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What is 'Perichoresis'—and Why Does It Matter?

Perichoresis as Properly Basic to the Christian Faith

John Jefferson Davis

I Perichoresis: Central to Christian Faith

Perichoresis is hardly a term that is part of the working vocabulary of most Christians today. This biblical concept, based on statements of Jesus such as 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (Jn 14:10), and others like it—referring to the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son—is generally considered to be of interest only to academic theologians—an enigmatic and esoteric idea with little practical significance for Christian living.

It is the purpose of this article to argue, on the contrary, that *perichoresis* belongs not on the margins of Christian faith, but at the very centre, and should be recognized as a vital biblical truth that illuminates the nature of Christian salvation, the believer's personal relationship to Christ and the meaning of genuine fellowship in the church.

In arguing that perichoresis is

'properly basic' to the Christian faith, I am arguing that it is a primordial or fundamental concept that describes 'how God essentially and eternally is'. As such, perichoresis is a doctrine that is not so much argued *to* as argued *from*. Perichoresis will be seen to offer a vision of community and deeper connection with other persons—often sought for in modern society, but rarely realized in the face of the fragmentation and busyness of modern life, even with the aid of social media.

This article will first, briefly review the history of the usage of this term in Christian theology; second, a working definition of the term will be offered; third, the New Testament data will be examined, with special reference to the life of Jesus in the gospel of John, and the 'in Christ' language of the apostle Paul; fourth, a philosophical analysis of the meaning of 'person' will be presented, in light of the biblical data, together with a proposal for a new con-

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cept of the 'extended Self'; and fifth, and finally, some practical implications of perichoresis for the doctrines of soteriology (salvation), anthropology (nature of man), and ecclesiology (fellowship and ministry in the church) will be suggested.

II Perichoresis: Some Historical Trajectories

The concept of perichoresis was first introduced into theology by Gregory of Nazianzus in his *Epistle* 101, when he used the verb *perichoreo* to speak of the union of the divine and human natures in Christ: 'Just as the natures are mixed, so also the names pass reciprocally into each (*perichorouson*) other by the principle of this coalescence.'¹ Gregory here speaks of the interchange of names and attributes between the two natures that later came to be called the *communicatio idiomatum* or 'communication of attributes'.²

1 As cited by Verna Harrison, 'Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers', *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 35 (1991): 53-65 at page 55. For the history of perichoresis in Christian theology I have drawn on Harrison and G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: S.P.C.K., 1964), 282-302; Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1996), 175-202; and Jacques Fantino, 'Circumincession', in Jean-Yves Lacoste, ed., *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, v.1 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 315-16.

2 A very careful recounting of the history of the concept of the *communication idiomatum* from the patristic period through the Reformation and post-Reformation periods is provided in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 296-307, 'Mutual Interpenetration of the Natures as a Way of Understanding the Unity of Christ'.

The interpenetration of the natures was understood to be the ground of the interchange of the attributes.³

Maximus the Confessor, who studied Gregory's writings, adopted the concept, and was the first to use the noun *perichoresis* to describe this movement of penetration in the person of Christ of the divine nature toward the human nature.⁴ In the seventh century John of Damascus took up the concept, being the first to apply it to the mutual interpenetration⁵ of the three persons of the Trinity:

(T)hese are indivisible and inseparable from each other and united into one, and interpenetrating one another without confusion ... they are three although united, and they are distinct, although inseparable.⁶

In the twelfth century, John of Damascus' *The Orthodox Faith* was translated into Latin, and the concept of perichoresis entered into Western Trinitarian theology under the term *circumincessio*. Other Latin theologians such as Thomas Aquinas affirmed the

3 A widely recognized biblical example of this 'communication of attributes' is found in Acts 20:28, where Paul speaks of the 'church of God which he bought with his own blood'—where blood, a property of Christ's human nature, is attributed to Christ as God in his divine nature.

4 Fantino, 'Circumincession', 315.

5 For the patristic usage of the noun *perichoresis* and the verb *perichoreo* with the sense of 'interpenetrate', or 'interpenetration', see G.W.H. Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 1077.

