THE SELF-GIVING TRIUNE GOD, THE *IMAGO DEI* AND THE NATURE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH: AN ONTOLOGY OF MISSION

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INTRODUCTION

For many years in Western society, the concept of a Holy Trinity has been one of those doctrines which we affirm to be Christian yet which for many has seemed largely irrelevant. German philosopher Immanuel Kant complained that, "Taken literally, absolutely nothing worthwhile for the practical life can be made out of the doctrine of the Trinity."[1]

Today, however, many Christian thinkers are reaffirming the central importance of trinitarian theology for our daily lives. Stimulated in part by Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, Catholic and Protestant theologians have produced in the last forty years a significant corpus on the subject. Especially notable are works by Karl Rahner, Eberhard Jüngel, Bernard Lonergan, Bertrand de Margerie, Jürgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, Colin Gunton, T. F. Torrance, Catherine LaCugna and Millard Erickson.[2] Nearly every theological movement has recently sought in some sense to reflect upon and to reapply the doctrine of Nicea, and this has produced a harvest of literature in biblical, historical and contemporary trinitarian studies. By the early 1990's, many concurred with Wolfhart Pannenberg's judgment that the Trinity had become the most important of subjects in current theological discussion.[3]

As in any faith, one's understanding of God should significantly define his worldview. It is my belief that the doctrine of the Three-in-One provides a macro-structure of reality that makes sense of life, one that gives a remarkable basis for our perception of ourselves as persons, for our relationships in marriage, family, the local church and community and, in point, the role of the local church in mission.

Nevertheless, many still feel what Kant expressed. At an ordination council in a large evangelical church in São Paulo, Brazil, after a pastoral candidate had floundered completely in trying to answer questions concerning the Godhead, a veteran denominational leader proffered in the young man's defense that the doctrine of the Trinity did not really matter: "Most Evangelicals believe in three Gods anyway." Apparently for this pastor, as for Kant, the concept of the Triune God was irrelevant. When Christian leadership assumes indifference toward trinitarian theology, it is hardly surprising that many people in the church feel the same.

In this article, I wish to develop three points:

1. The self-giving nature of the tri-personal God.

2. The implications of a self-giving God for man as the image of God.

3. How understanding the self-giving God should effect our concept of the local church and its role in the world.

In short, I will argue that the ontology of the Godhead is the foundation for personal and communitarian mission in the world.

TRINITY AS THE ETERNALLY SELF-GIVING GOD

Is the God of the Bible Selfish?

Tensions between Divine *Glory and Love.* Many suspect that God is selfish. Most would never say that of course. But we understand that the purpose of all existence is to glorify God. Even the French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre is said to have commented that, if there is a God, the purpose of the universe would be to glorify him. Christian creeds and catechisms such as the Westminster Confession are equally clear: God created the universe and man for his glory. And that is true. As Creator, the entire universe was created centripetal to his character and to his purposes. Everything finally exists for his glory.

But can the God of Scripture truly be love yet also desire his own glory? Interestingly, he Holy Spirit through Paul defines *love* in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7: love "is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does *not boast*, it is *not proud*, … is *not self-seeking* … it keeps no record of wrongs." Elsewhere we read "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). Yet the God of the Bible does indeed declare his own glory and does call upon all creation to worship him. At first glance the God of the Bible does not turn the other cheek but declares "vengeance is mine," judging the living and the dead and condemning some to everlasting punishment. Whether such passages such as 1 Corinthians 13 can be directly related to God or not is, for many, somewhat beside the point. According to skeptic John Stuart Mill, God does every day that for which he regularly condemns man. For many others, whether Charles Baudelaire, Mark Twain or Pablo Picasso, God is the paradigm of selfishness.

Of course, the Almighty Creator of the Universe would have every right to be selfish, for he is God. This is essentially how the Moslem defends Allah. And many Christians inadvertently do the same. Yet for the Christian there is a fundamental contradiction: while the Creator may deserve all glory, how can the God of love covet his own glory? If Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit had not revealed the true nature of the Godhead, and *if God were only one person*, it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in some sense, while *we* are not to be selfish, God himself is absolutely selfish.

The God of the Bible as Trinity. In the Old Testament, already we see implications of a tri-personal God: (1) the passages where God seems to speak of himself as plural ("let *us* make man in our *own* image" Ge 1:26; *etc*.). (2) The plural terms for God *Elohim* and *Adonai*—two of the three main terms for God in the Hebrew Scriptures—are topics of considerable scholarship and debate, not to mention numerous other plural titles of God with their singular modifiers. (3) In Isaiah the Lord God insists that *he alone is God, there is no god either before or after him*, yet in the same book the promised Messiah, Son of David, would be called *El Gibbor* "Mighty God". Again, while insisting *I will not give my glory to another*, it is the Ancient of Days who calls upon all humankind to glorify and to worship "the Son of Man" (Da 7:14). (4) Many have noted,

as well, the ambiguous plurality in the Hebrew God. The *dabar* or the *word* of God is seen sometimes as God speaking, but other times as a dynamic creative power distinct from God. The *Holy Spirit* is often identified as Almighty God, yet other times appears as a separate entity. *The angel of the Lord* appears both different from and yet sometimes identified as the Living God, one who speaks as God, is worshipped as God, and yet is many times distinct from God. Again, the *Wisdom of God* is personified as one "appointed from eternity," present before the creation of the universe, a *craftsman* at Yahweh's side (Pr 8:23-31)—not incidentally Paul speaks of Christ as "the wisdom of God" (1Co 1:24; *cf.* 1:30; Col 2:3). Intertestamental Jews were well aware of the mysterious diversity expressing the one true God.[4]

