and upholds the universe. Early theologians spoke of the divine nature as a dance, a circling round of threefold life, as a coming

and going among the Persons and graciously in relation to creation.[a] We start with the identity of the triune God and with the face of the Spirit within this community as the ecstasy of its life.[1]

Why Begin Here?

This is not an easy topic; one might ask why I would begin with it. I do so because God's triune identity and the Spirit as the bond of love within it underlie so much else that I want to say. It is also a practical truth, for clarity concerning Being (ontology) helps us understand not only who God is but who we are and what kind of world we inhabit. The Christian understanding of God as pure relationality is such a stunning contribution to human understanding about ultimate matters that it must come first.[2]

Theology must break certain habits surrounding this theme. Often, having defended the doctrine of the Trinity against its various denials, theologians become complacent and fail to go further and make the belief intelligible. Theologians stare, as it were, at a priceless treasure, an expression of the relational essence of God, yet do not perceive its immense value in terms of proclamation. To miss it is to overlook a major aspect of the fair beauty of the Lord.[3]

Because the matter has often been left enigmatic, we need to reflect theologically on the meaning of the Trinity. I hope to counter the impression that while the Trinity is an important belief that must be embraced by anyone who would be orthodox, it is not a belief one should

---

[a]The notion alluded to here is *perichōrēsis*, which Pinnock explicitly references below. Although the term continues to be used in reference to a divine dance of interrelationality, the roots of the word suggest otherwise—namely, something akin to "coinherence" when used for trinitarian purposes.

[1]John D. Zizioulas strikes this note as regards the divine nature: "Personhood and Being," chap. 1 in *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

[2]For a sound introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity, see William J. Hill, *The Three-Personed God: The Trinity as a Mystery of Salvation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1982).

[3]Other excellent books on the Trinity include Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), and Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).

expect to understand. There is an aphorism along these lines: "Try to explain the Trinity and you'll lose your mind; try to deny it and you'll lose your soul."[4] This sends a bleak message regarding the intelligibility of faith and invites the criticism that the Trinity is a piece of outdated mythology. Effective communication requires that doctrine not be left unintelligible if light *can* be shed on it. I think some light can be shed on it, though the mystery remains great. Revelation of the triune God is both significant and limited.

Nevertheless, the truth of the doctrine is meaningful and quite marvelous. From the Trinity we learn that the Creator is not static or standoffish but a loving relationality and sheer liveliness. It informs us that creation is grounded in God's love and that grace underlies the gift of life itself. If God is a loving relationality, grace is primary, because it is rooted in the loving divine communion. Creation as well as redemption flows from the Trinity as pure gift. God did not invent grace when sin entered the world. What happened then was that grace abounded all the more (Rom 5:20). The goal of redemption as union with God was not thought up later on but is the outworking of God's original purpose.[5]

As loving communion, God calls into being a world that has the potential of realizing loving relationality within itself. God projected a created order in which he delights and to which the Spirit gives life (see chapter two). When things went wrong through the misuse of freedom, God sent forth the Spirit on a mission of restoration through incarnation, so that injury and brokenness might be healed from within our nature by God's power (chapter three). Healing continues to happen through the power of the Spirit, who indwells the body of Christ, and that power is present and real both sacramentally and charismatically, so that justice and salvation may be brought to all the nations (chapter four).

---

[4]One can find the aphorism in Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 1:342. The skeptical response to it is in John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 124.

[5]On the meaningfulness of the doctrine of the Trinity understood as loving relationality, see Catherine M. LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

Relationality features also in the understanding of salvation as union
with God. Spirit is moving humanity toward personal communion and
participation in the divine nature, which was God's everlasting purpose
(chapter five). And just as the work of the Creator is the source of all that
exists, so the scope of reconciliation has a universal tendency. God has
the whole human race in view in his desire to save, and the Spirit every-
where draws sinners from the far country to the Father's love (chapter six).
And, because the church is so important to God as his dwelling place,
anointed servant, and beloved bride, Spirit ceaselessly strives within the
community through time and space to bring us deeper into unity and
truth (chapter seven).

God as Spirit

Spirit is a subtle word and is used in different ways in Scripture. The di-
versity of usage makes it natural for readers to ask whether the term
refers only to God's presence or to the third Person of the Holy Trinity.
Here I hope first to show that both usages in fact obtain and then turn to
the question of the face of the Spirit. How does Spirit fit the triune figu-
ration? What is the Spirit's identity?

As to whether God *is* spirit or *has a* Spirit, it is not an either-or but a
both-and. There are texts that say God is spirit *and* that God has Spirit.
The term can refer to God in a general way and also to the third Person
of the Trinity. This double pattern is reminiscent of the way the term
wisdom is used in the Bible also, both in a general way to refer to the
wisdom of God and in a specific way to refer to the Son, who is God's
wisdom in person. Wisdom both symbolizes God's power to order the
world (Prov 1:20) and is identified with the Word made flesh (1 Cor 1:30).

Similarly, *spirit* refers both to God's presence in a general sense and to
the third Person. As to the general meaning of *Spirit*, Jesus states it
plainly: "God is spirit" (Jn 4:24). Obviously the term can be used to
define the divine essence. However, this kind of usage is rare. Scripture
does not usually speak abstractly. It prefers to put emphasis on God as
an agent and avoids giving the impression that God is any kind of

impersonal absolute. Hegel liked to call God absolute Spirit, which for him came close to an impersonal force. The Bible prefers to take the risk of anthropomorphic speech. This may be why it rarely says "God is spirit" or similar things, lest the impression be left that God is ethereal and not a dynamic, personal agent.

So what does Jesus mean? He does not mean that God is immaterial. His point is that God is like a powerful wind, not like a frail creature that is easily pushed around. To say God is Spirit is to say God is mighty wind, power of creation, reservoir of inexhaustible life. What Jesus is saying is like what Isaiah had said: "The Egyptians are human, and not God; their horses are flesh, and not spirit" (Is 31:3). When Jesus says that God is spirit, he is saying not that God is ghostly but that God is the power of creation, the incalculable energy that can give life to the dead and call things that do not exist into being (Rom 4:17).

It is easy for us to be misled about the meaning of spirit, since in Western languages and philosophies we think of it standing in antithesis to matter. So when we hear that God is spirit, we think in terms of Platonic ideas of incorporeality.[b] But spirit in the Bible has to do less with immateriality than with power and life—the invisible, mysterious power of a gale-force wind that we cannot begin to track (Jn 3:8). *Spirit* is the Bible's way of speaking of what we would call the transcendent power of creation.[6]

In saying that God is spirit, the mighty power of creation, I am referring to what Wolfhart Pannenberg calls the field of deity. *Spirit* here refers to the power of Godhead and to the divine field in which Persons of the Trinity exist in the fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit. In this use of the term all the Persons are spirit, and it refers to the deity common

---

[b]We should not rush past this point, for it is worth pressing repeatedly. Philosophically, intellectually, and culturally, the language of spirit already comes freighted with possibilities and limits for readers. Therefore, English speakers in particular do not approach these matters neutrally. In order to appreciate various aspects of Christian pneumatology, readers will have to identify and maybe even unlearn certain things as they seek to learn others.

