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# The Consummate Trinity and Participation in the Life of God

Brian Edgar

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THIS PAPER STRESSES the point that if one tries to understand the significance of the eschaton apart from its significance *for God* then one really cannot grasp it at all, for the significance of the eschaton for humanity and the cosmos is tied up with the future eschatological life of God in whom all things come together (Eph. 1:10). Wolfhart Pannenberg commented that, 'it is only 20th century theology that has come to see again the significance of the theme of eschatology for all Christian doctrine'<sup>1</sup> and it remains critically important to continue to stress this in developing an understanding of the nature of God as Trinity. God's kingdom is present in the work of Jesus and shown in his resurrection but its full revelation awaits the end of history, the final consumma-

tion, the end of evil, pain and suffering, the fulfilment of human society, the confirmation of divine purposes and the revelation of divine glory.

## I Three 'Trinities'

Over many decades now there have been numerous discussions about the *economic* and *immanent* aspects of the Trinity. One central point of debate has been the manner in which the life of God relates to salvation history and whether that connection dissolves the notion of a God who exists independently of creation if the divine life is tied too tightly to the events of salvation history, or whether that is, in fact, the distinctive Christian understanding of the nature of God. With the concept of the *consummate* Trinity I follow Paul in his description of God's plan for the fullness of time to gather all things in Christ found in the first chapter of Ephesians.

In this we see implications for the entire cosmos, but we can also ask

about the implications *for God*. This is the ultimate coming of God and his kingdom. The kingdom present is real, but it is still only an anticipation of God's ultimate reign. The notion of the consummate Trinity fills out the significance for God of the *anakephalaiaiosathai*—the gathering together described in Ephesians 1:10 by which the whole cosmos comes 'under' the head of Christ.

Despite the language of 'economic', 'essential' and 'consummate' Trinity, there is but one Trinity. The term economic Trinity is a reference to the Trinity of salvation and sacrifice, the One who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, known by the revelation of God's work *within* the created order. The immanent (or 'essential') Trinity is the Trinity of relationship, the origin, the source of life, Father, Son and Spirit, God known by reference to the intrinsic nature of the inner relationships who existed '*before*' creation. These dimensions of the divine nature are well known and their relationship frequently discussed.

The term consummate Trinity is a reference to the Trinity of completion with emphasis on doxology and the integration, the 'bringing together' of all life in God that takes place '*after*' this world. This is Trinity on the far side of the sending of the Father, and beyond the incarnation, cross and resurrection of the Son, and beyond the life-giving mission of the Spirit. This is the Trinity of Glory that includes God's own ultimate and final relationship to the world that is taken *into* the divine life. This is the Trinity with all things gathered together in God.

With a recognition of all the limitations of time-bound language one can

say that the immanent life of God gives rise to, or overflows into, the economic activity of salvation and the economic becomes the immanent which takes on, or perhaps takes in, created life and becomes the consummate, fulfilled, completed, perfected Trinity. The implication for humanity is that it, along with the whole of creation, is taken up into the divine life. Life is lived in God for through Christ humanity is able to 'participate in the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4). Specific reference to the consummate Trinity means emphasising the fact that God's very nature is correlated to the created world through incarnation and atonement, taking human life into the life of God. The divine life is not constituted by the world (as process theology affirms), but neither unaffected by the world (as though the incarnation and the cross were events external to the divine nature).

What are the practical implications of this? The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us about three dimensions of life. The first is personal in that the doctrine of the Trinity, as well as being a doctrine about God, is also an account of the consummate nature of the Christian life. Human life finds its destiny within the life of God. The eschatological implications for the present relate to the manner in which we anticipate, in the way we live now, this future destiny.

The second dimension is social because the Trinity explains to us the nature of human relationships in the light of divine relationships. It guides us in thinking not only about the proper life of the church, but also about the appropriate form for society. The doctrine of the Trinity also has implications for the *cosmic* dimension in that it reveals the

<sup>1</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 532.

Brian Edgar (MTh, Australian College of Theology; PhD, Deakin University) is Professor of Theological Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary (USA) although he primarily resides in Melbourne, Australia. He conducts intensives when in the US and on-line education when in Melbourne. He is the author of *God is Friendship: A Theology of Spirituality, Community and Society* (Seedbed, 2013), *The Message of the Trinity* (IVP, 2004), editor of a number of other books and author of numerous journal articles. An early, somewhat different, version of the table appeared in 'What Hope is there for Mission?' in *Australian Journal of Mission Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (December 2010) 55-61.