When coming into the New Testament we find Jesus Christ, one who is presented as the Son of God—one who is God, yet God distinct from God—and again God the Holy Spirit who, like the Savior, is personal and manifests all the attributes of deity. In more than 40 passages of the New Testament, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are spoken of together, yet each with distinctive roles in their personal relationships.[5] As the Athanasian Creed later clarifies, the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God. Nor are there three Fathers but one Father, not three Sons but one Son, not three Holy Spirits but only one Holy Spirit.

Even more extraordinary, in the New Testament we see the Father *delighting in* and *glorifying* the Son, giving all things to the beloved One. Yet the Son appears *delighting in* and *glorifying* the Father. After conquering all things and reigning over his kingdom, the Son lays all things at the feet of the Father. And we find that the Holy Spirit *delights in glorifying* not himself but the Son and again *in revealing the glory* of the Father. As Gruenler remarks in his thematic commentary on John:

In Jesus' disclosure of the divine Family the theme that runs repeatedly through his discourses is the generosity of the social God. The manner of Jesus' speech indicates his conviction that the persons of the divine Community inwardly enjoy one another's love, hospitality, generosity, and interpersonal communion, so much so that they are one God, and being one God, express such love to one another.[6]

In God's own revelation, we encounter a Father, Son and Holy Spirit each *loving* the other, *giving to* the other, *honoring* the other, *glorifying* the other—this without confusing the high order of the Godhead, the roles that each divine person has fulfilled from eternity past.[7]

Which returns us to the question: *Is the God of the Bible selfish?* Quite the contrary. We discover that the three-personed God of Scripture is profoundly and infinitely self-giving. The God of Love in calling for glory is not necessarily selfish at all. His glory is a shared glory, each delighting in the other.

Beyond Self-Centeredness: Divine Inter-Relatedness as Primary

Placed before pagan and cultic concepts of deity, God's own revelation as Holy Trinity is remarkably unique: a holy and perfect God who in three centers of consciousness manifests the deepest realities of personhood, each member thinking, feeling and choosing in relationship to one another in terms that far surpass our deepest understanding of intimacy.

Unfortunately, in much of Roman Catholic and later Protestant theological development, the New Testament personal dynamism of the Godhead was largely ignored. Western Fathers,

beginning especially with Augustine and developing through Scholasticism, emphasized the *unity* of the divine substance of God, at times implicitly reducing God to a list of attributes or to an abstract Immovable Mover or to Pure Act. If Colin Gunton is correct, Western notions of God—owing to this emphasis on the oneness of the divine essence—became increasingly philosophic and remote, leading to a deism and finally an agnosticism in which God became completely unknowable.[8]

On the other hand, the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century—Basil of Caesaria, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa (the formulators of Eastern trinitarianism)—envisioned God not so much as some divine essence in three *subsistencies*, but rather as a divine family that could be spoken of as Adam, Eve and Seth, or Peter, James and John. Whereas each member of the Godhead was understood as possessing the same nature, the Eastern Church has continually stressed the primacy of the relationships between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[9] It was believed that if Christ and the New Testament are God's culminating revelation, then our understanding of the Trinity must center on the personal inter-relatedness witnessed so clearly in such texts as John 14-17.

But if one stresses the three divine persons, how then is the unity of the Godhead to be defined? For much of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, as for an increasing number of scholars in the West, the unity of the Trinity is to be found in *perichoresis*, the inner habitation (or coinherence) of each divine person in the other.[10] That is, each member of the Godhead in some sense indwells the other, without diminishing the full personhood of each. The essential unity of the Godhead, then, is found both in their intrinsic equality of divine characteristics and also in the intensely personal unity that comes from mutual indwelling.

Whereas Western theology tended to begin with the unity and nature of God and then sought to explain the three persons, the East began with the three persons and then sought to resolve the nature of their unity. From the Eastern Orthodox perspective, therefore, it is out of the Godhead's personal relatedness that all else flows: the creation of angels, man in the *imago dei*, and the great plan of redemption—all in order that finite beings might enter into the joyous fellowship of the Holy Trinity. Put another way, creation and salvation begin and end with God's self-givingness, both internally (each to the other within the Godhead) and externally (the Triune God to all creation). And so, in the most profound sense as Trinity—and finally only as Trinity—God is love.