6 St. John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith*, III,5, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, v.9, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, repr. 1994), 49.

notion of the indwelling of the divine persons of the Trinity, without using the term, as did the Council of Florence (1431-45) in its Decree of Union with the Jacobites.⁷

There has been little dogmatic development of the concept of perichoresis in the East since the time of John of Damascus, and little in the West since the middle ages. In the West, this relative lack of theological attention to the implications of perichoresis may be, in part, a consequence of the increasing scholastic elaboration of the doctrine of the Trinity, after the introduction of Aristotelean philosophy and the introduction of many technical distinctions that tended to separate Trinitarian doctrine from the lived experience of Christians.⁸ As the doctrine of the Trinity became somewhat marginalized as a result, the pivotal concept of perichoresis embedded within it tended to drop out of sight as well.

With the renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity of the last several generations, sparked by the work of Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, and others, it now seems that the time has come to give this neglected biblical truth renewed theological attention, with a view to showing its significance not only for the Trinity and Christology, but for other vital areas of Christian theology as well—notably, for the doctrines of salvation and the church.

III Perichoresis: a Working Definition:

Before proceeding with a consideration of the biblical data, a working definition of perichoresis will be given, with a view to possible refinement in light of the biblical and theological analysis to follow. This working definition will draw from three different, but related, lines of thought: *shared interiority*; *reciprocal empathy*; and the 'Thou-Thou' relationship.

In the first instance, perichoresis can be understood to involve a relationship of shared interiority, in which two (or more) persons share, at a deep level, their inner lives with one another. It involves an 'opening of the heart' to the other, a giving of permission to the other to 'get inside' my life.

When Jesus says that 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me', the preposition 'in' does not refer to one physical object being spatially inside the other, but rather, one person being 'in' the other in a relational manner that engages mind, will, and emotions. Jesus and the Father are in a mutually 'open hearted' relation with one another, that puts them 'on the same page' with one another, in a unity of understanding, purpose, and emotion.

Perichoresis can also be viewed as a personal relationship characterized by *mutual empathy*, with empathy being defined simply as 'the ability to feel another's experience'.⁹ When the

⁷ Fantino, 'Circumincission', 315, 316.

⁸ As argued by the Catholic theologian Catherine Lacugna in *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 168-69.

⁹ This definition of empathy is borrowed from Sim Van der Ryn, *Design for an Empathic World: Reconnecting People, Nature and Self* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2013). The term 'empathy' was coined in 1909 by the psychologist Edward Titchener, as a translation of the German *Einfühlung* ('feeling into').

apostle Paul admonishes the Christians in Rome to 'Rejoice with those who rejoice' and to 'mourn with those who mourn' (Rom 12:15), he is, in effect, pointing to such an experience of mutual empathy as a characteristic of Christian fellowship or *koinonia*. Jesus, in his prayer for us as his disciples, prayed that we might experience the joy that he experiences with the Father (Jn 17:13)—that we might participate in the reciprocally empathic joy that the Father knows in him and that he knows in the Father.

From a third vantage point, perichoresis can be viewed as a 'Thou-Thou' relationship, along the lines of Martin Buber's personalist philosophy of his well-known work, *I and Thou*.¹⁰ In such a relationship each person seeks to know the other not impersonally as an 'It', as mere object or instrument of one's own self-interests, but as a 'Thou' who has opened the heart to share the inner life, with no ulterior motives, but only in a stance of reciprocal self-donation. Likewise, as an 'I' in that relationship, each person intends to allow the other to know himself or herself as a 'Thou', in reciprocal openness, transparency and trust.

In the light of the biblical analysis to follow, it hopefully will become evident that God's design for his people from the beginning was that they might come to experience with one another and with himself the 'Thou-Thou' quality of relationship that characterizes the Triune life of the Father, Son, and the Spirit. In short, *perichoretic communion* could be understood as a

'heart-to-heart' or 'heart-in-heart' connection between two or more persons characterized by reciprocal empathy.