The Trinity understood as -	The Trinity	Dimensions of life	The focus of salvation	Central concepts concerning Trinitarian relations	Imagery	Mission understood as -	Holiness as
'Economic' – describing the specific work of Father, Son and Spirit	Reveals God's plan of salvation	Personal	Eternal Life	<i>Homousios</i> (Jesus is 'of the same substance' as the Father)	Found in individual objects or persons. A mark pattern or stamp. Clover, river, light force field or person	<i>Individual</i> Evangelism Word Conversion	Repentance <i>Faith</i> Justification
'Essential' - Describing the inner-life community relationships of the Trinity	Is a <i>paradigm</i> for community life	Social	Kingdom of God	<i>Perichoresis</i> (Father, Son and Spirit live in community in one another)	Found in relationships. <i>Model</i> Community.	<i>Community</i> Peace/Justice Model, action, transformation	Social <i>Love</i> Sanctification
'Consummate' – describing the future of God' whereby all things are in Christ	Involves <i>participation</i> in the life of God	Cosmic	New Creation	<i>Anakephalosis</i> (all things gathered together under one head) <i>Theis koinonoi phuseis</i> (We become participants of the divine nature)	Found in Christ. <i>Membership</i> .	<i>Cosmic</i> Doxology Worship, ecological care,	Participation Divinisation <i>Hope</i> Perfection

intrinsic value and doxological purpose of creation.

The rest of this article will develop this understanding of the consummate Trinity by reference to the table which outlines the emphases of the three forms of trinitarian thought. This will involve summarising the frequently discussed implications associated with economic and essential trinitarianism before considering the implications of the consummate Trinity. There are problems associated with this kind of tabular simplification and my only defence is that if one included everything in every part then it wouldn't be possible to have a simple model. The text will provide details that are difficult to express in a table.

## II The Economic Trinity

In considering the table it is best to start with the row considering the Trinity understood as 'economic'—describing the specific work of Father, Son and Spirit. Theology has spoken extensively of the economic Trinity which is an understanding of the way God works in the world as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer in order to bring salvation: God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; Jesus Christ the Redeemer of the world; the Holy Spirit, revealer, inspirer, strength and comfort. An initial focus on an economic understanding of the Trinity is perhaps inevitable, given the soteriological focus of the New Testament.

This is by no means separated from an immanent trinitarianism for it is precisely the Father who sent the Son and the Spirit to bring salvation to the world but, from a human point of view,

it is the message of salvation which comes first and which requires attention regarding the one from whom, and through whom, this message and this possibility come. The economic Trinity is a statement about the revelation of God's plan of salvation (as in the second column) and this is usually (though certainly not universally) interpreted in primarily personal categories (as per the third column) with the focus being upon the possibility of eternal life for those who believe (column four).

In historical terms there were numerous debates about the nature and the mode of salvation (such as the way good works were involved and whether salvation included the body) but the most critical issues were distinctly trinitarian in nature (for example, whether the God of the Old Testament was the God of the New, and whether the Spirit was divine) with the absolutely central issue concerning the person of Jesus. That is, if Christ is to bring salvation it seemed to many that he must be both God *and* man. The issues involved in this were at the heart of the early church debates about Christ and it was problematic for many.

The debate swung around the word *homousios* (see column 5): can we say Jesus is 'of the same substance' as the Father—and thus truly God? The orthodox answer was, 'Yes, not only can we, but we must'. As T. F. Torrance says, the *homousion* 'is of staggering significance. It crystalizes the conviction that while the incarnation falls within the structures of our spatio-temporal humanity in this world, it also falls within the life and being of God.' Consequently, the *homousion* 'is the ontological and epistemological lynchpin of Christian theology. With it,

everything hangs together; without it, everything ultimately falls apart.<sup>2</sup>

The most ancient way of illustrating the relationship of the Trinity to the person is that the Trinity is understood as a *mark* (or pattern; see column 6) that is imprinted on the world. This is the *vestigia Trinitatis*—the notion that the fingerprints of the creator, the vestiges of the Trinity, can be seen, by the discerning, in the world around us. This gives a trinitarian character to the whole of creation which may be seen in a three-leafed clover or in the spring of water which gives rise to the river and ends up in the lake: three-in-one and on-in-three.