THE SELF-GIVING GOD AND MAN IN THE IMAGO DEI

If God exists as Holy Trinity, what are the implications for man having been created in the divine image? And what might this mean for the nature of the Christian life? While scholars have debated the meaning of the *imago dei* for centuries, certainly the fact that even the Holy Spirit is revealed with real personhood—that he demonstrates intellect, chooses and guides the church and manifests profound emotion —is instructive.[11]

Densified Personhood

A Word of Testimony (or Why Theology Is Meaningful). At a point of crisis in my life I found it difficult to sense any basis for my own personhood. There were no anchors for my (or

any other) human significance. The *why* was gone for simple personal actions like laughing or even talking. When I looked within to "find myself"—as so often suggested by psychologists— all the more I plunged into a bottomless pit with nothing to grasp or to secure the fall. The abyss left nothing to call *me* and nothing to call *man*.

Not surprisingly, the Bible does not present a single psychology or even a well-defined set of words for inner man. Terms such as *soul*, *heart*, *spirit* and *inward parts*, for example, neither carry technical definitions nor are necessarily used with the same definitions among the biblical authors.[12] The implication is that it is not in "finding ourselves" that we discover what it means to be human. Scripture repeatedly points us to our Creator, the living God. When we focus upon him—looking upward not inward—then we begin to recover our humanity. As Barth put it, *person* means primarily what it signifies in relation to God[13]; that is, our definition of *person* must be finally situated in God himself. Although significant differences exist between the infinite and the finite, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit provide the ontological framework for our own personhood as human beings.[14]

Ontology vs. Straw Men. The world has a caricature of the Christian. For many a secular observer, the believer is a human disaster. To become a Christian is to abnegate life. No more laughter, no more days of raucous shouting around a football game at a tavern with a good beer. The gusto is gone. The Christian convert has died. Too often, we must admit, this caricature is true. Many Christians have died, not just to sin—which is right—but somehow they have also died to their own humanity, which is wrong. Some have been bound by guilt and legalism, owing to religious inhibitions of every kind. As believers we can become forced, defensive, angry, afraid, isolated, morose, mechanical or spiritually artificial.

Yet if our God is truly three persons in infinitely meaningful relationship, then those who are redeemed and brought into re lationship with this God have every reason be the most fulfilled and authentic of all the human race. When inhabited by the Holy Spirit, as we walk with the Son, as we take our place as sons and daughters of the Father, our humanness should come alive. Indeed, the Christian's humanity should luster and glow. Our personhood should radiate because we are in loving relationship with the fount of all personal life. Christians should be the most powerful, sensitive, transparent and truly human of all the people on earth.

One might ask, who was the most extraordinary man that ever walked this earth? Even many atheists will declare that it was Jesus of Nazareth. Our Savior's humanity was not erased or diminished by his submission to the Father. Rather, our Lord's humanity appears *densified*, made more profound and real. Whether Anselm, Luther or Barth, the Christian faith affirms that Jesus Christ did not only reveal true God to man, he also revealed true man to man.[15] He taught us how to become true human beings fulfilled in relationship with God.

In contrast to all atheism where human personeity exists as an arbitrary, meaningless instant in time and space, and in contrast to all pantheism where human distinctives separate man from the all-inclusive, apersonal One (and thus it must be extinguished), Christianity affirms that personhood is directly grounded in the three-personed God. It is in God himself that we find a basis for human reason and language, for our capacity to choose, for our profound diversity of emotions, for appreciation of beauty, for our propensity for creativity, for our sense of morality and eternality, for our social nature desiring relationship with others—all virtual enigmas for modern man who experiences these realities but has no adequate final explanation. Thus mission

and missions begins with understanding who the God of the Bible is and what it means to be created in the divine image.

Perichoresis and the Imago Dei

When reconciled with God, man and woman are infused with his personal presence. In some sense, the capacity of each person of the Godhead to be indwelt (*perichoresis*) by the other while remaining fully an individual is reflected in man as created in the image of God (*cf.* Jn 14:8-11,20,23; 15:4-7; 17:20-23,26). Similar to how the Father indwells the Son and the Son indwells the Father, and to how the Holy Spirit is also literally "the Spirit of Christ" and "the Spirit of the Father," so God has structured the human being so that he or she can be indwelled by God himself, notably the Holy Spirit. While indwelled by the divine Other, human beings are both conformed to the divine character and simultaneously strengthened in their unique individuality. Man's capacity for a kind of*perichoresis* is why also, on the negative side, the human being can be inhabited by demonic spirits. In such cases, of course, malignant spirits typically enslave and depersonalize their human abode. Conversely, the Holy Spirit liberates the sinner, capacitates him to obey and conforms him to the image of Christ.

The Church Fathers nearly unanimously spoke of God's habitation in man in terms of *theosis*, that is, of being *divinized* (God-infused) in character and person (*cf.* 2Pe 1:4). Unlike pantheism, spiritism and New Age thought, it is not that man becomes God, who is infinite and immutable in nature. Rather man becomes godly in character, resplendent with the divine presence and in this sense*God-like*.[16] Thus, the *divinization* of man is directly related to his innate capacity for *perichoresis* through which God indwells his human creation. As such, the individual becomes alive, elevated and completed as a unique human individual through fellowship with the God of Life.