IV Perichoresis in the Life of God and the People of God: New Testament Perspectives:

In this section we will highlight New Testament passages that illustrate perichoresis in Jesus' relationship to the Father, and in the relationships of Christians with God and with one another, with special references to the Johannine and Pauline texts.

1. Johannine texts

Jesus' programmatic statement that 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (Jn 14:10) was noted at the beginning of this paper. Elsewhere in the Johannine literature we can see that the relationship of perichoretic communion that Jesus enjoyed with the Father is promised to his disciples, through the arrival and presence of the Holy Spirit, and realized in the experience of fellowship in the churches. Jesus' high priestly prayer (Jn 17) points to the eschatological perfection of this communion in the life to come.

During the farewell discourse Jesus announces that 'On that day (when the Spirit arrives: 14:16) you will realize that I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I am in you' (Jn 14:20). Jesus was teaching the disciples that this perichoretic language of being 'in him', so enigmatic before his cross and resurrection, would become understandable after Pentecost and the reception of the Spirit, for the Spirit would take them 'inside' Jesus' interior experience, and allow them to have an expe-

¹⁰ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

riential and subjective understanding of the meaning of his words.

This is why Jesus could also say, 'It is for your *advantage* that I go away; unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you' (Jn 16:7). Jesus was making the astonishing promise that his disciples would have an even more intimate relationship with himself when he was physically absent—for though absent in the body, he would be present with them in the Spirit in a new way, in which the Spirit would take them 'inside' the heart experience of Jesus, creating a new condition of reciprocally shared, empathic life. Even before the arrival of the Spirit, he instructed them to expect a new closeness and indwelling with the Father and himself (Jn 14:23), and that abiding in him in this perichoretic communion, like a branch in the vine (Jn 15:5), was the secret of being a fruitful disciple.

In his epistles John gives evidence that Jesus' promise of perichoretic communion was being fulfilled in his circle of churches, through the arrival and reception of the Spirit. Christian existence, he announces, is a matter of experiencing communion with the Father and the Son and with those who are experiencing this joyful fellowship (1 Jn 1:3). By abiding in the apostolic teaching, the believers abide *in the Son* and *in the Father* (1 Jn 3:24), and they do so in view of the anointing of the Spirit, who remains *in* them (1 Jn 3:27).

In John's 'logo-pneumatic' (Word-Spirit) epistemology of Christian experience, the believers know that they live in him, and Christ in them (= perichoretic communion), because he has given us his Spirit (1 Jn 4:13)—in fulfilment of the promise of Jn 14:20. The anointing of the Holy Spirit (1 Jn

2:20) enables the believers to discern the truth and to remain in it; by so doing, they remain *in* the Son and *in* the Father (1 Jn 2:24).

Jesus's high priestly prayer (Jn 17) pointed to the eschatological perfecting of the believer's perichoretic communion with God and the people of God: 'I pray ... that all of them may be one, 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' (Jn 17:20,21). In this enormously important statement, Jesus prayed that his disciples would ultimately experience the depth of unity in fellowship among themselves—and with himself and the Father—that he had experienced from eternity with the Father—as they experienced what it meant to be 'in us'.

Such a supernatural degree of unity, produced by the ministry of the Spirit, and so poorly realized in the history of the church, would be fundamental to the success of the Christian mission, and the world's recognition that Jesus had indeed been sent by the Father (17:21b).

2. Pauline texts

The reality of perichoretic communion with Christ in the Spirit is fundamental to Paul's understanding of Christian existence as well. The apostle's pervasive use of the language of being 'in Christ' or Christ being 'in' the believer was a consequence of the fact that he, like John and the other apostles, had himself experienced the fulfilment of Jesus' promise of Jn 14:20. Paul had not only a dramatic encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, objectively and externally, but having

received the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17, 18) through Ananias' prayer and laying on of hands, he came to know Christ as dwelling in him, subjectively and internally.