The idea remains today in popular thought though it is frequently critiqued, but newer versions also exist, particularly within the science-faith dialogue. There is Pannenberg's interpretation of the Spirit as force field,<sup>3</sup> Moltmann's ecological concept of space,<sup>4</sup> Denis Edwards' use of evolutionary emergence,<sup>5</sup> Happel's use of space-time relations<sup>6</sup> and Ted Peters' description of the end of the universe.<sup>7</sup>

The early Fathers of the church, however, soon recognised that vestiges of the Trinity that are found in the natural world are less adequate for understanding God because they are not personal enough. This led to the view that the imprint of God is best seen in the highest part of creation—human nature—through the presence of the *imago dei* (Gen 1:26). From Augustine onwards the most important vestiges of the Trinity are seen in the human person (including lover, loved and love; being, knowing and willing; memory, understanding and will).<sup>8</sup>

What practical implications are to be drawn out of this description of the Trinity in economic terms? In terms of *mission* (see column 7) the salvation that is at the heart of an economic interpretation of the Trinity is all about the possibility of eternal life for everyone. In the evangelical tradition salvation is simply, 'The saving of man from the power of sin'.<sup>9</sup> There are numerous areas where there are debates and differences of opinion concerning aspects of this salvation but the main points are clear.

There is an emphasis, first of all, on the grace of God and the work of Christ in achieving salvation. This is at the heart of economic trinitarian theology. This leads to a reflection on the comprehensiveness of the salvation that overcomes sin, death and judgment

2 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), 160–161.

3 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1998, 3:82.

4 Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 100.

5 Denis Edwards, *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

6 S. Happel, 'Metaphors and Time Asymmetry: Cosmologies in Physics and Christian Meanings', in *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 1993), 103–134.

7 Ted Peters, 'The Trinity In and Beyond

Time', in *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 1993), 263–292.

8 Augustine, *The Trinity* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1963).

9 Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1984), 967.

and a stress on the value attributed to the human person and God's concern for every individual and the related need for themes such as repentance, individual responsibility, conversion and the place of faith. It culminates in the comprehensive transformation of the individual and a personal resurrection at the final consummation of all things.

Holiness (see column 8), in terms of economic trinitarianism, focuses on the development of the individual: a person's set-apartness for God, their relationship with God and the moral content of their character. Again, there are debates about the distinctives, various emphases and the processes involved, but the fundamental characteristics of inward holiness and external behaviour—sanctification in every aspect of being—are clear.

This outline of the mission of the church and the life of the believer within the context of an economic trinitarianism makes the strengths of this approach very clear. However, it has now long been recognised that this form of presentation of the work of God in salvation is connected with an understanding of mission and holiness that is limited in scope. Those themes that are connected with an immanent, or essential, trinitarianism are required to enhance the understanding of salvation.

### III The Essential Trinity

The central truth of the essential Trinity is that God has not merely *appeared* in a trinitarian fashion in order to save the world but is *actually* trinitarian in nature. It directs attention to the essential, inner life of God as Father, Son

and Holy Spirit and the focus shifts from the plan of salvation to these inner relationships as a *paradigm* for the life of the church. The relationships between Father, Son and Spirit (as in John 17:20–21) provide a pattern for community relationships and this, in turn, draws attention to the social dimensions of life that God is concerned about—along with individuals.

Historically speaking, if *homoousios* was critical for economic trinitarianism then the equally critical word for immanent trinitarianism has been *perichoresis* which refers to 'mutual indwelling' or 'inter-penetration' of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At least since John of Damascus it has meant that there is no separate essence of God apart from God's life as Father, Son and Holy Spirit who live in a communion of persons.

Whereas the imagery for economic trinitarianism was found in various *marks* imprinted on, firstly, the natural world and then, secondly, the individual person, the imagery for essential trinitarianism is found in the social relationships of Father, Son and Spirit that become a *model* or paradigm for the way in which the church is to live. Consequently, corporate imagery, such as the notion of the Kingdom of God, comes to the fore in this thinking.

And what then are the practical implications of an essentialist perspective on trinitarian theology? Inevitably they relate to the social, rather than individual, life of believers and the church. Mission becomes a much more socially orientated activity in which social needs, such as the need for peace and justice predominate. The church is a foretaste of God's community—an eschatological community working for



the good of society, ending poverty and doing justice.