C. S. Lewis' captures something of this reality in *The Great Divorce*,[17] his parable of the afterlife in heaven and hell. Lewis takes the reader on a fictitious bus to visit the musty grayness of hell, where people are not so much suffering as simply going about their normal business. Yet the appearance of the residents of hell, depending on when they arrived, is increasingly translucent and ghostlike. Preoccupied with their selfish lives, they become utterly light of substance and less and less persons at all. In contrast, when the bus travels up to the outskirts of heaven, we discover the grass, flowers and trees vibrant with color and bigger and weightier than in earthly life. The residents of heaven, called the "Solid People," are massive, magnificent human beings. They reflect the grandeur and presence of their Sovereign. In their devotion and obedience to the King, they are innocent and free to care for others, and therefore free to be themselves.

Exactly the opposite of the caricature the world portrays of the Christian, it is only in saving relationship to the God of the Bible that we can truly become "solid people" in the satisfying sense that we are designed to be. In short, through man's design for *perichoresis*, those who experience God's literal indwelling will be the most personal, resplendent and godly of all human beings.

The Self-Giving Nature of the Imago Dei

If right relationship with God is the foundation for true personhood, how is the divine image increasingly formed in the Christian's life? What is the key to becoming man like Jesus Christ? We are not three persons, but one person. We are not infinite or self-sufficient, but finite and creaturely. Given that we are structured as persons in the *imago dei*, how does the Lord God make alive and perfect his image in us?

Christian Selfishness. From an historical and international perspective, it has often been said that Western Christianity has be come increasingly self-serving. We offer Christianity because it will help set us free from our problems, make us feel good about ourselves, give us emotional ecstacy, nurture better marriages and happy families, lead us to physical health, psychological well-being and even success in business. Biblical principles do indeed bring a practical (albeit partial) salvation to our daily lives. But for all the helps available for bettering the life of the believer, too often the quality of his Christian devotion actually deteriorates. He becomes less interested in the Gospel and less still in sharing Christ with others. Too often we inadvertently present a Christian faith without its center.

Primary Themes of Jesus. It hardly needs to be said that Jesus repeatedly set forth in one form or another two great commandments: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as our self (Mk 12:29-33). The Savior further clarified that the distinguishing activity of the Christian disciple and of the true believing community would be love for one another. The admonition or reference to *love one another* appears some 24 times in the New Testament. As Richard of St. Victor (d.1173) articulated in *De Trinitate*, true love always necessitates another who can receive that love.[18] While we might enjoy chocolate cake or value our family pet, in its highest and biblical form, love is given by one person to another person. Whatever is given for one's own benefit ultimately is little other than selfishness. We are to love the Lord God and our neighbor as ourselves.

A second most repeated theme of Jesus is that "whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life [*yuchv*, soul] for me will save it." The statement is found in various contexts in each Gospel (Mt 10:39; 16:25; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:24; 14:27; Jn 12:24-25). In Beasley-Murray's words, this is "the law of the kingdom of God: life is given through death,"[19] exemplified powerfully by Jesus giving his own life for the sins of the world. The Savior emphasizes the principle of daily sacrifice of oneself in love and obedience to God—a continual letting go of life that daily refills the believer with the life of God. Cuban evangelist B. G. Lavastida put it this way: "There are three paradoxes of the Christian life: You must *give* in order to *receive*, you must *let go* in order to *possess*, and you must *die* in order to *live*." Together with the commands to love wholeheartedly the Lord God, our brothers in Christ and our fellow human beings, the command to let go of self is one the most repeated of all the Savior's admonitions.

The Divine Example. The self-giving nature of each person of the Trinity suggests that Jesus' teaching on love and self-sacrifice relates to more than our simply being good. It seems to speak to the very nature of the *imago dei* of man. Self-sacrifice is not just an ethical extra for the pious. Rather, part of our human constitution is that we *must* give of ourselves in order to fulfill the way we are designed. One rightly supposes that members of the Godhead *freely* give of

themselves and are not under obligation by design. However, the human being seems to be by very ontology under a kind of *free obligation* to give of himself to others. It may be that he can *only* enter more fully into the divine image, into full personhood, by giving himself away. By placing others first—God and then fellow man—he is completed as a human being and made truly "Christ-like" and "God-like" as a person. Thus, in understanding the self-givingness of the Triune God, we discover that what Christ asks us to do in taking up our cross is what the Holy Trinity exemplifies repeatedly in its own self-revelation. Indeed, in a sense, Jesus asks nothing of us that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit do not practice a million times over—without contradicting divine transcendence, sovereignty and glory.

Summarily, then, the key to human ontology is the *imago dei* within a trinitarian framework: (1) in man's personal *nature* which, although fallen, reflects the personal aspects of the divine nature; (2) in his capacity for divine *indwelling*, paralleling the intra-trinitarian *perichoresis*; and (3) in his design for fulfullment through *self-giving*, mirroring the disposition of the Godhead itself.