Paul realized that he himself was a new creature (2 Cor 5: 17), and that his old self-centred life had been replaced by a new centre—Christ living *in* him (Gal 2:20) and ministering through him. On the basis of his new perichoretic communion with Christ, in the Spirit, he was able to teach his disciples that they too were 'in Christ' and that Christ was in them (Col 1:27).

Because they had the indwelling Spirit, as adopted sons and daughters of the Father, they, like Jesus, could experience perichoretic intimacy with God and address him in prayer as 'Abba' (Gal 4:4-6; Rom 8:15,16). God their Father was not only 'above' them but among them and even *in* them (Eph 4:6, 'in all'). To be a Christian is to have the indwelling Spirit (Rom 8:9), who makes us to be in Christ (Rom 8:1), and who enables us to know the mind of Christ and God, as the Spirit reveals to us the truths hidden deep in the interior life of God (1 Cor 2:10-12).

Paul's language of perichoretic communion, of union with Christ and being in Christ, was no mere figure of speech or merely a matter of being under the authority of Christ,¹¹ but was the expression of a radically new metaphysical and ontological reality: the presence of God *within* the church and the believer, in an astonishing depth of

intimacy through which God intended to impart all the fullness of his love for Christ his Son (Eph 3:17-19).

V Perichoresis and the Metaphysics of 'Person':

In order to advance the argument here being presented that perichoresis is not merely a strange property of the Trinitarian persons, but a property or capacity that is shared (in an analogical sense) by human beings, some metaphysical analysis of the nature of 'person'¹² will be needed. The working definition of 'person' that is stipulated for the purposes of the present discussion is as follows: 'an intelligent subject of experiences that has the capacity for self-consciousness and awareness of a relationship to God'. This stipulated definition is deliberately formulated from within a biblical and Christian frame of reference.

With this stipulated definition of person in mind, there are two common assumptions concerning the nature of 'person' that need to be examined: 1) that human beings, with physical bodies, are the primary and paradigmatic examples of personhood; and 2) that human persons are essentially *contained* or circumscribed by their bodies. The point of examining these assumptions is that both can be mental barriers to understanding the meaning of perichoresis and Jesus' statement that 'I am in the Father and the Father is in

¹¹ See William B. Barclay, *Christ in You: A Study in Paul's Theology and Ethics* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1999), 5-19 for a review of modern scholarly discussions of the Pauline 'Christ in you/me' language.

¹² For historical surveys of the meanings of this somewhat elusive and often problematic notion of 'person', see: Joseph Ratzinger, 'Retrieving the Tradition: Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology', *Communio* 17:3(1990): 439-54.

me': how can two persons be 'in' one another?

1. Primary examples of personhood

As to the first assumption, it should be recognized that from a biblical and Christian point of view, the category of 'person' is not limited to human beings, but includes the divine persons of the Trinity and spiritual beings such as angels and demons as well. It could be and in fact should be argued that the divine persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and not human persons are the proper epistemic and ontological baselines or paradigm for what it means to be a 'person'.

The Pauline statement that the divine Father is the source of all 'fatherhood' in heaven and earth (Eph 3:14, 15) certainly points in this direction: human fatherhood is an image and analogy of the divine—rather than the reverse. Similarly, the biblical notion that human beings are made in the *image of God* implies that God is the original and that humans are the derivative reflections of what it means to be a personal being.

The point of arguing that divine persons are the primary exemplars of personhood is to notice that *having a physical body* is, technically, an 'accidental' and not a *necessary* property of a person. God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and angels and demons do not have material bodies as do human beings, but they are indeed personal agents.¹³

¹³ As another possible analogy, consider a personal assistant app on a smartphone such as 'Siri'. Siri *speaks* and has personal charac-

The further point to be noticed from the foregoing observations is that persons without material bodies are not subject to some of the limitations of persons with material bodies, viz, *impenetrability*. That is to say, two material bodies—such as two bowling balls or two apples—cannot interpenetrate one another and be 'in' one another, occupying the same region of space at the same time.¹⁴

However—and this is a crucial point—*non-material* entities can in fact occupy the same region of space at the same time and so interpenetrate one another. Examples of the latter non-material entities could include various forms of *energy* such as sound waves from human voices or musical instruments, and different wave lengths of electromagnetic radiation (visible light, infrared, ultraviolet, x-rays, microwaves, radio waves, television signals, cell phone signals, Wi-Fi connections, etc.) that can be present in the same room simultaneously.