This emphasis and the contrast this makes with the notion of salvation typically associated with economic trinitarianism has produced the debate about whether mission is really evangelism or social action. The answer is that both of them are grounded in different aspects of the trinitarian nature of God and one ought not to choose just one dimension of mission any more than one should choose between economic and essential dimensions of the Trinity. The absolute unity of the two is well expressed in the Micah Declaration on Integral Mission which says,

It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, there are corporate implications for the understanding of holiness, frequently expressed in terms of *social holiness*. Two different meanings are actually attributed to the term. They need to be distinguished but both are important aspects of the corporate nature of holiness and both derive from the communal nature of the essential Trinity.

The term, 'social holiness', is frequently used with respect to John Wesley's well-known observation in the introduction to the first volume of the

Methodist Hymn book that 'the gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness' and this is commonly connected with the historical reality that Methodism spoke out about the social injustices of the age. Thus 'social holiness' is interpreted as 'social justice' and usually intended as a supplement and a corrective to modern, often evangelical notions of 'personal holiness' that pay little attention to broader community concerns.

The appropriateness of this has increasingly been recognised but it is likely that the phrase as used by Wesley in the hymnbook (and this is the only place he used it) should be interpreted as referring to a different corporate dimension of holiness: the necessarily *social context* in which personal holiness is necessarily formed.<sup>11</sup> That is, no holiness (whether focused on the inner life, the development of character, one's relationships with others or on concerns for social structures) can develop without the influence and the aid of others. One's holiness is not purely and simply one's own; it is dependent, to a significant degree, upon the holiness (or lack of it) of others.

Holiness is social in terms of its growth and development as well as its expression in the world. Altogether, mission and holiness take on different dimensions when considered in the light of the essential relationships of the Trinity as well as in the light of the work of salvation. Together they provide an holistic approach to the life of

<sup>11</sup> Andrew C. Thompson, 'From Societies to Society: The Shift from Holiness to Justice in the Wesleyan Tradition', *Methodist Review* 3 (2011): 141–172.

<sup>10</sup> The Micah Network (Sept. 2001) <http://www.micahnetwork.org>

the believer, one that is to reflect, in its own appropriate way, the life and the work of the trinitarian God.

These two dimensions of thought concerning the Trinity must be held together. It is well recognised that Karl Barth was largely responsible for reviving the structural significance of the doctrine of the Trinity. His revelational trinitarianism demonstrated the importance of using the doctrine of the Trinity for theological structure. Jürgen Moltmann was also significant in the revival of trinitarian theology and despite the presence of some who have disagreed with this approach they have been followed by a wide range of people looking at the significance of the Trinity for various aspects of life including the church (Miroslav Volf),<sup>12</sup> society (Gordon Kaufman),<sup>13</sup> the cosmos (Sallie McFague),<sup>14</sup> the person in society (Leonardo Boff),<sup>15</sup> community (Stanley Grenz),<sup>16</sup> mission (Lesslie Newbigin),<sup>17</sup> and gender (Kevin Giles).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Kevin Giles, *The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

There has also been significant debate about the relationship between the economic and the essential 'Trinities'. Karl Rahner's well-known rule is that 'the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity'. Ontologically speaking, there is only one Trinity and the language of the economic Trinity and the immanent eternity is really a shorthand way of talking about different aspects or dimensions of God as Trinity. To speak of the economic Trinity is to speak of God's relationship to the world. To speak of the immanent Trinity is to speak of God's inner self.

Yet Rahner's rule has created concerns for some, such as John Thompson<sup>19</sup> who argues that this rule inevitably means that God's existence as Trinity is tied to God's actions in the world and therefore that there is no genuine life of God apart from the world. That is, there is a loss of the immanent. Whether Rahner, LaCugna or Moltmann or others can be read in this way and whether this is what they intend is a matter for debate regarding each one. However, the overall point is that the relationship of economic and immanent perspectives on the Trinity has profound implications for church and society that must continue to be worked through.

I would suggest, however, that trinitarian theological thinking has had less impact upon the local church than upon the theological academy because of the on-going impact of individualism upon the thinking of ordinary Christians in terms of understanding

<sup>19</sup> John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 28.

God. Even when trinitarian in theory (according to formal beliefs) few are instinctively trinitarian in thought or practice. Most Christian thought is, in pragmatic terms, 'personal' or 'individual' ('What does this mean *for me?*'). Much preaching is individualist in structure and aimed at individuals in content.