[6]For background to this usage, see Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1961), 1:210-20.

to them. All three Persons exist in the field that Jesus calls spirit and constitute eternal forms of that field.[7]

Spirit may sometimes refer then to the presence of God in the world, not to a third Person distinct from Father and Son. Spirit in this sense denotes the power that creates and renews the world. This is the sense of many passages, especially in the Old Testament, where trinitarian reflection has not yet arisen, since the incarnation has not yet taken place. In such texts spirit (wind) is an image like power, fire, light, water—an image about God that bypasses the issue of Trinity. *Spirit* does often refer to God's presence in a quite general sense.

Nontrinitarians are right to say God is spirit and that when we encounter spirit we encounter God himself. *Spirit* can refer to divine immanence, as opposed to a reference to a distinct Person in the Godhead. Liberalism was right to associate spirit with the general presence of God in the world, because it often refers to precisely that and to our experience of communion with God. As spirit, God inspires, motivates, and empowers people everywhere.

God Also Has Spirit

It would be a mistake, however, to deny other texts that use *Spirit* in a trinitarian way.[8] For in addition to evidence that God *is* spirit, there is evidence to support the claim that God *has* Spirit in a trinitarian sense. It is a little confusing for one term to refer to two related realities, but it is so. Perhaps there is a reason for this rooted in the Spirit's chosen identity in the history of salvation. Perhaps Spirit wishes no other name than the generic ascription for God. The others are called "Father" and "Son," but Spirit takes no special name and chooses to remain anonymous. Deferentially he turns away from himself and graciously points to the others.

---

[7]On divine spirituality see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:370-84.

[8]This is the error of Geoffrey W. H. Lampe, who refuses to accept evidence for the distinct personhood of Son and Spirit alongside the Father: *God as Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977).

The idea of the Trinity lies at the core of and indwells the narratives concerning Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The Gospels give insight into the trinitarian structure of the divine nature. This witness forces us to go beyond an understanding of spirit as God's presence to the truth of Spirit also in fellowship with Father and Son. The triadic pattern first becomes visible in the story of Jesus, which we take to be God's self-communication and the source of trinitarian developments in theology. To see God as relational Trinity is not human speculation but an insight arising from the narrative of salvation, which is God's self-revelation.

The economy of salvation history affords insight into the being of God, that God is the Father, revealed by the Son, through the Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is the product of reflection on God's activity in history and is the explanation of what happened. Leonard Hodgson remarks, "The doctrine of the trinity is an inference to the nature of God, drawn from what we believe to be the empirical evidence given by God in his revelation of himself in the history of the world."[9]

God does not reveal himself mostly in an abstract way, through propositions. God causes revelation to happen in human history, particularly in the events surrounding Jesus Christ, where we glimpse the three-foldness that characterizes the nature of God. Jesus is conscious of being the Son of God and proclaims the nearness of the kingdom of his Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. The story of Jesus does not yield the dogmatic formula of the Trinity as such, but it yields the foundations of trinitarian thought. The insight arises from observing Jesus' relationship with God.

At his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus was conscious of his sonship as the Father's beloved and experienced the power of the Spirit for mission. At this time Jesus experienced sonship (filiation) in an intimate relationship with the God whom he called "abba." The voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mk 1:11). From experiencing God as his father, Jesus knew he was sent to proclaim God's

---

[9]Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: James Nisbet, 1943), 140.

kingdom as the Father's Son. His prayer life reveals this relationship as he cries, "Abba, Father" (Mk 14:36). This language was remembered by his followers, and Paul even preserves the Aramaic term (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6).

Jesus says, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Mt 11:27). The saying captures the relationship out of which Jesus understood his mission. From this filial consciousness came the more developed Christology of the Epistles and of later tradition.

Alongside the experience of filiation, Jesus experienced the baptism of the Spirit and became the unique bearer of the Spirit. At his baptism the heavens were opened and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove. This was basic for his life and ministry. People experienced Jesus as Spirit-filled, as prophet and healer, not as professional clergy. The Spirit was upon him to preach good news to the poor and enabled him to speak with authority, to heal the sick and to cast out demons (Mt 12:28). Jesus was aware of being God's Son in a unique sense and at the same time being the unique bearer of the Spirit.[c]

Later trinitarian doctrine is rooted in this foundational experience. It comes from the life of Jesus as itself a trinitarian event. Jesus knew God as his loving Father, he knew himself as the Father's beloved Son, and he knew the Spirit as God's power at work in him. In this relationship Jesus distinguished himself from the Father but also submitted himself obediently to the Father with respect to the mission he had been given. The Spirit in turn was experienced as distinct from Father but as dedicated to implementing the work of the Father through the Son. Even Jesus' death—*especially* his death—was a trinitarian event in which the Son yielded up his life and the Father suffered with his beloved, while the Spirit both supported Jesus in his self-sacrifice and vindicated him by raising him up.[10]

---

[c]Although Pinnock will develop this claim further in chapter three, its reference here is worth highlighting: for Pinnock, Jesus is the quintessential charismatic figure.

[10]John J. O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God* (New York: Paulist, 1989), chap. 3, and Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, chap. 5.

Building on this narrative, the New Testament supplies key elements for the trinitarian development of doctrine.[11] First, writers identify Jesus as a divine Person, as the eternal Son who is distinct from the Father. The evidence is abundant and can be seen, for example, in the titles ascribed to Jesus, such as *Lord* and even *God.* More evidence appears in the way in which Old Testament texts that refer originally to God are applied to Jesus and in the divine functions Jesus performs, such as creating and judging. Jesus is spoken of as preexistent and the One whom it is appropriate to worship. There are many direct and remarkable claims for him (for example, Phil 2:6; Col 1:19; 2:9; Heb 1:3).

Clearly, then, the New Testament requires us to recognize at least two subjects or Persons in the Godhead. The change in Jewish monotheism has been made. Now the question is, Having posited two Persons, should we posit a third?

The New Testament does in fact posit a third Person distinct from Father and Son. Though it can speak of the Spirit impersonally as the Old Testament does, as God's gift and power, it also presents Spirit in richly personal ways as One who speaks, intercedes, teaches, grieves, and the like. In such texts Spirit is being understood as a Person, taking initiative and doing things. In short, Spirit is being regarded as a Person like the Father and the Son. Plainly the move is on toward fully trinitarian speech. There are not only one or two but three distinct and associated subjects in the Godhead. The Nicene Creed properly names the Spirit as the Lord and giver of life—titles proper to the divine being—and properly exhorts us to worship the Spirit together with Father and Son.[12]

The Gospel of John completes the picture by presenting God as actually experiencing intradivine personal relationships and differences within the unity. It points to mutual indwelling and to personal

---

[11]I am indebted here to Cornelius Plantinga for his PhD thesis, "The Hodgson-Welch Debate and the Social Analogy of the Trinity" (Princeton University, 1982), chap. 3, which is summarized in "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 21-47.

[12]For data supporting the personhood of the Spirit, see Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 829-42.

interactions among the three. It assumes personal distinctions in the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit. We read that God sends the Spirit in the name of Jesus to teach us (Jn 14:26). The three Persons are involved in mutual relations: "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, . . . he will testify on my behalf" (Jn 15:26). "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (Jn 17:21).

