BEYOND FOUNDATIONALISM:
Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context

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Chapter Six

The Trinity: Theology's Structural Motif

It is part of the pathos of western theology that it has often believed that while trinitarian theology might well be of edificatory value to those who already believe, for the outsider it is an unfortunate barrier to belief, which must therefore be facilitated by some non-trinitarian apologetic, some essentially monotheistic 'natural theology.' My belief is the reverse: that because the theology of the Trinity has so much to teach about the nature of our world and life within it, it is or could be the centre of Christianity's appeal to the unbeliever, as the good news of a God who enters into free relations of creation and redemption with his world. In the light of the theology of the Trinity, everything looks different.

—Colin Gunton[1]

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

—Matthew 28:19 (KJV)

By its very definition, theology—the teaching about God—has as its central interest the divine reality, together with God's actions in creation. The chief inquiry for any theology, therefore, is the question of the identity of God. The Christian answer to the question "Who is God?" ultimately leads to the

1. Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 7.

doctrine of the Trinity. The one God, Christians assert, is triune—Father, Son, and Spirit, to cite the traditional designations for the trinitarian persons—and consequently the confession of the triune God is the sine qua non of the Christian faith. In keeping with this fundamental Christian confession, both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, the ancient and ecumenical symbols of the church, are ordered around and divided into three articles that correspond to the three persons of the triune God: the Father and creation; the Son and reconciliation; the Spirit and salvation as well as consummation. For much of the history of the church this creedal pattern gave rise to a trinitarian structure in the construction and exposition of theology.

This observation leads us to the first of three focal motifs that provide unity and coherence for the various local, contextual expressions of theology and thus constitute them as authentically *Christian* theology. Because Christian theology is committed to finding its basis in the being and actions of the God of the Bible, it should be ordered and structured in such a way as to reflect the primacy of the fundamental Christian confession about the nature of this God. Because the structuring motif of the Christian confession of God is trinitarian, a truly Christian theology is likewise necessarily trinitarian. In a truly trinitarian theology, the structuring influence of God's triunity goes well beyond the exposition of theology proper, extending to all aspects of the delineation of the Christian belief-mosaic.

This present chapter focuses on the Trinity as the content, or structural motif, of theology and thus on the trinitarian character of Christian theology. Our goal is to make a case for the centrality of the Trinity in the explication of theology and, in the process, to describe what we mean by a theology that is trinitarian in structure. We do so, however, conscious of the continuing skepticism regarding the doctrine of the Trinity and its usefulness for theology that typifies much of contemporary theology, a skepticism that raises the question of whether the doctrine of the Trinity is truly significant for Christian theology as a whole.

The Case for a Trinitarian Theology

Throughout much of church history, theologians, following the pattern of ancient creed, have structured theology in a trinitarian manner. Although various interpretations of the Trinity abounded in the early and medieval church, the doctrine was universally considered central to the task of theology.[2] The rise of the Enlightenment, however, altered the situation, resulting in the marginalization of the doctrine of the Trinity, which came to be regarded as little more than an abstract and indefensible example of the excesses of speculative theology. The twentieth century witnessed a renaissance of trinitarian theology that

2. For a survey of the various views on offer, see Edmund Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972).

has spawned a wealth of studies of and proposals for a renewed understanding of the doctrine.[3] Despite this renewed interest, however, the question of its proper role in theology remains the subject of considerable debate.

On one side of this debate are those theologians who continue to give little place to the doctrine of the Trinity. Cyril Richardson, for example, views it as an artificial intellectual construction that is racked with "inherent confusions,"[4] and John Hick dismisses the doctrine as the product of an outmoded understanding of the world that must be left behind."[5] Other critics avoid trinitarian speculation because they are convinced that God's eternal triune nature is fundamentally mysterious and therefore lies beyond the capacity of finite humans to grasp. On this basis, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who devoted a scant fifteen pages to the doctrine of the Trinity in the conclusion to his 750-page magnum opus, surmised that delving into this mystery would go against the very nature of theology.[6] Another group of naysayers are convinced that the Trinity is of little practical significance. Immanuel Kant, to cite one extreme example, declared that the doctrine leads to "absolutely nothing worthwhile" for practical, everyday life.[7] This suspicion is given voice by Dorothy Sayers in her characterization of the average churchgoer's view of the Trinity: "The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the whole thing incomprehensible. Something put in by theologians to make it more difficult—nothing to do with daily life or ethics."[8]

Colin Gunton summarizes well this aspect of the contemporary theological climate: "Overall, there is a suspicion that the whole thing is a bore, a matter of mathematical conundrums and illogical attempts to square the circle."[9] Many view the doctrine as at best a theological terminus. They might admit that it remains a necessary support for the Christian consciousness, for Christian worship, or for Christian orthodoxy. But they are convinced that giving it a place in the theological enterprise—beyond merely clarifying how the doctrine is to be articulated—is to invite worthless, even detrimental, speculation.

Standing on the other side of the debate are those who suggest that because theology is particularly interested in God as well as God's actions in creation, the reality of God as triune lies at the heart of any truly *theological* exposition. These theologians are convinced that rather than being mere speculation, unpacking the eternal trinitarian relations is endemic to the theological task and

3. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "Philosophers and Theologians on the Trinity," *Modern Theology* 2/3 (April 1986): 169–81. LaCugna notes this renaissance of trinitarian thought in conjunction with the citation of a number of recently published major works on the doctrine of the Trinity.

4. Cyril Richardson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), 148–9.

5. John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 124.

6. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 748.

7. Cited in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981), 6.

8. Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949), 22.

9. Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2–3.

is warranted by the now famous dictum known as Rahner's rule: "'The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity."[10] The trailblazer in the revival of trinitarianism was clearly Karl Barth. Barth returned the focus of theology to God as triune by recognizing that present in the economy of salvation is none other than God as God is within the eternal divine reality.[11] Since Barth's pioneering work, a host of theologians have taken up the trinitarian theme. In fact, David Cunningham recently commented that studies on the Trinity have become so prevalent that "the phenomenon begins to look not so much like a renaissance as a bandwagon."[12]

We are convinced that the theologians who comprise this second group are correct. The Christian understanding of God as triune offers a fruitful starting point for theological and ethical reflection. In fact, we would go further, claiming that the Trinity provides the structuring motif for Christian theology. Building from the sources for theology set forth in the previous chapters, we argue that theology must be trinitarian because this structure reflects the biblical narrative, dominates the Christian tradition, and resonates with the cultural moment. Unpacking this thesis implicitly indicates in part what it means to pursue a theology that is truly trinitarian.

Trinitarian Theology and the Biblical Narrative

The word "trinity" is not found in the Bible, nor is the theological concept developed or fully delineated in scripture. The absence of any explicit reference to God as triune in the Bible led Swiss theologian Emil Brunner to conclude, "The ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity, established by the dogma of the ancient Church, is not a Biblical *kerygma*, therefore it is not the *kerygma* of the Church, but it is a theological doctrine which defends the central faith of the Bible and the Church."[13] In this terse statement Brunner calls our attention to the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity as we know it was not formulated in scripture itself, but by the church during the patristic era. Nevertheless, by the fourth century the Christian community had come to the conclusion that understanding God as triune was a nonnegotiable aspect of the gospel, because it capsulized the Christian conception of God.

Brunner is surely correct in this judgment. At the same time, the doctrine of the Trinity that unfolded in the patristic era is a natural—and perhaps even necessary—outworking of the faith of the New Testament community. Above all, it is based on the concrete witness of the biblical narrative. It emerges as the

10. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 22.

11. John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.

12. David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 19.

13. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 206.

fundamental theological conclusion arising from and embodying that narrative. In fact, the trinitarian conception of God is so closely tied to the biblical narrative that it serves as a shorthand way of speaking not only about the God of the narrative but about the narrative itself as the act of the God of the Bible.

The Trinity and the New Testament Community

The doctrine of the Trinity is often portrayed as a highly abstract teaching that emerged from the philosophical concerns and speculations of third- and fourth-century theologians, rather than from the content of the biblical witness. The fact is, however, that the doctrine arose as a response to the concrete historical situation encountered by the early Christian community. The early Christians faced a grave theological problem, namely, how to reconcile their inherited commitment to the confession of the one God with the lordship of Jesus Christ and the experience of the Spirit. Far from a philosophical abstraction, therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity was the culmination of an attempt on the part of the church to address the central theological question regarding the content of the Christian faith, a question that arose out of the experience of the earliest followers of Jesus.

The early Christians, following their Jewish heritage, vigorously maintained the belief in one God together with the attendant rejection of the polytheistic practices of other nations. This commitment was rooted in their claim that the Christian faith was a continuation of what God had initiated in the covenant with Abraham. The Hebrew community that had been shaped by the promises contained in the Abrahamic covenant asserted unequivocally that there is only one God and that this God alone was to be the object of their loyalty and worship (e.g. Deut. 6: 4). The early Christians viewed themselves as the continuation of the one people of the one God, and consequently they steadfastly continued in the Old Testament tradition of monotheism. The followers of Jesus asserted that the God they worshiped is none other than the God of the patriarchs, the one and only true God. This commitment to one God of the Hebrew community provided the Christian community an indispensable framework in which to reflect on its experience of the living God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Although the early Christians continued the Jewish practice of worshiping only one God, they also believed that this God had been revealed preeminently in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. They confessed that this Jesus is the head of the church and the Lord of all creation. This confession resulted in a second core belief. In addition to the commitment to one God, the early church asserted the deity and lordship of Jesus (John 1:1; John 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:3). At the same time, the followers of Jesus made a clear distinction, following the pattern of Jesus himself, between Jesus as the Son of God and the God of Israel, the Creator of the world, whom he addressed as "Father." In short, the Church asserted that while Jesus is divine, he is nevertheless distinct from the Father.