At a cocktail party many voices and many conversations from many persons are all present in the same room and 'interpenetrate' one another. Similarly, when a trio of jazz musicians are playing a piece of jazz together, the

teristics such as intelligence and the ability to interact with human persons—though without a physical body—being embedded in software and a silicon-based internet server.

¹⁴ The impenetrability of solid material objects is a consequence of what in physics is known as the Pauli Exclusion Principle. Light and electromagnetic radiation, however, are not subject to the Pauli Exclusion Principle, and so can be present simultaneously in the same region of space. See Michela Massimi, *Pauli's Exclusion Principle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

physical bodies of the pianist, the bass player, and the drummer are not literally 'in' one another, but they are together 'into' the music, and the sound of each instrument is taken into the experience of the other musicians, while each maintains his or her own identity and part.

More generally, then, we can say that while material objects do not interpenetrate one another, a material object can be penetrated by a non-material entity (e.g., a human body penetrated by x-rays during a physical exam), and one non-material (mental; spiritual; electromagnetic radiation) entity can penetrate another non-material entity (e.g., two voices in the room; the sounds of three musical instruments; one mind speaking into another mind). Material objects are not capable of perichoresis—but non-material entities or agents are.

2. Contained by their bodies

The illustrations above of conversations at a cocktail party or jazz musicians playing jazz are relevant to the second assumption that is being questioned: the assumption that human persons are 'contained' or circumscribed by their bodies. While it is true that human beings are in a significant sense 'in' their own bodies, and as such can be said to have a definite location in space ('here' rather than 'there'), an important qualification of this common-sense assumption needs to be made.

More properly, I wish to argue that human beings, while *centred* in their bodies, are neither *reducible* to their bodies, nor *circumscribed* by their bodies, in a sense that is to be explained.

Human beings have not only physical bodies, but also *minds*. Human minds, while connected to the brain, are not identical to the brain, and are endowed with non-material capacities of understanding, language, and speech.

Human persons are not circumscribed by their bodies in the sense that as intelligent agents, human beings can *extend* themselves and their personal presence beyond the boundaries of their physical bodies through the use of instruments, tools, language, and written and electronic media.

Human beings are not only embodied Selves, but more importantly, for the purpose of this argument, *extended Selves*.¹⁵ As intelligent agents, human beings can extend themselves into the world and to other humans not only by physical contact (e.g., a handshake or a hug or kiss), but through social media and through speech and language.

Whenever one person speaks to another, in deeper openness of heart and vulnerability, one person is being allowed into the other's inner world. If the conversation is a mutual conversation of 'Thou' with 'Thou', they are mentally, emotionally, and relationally 'in' one another. Just as the Holy Spirit is inside the mind of God the Father (1 Cor 2:10-12), with access to the 'deep things of God' and the inner life of the Father, in a relationship of perichoretic communion between Father and Spirit, so is deep conversation and empathic, personal sharing between two people an image of this Trinitarian perichoresis.

¹⁵ I have presented this notion of the extended Self in my earlier article, 'How Personal Agents Are Located in Space', *Philosophia Christi* 13:2 (2011): 449-55.

Human conversation is a form of communication. Communication between persons can open up *communion* between persons; and such communion between persons can be a reflection of and a participation in, at the ideal limit—the perichoretic communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Human bodies, strictly speaking, cannot occupy the same space at the same time, but human *minds* and *hearts* can be connected and ‘in the same place’ by open and honest words and language.