It is perhaps a rare thing for congregations to begin even to address the full implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. James Torrance, for instance, has pointed out that, even when liturgical language is Trinitarian, often the understanding of worship itself is monotheist with a structure that would be suitable for a Jewish or Muslim person. That is because the structure of worship is unitarian in form in that pastor/priest and people are on one side, offering worship to God who is on the other side, hearing the prayer and receiving the worship.

However, genuinely trinitarian worship is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father. Trinitarian worship means having God coming onto our side and lifting us up so that worship is fellowship (or participating or sharing) in the life of God. The Trinity, in distinction to other forms of worship, thus provides 'a participatory understanding of worship and prayer'<sup>20</sup> that is predicated on the grace of God rather than on the work, effort or enthusiasm of the believer. In this, and in so many other areas of the church's life, the full implications of essential trinitarianism need to be explored.

#### IV The Consummate Trinity

Torrance's participatory understanding of worship illustrates the way in which it is possible to incorporate an eschatological dimension into trinitarian thought, but many other discussions do not do this. A more specific focus upon the eschaton and the consummation of all things and the implications of this for the life of God is necessary.

This means taking very seriously Pannenberg's observation that theology has to see again the significance of the theme of eschatology for *all* Christian doctrine.<sup>21</sup> A consideration of God 'at end of time'—the consummate Trinity—is a reflection on God who has embraced within God's own life the whole of creation, and is one that unites economic and immanent dimensions of trinitarian thinking in the eschatological life of God.

This approach to the doctrine of the Trinity goes beyond both the idea of the Trinity as a *mark* on creation and as a *model* for life and sees the doctrine of the Trinity from the inside—by which people, and indeed ultimately the whole of creation—are *members* or partners who participate in communion not only with, but within, the life of God. The life of the Trinity is an interpersonal fellowship in which believers participate by grace. This experiential, participatory understanding of consummation life is a reminder that the future is not so much a *place* as an *existence in God*.

Just as the focus of economic trinitarianism revolved, theologically, around the *homousios* and the focus

of immanent trinitarianism can be said to revolve around the concept of *perichoresis*, the concept which is at the heart here is the notion of *anakephalaaiosathai*—the 'gathering together' described in Ephesians 1:10 by which the whole cosmos comes 'under' the head of Christ. The very long, complex, single sentence of the first chapter of Ephesians 1: 3-10 reaches its climax in verse 10 in which the Father reveals 'the mystery of his will' (v. 9) to be 'a plan for the fullness of time', namely, 'to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ'.

This 'gathering together' is the *anakephalaiōsis*—a word which occurs only twice in the New Testament. It has the sense of 'bringing things together' so that it can be translated: 'that he might gather together in one all things in Christ' or 'to unite all things in him'.<sup>22</sup> It is also possible to take the basic meaning as relating to the 'head' (*kephalē*) under which all things are brought and so it can be expressed as bringing all things 'together under one head'. Recent scholarship prefers to think of it as referring to the 'main point', 'summary' or perhaps 'heading' in the sense that everything is 'summed up in Christ'. Eugene H. Peterson puts it as 'a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him'.

This summation is not just a summary in the sense of a condensation such as one might have in a brief chapter summary of a text book. Ernest Best suggests it sums up more as an architect's plans sum up a building—

it summarises it *and* determines its shape.<sup>23</sup> The only other NT occurrence of this expression is in Romans where Paul says that all the commandments of the law 'are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself".'

If we draw a parallel here we might say that just as Romans 13:9 shows that all that is true, meaningful and significant for human discipleship in the myriad principles and commandments of the law is expressed in one single command, so Ephesians 1:10 shows how all of God's truth, goodness and purpose that are found throughout the various elements and dimensions of the universe are summed up in the person of Jesus Christ.

However it is put, it is clear that it refers to nothing short of cosmic reunification in Christ. All things point to Christ—he is the focal point of the whole of creation—and Paul urges people to bring their lives into conformity with God's divine plan so that Christ is central in everything that they do.

In this we see implications for the entire cosmos, but we can also, once again, ask about the implications for God. If we try to understand the significance of the eschaton apart from its significance for God then we really cannot grasp it for the significance of the eschaton for the cosmos is tied up with the future eschatological life of God. At the end, the love of God is victorious, it is the end of tears and suffering (Rev. 21:4) and God enters into fellowship with the whole creation. It is precisely in God that all things come together

<sup>20</sup> James Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1998, 3:532.