If vestiges and potentialities of the divine image are found in the individual, then what might the *imago dei* indicate for the local church?

THE LOCAL CHURCH IN THE SELF-GIVING IMAGE

We have seen that (1), as Trinity, the Christian God is the eternally self-giving God and that (2) God created man in his self-giving image. This brings us to a final suggestion: God created not only the individual person but also the local church in the trinitarian self-giving image.[20]

A Collective Image of God

Tertullian once remarked, "Where the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are, there too is the Church which is the body of the Three."[21] Put a little differently, the expression of the Triune God is best reflected in the local church, the community of believers.

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you … I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. [Jn 17:20-23]

Among the many lessons of this prayer, Jesus asks that the unity he has with the Father be experienced in the unity of Christians—a unity with himself (and through him with the Father) and again with one another.

But what is the nature of the Godhead's unity? On the one hand, as we have seen earlier, divine unity is not to be conceived as simply the fellowship of three independent deities—an idea made popular in the Social Theory of the Trinity. The unity of the Triune God is unique and beyond what can be said of finite personal union. In the words of Colin Gunton:

[divine unity's] central concept is that of shared being: the persons do not simply enter into relations with one another, but are constituted by one another in the relations. Father, Son

and Spirit are eternally what they are by virtue of what they are from and to one another. Being and relation can be distinguished in thought but in no way separated ontologically; they are rather part of the one ontological dynamic … not a blank unity, but a being in communion.[22]

Gunton is not denying a divine essence. He is arguing that God's being is best understood not in classical Western terms of abstract substance (or *essence*) but of eternal personal relatedness. That is, God is being in relationship, or personally shared being. Therefore, in an ultimate sense, the unity of God is unique to the Godhead. Both trinitarian unity and inter-relatedness exist on a transcendent level outside human understanding.

On the other hand, although divine oneness surpasses human understanding, believers are called to be "a finite echo or bodying forth of the divine personal dynamics."[23]

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God … because God is love … This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No-one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. [1 Jn 4:7-13]

Those elect and redeemed by the Lord are called in a limited way to be a communal expression of the Trinity. First, even though divine *perichoresis* goes beyond human categories, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers mirrors a similar reality. As the Spirit inhabits a Christian community, he unites believers to the Son and to the Father through the Godhead's own coinherence in him. There is fellowship with and the presence of the entire Trinity through the mediation of the Spirit. Second, the responsive love that believers share toward God is reflective of the reciprocal love experienced in the Godhead. In Eastern Orthodoxy's thinking, such love allows the believer to enter into the beatific fellowship of the Trinity itself. Third, the love of God shown by members *toward one another*reveals the nature of God and so serves as a collective image of the Trinity. It might be suggested that, as man and woman become one flesh in marriage, the act of sexuality becomes the closest creaturely approachment to indwelling the other. So in a spiritual sense, believers in the local church who love and care for one another reflect a presence of the others in their hearts. In any case, the personal unity and diversity of the Triune God is reflected in the unity and plurality of the local church bound together in the Holy Spirit and in the love of God.

True Koinonia

Rarely in Christian history, however, has there been effort to conceive of the church as a community reflective of the trinitarian relationship. Instead, ecclesiology has been more patterned by the socio-political structures predominant in cultures where church organizations were formed. James Houston comments, "the tendency of ecclesial structures has been *legal* and essentially interpreted as*political* institutions."[24] Church forms of government typically have been little more than variations of monarchical (episcopal), federal (representative) and democratic (congregational) systems. Interestingly, Jürgen Moltmann suggests the opposite, that Western political (and ecclesiastical) systems from dictatorships to socialism have reflected poor theology—specifically an inadequate trinitarian theology, thus the loss of the freedom of the individual.[25]

Both organizationally and functionally, churches have fallen considerably short of reflecting trinitarian community. In Latin America, Evangelicalism has been characterized by *coronelismo* where a single pastor rules a church with an iron hand—continuance of both the spirit of the *conquistadores* and a papal religious heritage. Likewise, the African tribal structure led by chieftains and shamans is often carried directly into the pastoral roles of Christendom on that continent. And in North American churches, the fierce individualism of pioneers, cowboys and farmers is even yet occasionally passed into the working of the local church, where pastors assume unyielding authority or where individual members distrust anyone but themselves. More likely today, however, is the opposite extreme mirroring the ambiguities of postmodernism in which churches tolerate such extreme plurality of doctrine, ethics and authority that there is hardly a unifying center.

How might the local church reflect the triune divine image? I would like to the initiate discussion with several directives:

(1) Mutuality. Just as each member of the Holy Trinity is equally and completely God, so each believer in the local church is equally a son and daughter of God, coheir of the promises of the cross. Against the preacher-centered programs of many churches, local church functions (including the "worship service") can better manifest the triune nature of God by involving, as much as possible, each member with spiritual activities. Believers are to be given real value and dignity by the local church, not left as anonymous spectators amidst professional performances. Creative biblical and cultural ways to include members should be encouraged, remembering that every believer is important and necessary in the Body of Christ. All members should be conscious of their responsibility of reciprocal submission and of giving of themselves to the other.