In addition to the belief in one God and the confession of Jesus as Lord, the early Christian community also experienced the living God present among them through Another, who is neither Jesus nor his heavenly Father. This Other is the Holy Spirit, through whose ministry the early Christian believers enjoyed an intimate fellowship with the living God and therefore whom they equated with the presence of God among and within them. The community believed that through the presence of the Spirit, Christians individually and corporately comprise the true temple of God (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 3).

This assertion is particularly striking in light of the significance of the Temple in first-century Judaism. As the focal point of all aspects of Jewish national life, the Temple was regarded as the place where God lived and ruled.[14] Thus, the connection between the presence of the Spirit in the life of the Christian community as constituting that community as the temple of God intimately linked the Spirit with God. In addition, the early Christians also closely connected the Holy Spirit to the risen Lord (2 Cor. 3:17; Phil. 1:19), while also making a clear and definite distinction between the Spirit and both the Father and the Son. This distinction among the trinitarian members is evident in the trinitarian formulations found in the documents of the New Testament canon (e.g. 2 Cor. 13:14).

The early Christians were faced with the task of integrating into a coherent, composite understanding these three commitments borne out of their experience of God. More particularly, they were faced with the challenge of maintaining both the unity and the differentiated plurality of God. They did not want to posit three Gods, yet the three differentiated experiences of God were far too concrete to be seen as simply different "modes" of the one God. As a result, trinitarian theology is rooted in the practical, concrete concern to provide a Christian account of God that is in accord with the experience and witness of the community. Of course, subsequent attempts to provide such an account drew from the philosophical terminology and thought forms of the Greek culture in which the patristic church was embedded. Yet this does not mean that the doctrine itself is merely the product of philosophical speculation. As David Cunningham points out, when Christian theologians engaged in the attempt to make sense of the God of the Bible, "they (quite naturally and appropriately) turned to the philosophical categories that were available to them. But this fact should not be allowed to eclipse the concrete reality of the particular narratives that gave rise to trinitarian thought."[15]

The Trinity and the Eternal "History" of God

The biblical narratives speak of three historical encounters with God: with the one God of Israel, with Jesus the incarnate Son, and with the Spirit as the

14. On the significance of the Temple, see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 224–226.

15. Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 22.

manifestation of the ongoing presence and guidance of God in the community and in the world. While the constitutive narratives of the Christian tradition bear witness to the engagement of God with the world, they also point beyond this encounter to the eternal divine life. In addition to acting in the history of the world, the biblical materials view God as having a "history." In this history, creation is not the beginning point but an event in the continuing story of God's life, which stretches from the eternal past into the eternal future. Catherine LaCugna notes that although the acts of God in history were the original subject matter of the doctrine of the Trinity, theologians have come to understand that "God's relations to us in history are taken to be what is characteristic of the very being of God."[16] In other words, God has an internal "history" (the inner divine life) as well as an external history (God's actions and engagement with the world). The narratives of scripture invite theologians to take account of both the internal and external aspects of God's life and to think through the details and the implications of this history.

The Return of the Narrative

The significance of God's internal and external history was taken for granted throughout much of the history of theology, and numerous systems of speculative theology were produced, based in no small part on this distinction arising out of the biblical narrative.[17] In the aftermath of the Enlightenment, however, the biblical narratives began to suffer neglect due to incredulity toward the truth of the narratives displayed in the Age of Reason and the corresponding rise of biblical criticism.[18] The effect of this suspicion toward the biblical narratives was a shift away from the accounts of scripture as providing the basis for Christian belief, a shift that led in turn to the rejection of Christian doctrines such as the Trinity as being the product of abstract philosophical speculation.

In the twentieth century, however, proponents of trinitarian theology sought once again to link the doctrine of the Trinity with the biblical narratives. Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* stands out as a monumental attempt to reassert the centrality of the Trinity for the task of theology by grounding the doctrine in the narratives of God's relationship with Israel and the church. For Barth, trinitarian theology is the story of God and God's action in the world, which finds its ultimate center in Christ.[19]

Like Barth, Robert Jenson is committed to showing that the doctrine is grounded in the concrete narratives of the Christian faith that witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and therefore that the Trinity is not the

16. LaCugna, "Philosophers and Theologians on the Trinity," 173.

17. Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 22.

18. On the history of this development, see Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974).

19. David Ford, *Barth and God's Story* (Frankfurt: Perter Lang, 1985).

product of mere abstract philosophical speculation."[20] To this end, he seeks to free the doctrine of God in particular and Christian theology in general from its excessive dependence on the categories of Hellenistic philosophy, such as divine timelessness, simplicity, and impassability. Although agreeing that the communities of ancient Israel and the church experienced God as eternal, Jenson argues that they did not understand this eternity as timelessness but as faithfulness through time. The God of the biblical narratives does not transcend time by being immune from it but by maintaining faithful continuity through time, a continuity that Jenson describes as "personal." The eternity of the Christian God, he therefore concludes, is intrinsically a matter of relationship with God's creatures.[21] By working from the biblical texts in this manner rather than drawing from Greek philosophical categories, Jenson seeks to ensure that trinitarian theology remains firmly grounded in the narrative of the experience of Israel and the church with the God of the Bible.

Perhaps the most widely hailed attempts to link trinitarian theology with the biblical narratives are those of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Although they differ from each other at a number of important points, both seek to liberate the doctrine of the Trinity from abstract speculation about a distant being and to connect the triune God with the historical process. To this end, both thinkers have followed Barth in linking the doctrine of the Trinity with the doctrine of revelation, albeit by asserting that God, as the one who is active in history, is revealed in history. Their emphasis on revelation, whether in a Barthian manner or after the fashion of the theologians of hope, has served to reconnect the doctrine of God in general and the understanding of the Trinity in particular with the biblical story.

Some scholars find in the separation of the doctrine of God from the biblical narratives the genesis of modern atheism, which emerged in the wake of Enlightenment theology, with its propensity to develop generic conceptions of God believed to be demonstrable by reason.[22] In the estimation of these observers, the rationalist approach of the Enlightenment led to the belief that the existence of God could be "proved" rationally, an assumption that, when it was subsequently undermined, led to the undermining of the conception of God as well.[23] This historical appraisal implies that modern atheism emerged in part as the result of the neglect of the biblical narratives in theology, as theologians discarded the biblical witness to the active presence of God in the world in favor of speculation about a generic, completely transcendent deity.

The renewed emphasis on the narratives of the Christian faith as the narratives of God's history has reinvigorated trinitarian theology by asserting that its

20. Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

21. Ted Peters, *GOD as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 129.

22. The most detailed account of this development is Michael J. Buckley, S. J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

23. Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 24.

claims are not grounded in abstract philosophical speculation but in the intellectual challenges about God and God's relationship to creation raised by these narratives. Moreover, as David Cunningham notes, the biblical narrative is properly read and interpreted "not according to the supposedly context-independent assumptions of rationalism, but in the context of Christian participation in concrete practices of worship, education, and discipleship."[24]

To summarize: The doctrine of the Trinity is not the product of philosophically speculative theology gone awry but the outworking of communal Christian reflection on the concrete narratives of scripture, which call for coherent explanation. For this reason, the centrality of the Trinity in giving shape to theology is likewise demanded by these narratives, which witness to the revelation of God in Christ. The biblical narratives lead to the conclusion that the affirmation of God as the triune one lies at the very heart of the Christian faith and comprises its distinctive conception of God. Therefore, insofar as the theological enterprise is embedded methodologically in the biblical narratives, a truly Christian theology must be trinitarian in structure, and in this way theology becomes the study of the God of the Bible, who is the triune one.

Trinitarian Theology and the Theological Heritage of the Church

A truly Christian theology must be trinitarian because the biblical narrative, which speaks about the history of God, focuses on the triune God. Not only does the Trinity as theology's structural motif emerge out of the biblical narrative, however; it also arises from the theological heritage of the church. The doctrine of the Trinity has stood at the heart of theology throughout church history, providing impetus to the theological task and giving shape to the theological deposit that has continually arisen from that enterprise. In fact, we might suggest that in one sense the history of theology is the history of the genesis and development of the doctrine of the Trinity, the engagement with the trinitarian conception of God, and the quest to set forth a theology that is truly trinitarian.

The Emergence of Trinitarian Theology

We noted previously that the early Christians faced the challenge of coming to grips with the theological situation spawned by their confession of the lordship of Jesus, their experience of the Holy Spirit, and their commitment to the one God of the Old Testament. The preoccupation with the unity of God thrust on the second-century church by their struggle with paganism and Gnosticism initially left the theologians of the day with little interest in exploring the eternal relations of the trinitarian persons or in devising a conceptual and linguistic apparatus capable of expressing these relations.[25] The situation soon changed,

24. Ibid., 25.

25. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 109.

however, as the church became embroiled in theological controversy that would eventually insure that all subsequent theology would be cast in a trinitarian die.