God Is Love

The picture is of a transcendent society or community of three personal entities. Father, Son, and Spirit are the members of a divine community, unified by common divinity and singleness of purpose. The Trinity portrays God as a community of love and mutuality. While it is true that the New Testament does not address all the issues regarding substance, person, and equality that would surface later, it lays the foundations firmly for trinitarian doctrine. It is aware of a threefoldness in the life of God and supplies rich material from which to construct the doctrine. Though the inner life of God remains mysterious, there is a threeness in it which was disclosed when God saved humanity through incarnation. God is not an isolated individual but a loving, interpersonal communion, to which we owe our very existence.

Believing this is not a leap into the dark. It is historically grounded in the history of Jesus. At the cross the truth of the Trinity was in doubt, but not for long. After three days Jesus was "declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4, NRSV margin note). God manifested his triune nature by raising Jesus from the dead by the Spirit. By that event, even more than Jesus' baptism, the truth of the Trinity was established. This is not theological subjectivism or a venture of faith without justification. The truth of the Trinity is grounded in the bodily resurrection of the Son through the Spirit.[13]

---

[13]Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).

Belief in the Trinity is even rational to a degree. Unity is a relatively simple notion in mathematics, but not simple elsewhere. For example, it is not simple in "single" organisms, which are highly complex. The higher the entity, the more complex unity seems to be. Think of the unity of a work of art.

Unity is not a simple idea. Unity can admit of great complexity. Why expect divine unity to lack complexity? Trinity is a mystery, but it is not an irrationality. It epitomizes the complexity in unity that we find everywhere in experience.[14]

Earlier we encountered the short statement "God is spirit." Now we turn to another: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). This one also describes the nature of God and complements the other. The God who is spirit is also love. God's essence is spirit—God's character is love.

Now on one level this refers to God's benevolent disposition to save sinners. Jesus exalted God as a merciful Father with a loving heart. On another level, however, the phrase "God is love" refers to the inner life of God. God loves sinners in history because, prior to that, God loves the Son and the Spirit, and loves us in relation to them.

John is saying that the love God has for sinners flows from the love that circulates everlastingly within the Trinity. As Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you" (Jn 15:9). God's love for sinners is not just the love of a single, unitarian Subject. John is making reference to a triune love that flows among the Persons of the Godhead. Not only concretions of the divine field of deity, these Persons make up a relational Being, a community of love and mutual indwelling.[15]

The Trinity was revealed when the Father, seeking to show his love for lost humanity, communicated with us through Word and Spirit. From this divine saving activity we are given insight into the inner life of God and glimpse a reciprocal community of love between Father, Son, and Spirit, three Persons relating in distinctive patterns.[16]

---

[14]Hodgson, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 89-96.
[15]Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:395-96, 422-23, 428-32.
[16]On the mystery of the Trinity and the Spirit within the Trinity, see George A. Maloney, *The Spirit Broods over the World* (New York: Alba House, 1993), chaps. 2-3.

God's nature is that of a communion of three Persons who exist in mutual relations with one another. Each is distinct from the others, but each is what it is in relation to the others. God exists in a dynamic of love, an economy of giving and receiving.

Note that this yields a different understanding of *person* than is common in Western culture, where *person* is equated with the individual. For Descartes a person is a thinking individual, and in his view social relationship does not enter the picture. The human is defined as an individual substance of a rational nature, not as a person related to other persons essentially. But *person* when seen in the context of the Trinity signifies relationality. The divine Persons exist in relationship with others and are constituted by those relations. They are individuals in a social matrix.

This is also true, by way of analogy, of us. We are persons who depend on one another in order to be ourselves. We are distinct from other persons but realize ourselves in and through them. Persons are individuals in relationship and communion, not in isolation.[17]

The Trinity is a divine reality constituting three Persons in relationship. God is Father in relation to the Son, and God is Son in relation to the Father. Father and Son are what they are because of the other one. The Father is the father in relation to the generation and sending of the Son. The Son is the son in his obedience to the Father. The Spirit is the spirit as he glorifies the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father.

Gregory of Nazianzus captured the mystery of triune life using the image of the dance (*perichōrēsis*), translated by Latin writers as "circumincession." The metaphor suggests moving around, making room, relating to one another without losing identity. The divine unity lies in the relationality of Persons, and the relationality is the nature of the unity. At the heart of this ontology is the mutuality and reciprocity among the Persons. Trinity means that shared life is basic to the nature of God. God is perfect sociality, mutuality, reciprocity, and peace. As a circle of loving

---

[17]LaCugna, *God for Us*, chap. 8.

relationships, God is dynamically alive. There is only one God, but this one God is not solitary but a loving communion that is distinguished by overflowing life.[18]

Classical theism considers God apart from Trinity, as though there were a divine nature to discuss apart from there being three Persons in it. We can indeed consider the divine nature in a general way, but an effect of doing so is that we can lose sight of relationality and its importance to God's identity. Considering the divine nature in isolation from Trinity might even lead to error, because it would encourage us to suppose that we know a fair amount about the divine nature from our own speculations, apart from revelation. Out of confidence in our own metaphysical acumen, we might even question whether there can be real relations within God or between God and the world. Aquinas came to that conclusion, owing to his prejudice against allowing change in God. Assumptions about what is "proper" for the divine nature to be like can make it difficult for us to take seriously what God's nature is like as revealed in the gospel.[d]

The problem in Greek thinking is that God suffers, as it were, from his own completeness. God is so perfect in that way of thinking that people are inclined to deny any degree of dynamic in God, whereas in the gospel the divine nature is essentially a dynamic communion of love and a transcendence capable of immanence by virtue of it.[19]

---

[d]At this and other junctures, Pinnock references a construct that he wishes to reject, one that goes by several names in his work: "classical theism," "Greek thinking," "Unmoved Mover," "Aristotle's god," and so on. Pinnock's legacy is partly constituted by rejection of this construct, as represented in the work *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), which is alluded to in *Flame of Love*, and his subsequent book *Most Moved Mover* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001). One finds much debate as to how to understand this construct and to what degree it applies to the many figures and traditions Pinnock and others associate with it. The larger question has to do with the place of metaphysics in theological endeavoring.

[18]Johnson, *She Who Is*, 220; John L. Gresham, "The Social Model of the Trinity and Its Critics," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993): 325-43; Robert L. Wilken, "Not a Solitary God: The Triune God of the Bible," *Pro Ecclesia* 3 (1994): 36-55; Donald G. Bloesch, "The Mystery of the Trinity," chap. 7 in *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

[19]Johnson, *She Who Is*, chap. 11. John Sanders traces the influence of Hellenistic assumptions about the divine nature on the Christian doctrine of God in Clark H. Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 59-100.

Both-And

Spirit both names the essence of God and refers to the third Person of the Trinity. Spirit is the nature common to all the Persons and, at the same time, a distinct Person alongside Father and Son. Spirit is the life common to all and a Person with his own face and the center of distinctive actions.