<sup>22</sup> As in, respectively, the AV (King James) and RSV editions.

<sup>23</sup> E. Best, *Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 142.

(Eph. 1:10) and so there is then, as a result 'one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all' (Eph. 4:6).

This dimension stresses the utter *comprehensiveness* of what God is doing in that not only human life but the whole of creation is gathered up. It also stresses the *continuity* of this life in God with the present world. The creation of a new heaven and a new earth does not mean the total abandonment of the old heaven and the old earth. This willingness to gather together all things is a continuation and consummation of the *sacrifice* expressed in the self-giving of the son for the sake of the world. There is a sense in which God sacrifices the divine life to embrace the world in eternal union. The divine nature is thus related to the world 'internally' (through personal relationship) and not merely externally (as a completely separately existing entity) in a consummation of the movement begun with the incarnation.

The notion of the consummate Trinity makes it clear that holiness is *ultimately about participation in the life of God*. The development of virtue and character is important, as are works of social justice, but both are to be directed towards a comprehensive fulfilment of the love relationship with God—whose essential nature is love—begun in relationship with Christ ('whoever lives in love lives in God', 1 John 4:16). The precise nature of a participatory interpretation of the consummation and the significance of, for example, the following passages has been much debated in recent times.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that

all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me (John 17:20-21).<sup>24</sup>

Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (2 Peter 1:4).

While it is well accepted that the life of the Trinity is to be worked out relationally, the implications beyond that remain controversial. For some *perichoresis* describes the inner, immanent life of God only, but for others it does much more. Just as the economic Trinity, in the work of salvation through suffering and death has implications for God as well as humanity, so too, it is argued that *perichoresis* and the immanent Trinity have implications for human life as well. Those who have developed it include Karl Rahner,<sup>25</sup> Catherine Lacugna<sup>26</sup> and Jürgen Moltmann.<sup>27</sup>

Though not without criticism, Rahner, for example, stressed the notion that God's involvement in the world is so intimate that the character of divinity itself is shaped by it. God's action through Christ in the incarnation redefines divinity to include humanity, and God's work in the Holy Spirit which

<sup>24</sup> New International Version throughout, except where specified.

<sup>25</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad Pub., 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

binds believers to Christ means that they are at one with Christ and so, at one with God, and thus, participants in the life of the Trinity.

Moltmann is well known for his desire to ensure that the significance, particularly the pain, of the cross, which is so central to his theology, not only belongs to, but actually constitutes the nature of the Triune God. This means that the history of God in the world constitutes the being of God. This noble quest—to find the cross of Jesus in the heart of God, so that the cross is not external to God—is critiqued by Pannenberg who argues that making the immanent nature of God subject to the life of God in the world actually makes the Trinity devoid of meaning, for the Trinity has significance only if the God revealed in salvation history is the same as God from eternity.<sup>28</sup>

The fact is that despite this conflict of opinion both Moltmann and Pannenberg are seeking to defend the inner nature of God: Moltmann is stressing the importance of self-sacrifice as constitutive of eternal, divine being; Pannenberg is stressing the importance of the eternal nature of the self-sacrificing God.

LaCugna wants to stress the notion that the doctrine of the Trinity—whether understood from economic or immanent perspectives—is not primarily a doctrine about God in isolation but a doctrine about God *in relation to humanity*. Her language sometimes suggests that God's immanence is dissolved. I think that she can be defended against this claim although her lan-

guage could possibly be refined at this point. As it is so often, it is not what she denies (if she does indeed deny it) which is important but what she is wanting to affirm—which is that just as the economic Trinity is about God's *soteriological* relationship *to the world*, so the immanent Trinity is about God's *communal* relationship *with persons*. 'The life of God—precisely because God is Triune—does not belong to God alone.'<sup>29</sup>

The divine life is also *our* life. The heart of the Christian life is to be united with the God of Jesus Christ by means of communion with one another. This is a *theosis*—union with God. The doctrine of the Trinity is not aimed at producing a theory of God's self-relatedness, it is about the encounter *between God and us*—a relational ontology.