The first crucial, specifically theological question to which the church devoted its attention centered on the relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and God. Because by the latter half of the second century Hellenism loomed as the chief audience to which Christian thought needed to be directed,[26] the early Christian apologists busied themselves with the task of finding common ground between the Christian message and the Greek philosophical tradition.[27] For this reason, the attempt to articulate the relationship between Jesus and God took on a decidedly Greek philosophical flavor. And this led to, as well as framed, the emerging theological controversy about the person of Christ.

The particular formulation of Christology that eventually climaxed in the formal development of the doctrine of the Trinity arose in the context of the Arian controversy. In his desire to protect the absolute uniqueness and transcendence of God, Arius, who agreed with Origen that the Father begets or generates the Son, argued that, rather than an eternal movement within the divine life, this begetting occurred at a temporal point. The Father made the Son, he asserted, and this meant that the Son is a creature who must have had a beginning.[28] In concluding that there was a time when the Son was not, Arius in effect made the trinitarian distinctions external to God and claimed that in the divine, eternal nature God is one, not three.[29] The church, however, disagreed with Arius, unequivocally affirming the full deity of Christ at the Council of Nicea in 325. The creed issued by the Council asserted that the Son is "begotten of the Father as only begotten, that is, from the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father."[30]

At Nicea, the church set the Christological basis for a trinitarian theology. A second theological debate occurring in the aftermath of Nicea provided the corresponding pneumatological basis. The dispute about the Holy Spirit likewise had its roots in Arius's teaching about the Son, for his followers, including Macedonius, the bishop of Constantinople[31] for whom the controversy is often named, asserted that not only was the Son the first creature of the Father, the Holy Spirit was the first creature of the Son.[32] The church father Athanasius countered this claim by showing that the full deity of the Spirit, like that of the

26. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 27.

27. For a discussion of the early Christian apologists, see Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988).

28. "The Letter of Arius to Eusebius," in *Documents of the Christian Church,* ed. Henry Bettenson, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 39.

29. Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 61–79.

30. See "The Creed of Nicaea," in *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present,* ed. John Leith, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 30–31.

31. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* 259.

32. Ibid., 256.

Son, was a necessary component of Christian faith,[33] especially the Christian teaching about salvation. He asserted that if the Spirit who enters the hearts and lives of the faithful is not fully divine, believers do not enjoy true community with God. The Council of Constantinople (381 C.E.) agreed with Athanasius,[34] articulating the orthodox position in a statement, popularly known as the Nicene Creed, that speaks of the Holy Spirit as "worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son."[35]

The decisions of the ecumenical councils at Nicea and Constantinople provided the framework for the future development of trinitarian theology. Yet, although the Councils affirmed the full deity of the Son and the Spirit along with the Father, the creeds that articulated the results of the conciliar deliberations did not address the question of how the three comprise one God or what the implications of this doctrine were for the Christian message. The task of providing a formulation of the relationship among Father, Son, and Spirit fell to the Cappadocian fathers: Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus.[36] In developing their conception of the triune God, the Cappadocians appropriated two Greek terms, *ousia* and *hypostasis,* theorizing that God is one *ousia* ("essence") but three *hypostaseis* ("independent realities") who share the one essence. The Cappadocian formulation of the Trinity provided the church with a fixed reference point, but it did not bring the discussions of the doctrine to an end. On the contrary, it opened the door for an ensuing debate about the exact way of construing the threeness and oneness of God, a debate that eventually led to a theological parting of ways between the Eastern and Western churches.

The theologians of the East sought to draw out the implications of the distinction posited by the Cappodicians between the words *ousia* and *hypostasis.* Gunton notes that by the time of the Cappadocians, the Greek term *hypostasis* had come to be used in distinction from the term *ousia* in order to refer to the concrete particularity of Father, Son, and Spirit.[37] In this rendering the three are not to be viewed simply as individuals but rather as persons whose reality can only be understood in terms of their relations to each other. By the virtue of these relations they together constitute the being or *ousia* of the one God. The persons are therefore not relations, but concrete particulars who are in relation to one another.[38] Gunton notes that this conceptual development not only provided a way to understand the threeness of the Christian God without loss to the divine unity but also established a new relational ontology: For God to be means that God is in communion. This theological conclusion arose out the linguistic connection between the terms *hypostasis* and *ousia,* which, although being conceptually distinct, are inseparable in thought because of their mutual

33. Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought,* 73–4.

34. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches,* 32.

35. See the "Constantinopolitan Creed" in *Creeds of the Churches,* 33.

36. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* 258.

37. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology,* 39.

38. Ibid.

involvement with one another."[39] The Eastern understanding was also characterized by the tendency to focus on the three individual members of the Trinity rather than on the divine unity.[40] Although not denying that Father, Son, and Spirit possess the one divine essence, the Eastern thinkers tended to highlight the specific operations of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the divine acts of creation, reconciliation, and consummation.

The linguistic differences between Latin and Greek as well as the differing cultural and theological temperaments of East and West[41] led the Western theologians to travel a somewhat different pathway. Their use of Latin meant that Western theologians were not fully cognizant of the nuances of the linguistic formulations emerging from the East. Instead, they drew on the work of Tertullian, whose formula *tres personae, una substantia* became a staple of the Latin conception. Tertullian's formula served to complicate the discussion with Eastern thinkers, however, in that the term *substantia* was the usual Latin translation of *hypostasis,* not *ousia.* The linguistic difficulties were compounded by the continuing influence of Athanasius, who had understood *ousia* and *hypostasis* as synonyms.[42] Use of the formula *tres personae, una substantia* led Western theologians to emphasize the one divine essence or substance rather than the plurality or threeness of divine persons characteristic of the East.

The classic statement of the Western understanding of the Trinity came in Augustine's influential work *De Trinitate.* Augustine appeals to the nature of human beings who, because they are created in the image of God, display "vestiges" of the Trinity, an approach that leads him to look for analogies of the Trinity in the nature of the human person.[43] In his estimation, the key to understanding the Trinity is found in the concept of love. According to Augustine, the human mind knows love in itself and as a consequence knows God, for God is love. This leads to a knowledge of the Trinity in that love implies a Trinity: "he that loves, and that which is loved, and love."[44] Actually, Augustine offered a long series of analogies based on humans as the *imago dei,* the most central of which is the triad of *being, knowing,* and *willing.*[45] Augustine's psychological analogy of the Trinity, with its focus on the oneness of God, in contrast to the Eastern emphasis on the divine threeness, and with its starting point in the divine essence, rather than in the saving act of God in Christ, set the stage for

39. Ibid.

40. For a discussion of the development of the Trinity in Eastern thought, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

41. For a discussion of these differences, see Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* 3–28.

42. Fortman, *The Triune God,* 72–83.

43. Cyril C. Richardson, "The Enigma of the Trinity" in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine,* ed. Roy Battenhouse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 248–255.

44. Augustine, *On the Trinity,* 8.10.14, trans. Arthur West Haddon, vol. 3, first series of The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (hereafter NPNF), reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 124.

45. Augustine, *Confessions* 13.11.12, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 279–280.

the trinitarian theologizing prominent in the West.[46] In the case of both East and West, however, the conception of God as triune, though definitely not the only topic of discussion, clearly framed the dominant theological agenda and structured the theologizing of the great minds of the day.

The Trinity in Medieval Theology

The linguistic and cultural differences between the Eastern and Western churches contributed to the Great Schism that came in the wake of the *filioque* controversy.[47] Yet the ecclesiastical breech did not terminate discussions of the doctrine or move the Trinity from the center of Christian theology, especially in the West. Throughout the medieval period the doctrine of the Trinity continued to receive considerable attention from both scholastic and mystical theologians who viewed God's triune nature as a central concern for Christian faith. This period is characterized by an emphasis on metaphysical speculation as well as by attempts to systematize and explicate trinitarian doctrine.

During the twelfth century a number of significant works on the Trinity served to codify and standardize the insights of the early Fathers and thereby provided a basis in tradition for the speculations of the following century. Leading thinkers such as Anselm of Canterbury and Peter Abelard developed a dialectical approach to theology that attempted to demonstrate the coherence between revealed and rational truth. But perhaps the most significant twelfth-century contribution to trinitarian theology was that of Richard of St. Victor, whose treatise *De Trinitate* stands as one of the most learned expositions of the Trinity in the Middle Ages.

In keeping with the classical understanding of theology as faith seeking understanding, Richard attempted to provide a rational demonstration of the Trinity and to discover "necessary reasons" for God's unity and triunity[48] that could be coupled with faith and experience.[49] Hence, he declared, "While God's unity and Trinity are beyond independent proof by reason, human reason can offer lines of reasoning that support and explicate what faith declares."[50] Of particular interest is Richard's discussion of the necessary plurality of persons in the Godhead.[51] To develop this point, he turns to the concept of divine goodness and observes that supreme goodness must involve love.[52] Richard argues that because self-love cannot be true charity, supreme love requires another, equal to the lover, who is the recipient of that love.[53] In addition, because supreme love

46. Fortman, *The Triune God,* 141.

47. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology: A Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 90.