It might have been easier for us if the Bible had reserved the term for the deity as a whole and employed a different term (like *Paraclete*) when referring to the third Person. This would have kept the two categories separate and simplified the task of interpreters. As it stands, one has to determine which category *spirit* refers to in any given passage.[20]

Trinitarian insight into the life of God derives from revelation in history, not from philosophy. God differentiates himself in the incarnation in a triune way. Accepting Jesus as the revelation of God, we take it that God as he is revealed in the economy of salvation corresponds to God as he is in his inner being. We assume that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity. The immanent Trinity (God in himself) is revealed by the economic Trinity (God in history), from which we learn that God is Father, Son, and Spirit.[21]

What can we say about the inner life of God? On the one hand, the economic Trinity does not exhaust the immanent Trinity, since the divine mystery overflows revelation and is unattainable by the creature. On the other hand, revelation does establish the Trinity and three Persons in God. We are in the situation of having been given a true, though partial, knowledge of God in the economy of salvation. What has been revealed about the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit reveals something about the divine relationships.

What we see happening in the gospel narrative between the Persons we understand also to take place in the life of God. Thus the self-giving

---

[20]Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:370-84; A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Deity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity* (New York: Paragon House, 1994).

[21]Karl Rahner equates the immanent and the economic Trinity: *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 136.

love that we see in the Gospels has roots in what transpires within God the Trinity. We joyfully name God Father, Son, and Spirit, even while remaining well aware that our knowledge in these matters is very limited.[22]

A Struggle to Understand

Theology has not found it easy to take plurality in God seriously. There are several reasons for this. Given the background of Old Testament thinking, it was a significant development of monotheism to posit three Persons in God. From the Greek side, plurality did not fit easily into Hellenistic thinking, because it introduced complexity into God's nature, challenging the assumption of simplicity. The effect of such impediments has made trinitarian thinking often quite disappointing.

There were some good beginnings in early theology, such as in the social trinitarianism of the Cappadocian fathers. Gregory of Nyssa allowed for real personhood in his concept of Father, Son, and Spirit. He did not see them as modes of existence only but as subjects of the divine life enjoying personal relations. But it has not been easy to maintain this insight. An exception was Richard of St. Victor, who focused on love as most characteristic of the divine nature and came to the realization that if God is love everlastingly, this implies a circulation of love in the social context of the Trinity and the understanding of God as loving society.[23]

Augustine made a bad move for trinitarian reflection when he proposed a psychological analogy of Trinity which could not handle relationality in God. He thought of God as a single mind and the Persons as aspects of it. The analogy sounds modalistic and even unitarian, though Augustine did not intend it so. His problem was the idea of the simplicity of God derived from philosophical sources. This notion stood in the way

---

[22]Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 284-89.

[23]Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), chap. 5, and Hill, *Three-Personed God*, 78-79, 225-32.

of articulating the social Trinity. An assumption about the unity of God stemming from extrabiblical speculation led him into difficulty.[e]

Theology always gets into trouble when its practitioners think they know what God is like apart from what revelation says God is like. In this case Augustine needed to allow his concept of divine simplicity to be corrected by revelation, rather than determining the meaning of revelation. Failing to give primacy to revelation causes one to lose sight of the distinctions between Persons of the Trinity as the gospel reveals them.[24]

Reluctance to espouse the social model of the Trinity has dogged theology's path over the centuries. Even Karl Barth, despite the fact that he made the Trinity central in his theology, elevates unity over diversity when he insists on speaking of three modes, not three Persons, in God. He gives the appearance of thinking of God as a single Person existing in three unidentified modes. Such agnosticism regarding the immanent Trinity has led some of his disciples into unitarianism.[25] Similarly, Karl Rahner, the other truly great modern theologian, refuses to go beyond speaking of three "ways of existing" in God. Though it seems ironic, one can only call these two "neomodalist" in their doctrine of God.[26,f]

---

[e]At this time—that is, during the 1990s—Augustine was often critiqued for contributing to trinitarian theology's malaise in Western history. A prominent promulgator of this tendency was Colin Gunton (whom Pinnock cites in note 42). Of course, one issue is the original figure (Augustine, Aquinas, and so on), and another is the figure's reception. As for Augustine, he is exceedingly complex to consider, and a reference to the psychological analogy (which constitutes only a portion of *De Trinitate*) is insufficient with respect to Augustine's trinitarian legacy. For a monograph aiming to amplify receptions of Augustine's trinitarianism, see Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[f]Some of what was said earlier about Augustine applies here: Barth and Rahner produced a vast amount of materials, and a large secondary literature has emerged around them. Yes, their conventions of speech may have been undesirable at points in the opinion of some readers, but they are also widely regarded as two of the most important forces for the revival of trinitarian thought in the twentieth century.

---

[24]William Hasker, "Tri-unity," *Journal of Religion* 50 (1970): 6-11; Hill, *Three-Personed God*, 59-62; Hodgson, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 144-57.

[25]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/1, trans. G. T. Thompson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 400. Robert Jenson asks tellingly, "You Wonder Where the Spirit Went?," *Pro Ecclesia* 2 (1993): 296-304. Hendrikus Berkhof sounds like a unitarian in *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1964), chap. 6.

[26]Hill discusses them under the heading "Neo-modal Trinitarianism: The Uni-personal God of Three Eternal Modes of Being," chap. 5 in *Three-Personed God*.

Hans Küng, another truly able theologian who wants to be faithful to Scripture and can be brilliant in the timeliness of his applications, is also plainly modalistic. He takes the Persons of the Trinity as aspects of a single subject. He takes *Father* to refer to God above us, *Son* to refer to the representative human through whom God is revealed, and *Spirit* to refer to God's power within us. It appears Küng is saying that *Father* is God, while *Son* and *Spirit* refer to God's activity in history. That is, *Son* and *Spirit* refer to roles of one divine Person in the events of revelation and redemption.

In Küng's case, apologetic considerations play a role. He wants to make it easier for Jews and Muslims to understand Christianity in the context of monotheism—but he pays a price for it. Ironically, what he does is to deny such fellow monotheists access to the revolutionary insight concerning God's nature represented by the social analogy of the Trinity.[27]

The problem is much worse in liberal theology, where unitarian thinking is most influential and spirit is understood as God's presence, not as a third Person. Geoffrey Lampe, for example, equates spirit with divine immanence and the consequent nature of God, as in process theism. In effect, Spirit is conscripted to meet the requirements of a philosophy in which it is not a Person but a symbol of creative love.[28]

Fortunately the situation is now changing. Theologians are taking the social Trinity more seriously as involving real community in God. Heribert Mühlen follows Richard of St. Victor in this, and many others such as Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, Colin Gunton, Ted Peters, Cornelius Plantinga, Walter Kasper, Joseph Bracken, and William Hill are social trinitarians today. That is, they recognize the personal distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit in God. They take the plurality in God to be real and hold that the Persons relate to each other in love and reciprocity.

"Social Trinity" means that there are three Persons who are subjects of the divine experiences. Spirit in one sense is the nature of God possessed

---

[27]Hans Küng, *Credo: The Apostles' Creed Explained for Today* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 150-56.
[28]Blair Reynolds, *Toward a Process Pneumatology* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990).

by all the subjects, but *Spirit* also refers to the third Person in the divine fellowship. God's life is thus personal in the fullest sense—it is a life of personal communion. God is constituted by three subjects, each of whom is distinct from the others and is the subject of its own experiences in the unity of one divine life. This means among other things that God does not have to be related to a created order in order to be personal and loving. In the eternal being of God there exist the elements necessary for a fully personal life. This means that God, when he creates, creates freely, not out of necessity.[29]

Moltmann writes, "In order to comprehend the New Testament's testimony to the history of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the church had to develop the trinitarian concept of God. The history of Jesus the Son cannot be grasped except as part of the history of the Father, the Son and the Spirit."[30] In the New Testament we are confronted with three Persons and only then go on to ask about unity.