Recent research in neuroscience appears to indicate that human beings are in some sense ‘hard-wired for empathy’, in that the mirror neurons in the brain allow us, through imitation of facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and so forth, to enter empathetically into the experience of others.¹⁶ Far from being limited only to the persons of the Trinity, the capacity for perichoretic relationships—reciprocal sharing of inner experience—can be recognized as *a basic capacity of human beings*.

Human beings made in the image of God, with the powers of speech and language, were *designed for perichoresis*, so to speak. It might be said that all the world’s great love poetry and love songs are expressions of the longing of the human heart for such ‘heart-to-heart’ and ‘heart-in-heart’ perichoretic intimacy. It was precisely for such an optimal quality of personal

relationships for which Christ prayed (Jn 17:21) in his greatest prayer, the prayer that expressed Jesus’ vision of the ultimate *telos* of our Christian salvation.

VI ‘Perichoresis for the Rest of Us’: Some Practical Applications

At the beginning of this essay the claim was set forth that perichoresis was not just a mysterious property unique to the Trinity, but was ‘properly basic’ to the Christian faith, and as a fundamental truth had important implications for salvation, the Christian life, and fellowship and ministry in the church. This discussion will be concluded with some brief indications of how perichoresis and perichoretic communion illuminate these aspects of Christian faith and life.

With respect to soteriology or the doctrine of salvation, the crucial statement in Jesus’ high priestly prayer (Jn 17:21) reveals that perichoretic communion is the highest fulfilment and ultimate purpose of Christ’s redemptive work:

My prayer ... is 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.

In this astonishing prayer for unity, which is at its heart a revelation of the nature of salvation, and not only a prayer for church unity—Jesus prays that as a result of his redemptive work, his disciples might be ‘in us,’ having the interior heart experience of the Father’s love that he himself enjoyed, and that the disciples might have such

¹⁶ Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others* (New York: Picador, 2008), pp. 116, 119: mirror neurons in the brain connect with the limbic areas to facilitate emotions and empathy, and help us to imitate and understand the emotions of others.

perichoretic, 'heart-to-heart', 'Thou-Thou' relationships with one another. His prayer for the church's final end reveals what was the purpose of the Triune God from the beginning.

The promise of salvation in the Old Covenant was epitomized in the promise of 'Emmanuel', 'God *with* us'. In the New Covenant this promise is not only fulfilled, but taken to an even deeper level: 'God *in* us'. Jesus' prayer will be fully answered in the world to come, only when *all* God's people, together and in unity, enjoy the intimate communion with the Father that Jesus knows in the Spirit. God who as Redeemer is 'in heaven', 'above us', and who is also near and *among* us, is finally *in* us, as Father, Son, and Spirit dwell in the hearts of every believer, sharing with us the love, joy, peace, and glory that Jesus knows in the Father.

The concept of perichoresis embedded in Jn 17:21 (and elsewhere) allows us to bring together the legal and forensic categories of western soteriology with the 'mystical' and participatory categories of the East.¹⁷ The atonement and forgiveness of sins allows us to come into God's presence with confidence (Heb 10: 19,22). Forgiveness of sins, however, while the basis and beginning of salvation, is not the final end.

Christ's highest purpose in going to the cross was that on the basis of the forgiveness provided, all of God's peo-

ple together and unitedly might enjoy his own intimate communion with the Father in the Spirit—that we might dwell 'in the bosom of the Trinity' as he himself dwells 'in the bosom' of the Father (Jn 1:18). Jesus promises that his disciples can experience being indwelt by him (Jn 17:26), even as he indwelt the Father. Perichoresis is the basis of the believer's union with Christ, the concept that is so central to the soteriological understanding of both John and Paul.¹⁸

VII Perichoresis in Practice

What does such a union look like in practice? Three examples might be given: one from Jesus' own experience of joy with the Father; a second from the early Christian experience of sonship and adoption; and a third one from church history, Wesley's spiritual awakening at Aldersgate. Each will be viewed in light of the concept of perichoretic communion as understood in this essay.