48. Fortman, *The Triune God,* 193.

49. Ewert Cousins, "A Theology of Interpersonal Relations," *Thought* 45 (1970): 59.

50. Grover A. Zinn, ed. *Richard of St. Victor* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 46.

51. For an English translation of book 3 of Richard's *De Trinitate,* see Zinn, *Richard of St. Victor,* 373–397.

52. Ibid., 375–6.

53. Ibid., 374–5.

is received as well as given, such love must be a shared love, one in which each person loves and is loved by the other.[54] Cognizant that the witness of Christian faith declares that the one God is three, and not merely two persons,[55] Richard claims that further analysis of supreme love demonstrates that indeed three persons are required.[56] He argues that for love to be supreme it must desire that the love it experiences through giving and receiving be one that is shared with another. Consequently, perfect love is not merely mutual love between two but is fully shared among three and only three.[57]

Richard's work is significant in that it provides a relationally based alternative to Augustine's psychological approach to the Trinity. As Gunton notes regarding Richard, "Unlike Augustine, the fountainhead of most Western theology of the Trinity, he looks not at the inner soul for his clues to the nature of God, but at persons in relation."[58] Moreover, Richard's conception of the interior life of God demands a fully personal Trinity. By extension, the relationality within the divine life captured in Richard's theological model carries implications for a theological understanding of humans as the *imago dei* as well, a point we will pick up later. As Zinn explains, "[T]he reflection of this life should lead to a renewed appreciation of charity as a love lived in community with others, involving interpersonal sharing of the deepest kind."[59] In short, whereas Augustine's conception of the individual soul as an image of the Trinity provided the basis for an interior approach to spirituality that emphasizes the ascent of the individual to union with God, Richard's approach suggests the possibility of spirituality based on interpersonal community.[60] Although it would be misleading to say that Richard developed a fully relational view of the person in his thought, he provided, as Gunton points out, "an approach to the doctrine of the Trinity that contains possibilities for the development of a relational view of the person."[61] Commenting on the significance of Richard's theological program, Fortman declares that henceforth "there will be two great trinitarian theories in the medieval theological world, the Augustinian that St. Thomas will systematize, and the theory of Richard of St. Victor, whose principal representative will be St. Bonaventure."[62]

The thirteenth century was the high point of medieval theology. During this century, the theologians of the Dominican and Franciscan orders produced what one historian calls "the greatest contribution to trinitarian systematization that the Western Church ever had seen or would see."[63] Clearly the most significant figure of this period is Thomas Aquinas. The comprehensive detail and

54. Ibid., 380.
55. Ibid., 384.
56. Ibid., 386–393.
57. Fortman, *The Triune God*, 194.
58. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 89.
59. Zinn, *Richard of St. Victor*, 46.
60. Cousins, "A Theology of Interpersonal Relations," 59.
61. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 91.
62. Fortman, *The Triune God*, 191.
63. Ibid., 233.

philosophical precision of his trinitarian theology has won for him the admiration of many who would affirm with Fortman that there can be "little doubt that Aquinas produced the finest metaphysical synthesis of trinitarian doctrine that had thus far appeared in West or East."[64] In sum, Aquinas provides an outstanding example of a comprehensive understanding of the Christian faith and the created order developed into a coherent whole through the doctrine of the triune God, "to which everything was made tributary and in the light of which all things were viewed," to cite McGiffert's characterization.[65]

The approach of the medieval scholastic theologians to the doctrine of the Trinity has recently come under scrutiny, largely because of its focus on the unity of God. As the leading theologian of the time, Aquinas in particular is the recipient of much of the criticism. Karl Rahner, for example, suggests that by turning first to the doctrine of the one God and only later developing an understanding of God as triune, Aquinas contributed to the decline of robust trinitarian theology in the life of the church.[66]

Critiques such as Rahner's often leave the impression that Aquinas was not genuinely interested in the doctrine of the Trinity and that his relative lack of concern was symptomatic of the decline of the doctrine over the course of the Middle Ages. This is, however, manifestly not the case. Medieval theology is marked by extensive trinitarian discourse motivated by a robust concern for a proper understanding of the nature of God as triune. To the criticism that Aquinas's method of beginning with the doctrine of the one God effectively marginalized the doctrine of the Trinity, Cunningham replies that the medieval doctor knew that it would not even have crossed the minds of his readers "to imagine God in anything *other* than trinitarian categories." Cunningham then adds, "Centuries later, audiences may no longer operate with this assumption; we need to take this into account, but it can hardly be blamed on Thomas."[67] Evident in the thought of the medieval theologians in general and Aquinas in particular is a deep commitment to the trinitarian faith and witness of the early church coupled with an earnest desire to provide a compelling account of that confession as an integral component of the faith of the Christian community.

The Decline of Trinitarian Theology

In many ways the medieval period was the high water mark of trinitarian discourse in the history of the church, at least until the twentieth century. As the cultural ethos of the medieval world gave way to the Renaissance and the emergence of the modern world, the theological concerns of the church shifted. The most significant development in the Western church was, of course, the

64. Ibid., 234.
65. Arthur C. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner's, 1933), 293.
66. Rahner, *The Trinity*, 16–7. For a similar critique, see Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 145.
67. Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 33.

Protestant Reformation with its focus on the nature of authority and the doctrine of individual salvation. The advent of the Reformation and the emergence of the modern world inaugurated a period of decreased theological interest in the Trinity and the waning of trinitarian discourse in the church.

The doctrine of the Trinity was not central in the theological debates of the Reformation. The magisterial Reformers essentially affirmed the trinitarian doctrine of the ancient creeds as expressing the teaching of scripture on the doctrine, while doing little to advance trinitarian theology itself. Although the Reformers were committed to the confession of the Trinity, they had only a paltry interest in speculative reflection. This disinterest was due in part to their aversion to the speculative theology characteristic of scholasticism and their desire not to move beyond the testimony of the biblical writings.

The magisterial Reformers were content merely to affirm the classical Western position. Some leaders in the radical tradition of the Reformation, however, transformed the general reticence to engage in speculative matters into an actual rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity. A few went so far as to claim that the doctrine is an unbiblical human construction and therefore ought to be dropped from the Christian confession.

Perhaps the best known of the antitrinitarians is Faustus Socinus. Socinus accepted scripture as the supreme authority in matters of faith but insisted that it be interpreted in accordance with reason and not in the context of the traditional creeds. On this basis, he argued that God was one in both essence and person. In Socinius's estimation, if the divine essence is one in number, there cannot "be several divine persons in it, since a person is nothing else than an intelligent, indivisible essence."[68] Thus, although orthodox theology had always carefully distinguished between essence and person, Socinus equated the two and as a consequence asserted that God is a single person. The Socinian understanding later provided the theological basis for Unitarianism in England and America.

In the Enlightenment, the doctrine of the Trinity came under widespread attack as the benign neglect of earlier years turned into outright hostility. The thinkers of the Age of Reason eschewed revealed religion in favor of a religion based solely on reason. Because the basis for the traditional understanding of the Trinity lay in divine revelation and church tradition rather than in universal reason, the doctrine was cast aside as a relic of a superstitious and uninformed past. In challenging the concept of the Trinity, the Enlightenment thinkers called into question the possibility of structuring an entire theology around it.

The hegemony of Enlightenment thought came to an apex in the work of Immanuel Kant, who represented both the culmination and the destruction of the rationalist mind-set.[69] Kant opened the way for the modern theological

68. *Racovian Catechism*, qq. 21–23. Cited in Fortman, *The Triune God*, 244.

69. Jaroslav Pelikan, *From Luther to Kierkegaard* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 97.

situation through the rejection of both the classical orthodox and the purely rationalist understandings of theology. His abnegation of any special revelation as the source for religious truth or any church authority as the interpreter of theological truth undermined the classical understanding of the Trinity. And his claim that "scientific" knowledge must be limited to the realm of experience shaped by the rational structures of the mind meant that claims to knowledge of God through pure reason were impossible. Although Kant provided a telling critique of many of the claims of the Enlightenment, he also sealed off the possibility of any rational knowledge of God and thereby made traditional trinitarian discourse both impractical and superfluous.

In the wake of Kant's "Copernican revolutions" in philosophy, nineteenth-century theologians followed three basic trajectories, each of which continued to play a major role in the twentieth-century discussion. One approach, that of the conservatives who sought to maintain traditional, confessional orthodoxy, simply held fast to the classical position on the basis of scripture or tradition. Despite their commitment to the orthodox doctrine, however, conservatives gave little place to the Trinity or to a trinitarian structure in their constructive theological work. As a result, in conservative circles the doctrine of the Trinity increasingly came to be viewed as a mystery to be confessed on the basis of scripture and tradition, but not as a motif that can provide content and structure to the theological enterprise.

A second approach was pioneered by Schleiermacher, who denied that the doctrine of the Trinity is an essential component of Christian faith. As has been noted earlier, in his major theological work, *The Christian Faith*, he provides only a brief discussion of the Trinity, which comes as little more than an addendum to the whole. In this short discussion, Schleiermacher confesses that he is unable to provide an adequate construction of the doctrine,[70] largely because the Trinity is "not an immediate utterance concerning the Christian self-consciousness but only a combination of several such utterances."[71]

For Schleiermacher, therefore, trinitarian theology is the product of synthetic construction based on a variety of faith utterances that lead to the doctrine of the Trinity only after the fact. He works on the assumption that the primary Christian experience and therefore the primary Christian symbols are bound up with the concept of the one God, the God of monotheism. In this understanding, the threeness of God is not a part of the primary witness of Christian faith but merely the product of the attempt to pull together the various elements of early Christian experience. As Ted Peters points out, the assumption that trinitarian doctrine is "a synthesis of otherwise random convictions regarding a more fundamental monotheism renders the Trinity systematically superfluous."[72] In this way, Schleiermacher shifts the triunity of God to the

70. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 751.