(2) Order. On the other hand, just as there is a functional or *economic* order in all the Godhead does (each divine person having distinct roles), so the New Testament defines a necessary order in the local church with pastor/presbyters, deacons, *etc.* Whether in the church, family or society, submission to another does not admit inferiority any more than the Son, by his obedience, is inferior to the Father (*cf.* 1 Pe 2:13-3:7; 5:1-5). Whereas reciprocal love and sensitivity on the part of the leader to those under his authority are important, these do not exempt him from leading, making difficult decisions and disciplining errant members. His love for God must outweigh his love of his brothers. Yet if one's gift and role as leader has been given by God, then he should reflect the self-giving nature of God, even in the difficult task of discipline. Leadership itself would do well always to function in interdependency with order before the Lord.

(3) Deep friendships. If God exists as community, then real community is to be reflected in all the life of the church. In the words of Gordon Fee, "God is not just saving individuals and preparing them for heaven; rather, he is creating a people among whom he can live and who in their life together will reproduce God's life and character."[26] Just as the Holy Trinity lives and functions not on the basis of rules, regulations or dogma but primarily on the basis of loving interdependency, so the church while standing for biblical truth is to nurture caring relationships among its members. Not surprisingly, the largest percentage of imperatives in the New Testament do not address the believer's relationship directly to God, nor his relationship to the world, but his relationship to others in the local church. To imitate God, the local church must seek to cultivate deep friendships.[27] Although doctrine is important, for it defines the nature and the will of the God we worship, the Christian life is primarily relational. It is learning to love and

to respond to one another, in our limited ways, as do the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to one another. By encouraging deep friendships around love for the Lord, the local church is to prefigure the blessed communion of heaven and of the Godhead itself.

(4) Biblical ecumenicity. The same mutual caring is not limited to believers in the local church or single denomination. Sensitivity to the unity and diversity of the Body of Christ should extend our care to other Christian churches as well—seen not as religious competition or as "errant brethren" but as fellow congregations in the universal Church of our Lord. The triune nature of the Godhead reminds one of the value and beauty of traditional, cultural and ethnic diversity manifest in sometimes radically diverse styles of worship and service. Often local churches and denominations have failed to appreciate the pluralism of God's people, a people nevertheless united by "one Spirit … one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph 4:4-5).

Self-Giving to the World

The Question of Creation. Returning to a larger perspective, one of the greatest of all questions is, Why is there something instead of nothing? Or why does anything exist at all? If God were selfish, it would be hard to understand why he would create something outside himself. Perhaps a God who is only one person would create in order to satisfy his own desire (or need) for glory, for relationship or so that he might exercise his sovereignty. But in an eternal Trinity where each member glorifies the other, where profound interpersonal relationships already exist and where God is completely self-sufficient, what would be the motive for the creation? As has been alluded to earlier, various scholars conclude that the Triune God created the vast realm of heaven—with its diversity of angelic beings—and our immense universe and tiny earth—with its vast diversity of plants, animals and people—as a overflow of the life and creative love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This divine*overflow* is not in pantheistic or deterministic senses, but rather God's creative artistry that gives being to the other while maintaining God's own freedom and independence. If such a deduction is true, then all creation exists as the result of God's own self-giving *beyond* the internal personal relations of the Godhead.

If earth's very existence owes itself to divine self-giving, then the local church created in the divine image would seem called to give itself to the world as well. Believers are called to manifest the saving presence of Jesus Christ through their own collective sacrifice among a hurting and hopeless humanity.

Selfish Churches. Just as an individual Christian focused upon himself becomes less Christ-like (and so less human), so a local church when it becomes centered on its own well-being will become a hollow shell of what it is intended to be. Too often churches, whether traditional or contemporary, have become content to orient nearly everything to their own members: programs, finances and even prayer concentrate repeatedly on themselves, their own preferences, patterns and goals. Not that members of a church should not nurture and care for one another. As we have seen, the imperative to love one another in the church— as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit love one another—is very important. Yet the local church cannot remain absorbed in itself. Just as the persons of the Trinity did not *confine* themselves to loving themselves but rather created the worlds and entered redemptively into our existence, so the local church is called to give of itself to an alienated world.

A Missionary Image. In a sense, we might think of God the Father as the Sender, and both God the Son and God the Spirit as the divine missionaries. In Ireneaus' well-worn terms, both are the ministering hands of God to bring mankind to salvation and into the family of God.[28] In this sense, then, the Holy Trinity is the archetype of the local church and mission. As the Triune God came to a lost world in both the Son and the Holy Spirit, so this same God has structured the local body of Christians in such a way that in order to be fulfilled it too must collectively give of itself.