1. Joy

In Luke's account of the return of the seventy two from a mission, we are told that at that time 'Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth ...', (Lk 10:21). The Trinitarian nature of this incident is apparent: Jesus the Son experiences a joy mediated by a fresh affusion of the Holy Spirit in an

¹⁷ I have discussed in greater detail such an integration of western and eastern soteriologies in the chapter, 'Salvation Reconceptualized: Is Our Western Gospel Big Enough?' in John Jefferson Davis, *Practicing Ministry in the Presence of God* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, forthcoming, 2015).

¹⁸ I have discussed the concept of union with Christ, and its biblical and metaphysical dimensions in *Meditation and Communion with God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 41-51.

act of spontaneous prayer and thanksgiving to the Father.

This text could be viewed in the light of two others: John 14:20 ('On that day [when the Spirit comes: 14:16,17] you will know that I am in the Father and you are in me, and I am in you'), and Romans 5:5 ('God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us').

In Luke 10:21 we have a beautiful picture of Jesus' own experience of perichoretic communion with the Father—of being 'in the Father' in 'heart-to-heart' contact. He was experiencing at that moment what he promised that his disciples would later experience—and also understand on the basis of that experience—when they personally received the Spirit. Jesus was experiencing that of which Paul spoke in Rom 5:5: the love of God the Father was being poured afresh into his heart by the Spirit; *joy is the feeling of love experienced*.

2. Sonship and adoption

The reality of perichoretic communion with God the Father can be illustrated from the New Testament and early Christian experience with reference to *sonship* and *adoption*. The apostle Paul reminded the believers in Galatia that they had received the Spirit, through faith, when they believed the gospel (Gal 3:2,3, 14). Because they were consequently sons of God by adoption, and no longer slaves, God the Father had sent the Spirit of his Son into their hearts, who called out 'Abba, Father!' (Gal 4:6,7; cf. Rom 8:15, 16).

The Holy Spirit was reduplicating the prayer language of Jesus in their hearts, communicating to them the

sense of intimacy and affection of Jesus' own perichoretic communion ('I am in the Father') with the Father. This reality of perichoretic communion with the Father, mediated by the Spirit, was, in early Christianity—and can be today—a *conscious* experience that can be *known*: 'This is how we *know* that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us' (1 Jn 3:24; 4:13: 'We *know* that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us his Spirit').

3. Spiritual awakening

John Wesley's experience of spiritual awakening at Aldersgate could also be viewed through the lens of perichoretic communion. On the evening of May 24, 1738, at a Moravian meeting where Luther's *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans* was being read, Wesley felt that 'his heart was strangely warmed', as he came to experience a true meaning of the gospel and justification by faith alone. In Wesley's own account in his *Journal*, he recalls:

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.¹⁹

The Holy Spirit's work of *illuminating* biblical truth in this way was, in fact, bringing Wesley into perichoretic communion with Christ and the Father.

¹⁹ *Journal of John Wesley*, accessed at www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.ii.xvi.htm.

In this case the Spirit connected not only with Wesley's mind in new spiritual understanding, and with the will in new attitude and motivation, but with the affections and feelings as well, as Wesley came to personally experience grace—the Father's favour and affection for him in Christ. As a result, John Wesley was from that moment, a new creature in Christ.

4. Anthropology

The perichoretic nature of New Testament soteriology can shed light on biblical anthropology, the Christian understanding of the human person. The vision of the nature of the redeemed human's final end reveals what was God's purpose for humanity from the beginning, from eternity. We might say that human beings were designed by God for perichoresis—for intimacy, for communion. Or to state this in yet another way, we could say that being made in the image of God is to be constituted with a capacity for perichoresis, to enjoy a quality of life with God like that which Jesus knew with the Father.