71. Ibid., 738.

72. Peters, *GOD as Trinity*, 85.

margins of Christian faith, effectively "relegating it to the status of a second rank doctrine."[73]

Hegel stands at the genesis of the third nineteenth century approach to the Trinity. According to Hegel, God is the Absolute Spirit, whose nature is to differentiate himself in order to determine himself. God accomplishes this task through a dialectical process that develops under three determinations, which correspond to the three members of the Trinity.[74] Despite its innovative way of understanding God as triune, at several points Hegel's speculative trinitarianism falls short of the classical conception. For example, his model suggests that the reality of God is fully manifest only in the third mode, the Spirit, thereby effectively denying the traditional doctrine, with its clear assertion that all three persons participate equally in deity. In addition, Hegel reduces the Christian theological conception of God as Trinity to a symbolic illustration of a philosophical truth accessible through human reason apart from Christian revelation or experience. In short, as Peters concludes, Hegel and his followers affirm a philosophical trinitarianism in which the Trinity "is the equivalent of a metaphysical truth that can be established more or less independently of the Christian revelation."[75]

In spite of shortcomings such as these, Hegel is important in that he broke with his Enlightenment philosophical predecessors and many of his contemporaries, who saw the concept of the Trinity as an embarrassing relic from the ancient Christian past. Going against the philosophical grain, he boldly reestablished the concept of the Trinity as a crucial component in both philosophy and theology. As a consequence, Hegel's reaffirmation of the importance of the trinitarian conception of God opened the way for the revival of trinitarian theology in the twentieth century. In this sense, his understanding of the Trinity marked the first stage in the contemporary recovery of the doctrine.

Conclusion: Trinitarian Theology as "Church Dogmatics"

We have argued that Christian theology must be trinitarian because the understanding of God as triune reflects the biblical narrative and because, apart from a hiatus generated by the Enlightenment, it has informed—and even shaped—the theological conversation throughout the history of the church. Modern theology did mark a momentary move away from this approach, one that led to the marginalization of the Trinity, as both liberal and conservative theologians pursued the agenda of the Enlightenment, even if in differing ways. Yet the twentieth century launched a renewal of trinitarian theology, characterized by a return to the classical supposition that the Trinity ought to be a central concern for Christian faith and life, and that the

73. Ibid., 83.

74. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Ballie (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 766–85.

75. Peters, *GOD as Trinity*, 83.

entire content and exposition of theology should be ordered around the trinitarian conception of God.

The renewed commitment to the centrality of the Trinity that typifies the contemporary theological environment is in keeping with the historical trajectory of the Christian community 's reflection on the content of theology. As has been mentioned repeatedly in this chapter, the particularly Christian answer to the question of God's identity is rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity. The one God is Father, Son, and Spirit. This confession reflects the Christian experience of God and stands as the chief hallmark of the Christian faith. The ecumenical symbols of the Christian tradition are ordered around this confession, and the history of Christian theological reflection has been decisively shaped by it. Consequently, any theology that would claim to be *Christian* theology must be trinitarian. That is, because the Christian community has, in a fundamental way, been committed to finding its basis in the being and action of the triune God, truly *Christian* theological reflection must continue in this tradition if it is to make any claim of continuity with the past. Faithful Christian theology should thus be ordered and structured in such a way as to reflect the primacy of this fundamental Christian confession.

This is not to say that there is no room for revisioning the exact content of the doctrine of the Trinity. This can and should be an important part of the faithful Christian theological agenda, which continually seeks a better understanding of the message of the gospel and its implications. What we are claiming is simply that any theology that would call itself Christian in any meaningful sense has an obligation not only to contemporary theological concerns but also to past reflections of the Christian community. As we maintained in chapter 4, the Christian tradition provides the hermeneutical trajectory for contemporary theology. Theology that is faithful to this hermeneutical trajectory must be trinitarian.

There remains yet a third reason that we must mention. A trinitarian theology reflects the understanding of theology that arises from the contemporary understanding of the nature of theology itself. Because this point emerges from the previous chapter, along with the argument of this chapter's previous sections, and because we will touch on the topic again in chapter 7, we need devote only a paragraph to the idea here.

In chapter 5 we asked whether or not theology is a cultural practice, that is, an act of the Christian community viewed as a culture. In that discussion, we concluded that in its constructive dimension, theology is directly a cultural practice of the church, insofar as theology is connected to the production of meaning. Viewed from this perspective, the goal of theological construction is exploring and articulating an understanding of the particular belief-mosaic of the Christian community. This goal is attained as participants in the community engage in an ongoing conversation about the meanings of the symbols they hold in common as Christians. Of the various topics about which Christians converse, none is more central to the faith than the conception of God, and as we have argued in this chapter, the understanding of God that lies at the heart

of the faith is of God as triune. In this sense, we might speak of the Trinity as the central symbol of the Christian community. Theology, in turn, is the community's conversation about the meaning of this central symbol, and consequently, Christian theology is inherently trinitarian in content and structure. In short, as will be argued again in chapter 7, theology is "church dogmatics," and the "dogmatics" of the *Christian* church must by its very nature be trinitarian.

The Character of a Trinitarian Theology

The biblical witness, the theological heritage of the church, and contemporary understandings converge to indicate that a truly Christian theology must be trinitarian. In setting forth our case for a trinitarian theology we have implicitly indicated what characterizes a theology whose contents and structure are informed by the Christian conception of God as triune. What remains is to present our understanding in a more explicit manner. The place to begin this discussion is with the resurgence of trinitarian theology in the twentieth century.

The Renewal of Trinitarian Theology and the Trinitarian Structure of Theology

As noted previously, the twentieth century witnessed a renewed interest in the doctrine of the Trinity and consequently in trinitarian theology. Although several theologians at the turn of the century were busily unfolding the implications of Hegelian trinitarianism, arguably the most significant thinker responsible for launching theology on a new path was Karl Barth.

Barth and Revelational Trinitarianism

A central aspect of Barth's agenda was clearly to reestablish the significance of the Trinity for theology. In his *Church Dogmatics* the doctrine functions both as a type of prolegomenon and as the structural motif for his presentation of Christian theology.

At the heart of Barth's program is his assertion that the revelation of God that provides the basis for theology is a trinitarian event in which the divine self-disclosure involves three moments: Revealer, Revelation, and Revealedness. He maintains that these correspond to Father, Son, and Spirit.[76] Departing from Schleiermacher's model of synthesis, Barth engages in an analysis of the biblical witness that leads him to the conclusion that the doctrine of the Trinity is a logical necessity.[77]

Actually, for Barth it is the Christocentric focus of the biblical witness that necessitates a trinitarian revelational theology. He is convinced that the biblical

76. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 1/1:295.

77. Peters, *GOD as Trinity*, 87.

affirmation that God has reconciled the world to himself through the mission of Jesus Christ leads to a trinitarian conception of God. Moreover, the scriptural witness to the life and mission of Jesus and the New Testament confession that this Jesus is Lord entail the corresponding belief that God is triune. Hence, for Barth, the threefoldness indicated by the terms Father, Son, and Spirit is in the words of Claude Welch, "a threefoldness in the structure or pattern of the one act of God in Christ and therefore the structure of all divine activity and of the being of God."[78] In short, Barth is convinced that the doctrine of the Trinity is deeply embedded in the biblical witness and consequently is in fact, contra Schleiermacher, a primary Christian symbol.[79]

Barth's Christocentric, revelational trinitarianism emerges as well from his conviction that the Christian conception of God does not begin with a generic monotheism to which Christology is added at a later point. Instead, the Christian understanding of God begins with the Son through whom God is revealed as Father, and it is through the revelation of the Son that God is known as the triune one. Thus, for Barth the Christian understanding of God as triune is distinct from all other conceptions of the divine reality.

In Barth's estimation, then, the doctrine of the Trinity follows directly from the Christian confession that God has revealed himself to the world in Jesus Christ. Claude Welch praises Barth's Christocentric revelational approach, in that in it the Trinity is "an immediate consequence of the gospel" due to the fact that the revelation "on which everything depends" cannot be developed or stated except in a trinitarian fashion. Welch then adds, "The doctrine of the Trinity is of all-embracing importance because it is the objective expression, the crystallization of the gospel itself. It is not just one part of the doctrine of God, but is integral to every aspect of the doctrine of God and to every other doctrine as well."[80]

Barth's great accomplishment, therefore, was to argue conclusively that the Christian community's primary experience of revelation is trinitarian in nature and, as a consequence, that the doctrine of the Trinity is a logically necessary component of the early Christian experience and confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and as revealer of God. In so doing, Barth avoided "splitting up" elements of the Christian experience that had in fact been received by the early community as a whole. Welch summarizes the far-reaching theological implications of this innovation: "It not only prevents us from identifying God simply with a Creator-God of nature and natural theology, thus falling into a 'unitarianism of the Father,' but it also makes impossible a Christology that is not wholly theocentric or a pneumatology that is not genuinely Christocentric and theocentric."[81] These implications are evident in the *Church Dogmatics* itself, as the

78. Claude Welch, *In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 234.

79. Peters, *GOD as Trinity*, 87.

80. Welch, *In This Name*, 238.

81. Peters, *GOD as Trinity*, 88.

renewed emphasis on the threefold nature of God as a primary component of Christian faith provides structure for everything that follows.