So the Trinity is not primarily a statement about God's own life but a statement about God sharing life with us. It is, therefore, not helpful to describe the economic Trinity as a reference to God as God is revealed to us, and the immanent Trinity as a way of describing God *in se*. A theology of the immanent Trinity cannot refer to God apart from relationship to us but to God who is revealed in Christ and the Spirit. 'Trinitarian life is also our life.'<sup>30</sup> If we free ourselves from thinking that there are two levels to the Trinity (*ad intra* and *ad extra*) then we can see that there is one life of God in which we have graciously been included as partners. The doctrine of the Trinity is a teaching about God's life with us and our life with each other.

<sup>28</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 331.

<sup>29</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 228.



The consummate Trinity unites a number of issues related to the economic and immanent dimensions of the Trinity. It takes one beyond soteriological thinking which is focused upon the individual to its proper end at the consummation and it also takes reflections on the inner relationships of God beyond a focus solely upon God in God's self to see God as a God who has taken up the cosmos into God's life. The Father is not only the Father of the Son, and the source of the Spirit, but now the Father of Glory, the one whose glory is revealed precisely at the consummation of all things. Glory was an immanent attribute of Yahweh sometimes revealed to humanity<sup>31</sup> but this inner glory of God shone out most brightly, and was revealed most clearly, in the life and work (economic) of Christ<sup>32</sup> but above all it is revealed at the Parousia, at the consummation of all things. The aim is that the whole world might know and glorify God.<sup>33</sup>

The practical implications of this cosmic consummation include the fact that the mission of the church includes caring for this world as best we are able. *Ecology* is a part of the church's mission. It also points emphatically towards the way that this is, primarily, God's mission. It is something that can be achieved only by God. It also points us towards *worship* as the ultimate focus of the church's mission.

This is the ultimate goal, and the unity, of evangelism and social justice. It is not that these activities do not

have value in their own right but they are married together in looking forward eschatologically to the final kingdom of God where all exists in worship of God. This reminds us that even now any evangelism that does not lead people to an on-going life of worship within the church is not good evangelism; maybe it is not evangelism at all. And a mission which seeks peace and justice in this world which does not equally seek to bring about the peace of God (and not just the absence of war, discrimination and injustice) is not really mission either.

Perhaps most importantly of all, the present life of believers and the church will be enhanced with a deeper recognition of the significance of the consummate Trinity. Ostensibly trinitarian faith that is actually unitarian in practice inevitably lacks vitality. A recognition of the possibility of participation with God, that is, having a faith lived within the life of God, surrounded by and participating in the life of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit will come alive.

## V Conclusion

Consequently the Trinity is the most profound part of the Christian faith. As it has been said, the Trinity is not a toy for theologians but a joy for believers. The Trinity is not the conclusion of a philosophical theology but the experience of actual Christian faith. Trinitarian doctrine is not, as some think, a philosophical, remote or removed doctrine. It is, in fact, the simplest, experientially lived and known doctrine.

John Wesley preached only one ser-

mon on the Trinity<sup>34</sup> but he thought consistently in a trinitarian way. It was, for him, not only a fundamental belief but also fundamental to a vital spiritual life. 'The knowledge of the Three-One God' he said, 'is interwoven with all true Christian faith; with all vital religion.' The individual believer may not explicitly recognise this, and may not use all the available theological terminology ('I do not mean that it is of importance to believe this or that explication of these words.') but it is essential *in practice* that the believer has the experience, 'the witness of the Spirit' that he is 'a child of God' who is 'accepted by the Father through the

merits of the Son'.

The doctrine of the Trinity is primarily known by experiencing God as Father, Son and Spirit, rather than something comprehended by rational thought. There is, in fact, a paradox here, that we understand the Trinity most when we realize that we understand it only dimly. If we think that the doctrine of Trinity is entirely something of the mind and try to work it out along purely rational lines then we are altogether mistaken.

Fortunately, one of the most important aspects of this presentation of the consummate dimensions of the Trinity is that it actually tells us that *the life of God as Trinity is something in which we participate* rather than something to be intellectually comprehended. In effect it tells us that God cannot be fully known by reason but God can be fully loved.

<sup>34</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, MA, Sometime Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford: With the Last Corrections of the Author* (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Book-Room, 1881), Sermon 55.

<sup>31</sup> Exodus 16:7, 10; 24:15; 40:34-35; Lev. 9:6, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Heb. 1:3; John 1:14; 7:39; Luke 24:26; Acts 3:13; 8:55; Rom 6:4; 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 Peter 1:21.

<sup>33</sup> Mark 8:38; 13:26; Rom. 15:9.