Among multiple examples of unselfish sacrifice, the Assembly of God in Brazil has mushroomed in relatively few years to over 12 million members. One of the extraordinary characteristics of the movement is the emphasis on lay-member church planting. Nearly any mechanic, salesman or teacher who senses a call from God and proves himself faithful in the local church might be commissioned to start a new congregation. Often at considerable personal cost, the "layman" will begin to preach and to teach evangelistic Bible studies while also working to sustain his family. A new congregation will be built around him, gradually rise to provide financially for him, and then strive to send out its own members to do the same again. A vibrant mother church will lose many of its strongest participants. Yet it is precisely by "giving itself away" that the Assembly of God has grown in large proportions. And they are not alone. Among various evangelical denominations in Latin America, a church is not considered a *church* until it has given birth to daughter churches. While appearing to lose its most devout members, the local church that imitates the Godhead in sacrificial love for the world is the one which multiplies.

In the words of Alistair McGrath, "Evangelism is something in trinsic to the identity of the Church—not an optional extra, but something part and parcel of its very being."[29] We know this to be true experientially, but often we fail to ask why it is so? It is because, as the individual, so the local church is created in the *imago dei*. Self-giving to a lost world is intrinsic not only for its own reflection of God, but also for its ontological fulfillment. The local community is divinely designed to give itself away. There is no other way. As Emil Brunner observes, "The church lives by mission as a fire lives by burning."[30] Our Lord's imperative is to, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). Because of our right relationship with the Godhead, reasons Paul, "We are therefore ambassadors" with the message "Be reconciled to God" (2 Co 5:20). To truly reflect the character of the tri-personal God, believers in the local church must take such New Testament imperatives seriously, giving themselves not only to one another but to a needy, sometimes hostile world. In so doing, we discover that in imitating the Triune Self-Giving God, we have unlocked the very ontology of ourselves, our churches and mission.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that, first, far from being selfish, the tri-personal God of the Bible reveals the most profound depths of self-giving. Each member of the Godhead freely gives of himself to the other, delighting in glorifying the other. God is love. Second, the key to human ontology is the *imago dei* within a trinitarian framework. The divine image is reflected not only in man's innate personal nature but also through divine indwelling (a finite *perichoresis*) and the ontological obligation to give of oneself to God and to others. Thirdly, it is suggested that the local church also should reflect the trinitarian image, both in its internal and external relationships.

How unfortunate that the doctrine of the Trinity, with its implications for all of life, has lost its centrality in defining our worldview. Not only have we often not adequately understood the doctrine of the Godhead but, when understanding it, our tendency has been to separate theology from practice. We have done little to consciously express trinitarian belief in our daily lives and in the community of the church.

Yet, as James Houston puts it, "God's very being is expressive of our own being."[31] The Triune God is committed to us by his own self-giving nature. The Christian is created and redeemed to respond in like manner, giving himself to God and to fellow human beings. And so is the local church.

In the end, is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity irrelevant, Immanuel Kant? To the contrary, the revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the center and absolute of all human reality.

END NOTES

[1] Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, PhB 252, in Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., eds., *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1989) 4.

[2] Along with Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, primary works include: Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. J. Donceel (Grm. ed. 1967; New York: Herder & Herder, 1970); Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity. God's Being Is in Becoming*, trans. H. Harris (2d Grm. ed., 1966; Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1976); Bernard Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea: The Dialectical Development of Trinitarian Theology*, trans. C. O'Donovan (Rome ed., 1964; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); Bertrand de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History*, trans. E. J. Fortman (Fr. ed. 1975; Still River MA: St. Bede's, 1982); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, trans. M. Kohl (Grm. ed. 1980; London: SCM Press, 1981); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. P. Burns (Port. ed. 1985; Wellwood, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1988); Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991); Catherine Mowery LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993); Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994); Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995). Recent overviews include Christoph Schwöbel, ed., *Trinitarian Theology Today* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995); John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1994); and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

[3] In Millard J. Erickson, *Where Is Theology Going? Issues and Perspectives on the Future of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 122.

[4] See Aubrey R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God* (2d ed., Cardiff: Univ. of Wales, 1961) 1-37; Larry Hurtado, *One God One Lord: Early Chris tian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (London: SCM Press, 1988); Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (London: SPCK, 1992); Felix Christ, *Jesus Sophia. Die Sophia-Christologie bei den Synoptikern* (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1970); and Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-Existence, Wisdom and the Son of Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1973).

[5] Biblical studies include: A. W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962) 237-247; G. A. F. Knight, *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the*

Trinity (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1953); Peter Toon*, Our Triune God: A Biblical Portrayal of the Trinity* (Wheaton: BridgePoint/Victor, 1996); Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986); Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996) 9-46; and Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 159-210.

[6] Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John* 121, *cf.* 89-140.

[7] Two qualifying remarks are in order. First, it must be admitted that there is not full biblical evidence of trinitarian mutuality in every respect—particularly regarding the Holy Spirit in relation to the Father; the deduction is partially implicit and therefore made with caution. Second, concerning the accusation that the NT and early church were not explicitly trinitarianism, Fee observes, "We tend to think that a person is not a true trinitarian unless that person has a working formula in response to this question [of how God exists as Trinity]. To put the question this way, however, is to get ahead of Paul [and all the NT authors], not to mention to define trinitarianism by later standards … Paul affirms, asserts, and presupposes the Trinity in every way; and those affirmations—that the one God known and experienced as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each distinct from the other, is yet only one God—are precisely the reason the later church took up the question of how." *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* 38.