In order to avoid tritheism, we say that the Trinity is a society of persons united by a common divinity. There is one God, eternal, un-created, incomprehensible, and there is no other. But God's nature is internally complex and consists of a fellowship of three. It is the essence of God's nature to be relational. This is primordial in God and defines who God is. God is a triadic community, not a single, undifferentiated unity. Though beyond our understanding, God is a communion of Persons, and creation is a natural expression of God's life, because finite creatures find their fulfillment in relation to God. "At the deepest core of reality is a mystery of personal connectedness that constitutes the very livingness of God."[31]

---

[29]William C. Placher, "The Triune God: The Perichoresis of Particular Persons," chap. 3 in *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994).
[30]Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991), 16.
[31]Johnson, *She Who Is*, 228.

Identifying the Spirit

The Spirit is more than God's presence: the Spirit is a Person in fellowship with, but distinct from, Father and Son. Called the Paraclete in John's Gospel, the Spirit is personal agent, teacher, and friend.

Father and Son have a face. We can picture them, thanks to the narrative of salvation. Does the Spirit have a profile too? Human persons have an identity, thanks to the gift of God. Is this also true of the Spirit?[32]

Before addressing this question, let something more be said about the meaning of *person*, a category that has changed over the centuries and requires clarification. In the modern context *person* often indicates an autonomous, independent self. This approach to person may lie behind the hesitation to speak of three Persons in God which I noted in both Barth and Rahner. It would not be true to say that God has three Persons in that sense of person. *Person* should rather be defined as that which enters into relationships and does not exist apart from them. The key to its meaning is intersubjectivity along with mutuality and reciprocity.

With this in mind, we might say that each of the Persons of the Trinity is aware of its identity while relating with the others and sharing the divine consciousness. Each Person is conscious of itself as divine and distinct from the other Persons in reciprocal relationships.[33]

How might we think of the identity of the Spirit in this configuration? Spirit is not as clearly defined for us as Father and Son, because the Son became visible and renders the Father visible, while the Spirit remains invisible and not as easily known. It is easier to assign a face to the Son than to Spirit, because of the historical concreteness of incarnation. By comparison, the Spirit is less well-defined. Images like dove, water, and fire (for example) are evocative but do not reveal the face of a Person; the Spirit remains somewhat anonymous.

---

[32]LaCugna warns against doing what I am doing here but also provides help with doing it: *God for Us*, 296-300.

[33]Peters, *God as Trinity*, 34-37; LaCugna, *God for Us*, 288-92; Vincent Brummer, *The Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Often one gains the impression that the Spirit likes to be viewed as the influence of the risen Lord and not in its own right. We respect that. It is possible that the Spirit wishes to remain mysterious, a wind that cannot be traced, and values the freedom not to be limited by too many images. He may feel it is enough to be the power of creation and new creation. Revelation drops only hints about the Spirit's identity, and what can be said is limited. Nevertheless, the economy of salvation does allow a glimpse into the divine life. The mystery of God transcends definition, and there are limits to its uncovering. Yet given that Father, Son, and Spirit are revealed in the economy of salvation, there is still room to think about their relationships and differences.[34]

Spirit and Communion

One theme is apparent in both the Gospels and the Letters. The impression is given that the Spirit is the love that bonds the Father and Son, mediating the relationship and evoking its ecstasy. Consider this passage: "At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants'" (Lk 10:21). We are often led to associate the joy of communion and loving with the Spirit. Paul speaks of the communion of the Spirit who brings persons together in fellowship (2 Cor 13:13). He names the primary fruit of the Spirit as love, the love that binds everything together in harmony (Gal 5:22; Col 3:14).

The Spirit confirmed the sonship of Jesus and enriched his relationship with the Father. Similarly, the Spirit testifies to our own adoption as God's sons and daughters (Rom 8:16; Gal 4:6-7). What was true for the experience of Jesus is being communicated in our own. The Spirit's goal is love and fellowship, unity and peace (1 Cor 1:10; 3:3; Eph 4:2). Spirit draws us into the fellowship between Father and Son (1 Jn 1:3-4). A dove descended on Jesus at his baptism, and the beloved in the Song of

---

[34]O'Donnell, *Mystery of the Triune God*, 77-80.

Solomon is called a dove (Song 2:14; 6:9). We cry, "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one" (Song 5:2).[35]

Joy is associated with activities of the Spirit, along with love. Paul writes, "The kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). The Spirit filled the disciples with joy (Acts 13:52), gives us wine to drink and raises new songs in us (Acts 2:11; Eph 5:18-19), and inspires joy along with love (Gal 5:22; 1 Thess 1:6). Spirit is the joy giver who fills our hearts with singing. The Spirit's inspiration makes us want to dance and celebrate. It is the Spirit who creates glad and generous hearts in people (Acts 2:46). The Spirit caused Mary to rejoice greatly in God her Savior (Lk 1:47). I hear the Spirit saying: let the party begin, let the banquet be set, let us enter into the play of new creation! The Spirit choreographs the dance of God and also directs the steps of creatures entering God's dance.[36]

One may find the identity of the Spirit in the delight of God's social being, especially in the love that flows between the Father and the Son. Spirit completes the trinitarian circle and opens it up to the world outside God.

I like the term *ecstasy* for the Spirit. It means "standing outside oneself," which suggests that Spirit is the ecstasy that makes the triune life an open circle and a source of pure abundance. Spirit embodies and triggers the overflow of God's pure benevolence, fosters its ecstatic character, and opens it up to history.[37]

Tradition since Augustine has noted this and linked the Spirit to the relationship of Father and Son, even naming the Spirit "the bond of love" (*vinculum amoris*).[38] It is fruitful to see the Spirit in this way, as the bond

---

[35]Iconography uses the dove to represent the Spirit. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 701. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 226.

[36]Peter J. Cullen, "Euphoria, Praise and Thanksgiving: Rejoicing in the Spirit in Luke-Acts," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 6 (1995): 13-24.

[37]Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 226; O'Donnell, *Mystery of the Triune God*, 79. The theme is central to Gregory A. Boyd's interaction with process theology in *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Di-polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

[38]Augustine, *On the Trinity* 15.17-19.

of the divine relationship and as the principle of the divine unity. The identity of the Spirit is best located in the communion of Father and Son, as the mutual and reciprocal love that flows between them. Spirit can be seen as the love that they share and even to constitute the *condilectus*, the channel, of their loving. Augustine saw the Spirit not only as the gift of love to us but as the divine love itself, making possible a communion of God with creatures. Spirit opens God up to what is nondivine, as the divine ecstasy directed toward the creature.[39]

In a mysterious manner Spirit may be said to unite the Father and Son in love and to proceed as the love between them. Some seek an analogy in the human family, in the relation of parent and child. One might think of Spirit as child of the Father and Son and the fruit of their love. God is a fuller community than just I-Thou. As husband and wife fashion a more perfect community by the birth of a child, so Father and Son perfect their love by sharing it with the Spirit. What could remain the *eros* of only two is transformed into the *agape* of three, just as marriage transcends the two who first compacted it. In some sense the Spirit, in creating fellowship between two, can be thought of as the "we" of the I-Thou, as the child born out of the love of the other two.