We noted previously Hegel's importance in opening the way for a revival of trinitarian theology. Despite its shortcomings, Hegel's work leads to an important insight for theological method. Taking Hegel's impulse seriously, we conclude that insofar as the triune God is connected to the historical process (even if not in the manner Hegel himself proposed), the doctrine of the Trinity is not merely a subtheme of theology proper but is in fact the topic of the entire, systematic theological construction, which views all the theological loci as in some sense participants in the central topic of theology, namely, the triune God. Barth's renewal of the doctrine of the Trinity took this Hegelian implication a step further. In his estimation, all theology is the explication of the being and action of God in Christ. As a consequence of this Barthian insight, a truly trinitarian theology is one that is structured around the self-disclosure of the triune God as centered in Christ and given through scripture to the believing community. Building from Barth, we would add that a truly trinitarian theology is one in which all of the theological loci are informed by and, in turn, inform the explication of the Trinity that, following Hegel, stands at the heart of the constructive systematic-theological enterprise.

Trinitarian-structured Theology

Following the trail blazed by Barth, many theologians[82] have risen to the challenge of placing the doctrine of the Trinity back into the center of constructive theology. Often ranked with Hegel and Barth in setting the theological agenda is Karl Rahner. Rahner articulated the important thesis that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity.[83] This thesis, known as Rahner's rule, marks out the new phase that trinitarian discourse has entered, as this basic principle has engendered a broad consensus of opinion among theologians of various traditions.[84]

Rahner's rule indicates that rather than God's relating to the world in the unity of the divine being, God's ongoing interaction with creation always comes as the work of one or another of the three divine persons. Because the Christian experience of God occurs through the economy of salvation, that is, through God's redemptive activity in history, knowledge of God is never simply knowledge of God in general but always knowledge of God in God's triune being. At the same time, Rahner argues that the experience of God that arises in the economy of salvation remains a genuine experience of the eternal God, for through the process of salvation the eternal God reveals his own true self to humans.

82. For helpful summaries of several recent contributions as well as an overview of the issues under consideration in the contemporary discussion, see John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Peters, *GOD as Trinity.*

83. Rahner, *The Trinity,* 22.

84. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ,* trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (London: SCM Press, 1983), 274.

Thus, Rahner declares that God is "actually internally just the way we experience the divine in relation to us, namely, as Father, Son, and Spirit."[85] Although theologians such as Moltmann and Jenson subsequently developed the idea that God finds his identity in the temporal events of the economy of salvation, Rahner himself did not move in this direction. He retains the classical belief that God's eternal being is independent of historical events. He views "Rahner's rule" as postulating that the way in which God relates to the world must be understood with reference to each of the three persons and not as emerging from a prior understanding of God as a unity.[86]

Hegel, through his connection of the Trinity and the unfolding historical process; Barth, through his insistence on the connection between the Trinity and revelation as the basis for all theological assertions; and Rahner, through his connection of the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity as one identical reality, set the context for the discussion of trinitarian theology in the twentieth century.[87] Jüngel, Moltmann, Jenson, and Pannenberg in turn, attempted to develop a trinitarian theology within the context of the framework and insights provided by the three pioneers. All of these theologians are committed to a relational interpretation of the Trinity and to the methodological premise that the revelation of God as Trinity, along with the corresponding trinitarian theology, must be grounded solely in the historical person of Jesus and not based on alien philosophical categories and structures.[88] Their work launched a relatively new emphasis that bases the doctrine of the Trinity on relationality and as such represents, at least to some degree, an extension and development of ancient trinitarian thought.[89]

Of these, Pannenberg's proposal offers perhaps the most rigorous and highly developed statement of the doctrine and its interrelatedness to the whole of theology.[90] He asserts that rather than relegating the Trinity to the status of a footnote, we ought to place God's triune nature at the very heart of theology. In a manner reminiscent of Barth, Pannenberg asserts that all of systematic theology is in some sense the explication of this central doctrine. At the same time, Pannenberg is also critical of the theological tradition from Augustine to Barth. He claims that, by viewing the trinitarian members as the internal relations within the one God, theologians have made God into a fourth person above the three members of the Trinity. Rather than speaking of the one God who is above the three, Pannenberg argues

85. Peters, *GOD as Trinity,* 96–7.

86. Peters, *GOD as Trinity,* 97.

87. Faye E. Schott, "God is Love: The Contemporary Theological Movement of Interpreting the Trinity as God's Relational Being" (Th.D. dissertation, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1990), 62.

88. Schott, "God is Love," 9.

89. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "Current Trends in Trinitarian Theology," *Religious Studies Review* 13/2 (April 1987): 141–47.

90. For a summary and discussion of Pannenberg's conception of the Trinity, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 46–54, 71–75.

that the one God is the three, and that there is no God other than the Father, Son, and Spirit."[91]

These insights from Rahner and Pannenberg are significant for a theological method that seeks to structure theology in a trinitarian manner. They provide assurance that the explication of the triune God in God's self-disclosure in and to creation is at the same time the explication of the triune God in the divine reality. This assertion takes us back to our earlier discussion of the history of God. At that point we noted that throughout much of church history theologians assumed that God's internal history corresponded to God's external history. This assumption, however, eventually led to a focus on God's internal history that elevated a speculative trinitarian theology separate from the concrete historical narratives of the Bible. This produced a "theology from above" that no longer had much interest in the "theology from below" to which it was necessarily linked and on which it depended. In the aftermath of the attendant loss of trinitarian theology, Rahner and Pannenberg have reunited God's internal and external histories and, in so doing, brought together once again theology "from above" and "from below."

Methodologically, this means that trinitarian-theological explication runs in two directions. On the one hand, it moves *from* the self-disclosure of God in and to creation, centered on the coming of Christ and the ongoing work of the Spirit, *to* the eternal life of the triune God. Viewed from this perspective, theology (proper) is dependent on Christology and pneumatology. On the other hand, theological construction moves as well *from* the eternal reality of the triune God, which is confessed by the ecumenical church of all ages, *to* an understanding of the trinitarian persons in the creative and redemptive work of the one God. In this sense, Christology and pneumatology can only be ventured in the light of theology (proper).

Trinitarian Theology and the *Imago Dei*

The methodological insights we drew from the architects of the renewal of trinitarian theology brought the doctrine of the Trinity into play within the loci of systematic theology. More specifically, we asserted that in a trinitarian theology the three central aspects—theology (proper), Christology, and pneumatology—are interrelated. One further aspect of a truly trinitarian theology remains to be mentioned, a dimension that links the divine and the human or the theological and the anthropological. This aspect is crucial if our systematic-theological articulation is to draw insight from the Christian understanding of God in a manner that can inform our human purpose as creatures of the triune God. The path to this goal leads through the traditional theological conviction that God's triune nature forms the transcendent grounding for human relationships, which in turn is connected to the theological concept of humans as the *imago dei*. Because venturing in this direction leads us beyond what has been the methodological focus to date of the renewed interest in trinitarian theology, we must flesh out this aspect of the trinitarian structuring of theology in somewhat greater detail.

91. This theme is addressed repeatedly in Pannenberg's work. For example, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Christian Vision of God: The New Discussion on the Trinitarian Doctrine," *Trinity Seminary Review* 13/2 (Fall 1991): 53–60.

The Relationality of God

Perhaps the single most significant development in the contemporary renaissance of trinitarian theology has been the emphasis on relationality. The category of relationality enjoys a considerable degree of consensus among recent interpreters of trinitarian theology, who see it as providing an alternative to the metaphysics of substance that dominated theological reflection on the Trinity throughout much of church history. The traditional emphasis on an abstract property of substance, or a divine essence, standing under God has come under scrutiny in recent trinitarian studies. Theologians today routinely critique the concept as one that implies that God is an isolated, solitary individual.

The question of the nature of a substance was initially placed on the theological table by the early church father Tertullian through his famous formula *una substantia, tres personae*. Theologians, especially in the West, subsequently took up the challenge of devising an understanding of the nature of substance when used with reference to God. Hence, Augustine spoke of God as a substance that was eternal and unchangeable. Later Thomas Aquinas defined God as pure act, thereby excluding such ideas as *becoming* or *potency* as inapplicable to God, insofar as these would imply change in the immutable God in the act of becoming or in the transition from potency to act. The definitional link these theologians forged between substance and unchangeability meant that they viewed God as eternal and unchanging, in contrast to creation, which is temporal and in a constant state of change in its relation to God.

The substantialist conception carried within itself the distinction between absolute essence and relational attributes. According to this understanding, essence is absolute, and therefore it must remain unchanged in order to preserve its identity. If change occurs in the essence of an entity its identity is lost. Relationality, in turn, was deemed to belong to the dimension of attributes, not substance. Consequently, substantialist theologians suggested that God is absolute and immutable in his essential nature, whereas he maintains relationality to creation through the divine attributes. As Ted Peters notes regarding the classical position, "What could not be countenanced is the notion that the divine essence is contingent upon the relational dimensions of its being."[92] The result, however, has been the obscuring of God's internal relationality and of God's loving relationship to creation in much of the classical literature on the nature of God.

In recent years, the classical commitment to a substantialist conception of God's nature has been critiqued. At the heart of this critique is the apparent

92. Peters, *GOD as Trinity*, 31.

incompatibility of an eternal, essentially immutable God with the portrait in the biblical narratives of a God who has entered into loving relationship with creation. Although the debate continues regarding the degree to which the category of substance ought to be abandoned, theologians voice considerable agreement that the primary accent should be placed on the category of relationality.