[8] Colin Gunton, "Augustine, the Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43:1 (1990) 33-58; *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* 31-57; and *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1993).

[9] See G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (2d ed., London: SPCK, 1952) 219-301; T. R. Martland, "A Study of Cappadocian and Augustinian Trinitarian Methodology," *Anglican Theological Review* 47:3 (1965) 252-263; William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980)149-179; and Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church*, trans. M. Westerhoff, ed. A. Louth (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993) 139-153. Eastern Orthodoxy defends the *apophatic* nature of God, *i.e.*, that divine essence transcends human understanding and can only be spoken of as to what it is not. See Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, eds. J. H. Erickson and T. E. Bird (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1974) 13-29;

[10] *Cf.* Jn 17:21. The Greek term *perichoresis* is often referred to as *circumincession* (Latin). See Michael O'Carroll, "Circumincession," in *Trinitas: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Holy Trinity* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987) 68-69; and Brian Hebbleth waite, "*Perichoresis—Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity*," *Theology* 80:676 (1977) 255-261.

[11] See, Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) 829-845.

[12] Walter F. Taylor, Jr., "Humanity, NT View of" in *ABD* III:321: "there is no independent reflection on anthropology in the NT dealing with humanity's qualities, constituent parts, or nature, and therefore little definition of terms and no standardization of their usage. Rather, the *anthropos* is always understood in terms of the relationship with God." *Cf.* 321-325.

[13] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 272.

[14] See Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theology of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1990); John Zizioulas, *Being As Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985); David Brown, "Trinitarian Personhood and Individuality," in Feenstra and Plantinga, eds., *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement* 48-78.

[15] *Cf.* Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. T. Wieser and J. N. Thomas (Grm. ed. 1956; Richmond: John Knox, 1960).

[16] See Petro B. T. Bilaniuk, "The Mystery of *Theosis* or Divinization," in *The Heritage of the Early Church*, eds. David Neiman and Margaret Schatkin (Rome: Pontificus Institutum

Studiorum Orientalium, 1973) 337-359; Vladmir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (London: James Clarke, 1957) 67-134; Lossky, *The Image and Likeness of God* 97-140; and Dumitri Staniloae, "Image, Likeness and Deification in the Human Person,"*Communio* 13:1 (1986) 64-83. Not all church fathers (nor all moderns) are clear on the fundamental distinction between the divine nature and the nature of the believer. But, in time, Eastern theologians clarified that the believer partakes of (2Pe 1:4) what they termed *divine energies*, but not the divine *essence* which, as we have noted, was seen as mysteriously unique to God alone.

[17] C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946).

[18] J. Ribaillier, *Richard de Saint-Victor, De Trinitate. Texte critique* (Paris, 1958) I.20.

[19] George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word, 1987) 211, WBC; he notes "hates his life" sometimes carries the meaning of "love less" in Hebrew idiom (Ge 29:30-31; Mt 10:37; Lk 14:26). It seems our Lord, rather than encourage a masochistic view of life —life which itself is a gift from God—insists that our obedience to God far surpass any thought of self-preservation and well-being.

[20] Implications of the tri-personal God for marital and familial relations have been developed by Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History*; Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "The Perfect Family," *Christianity Today* (March 4, 1988) 24-27; Larry R. Thornton, "A Biblical Approach to Establishing Marital Intimacy. Part 1: Intimacy and Trinity," *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* 4:2(1988) 43-72.

[21] Tertullian *De baptismo* VI,1; see Boff, *Trinity and Society* 106.

[22] Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* 214. See also Boff, *Trinity and Society* 123-154.

[23] Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* 74.

[24] James Houston "Community and the Nature of God" (Chapel lecture no. 2526 (tape), Regent College, Vancouver BC).

[25] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* 191-222; see also Charles Sherrard MacKenzie, *The Trinity and Culture* (New York: P. Lang, 1987); Douglas M. Meeks*, God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* 106-123; and Daniel L. Migliore, "The Trinity and Human Liberty," *Theology Today* 36:4 (1980) 488-497. On the other hand, one could hardly argue that Eastern trinitarianism has contributed to ecclesial and political balance in Eastern history.

[26] Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God* 66.

[27] Houston, "Community and the Nature of God" (tape). See also Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* 81-85; John J. O'Donnell, "The Trinity as Divine Community," *Gregorianum* 69:1 (1988) 5-34; and Plantinga, "The Perfect Family" 24-27.

[28] Irineaus, *Adversus Haereses* 5.6.1.

[29] Alistair McGrath, *Christianity Today* (June 19, 1995) 21.

[30] Emil Brunner, cited in *op. cit.*

[31] Houston, "Community and the Nature of God" (tape).