Love unites persons who cherish one another, and in God's case love reaches fullness in the third Person, who is loved by Father and Son. The presence of the third lifts love out of preoccupation with each other into a fuller expression of self-giving. The perfection of love in turn overflows outward in movements of expansiveness and creativity.[40]

Spirit within the social Trinity fosters community and reveals sensitivity in that area. Spirit brings persons together in heaven and on earth, being both the medium of the communion of Jesus with the Father and the medium of our communion with brothers and sisters.

---

[39]On this matter see Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 1:85-92; David Coffey, "Holy Spirit as the Mutual Bond Between the Father and the Son," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 193-229; Peters, *God as Trinity*, 67-70; and LaCugna, *God for Us*, 296-300.

[40]Heribert Mühlen, *Der Heilige Geist als Person: Ich-Du-Wir*, 2nd ed. (Münster, Germany: Verlag Aschendorff, 1966); Maloney, "Holy Spirit Within the Trinity," chap. 3 in *Spirit Broods over the World*.

Spirit mediates the Father-Son relation on two different levels. The Son has access to the Father by the Spirit by nature, and we also have access as a gift (Eph 2:18). In the Son, the Father has chosen humanity to be his sons and daughters; in his self-surrender, the Son lavishes grace on us through his representative journey, while the Spirit seals us as those belonging to God, fostering both love and community. Though at work within us in a hidden way and having no proper name of his own, the Spirit forms and fosters community. As the oneness of the love of Father and Son, Spirit is the source of the oneness of believers in the fellowship of love, creating relationships and bringing about a common life. Even our love for God is the Spirit's gift to us.

The third Person, having no special name like "Father" or "Son," is content with God's generic name of "spirit." It is enough to be known as "bond of love." This does not mean the Spirit does not have a more specific profile, but only that we have not been told about it. Spirit is content to be thought of as the medium and fellowship of love. He delights in the loving relationships of the divine dance and exults in the self-emptying love that binds Father and Son. He delights to introduce creatures to union with God, the dance of the Trinity, and the sabbath play of new creation.

Spirit is also associated with hope. The Spirit brooded over the waters of creation to bring life and order out of chaos. Spirit makes dry bones live and raises Christ up as firstfruits of those who sleep in death. Spirit belongs to the future and creates hope in people, being the power by which this present world will be transformed into the kingdom of God. Spirit opens up the future by realizing God's goals for history and pressing toward fulfillment. Therefore Paul writes, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom 15:13).

Spirit does not wish to be focused upon but to remain anonymous, a servant of the economy of salvation. Consumed with its future, he hides his own face. The Spirit of love effaces himself in order to bless others. The flame of love is humble and self-effacing in the presence of the

beloved. Like a mother in the service of life, the Spirit is disinterested and does not look to personal advantage. He is humble and dwells in the hearts of the poor in spirit.

Mediating love on earth must be very different from mediating it in heaven. Within the Godhead it must be sheer delight, but on this fallen earth it involves difficult remedial activities, such as exposing lack of love and promoting just relationships. The passion for love has to translate into passion for right relationships as well, which in turn leads to weeping and anguish. Therefore the Spirit does not mediate complacent love but chooses to be present in the midst of brokenness and distress.[41]

Not Just a Bond

Our thoughts are frail indeed when it comes to the immanent Trinity. Even this image, "bond of love," falls short of attributing personality to Spirit, leaving the possible impression of a binity—Father and Son plus a bond—rather than a trinity. It could reduce Spirit to the fostering environment of love. Spirit is more than that, however, being a distinct Person who, besides bonding others in love, shares and participates in it. Spirit bonds the Trinity by being the witness to the love of Father and Son, by entering into it and fostering it, and by communicating its warmth to creatures. Though we delight in the image of bond of love, we do not want to fail to do justice to real reciprocity in the Trinity or leave the impression of an impersonal bond that would obscure the personhood of the Spirit. Augustine had difficulty, as I have noted, with distinctions in the being of God, and perhaps this explains his attraction to this image. He had difficulty accepting that the being of God is a truly interpersonal communion.[42]

Plurality in God is real plurality, and relationality belongs to his essence. The dimension of intersubjectivity is basic—Father, Son, and Spirit are three subjects in communion. They constitute a community of Persons in reciprocity as subjects of one divine life. They joyously share

---

[41]Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 50-51, 184.
[42]Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 48-55; Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:315-19.

life together. The social Trinity is the only understanding of God that accounts for the narrative of salvation. The Father sends the Son into the world, and his suffering for us in union with the Father in turn releases the Spirit. The story reveals God as a fellowship of Persons who are open to the joy and pain of the world. Trinity bespeaks a livingness in God, both beyond and within our world.

This speaks eloquently to our human experience at many points. Community is central to our earthly life. We were created for it in the image of the Trinity. We know that the dynamic interaction of persons forms corporate realities far greater than individuals. Similarly, God is an interpersonal process, a community of Persons who love one another and enjoy unanimity. God is the ideal community to which humans aspire but do not attain. The three Persons of God, while distinct and each possessing consciousness, form together a shared life that is the perfect ideal. Human community was created in the first place to reflect God's own perfection, and its destiny is to participate in the very life of God.[43]

The history of salvation discloses a unique relationship between Son and Father, showing how the Father loves the Son and how the Son returns love by embracing lost humanity. It also exposes a relationship of both with the Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and descends on the Son, pouring out the power of God's love on him.

It may be that we should seek the face of the Spirit in the face of the community, God's dwelling and the place where love is being perfected (1 Jn 4:12). As the Son reveals the Father's face and the Spirit reveals the Son's face, perhaps the place where Spirit's is seen is the faces of believers (Rev 22:4). As they grow in grace and holiness, it will become increasingly possible to recognize the Spirit in their faces. Perhaps the church is the face of the Spirit, who shines from the faces of all the saints.

Paul asks, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Cor 3:16). We might ask, Do you not know that

---

[43]Joseph A. Bracken, *The Triune Symbol: Persons, Process and Community* (New York: University Press of America, 1985); Hill, *Three-Personed God*, 218-25.

the Spirit wishes to find his face made visible among those who believe?[44] We may find the Spirit's face also on those outside the church who give a cup of cold water to thirsty ones.

Such talk is metaphorical—do wind and breath have face? We bow to God's unfathomability. Let me add a word of clarification. The Trinity is not a picture of the inner life of God in a literal way. True, it speaks to us of a communion marked by overflowing love. But it remains mysterious and analogical, not univocal. It may help us to think about God in terms of human interactions such as between parent and child, husband and wife, friend and friend. But the divine reality is always greater than, always surpasses, any analogy. It is, let us remember, a symbolic picture of the shared life that is at the heart of the universe.