Catherine LaCugna, to cite one example, asserts that *person* rather than *substance* is the primary ontological category, and notes that the ultimate source of reality is not a "by-itself" or an "in-itself" but a person, a "toward-another." She concludes that the triune God is "self-communicating" and exists from all eternity "in relation to another."[93] Likewise, Robert Jenson writes, "The original point of trinitarian dogma and analysis was that God's relations to us are internal to him, and it is in carrying out this insight that the 'relation' concept was introduced to define the distinction of identities."[94] In a similar manner, Elizabeth Johnson claims that the priority of relation in the triune God challenges and critiques the concentration of classical theism on "singleness" in God. Because the persons are "constituted by their relationships to each other, each is unintelligible except as connected with the others."[95] The assertion that each of the persons in the triune life is constituted only in relationship to the others leads Johnson to the conclusion that the "very principal of their being" is to be found in the category of relation.[96]

David Cunningham notes that the breadth of the current consensus about the priority of relationality in trinitarian discourse is evidenced by the fact that both Jenson and Johnson may be cited in support of it, even though the two thinkers "are not usually noted for being in close agreement with one another."[97] This theological consensus encompasses a variety of thinkers, including Jürgen Moltmann,[98] Wolfhart Pannenberg,[99] Leonardo Boff,[100] Ted Peters,[101] Colin Gunton,[102] and Alan Torrance,[103] although these theologians may differ from one another on the precise construction of relationality.

93. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 14–15.

94. Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 120.

95. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 216.

96. Ibid.

97. Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 26.

98. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 171–72.

99. Pannenberg, "The Christian Vision of God: The New Discussion on the Trinitarian Doctrine," 53–60.

100. Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 134–48.

101. Peters, *GOD as Trinity*, 30–34.

102. Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 164.

103. Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995).

At the heart of the contemporary consensus of the divine relationality is the apostolic witness that God is love (e.g., 1 John 4:8, 16). Developing the doctrine of the Trinity in accordance with the category of relationality indicates how this biblical assertion is to be understood. Throughout all eternity the divine life of the triune God is aptly characterized by the word *love,* which, when viewed in the light of relationality, signifies the reciprocal self-dedication of the trinitarian members to one another. Indeed, there is no God other than the Father, Son, and Spirit bound together in love throughout eternity. The term *love,* in turn, provides a profound conception of the reality of God as understood by the Christian tradition. Love expressed and received by the trinitarian persons among themselves provides a description of the inner life of God throughout eternity apart from any reference to creation. In addition to enjoying the support of the biblical witness, *love* is an especially fruitful term as an explication of the divine life because it is a relational concept. Love requires both subject and object. Because God is triune—that is, multiplicity within unity—the divine reality comprehends both love's subject and love's object. For this reason, when viewed theologically, the statement "God is love" refers primarily to the eternal, relational, intratrinitarian fellowship among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who together are the one God. In this way, God is love within the divine reality, and in this sense, through all eternity God is the social Trinity, the community of love.

Two significant factors have influenced the contemporary interest in relationality among theologians. One is the recovery and introduction into Western thought of certain impulses from the Eastern or Greek theological tradition. The primary focus of attention in this "turn to the East" has been the Cappadocian emphasis on *relation* over *substance*[104] as developed by Orthodox theologians such as Vladimir Lossky[105] and John Zizioulas.[106] In the process, thinkers from other traditions have critiqued and modified the particularly Orthodox perspective on the Cappadocian understanding of relationality, yet they have generally retained the basic impulse toward relationality in preference to substantiality that goes back to this element in the patristic legacy.[107] The other crucial influence in the contemporary focus on relationality is the reconceptualization of the nature of personhood and the self that has emerged recently in reaction to the radical individualism spawned by the Enlightenment, with its elevation of the individual viewed in isolation and as fundamentally detached from the world. This facet of the contemporary situation requires further exploration.[108]

104. Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 26–7.

105. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1957; reprint, Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976).

106. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

107. For a recent and significant engagement with the thought of Zizioulas from a Protestant perspective, see Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church As the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

108. For a fuller exposition of the developments described here, see Stanley J. Grenz,

The Rise and Demise of the Self

Humans from the beginning to the present have sought to understand the nature of identity and personhood. Thinkers in every culture since ancient times have pondered the question of personal identity. For example, the Hebrew psalmist, while contemplating the vastness and majesty of the universe, asks in wonder and amazement, "[W]hat are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Ps. 8:4, NRSV). In recent years, however, this seemingly universal human quest to fathom the nature of personal identity has occurred in the context of the widespread cultural movement away from the outlook of modernity. The demise of the Enlightenment project has shifted the focus of the search for a sense of personhood. To understand this shift requires that we briefly consider the view of the self in modernity.

Whereas the psalmist placed humans within the context of creation, in the modern era the human person was pried loose from creation, now understood as "nature." And in contrast to the psalmist, who viewed human identity from a vantage point within the created order, the modern response to the question of human identity came in the form of the construction of the self. In the wake of the Enlightenment, for the determination of what it means to be a human many philosophers looked to reason, understood as the innately human ability to disengage from one's natural environment and social context and objectify the world. Disengagement from the objectified world formed the foundation for the modernist ideal—namely, individual autonomy—understood as the ability to choose one's own purposes from within oneself apart from the controlling influence of natural and social forces[109] and hence to create one's own identity or self. Society, in turn, was seen as a collection of autonomous, independent selves pursuing their personally chosen ends. In this manner, the modern self became self-created and self-sufficient, the highly centered "true inner person" persisting through time and standing above the vacillations and shifting relationships that characterize day-to-day living. The self was seen as the autonomous, individual subject, who enters into relationships (whether with other humans, with "nature," or even with God) as a preexisting "given."

Postmodern theorists have vigorously challenged this modern conception of the self, a process that has led to the demise of the modern self. Whatever else it may be, viewed from the perspective of anthropology the postmodern ethos is marked by the rejection of—or even more strongly stated, the deconstruction of—the modern self. Postmodern thinkers assert that rather than the disengaged, isolated observer who exists prior to society and thus forms the primary building block for the supposedly purely contractual social order, the human

"Belonging to God: The Quest for a Communal Spirituality in the Postmodern World," *Asbury Theological Journal* 54/2 (Fall 1999): 41–52.

109. Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4.

self is in some sense constituted by social relationships. Postmodern thinkers routinely picture this engaged self as a position in a vast web, a nexus, a point of intersection. The postmodern self is a bundle of fluctuating relationships and momentary preferences. Of course, in a fast-changing world, this image leads to a highly unstable, impermanent self. As the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard observed, "[E]ach exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before."[110]

The postmodern condition, therefore, arises out of the loss of the stability and consistency that characterized the self of the modern ideal. The destruction of the modern self leaves as its residue only the radically decentered postmodern "self," whose fleeting "existence" is limited to whatever tastes, preferences, and relationships happen to be juxtaposed in the existential moment. The result of this is what Fredric Jameson refers to as "psychic fragmentation."[111] And this splintering of the self into multiple subjectivities gives birth to, in the terminology of Johann Roten, the "chaotic self,"[112] which "attempts to absorb 'alterity' in all its forms to overcome separation and isolation, only to find itself in the end in a state of spiritual chaos."[113]

The Christian response to the demise of the self brought on by the postmodern ethos brings us to the Christian teaching that humans are created in the image of God.

The Image of God

Christian theologians have traditionally constructed theological anthropology around the concept of the *imago dei*. Human identity (or the self) is bound up with the idea that human beings are created in the image of God and therefore are bearers of the divine image. In keeping with this conviction, theologians have offered various suggestions as to the nature or content of the *imago dei*.[114]

Perhaps the most long-standing interpretation of the *imago* sees it as a structure of the human person. In this understanding, the divine image consists of the properties that constitute human beings as human with special emphasis placed on the capacity for rationality coupled with our moral nature. This view is widespread in the writings of the church fathers and the medieval scholastic theologians. It was challenged to some extent in the Protestant Reformation, regained ascendancy in Protestant orthodox theology, and continues to be influential in those traditions influenced by the scholastic traditions. In spite of

110. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 15.

111. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 90.

112. Johann G. Roten, "The Marian Counterpoint of Postmodern Spirituality," in *Divine Representations: Postmodernism and Spirituality*, ed. Ann W. Astell (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 113–14.

113. Roten, "The Marian Counterpoint of Postmodern Spirituality," 114.

114. For a fuller delineation of the *imago dei*, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 168–80.

its venerable pedigree, the substantialist view ultimately fails to do justice to the dynamic nature of the divine image.

Two concepts have served to move the discussion forward: relationality and destiny. The former finds its genesis in the Reformers, who tended to place primary focus on the special standing before God that characterizes human existence rather than on a formal structure supposedly found within the human person. According to the biblical narratives this relationship was tarnished by human sin but is restored through Christ. The relational view fostered by the Reformers found support in the twentieth century in the work of so-called neoorthodox theologians, such as Emil Brunner.[115]

The Reformers also opened the door to the other concept, namely, the idea that links the *imago dei* to our human destiny, although the groundwork for this idea lay in Irenaeus's fruitful christological proposal that Jesus is the "recapitulation" of the human story. In his discussion of Genesis 9:6, to cite one example from the Reformation, Luther declared that although humankind lost the image of God through sin, "it can be restored through the Word and the Holy Spirit."[116] This restoration, which begins now and reaches completion only on the Last Day, raises humans to a stature that is even higher than what was lost in the fall. The perfection of the divine image is the eternal life for which Adam was "fitted."[117] Hence, in this sense the *imago dei* is ultimately God's intention and goal for humankind.