The notion that perichoresis is a concept that is fundamental for an understanding of what it means to be human could be further unpacked with three other terms, each of which begins with the prefix 'inter', and each of which reflect the relationships within the Trinity: *interconnected*; *intersubjective*; and *interdependent*. Within the holy Trinity, the Father, Son, and Spirit are deeply and intrinsically interconnected, fully sharing the common divine nature, agreeing in common purpose, and united in mutual love. Their consciousnesses are not private and self-

enclosed, but open and transparent to one another, while yet retaining the distinctiveness of the 'I' in relationship to the other as 'Thou'. Father, Son, and Spirit work not independently, but in partnership and harmony in all the works of redemption *ad extra*.²⁰

Inasmuch as human beings made in the image of God reflect, in a partial and analogous manner, the dynamics of the Trinitarian life, such human lives should be lived with a consciousness of their own interconnectedness, intersubjectivity, and interdependence. Human beings must be *connected* to survive: connected to an environment, with air and water and sunlight and the food chain; to families, neighbourhoods, and social institutions; and to God and to the people of God.

Our subjectivity and emerging sense of 'self' and personal identity is not formed in some Cartesian, privatized subjectivity, but intersubjectively.²¹ Human beings learn language and develop as human beings through social interactions and institutions. Just as the Father and the Son have identities in relation to one another, so it is that human beings achieve a sense of identity only through their social interactions with others in the context of communities that transmit their stories, beliefs and practices to the next generations.

²⁰ In this respect the perichoretic communion of Father, Son, and Spirit can be seen as the basis for the patristic formula, *Opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*.

²¹ On the critical role of social processes in the formation of personal identity, see George Herbert Mead, *On Social Psychology: Selected Papers*, ed. Anselm Strauss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 19-42.

5. Church fellowship and ministry

Finally, perichoresis can illuminate the nature of fellowship and ministry in the life of the church. *Koinonia* or fellowship is, at its best, not merely a matter of Christians enjoying social contacts or participating in common tasks, but more properly, a deep sharing of a common life, a life of communion with the Father and the Son (1 Jn 1:3).

Such perichoretic communion involves an 'opening of the heart' between Christians. It was for such a depth and quality of relationship that the apostle Paul hoped in his appeal to the Corinthians: 'We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you ... As a fair exchange ... open wide your hearts also' (2 Cor 6:11-13). His admonition to the believers in Rome to '... rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn' (Rom 12:15) was a directive to practise perichoretic communion with one another, to relate to one another in reciprocal empathy.

Luke's characterization of life in the early Jerusalem church subsequent to Pentecost could be seen as a manifestation of such perichoretic communion. The believers were 'all together' (Acts 2:44), and were 'one in heart and mind' and 'shared everything they had' (Acts 4:32). One consequence of this remarkably attractive quality of Christian common life was numerical growth: 'the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47).

The concept of perichoresis can illuminate the nature of ministry in the New Testament and in the church today. Jesus practised ministry in perichoretic

communion with the Father: the miracles that he performed were not done acting alone; they reflected the fact that the Father was in him and that he was in the Father (Jn 10:38). He never spoke on his own authority, but first listened to the Father, and then spoke what the Father commanded him to say (Jn 12:49, 50; 8:26). Before acting, he first observed what the Father was doing (Jn 5:19). Jesus practised ministry with a consciousness of being in the presence of the Father (Jn 8:29) and in partnership with the Father, and his perichoretic practice of ministry is the pattern for our ministries as disciples of Christ.²² Ministering for Christ is first a matter of abiding *in* Christ (Jn 15:5), for apart from him our ministries will have not have lasting and eternal value.

Perichoretic communion, then, can be seen to be 'properly basic' to the Christian faith—to Christian salvation, life, and ministry. Christian existence is a life of interconnectedness, inter-subjectivity, and interdependence—a participation in the life of the Trinity, in Jesus' joyous fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised that when the Spirit came his disciples would know by personal experience that he was in the Father and that 'you are in me, and I am in you' (Jn 14:20). It is our great privilege as his disciples to believe that promise and to live into it, for by so doing, we will increase the likelihood that the world will believe that Jesus was indeed the one who was sent by the Father (Jn 17:21).

²² I have developed this point in greater detail in John Jefferson Davis, *Practicing Ministry in the Presence of God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, forthcoming 2015).