God's Fair Beauty

The social Trinity depicts God as beautiful and supremely lovable. God is not a featureless monad, isolated and motionless, but a dynamic event of loving actions and personal relationality. What loveliness and sheer liveliness God is! We praise the Father, who is primordial light and un-originated being, absolute mystery, without beginning or end. We praise our Lord Jesus Christ, everlasting Son of the Father, who lives in fellowship with the Father, ever responding to his love. We praise the Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who is breathed out everlastingly—living, ec-static, flaming. Each person of the Trinity exists eternally with the others, each has its gaze fixed on the others, each casts a glance away from itself in love to the others, the eye of each lover ever fixed on the beloved other.

Atheism is partly the result of bad theology, an unpaid bill resulting from failures in depicting God. How often have people been given the impression of God as a being exalting himself at our expense! One might be afraid of such a God, but no one would be attracted to love him. So often lacking has been the vision of the triune God as an event of open, dynamic, loving relations. It is not surprising that many have rejected

---

[44]John Breck, "The Face of the Spirit," *Pro Ecclesia* 3 (1994): 165-78; replied to by Robert Dotzel in *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (1995): 5-10.

God when there has been so little to attract them to him. Perhaps they would not reject as readily the God disclosed in Jesus Christ, who is an event of loving relationality and relates readily to the temporal world.[45]

The God of revelation is not distant from the world and untouched by its suffering. God cares for the world; it matters much to him. Prayer is a wonderful indicator of how God relates to the world. In asking us to pray and request things to happen, God invites us to join in shaping the future. Prayer reveals God as flexible in his planning and open in regard to what will happen. It indicates that the relationship between God and humanity is truly personal and that both are, in their own way, agents who make a difference to outcomes in a nondeterministic world.[46]

Theology ought to be beautiful, because its subject is so beautiful. Augustine exclaimed, "Too late did I love thee, O Fairness, so ancient yet so new" (*Confessions* 10.27). Barth comments, "Sulky faces, morose thoughts and boring ways of thinking are intolerable in this science."[47] Theology can be beautiful as it focuses on the beauty of God and the treasures of this relational ontology.

Hindrances to faith in God seldom have to do with a lack of proofs. Most people believe God exists because of the sense of divinity in them. Hindrances to faith have more to do with the quality of our theism. Theology has to do not with whether God is but with *who* God is. Theology gains credibility when we have a doctrine of God that one can fall in love with.

Faith in the social Trinity affects how we understand the attributes of God. Trinitarian doctrine leads one to look at the divine perfections afresh. God's self-revelation discloses not only his inner nature but also

---

[45]Anthony C. Thiselton notes the value of the social Trinity for issues of theological intelligibility today: *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 158.

[46]Vincent Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray? A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: SCM Press, 1984); John J. O'Donnell, *Trinity and Temporality: The Christian Doctrine of God in the Light of Process Theology and the Theology of Hope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Pinnock et al., *Openness of God.*

[47]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 2/1, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 656. Barth risks calling theology a science, despite the connotation of science as a collection of facts. Hodge's view of theology as a science fostered neglect of Spirit. In Barth theology is really more of an art than a science.

God's attributes. Often in the past philosophy has influenced the doctrine of God, so that theology has started with a general understanding of God rather than the truth of revelation.[48] For example, divine power may be misconstrued as total control because such a notion is thought "fitting" for God. Or righteousness may be conceived of as exactness because that is thought most fitting, despite what revelation says.

Yet God's self-revelation as the Triune One overturns foreign assumptions about divine perfections. In the gospel narrative God's power is revealed in the weakness of the cross, and God's righteousness is revealed as delivering us from sin, not giving us what we deserve.

God is wonderfully different from what our natural thinking tells us, for this God delights in social existence, ecstatic dance, creativity, and spontaneity. This is why we humans love to play in the midst of the seriousness of ordinary life—play bespeaks eternity. Play is a gesture of hope. It takes us momentarily out of the realm of suffering and lets us glimpse deathless joy. It is a gesture of hope in the face of ugliness and destruction.[49]

God is not an absolute Ego, unchangeable and all-determining. God is not a single self, isolated and solitary. God is a beautiful and alluring relational and dynamic community of love who does not alienate but fulfills us. God's glory does not lie in self-aggrandizement but in self-giving. God glories not in domination but in loving. What we see most centrally in God is the shining radiance of love.[50]

According to self-revelation, God is not an Unmoved Mover but the God of Jesus Christ, who goes out of himself and acts in history, who becomes involved in the affairs of his people and enters into conversation with them. God is closer and more intimate to us than we allow ourselves to believe. God is not preoccupied with himself, not unable to give himself away. It is the essence of God that he go out from himself and overflow for the sake of the other. In his very being as triune, God

---

[48]LaCugna, *God for Us*, 300-304.
[49]Placher, "The Vulnerable God," chap. 1 in *Narratives of a Vulnerable God.*
[50]A recurring theme in Boyd, *Trinity and Process*, 377, 384, 391, 392.

moves outward toward creation and incarnation. Giving us life and taking us to his own bosom are not afterthoughts but accord with God's nature and purpose.[51]

It is natural for God to make a world that would reflect relationality back to him. It is natural for God as social Trinity to create beings capable of hearing and responding to his word and capable of relating to each other also. It is natural for God to create a world not wholly determined but one peopled with creatures with whom God can freely share his life. It is natural for God to humble himself in the making of such a world, willing the existence of beings with an independent status alongside himself, and to accept limitations on his sovereignty voluntarily, not by external imposition. It is natural for God not to have to be all-determining but to be Ruler over a world of finite agents. Such a world is more difficult to manage but offers God items of much higher value.

The Trinity underlines the fact that the world exists by grace. It was not strictly necessary. It did not have to exist. God did not need it, since he exists in trinitarian fullness. The world exists not necessarily but freely, because God takes pleasure in it. God is like an artist who makes the world because he delights in self-expression. We see this in God's rest on the seventh day of creation—a rest not of fatigue but of satisfaction. God took pleasure in the world and delighted in what was made. We delight in it too, because it exists by grace, as a gift. We extol God's name and celebrate before him on account of it. When we dance and make melody to the Lord, we begin to experience on earth the joy of triune life in heaven, in anticipation of participating in union with God.[52]

Though complete in trinitarian fullness, God does not choose to be alone. Barth says, "God wills and posits the creature, neither out of caprice nor necessity, but because he loved it from eternity, because he wills

---

[51]O'Donnell, *Trinity and Temporality*, 23-25, 198-200.

[52]On creation as sabbath play, see Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 276-96. On charismatic theology as picking up on this theme, see Jean-Jacques Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play: Towards a Charismatic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

to demonstrate his love for it, and because he wills, not to limit his glory by its existence and being, but to reveal and manifest it in his own co-existence with it."[53] God is bound together with us by choice. This is why he acts in history and relates to creatures. He loves to exist in dynamic relationship with the world. God has pledged himself to this situation so full of promise and of risk.[54]

The love of God grounds creation. His purpose for it has always been union and communion. God loved the world before it fell into sin. His initial relationship with it was not a legal but a loving one.