The more formal development of the anthropological concept of destiny arose in the context of German romanticism, particularly in the work of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803).[118] Working from the idea of "openness to the world," Herder's followers, including such eminent proponents as Wolfhart Pannenberg,[119] posit a link between the biblical concept of the image of God and our future human destiny. This link introduces a dynamic dimension into the concept of the divine image. The image of God is a destiny toward which human beings are moving and entails what they are en route to becoming. It is what resurrected humans will bear in the new creation and hence a future reality that is present now only as a foretaste or only in the form of our human potential. As Daniel Migliore states, "Being created in the image of God is not a state or condition but a movement with a goal: human beings are restless for a fulfillment of life not yet realized."[120]

This dynamic conception of the *imago dei* arising out of the relational model launches us on the road toward an understanding of the self that can speak

115. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 55–56.

116. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. George V. Schick, American Edition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 2:141.

117. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, 1:64–5.

118. See, for example, J. G. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Berlin: G. Hempel, 1879), 9.5.

119. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 218–31.

120. Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 128.

within the postmodern context. At the heart of the divine image is human destiny as designed by God. Human beings are the image of God insofar as we have received, are now fulfilling, and one day will fully actualize the divine design for human existence, which is our destiny. But what is this design? This question takes us to the biblical texts.

The Genesis creation narratives suggest that the divinely given destiny of human beings begins with a special standing before God. As created in the divine image, human beings are the recipients of God's commands and thus have a special responsibility before God. Above all, however, Genesis 1 connects the human task with the concept of "dominion," which Genesis 2 elaborates further by suggesting that the special calling of humanity lies in our role in creation: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Gen. 2:15 NIV).

Rather than reading "dominion" against the background of the ideology of modern industrial society, however, we must place the concept within the context of the royal theology of the Old Testament.[121] The kings of the ancient Near East often left images of themselves in cities or territories where they could not be present in person. Such images served to represent their majesty and power.[122] Gerhard von Rad draws the parallel to humankind as the image of God:

> Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God's image as God's sovereign emblem. He is really only God's representative, summoned to maintain and enforce God's claim to dominion over the earth.[123]

Thus, "image" and "likeness" carry the sense of "representation." God has entrusted to humans a special task with reference to creation, namely, that we serve as God's representatives. We are to reflect to creation the nature of God.

Viewing the *imago dei* as pertaining to our divinely given purpose to represent God suggests that all persons are "in the image of God" (e.g., Gen. 9:6), in that all share in the one human *telos*. Yet the New Testament writers apply the concept of the divine image particularly to Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:4, 6; Col.

121. See, for example, Phyllis A. Bird, "'Male and Female He Created Them': Gen. 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (April 1981): 137–44; H. Paul Santmire, "The Genesis Creation Narratives Revisited: Themes for a Global Age," *Interpretation* 45/4 (October 1991):374–75.

122. Gerhard von Rad, "*Eikon*," in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 2:392. See also Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, trans. David G. Preston (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 81.

123. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. John H. Marks, in the Old Testament Library, ed. G. Ernest Wright (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 58.

1:15), who is the clear representation of the character and glory of God. By extension, those who are united to Christ share in his role as the *imago dei*. All who are "in Christ" are being transformed into the image of Christ so that their lives may reflect his glory (2 Cor. 3:18). In fact, it is to conformity to Christ (as the likeness of God) that God has destined us (Rom. 8:29; 1 John 3:2). For this reason, Paul proclaims the hope that "just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven" (1 Cor. 15:49). And this, he adds, will be accomplished through our participation in Christ's resurrection (1 Cor. 15:50–53). In short, the entire biblical panorama may be read as presenting the purpose of God as that of bringing into being a people who reflect the divine character and thus are the *imago dei*. At the eschaton, God will complete what was the divine intention from the beginning and has from the beginning been set before us as our human destiny. On that eschatological day we will reflect fully the divine image as God's representatives after the pattern of Christ.

The Trinity and the Social Image

While providing a necessary and helpful starting point, even the dynamic understanding of the *imago dei* as the eschatological destiny of human beings does not constitute the entire basis for recasting the self in response to the postmodern problematic. It too readily retains a potential indebtedness to the individualistic focus characteristic of the modern self.

Perhaps the most significant postmodern insight into identity formation is the observation that whatever the self may be, it is a social reality. That is to say, rather than arising sui generis, personal identity emerges *extra se*, as Luther, following Paul, observed. As a nexus, a bundle of relationships, the chaotic self that emerged from the deconstruction of the autonomous, self-positing, centered self of modernity looks to relationships for any semblance of identity.[124] Viewed from a Christian perspective, this "turn to relationships" is not misguided. On the contrary, it offers a perspective from which to view the *imago dei* and engage Christian anthropology with the postmodern condition. The contemporary acknowledgment of the relationality of personal identity suggests that the divine image is a shared, communal reality. It implies that the image of God is fully present only in relationships, that is, in "community."[125] And this aspect of the contemporary situation provides an occasion for us to return to the biblical texts with new insight into the strong communitarian strand already in the biblical concept of the *imago dei*.

The foundation for the understanding of the image of God as social lies in the creation narratives. As many thinkers since Karl Barth have noted, the first

124. See, for example, George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934, 1974), 138–58.

125. For a development of the philosophical basis for the social understanding of personhood, see Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

creation story connects the *imago dei* with humans in relationship. What is indicated in Genesis 1:26–28 is even more explicit in the second creation narrative: God creates the first human pair in order that humans might enjoy fellowship with each other. Specifically, the creation of the woman is designed to deliver the man from his isolation. This primal community of male and female then becomes expansive, producing the offspring that arise from the sexual union of husband and wife and eventually giving rise to the development of societies. In the biblical narrative, what begins in the Garden of Eden finds its completion at the consummation of history, when God establishes the new creation, the realm in which humans enjoy perfect fellowship with each other, creation, and the Creator (e.g., Rev. 21:1–5; 22:1–5). The second creation narrative links God's creation of humans in the image of God, which includes the creation of a plurality of sexes, to a plurality found within the divine self-reference: "Let us make humankind in our image" (Gen. 1:26, NRSV). Although the verse is not explicitly trinitarian, the use of the plural pronouns does suggest that the narrator intends the reader to make a connection between human relationality and the Creator, whom through their relationality humans represent.

It is not surprising that ultimately the image of God should focus on relationality, fellowship, or "community." Indeed, as we have seen, God is inherently relational. As the doctrine of the Trinity asserts, throughout all eternity God is "community," namely, the fellowship of the three trinitarian persons who comprise the triune God. As the triune one, the fellowship of the trinitarian persons, God is love. God's goal for humankind, in turn, is that we represent God by reflecting the divine nature (love) and thereby be the *imago dei*, which is our divinely intended destiny. According to the New Testament, the focus of this image-bearing function is humans-in-relationship but, more specifically, the church as the foretaste of the new humanity. Hence, the divine design for Christ's community is that we be a people who, because we share in the Holy Spirit and thereby participate in the eternal love of God, represent God in the midst of the fallenness of the present through relationships that reflect God's own loving character. The creation of humankind in the divine image, therefore, can mean nothing less than that humans express the relational dynamic of the God whose representation we are called to be. Consequently, each human is related to the image of God ultimately only within the context of life in relationship. Only in community can we truly show what God is like, for God is the community of love, the eternal relational dynamic enjoyed by the three persons of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity indicates why the image of God is, and can only be, expressed in human relationships. The God we know is the triune one—Father, Son, and Spirit united together in perfect love. Because God is "community"—the fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit—the creation of humankind in the divine image must be related to persons-in-relationship as well. God's own character can only be mirrored by humans who love after the manner of the perfect love present within the heart of the triune God. Only as

Christians who live in fellowship can we show forth what God is like. And as we reflect God's character—love—we also live in accordance with our own true nature and find our true identity.

This conception of God as a relational, trinitarian fellowship of love and the corresponding social reflection of the divine image by human beings in relationship leads us back to the question as to what characterizes a trinitarian theology. Theological construction that is truly trinitarian in content and structure brings the Christian confession of the triune God into its explication of the Christian belief-mosaic at every turn. As we noted earlier, this entails a thoroughly trinitarian approach to the three theologically oriented foci—theology (proper), Christology, and pneumatology. But it means as well that, by drawing from a relational understanding of the *imago dei* as derived from its transcendent theological grounding, the structuring principle of God as triune and therefore inherently relational informs the other foci as well. This method leads to a truly relational anthropology, a fully theological ecclesiology, and a completely trinitarian eschatology, as systematic theology from start to finish becomes, as Pannenberg notes, the explication of the Christian declaration that God is love.[126]

Relationality as characterizing the triune God and as marking our human calling as the *imago dei* suggests likewise the primacy of community in the construction of Christian theology. The deepest intentions of God in creation are fulfilled in the establishment of community, for indeed human beings have been created for fellowship and community with God, one another, and all of creation. This community will ultimately be established at the consummation of God's program for creation when the people of God, together with all creation, will be drawn into participation in the divine life. Given the social nature of God, a theology that is truly trinitarian will find coherence, or its integrative motif, in the concept of community, which is reflective of the nature of God and God's intention for creation. Thus, the trinitarian content of theology points to the concept of community as providing the integrative motif for theology and eventually to eschatology as its orienting motif. It is to these two focal motifs that we turn our attention in the remaining chapters of this volume.

126. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:448