In federal theology it was said that after creating us God placed us in a covenant of works, demanding obedience and showing no grace. Federal theologians spoke as if the world was not the creation of a gracious God. But love is not secondary among God's purposes. The purpose of creation was to open a sphere for a covenant with humanity. It has always been the Father's purpose to create a people corresponding to the Son and together-bound with him. As Barth says, creation is the external basis of the covenant, and covenant is the internal basis of creation. Creation made the covenant possible through the formation of creatures who could echo triune life. God elected humanity from eternity to share his glory and is so intent on doing this that he even willingly took on himself rejection. God created the world and acts in history to advance the purpose of fostering a community of personal relationships, modeled on the social Trinity, where the gifts of each person are celebrated and nurtured.[55]

The Trinity may even be thought of as providing the place for creation to occupy. Some posit that the distance, as it were, between Father and Son creates room for the world to exist. Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, thinks of this as the space in which the world exists. God did not need the world to realize himself, since the Persons are already fulfilled in one another. At the same time the Trinity does not hoard its love.

---

[53]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 95.
[54]Frank G. Kirkpatrick, *Together Bound: God, History and the Religious Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 175, 177, 179.
[55]Developed in Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/1, and considered central to American theology by Herbert W. Richardson, *Toward an American Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), chap. 5.

Its love is ecstatic and open to the world. Humanity is chosen in the context of the Father's love for the Son. We are loved in the Son. One could say that the plurality of the Trinity makes possible the existence of the world and the incarnation of the Son. Creation and redemption spring from the gracious dynamics of divine life, from the giving and receiving, the loving and surrendering, the interactions of love.[56]

Our desire for God did not originate with us. We did not initiate the possibility of this relationship. The Trinity made it possible and kindled the desire within us. We do not initiate this relationship. It is God who invites us to join the trinitarian conversation already occurring. The triune God invites us to share in intimacy with God and summons us to enter the communion of self-giving love. The dynamism of mutuality and self-giving goes on everlastingly in the being of God, and we are being drawn in. Prayer is joining an already occurring conversation.[g] The Spirit calls us to participate in the relationship of intimacy between Father and Son and to be caught up in the dance already begun. In prayer on this earth we join the dance and begin to experience the movement and interplay of the trinitarian Persons.[57]

We tend to be biased in the direction of reason as the way to know reality, even in the postmodern situation. But music also speaks to us of the richness and depths of reality. Think of the unity, the harmony, the patterns, the delicacy, the surprises, the delight in music. Even Jesus piped a tune for people to dance to. Was Handel not right to say in his *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day* that harmony was the source of the world and its goal? The text says that nature's heap of atoms hear the voice on high summon them to arise, and they leap to their stations. And in the end they will hear the last trumpet sound, and music will fill the whole

---

[g]With this statement, one thinks of Sarah Coakley's proposals relating to "incorporative prayer" in *God, Sexuality, and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chap. 3.

[56]Consider the "theo-dramatics" of Hans Urs von Balthasar: John J. O'Donnell, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 16-17, 66, 74-75, 108, 142.
[57]Martin Smith, *The Word Is Very Near You: A Guide to Praying with Scripture* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1989), pt. 1.

universe. It should not surprise us that music thrills us so much, because it draws us to the celestial sounds of the Spirit within us.[58]

By the Spirit we access the presence of the Father through Jesus Christ. Baptized into the triune name, we are adopted into the relationship everlastingly enjoyed by the Son with the Father through the Spirit. We are swept into a divine world of mutual love and begin to experience the very goal of our nature as spiritual and social beings. Designed for mutuality, we are destined for the dance, destined to be married to Christ and share in the triune life. The fellowship experienced on earth is destined to be raised a notch to the level of the Trinity.

Being a Christian is knowing Father and Son and walking along the pathway of cross and resurrection through the power of the Spirit. The loving communion between the Persons of the Trinity is diffusive—it tends by nature to radiate out from the center. Its diffusiveness manifests itself in our existence as loving and lovable creatures and alerts us to our destiny, which is to participate in God's love.

Here, then, I have laid the foundation for the next chapter. In the act of creation God is wanting to effect an echo of trinitarian life on the finite level and to produce beings that will share in the life of the Father with the Son by the Spirit. The other chapters follow from this. To deal with sin, stemming from the human refusal of love, God assumed our nature in the incarnation and incorporates all who believe into the body of Christ and new humanity by the Spirit (chapter three). From cross and resurrection comes the community that prolongs the anointing of Jesus by the Spirit and anticipates the new humanity. The church is a foretaste of the new race, the colony of heaven, the embodiment of the koinonia that God is and that the world will become. God does not will to be alone, so his love overflows in creation and redemption, and he seeks a community into which to pour the Spirit (chapter four). By the Spirit humankind is now being drawn in the direction of the wedding banquet and into union with God (chapter five). By the Spirit too, the invitation

---

[58]On meaning in music see Edward Rothstein, *Emblems of the Mind* (New York: Times Books, 1994).

becomes genuinely universal (chapter six), and the church is healed of its brokenness as it is led into the truth (chapter seven).

Loving mutuality and relationship belong to the essence of God. In recognizing this, theology makes explicit what the heart has always known. Let God not be defined so much by holiness and sovereignty in which loving relatedness is incidental, but by the dance of trinitarian life. And let us see Spirit as effecting relationships, connecting Son to Father, and us to God. Spirit is the ecstasy of divine life, the overabundance of joy, that gives birth to the universe and ever works to bring about a fullness of unity.

When we render God in this way, not only atheists might come to love him, but even Christians, for we ourselves often lack a sense of God's beauty and adorableness. God is the ever-expanding circle of loving, and the Spirit is the dynamic at the heart of the circle. Through him we all have access in one Spirit to the Father, on behalf of whom Spirit and Bride say, "Come!" Let us all join in the dance.

POSTSCRIPT BY DANIEL CASTELO

A crucial argument in this chapter is that a vital trinitarianism requires a vital pneumatology. Apart from that arrangement, trinitarianism devolves into something else besides its true character as a faithful account of the Christian God. Plenty of dangers present themselves to fill the void when such a breakdown occurs, including modalism, unitarianism, binitarianism, and so on. People may be nominal trinitarians, but without a vibrant pneumatology at work, something else will be on display.

In order to make a case for pneumatology within trinitarianism, Pinnock lifts up a social model of the Trinity. This approach is popular in the theological academy. Throughout his analysis Pinnock shows why this model has not been favored in the past, and as a result he highlights constructs and individuals he believes stray from this model. Some of these critiques are worthy of scrutiny in that they are quite general and perhaps dismissive at points. Nonetheless,

Pinnock's main argument stands: the Christian God is inherently relational, characterized by love, and disposed ecstatically. Pinnock rightly senses that these kinds of claims are important to stress within a pneumatological framework. In fact, pneumatology gives them conceptual generativity.

This chapter also covers many different aspects of theology, but it is important to note how Pinnock locates and emphasizes certain key themes precisely within the doctrine of God. These include aesthetics/art, play, and music. He explicitly states that a desire of his with this chapter is to present a picture of the Christian God (or, put another way, a doctrine of God) that "one can fall in love with." What a compelling claim! Some may brush the notion aside as demonstrating improper affect within theological reasoning, but such a dismissal may be too reactionary. After all, if Christians are to order their lives by loving God with their total selves, then a doctrine of God should reflect that imperative somehow. Pinnock is attuned to this necessity, and it is one of the factors that makes this chapter compelling.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/flame-of-love