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*OPERA TRINITATIS AD EXTRA TANQUAM
PROVIDENTIA DEI:*
A DOGMATIC ADUMBRATION OF GOD'S
TELEOLOGICAL TRIUNE ACTIVITY

ALEXANDER H. PIERCE

TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL, 2065 HALF DAY ROAD, T-2112, DEERFIELD IL 60015
ahpierce16@gmail.com

Twentieth-century theologians Karl Barth and Otto Weber have suggested that the intermingling of nascent Christianity with philosophical systems such as Platonism or Aristotelianism has isolated the Christian doctrine of providence from any sustained consideration of the tri-personal God revealed in Christ. However, a specifically Christian account of divine providence must examine what it means for the God who is provident to be identified as the Trinitarian God. Inasmuch as God's providence is willed eternally and enacted everlastingly the doctrine of providence encompasses all divine activity in the Creator-creature relationship. Moreover, all *opera trinitatis ad extra* are teleological in nature, having as their *telos* eschatological communion.¹ In this broad sense, God's providence can be explicated only by means of the Christian specification of how it is the triune God brings his creatures from their creaturely origin to immortal existence in contemplation of and communion with Him.²

The following account will consist of three parts. First, two basic constitutive judgments of historic trinitarian theology will be briefly expounded. Second, this twofold conception of triune activity will be used to aid reflection on three particular instances of divine activity—creation, redemption, and sanctification—each of which figures in God's

¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* Bk. V, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, [hereafter ANF] ed. by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (New York: Scribner's, 1913) vol. 1, pp. 526-67.

² John Webster, 'On the Theology of Providence', in *The Providence of God: Deus Habet Consilium*, ed. by Francesca Aran Murphy and Philip G. Ziegler (London: T & T Clark, 2009), pp. 158-75 (see pp. 160-1). So Webster: 'conceptual-topical treatment must be undertaken in such a way that the primary historical order of the canon in which all doctrines are being treated all the time is not set aside' (p. 160).

directing of his creation towards its *telos*.³ Finally, I will briefly outline a couple prospective axioms funded by this account.

I. TRIUNE ACTIVITY: UNITY AND DISTINCTION IN *OPERA TRINITATIS AD EXTRA*

A brief look at Pro-Nicene trinitarian theology yields two reciprocating judgments concerning the economic operation of the triune God: (1) unity of activity and (2) the appropriation of certain divine activities to individual persons. Many Pro-Nicene theologians hold to the unity and inseparability of the *opera trinitatis ad extra*.⁴ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were, by virtue of their consubstantiality, determined to be one in *ousia* and also therefore in *energeia* (Latin *operatio*).⁵ In other words, many base the inseparability of operations on (1) ontological or volitional unity among the divine persons, which was understood in terms of a triadic divine simplicity, and (2) Scripture's testimony concerning God's working in the economy of salvation (e.g., John 5:19; Acts 2:33; Titus 3:5-6; *inter alia*).

In *Ad Eustathius*, Gregory of Nyssa exhibits an instructive circularity in his demonstration of the unity of operations present in the testimony of Scripture. He argues that this perceptible unity of activity functioned as corroborative evidence for human understanding of the unity of nature among Father, Son, and Spirit. Yet, the unity of activity perceived is, ontologically speaking, the consequence of tri-personal consubstantiality.⁶ Gregory's extended affirmation of inseparable trinitarian operations advances out of his understanding of the unified will of God: 'There is no delay that exists or can be conceived in the motion of the divine will

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 97-128.

⁴ Cf., Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit*, 1.28; in Athanasius, *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, trans. C.R.B. Shapland (London: The Epworth Press, 1951), pp. 133-6.

⁵ T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), p. 74.

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Eustathium de Sancta Trinitate* = *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, [hereafter *NPNF*] ed. by P. Schaff and H. Wace, (New York: Scribner's, 1917), second series, vol. 5, pp. 328-30. For a helpful explanation of this theme in Gregory of Nyssa, cf. Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 231.

from the Father through the Son to the Spirit.⁷ As Michel Barnes advises, the unity among the wills of the three distinct persons functions as a *sine qua non* for Gregory's argument that 'the unity of operations proves unity of nature'.⁸

The accentuation of certain persons in particular divine activities is pervasive in the reflections of the early church fathers.⁹ These hypostatic identifications of divine activity in the creation form what is now considered the doctrine of appropriation, a teaching, which for the pro-Nicenes, was 'an important habit of Christian speech because it is central to Scripture's own speech about the divine persons'.¹⁰ Additionally, the Apostles' and Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creeds are both structured in a manner befitting this doctrine, for rather than speaking of the activities performed by God *triunely*, they both attribute particular activities to Father, Son, and Spirit, respectively. Following the latter creed especially, many associate the Father with creation, the Son with redemption (through incarnation), and the Spirit with sanctification.¹¹

Augustine supports the doctrine of appropriation, but with a strong qualification by way of inseparable operations: 'some things are even said about the persons singly by name; however, they must not be understood in the sense of excluding the other persons, because this same three is also one, and there is one substance and godhead of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit'.¹² Augustine here posits how to maintain both unity and distinction of the Trinity by virtue of the way they characterize the economic activity of the triune God. In short, the doctrine of divine appropriations

⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *On 'Not Three Gods,' Ad Ablabium* = *NPNF*, 2, vol. 5, p. 335. This translation is taken from Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 231.

⁸ Michel René Barnes, 'Divine Unity and the Divided Self: Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology and Its Psychological Context,' *Modern Theology* 18 (2002), 489.

⁹ For a summary of the 'pro-Nicene' Fathers on this topic, cf. Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 297-300. This work of Ayres on the pro-Nicene Fathers is a magnum opus that offers detailed analyses of the prevailing trinitarian theology of the Church Fathers, which emerged 'from the 360s onwards' (p. 240).

¹⁰ Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, p. 299.

¹¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg posits a helpful connection between the order of the divine persons of the Trinity (i.e., the relations of origin) *ad intra* and the operation of God *ad extra*, which results in the following appropriation: creation to the Father, reconciliation to the Son, and eschatological consummation to the Spirit; *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols, trans. by G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) vol. 2, p. 6.

¹² St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 1.19 = *NPNF*, 1, vol. 3, p. 28.

functions as the means by which the Personal property of each divine person is perceived in the economy of salvation as Father, Son, and Spirit are attributed distinctive operations, yet this in accordance with God's unity of will, power, and wisdom, which obtains despite the threeness revealed in the advent of Christ. Together the *opera indivisa trinitatis ad extra* and the doctrine of appropriation form a framework for interpreting the work of God in the enactment of his eternal plan for creation.

II. TELEOLOGICAL TRIUNE ACTIVITY: GOD'S ACTING TOWARD THE TELOS OF HIS *OPERATIO EXTERNA*

A. God's Triune Creative Love. God in his eternal triune perfection freely elected to create with the intention that his creatures would enter into perfect, everlasting fellowship with Him. Creation itself is an act of God, which assumes providential activity.¹³ Thus, the enactment of God's plan begins where the *opera trinitatis ad extra* begin—*creatio ex nihilo*. The intra-trinitarian life obtains necessarily and eternally, but God's relationship to his creation does so by virtue of divine freedom and omniscient, loving election.¹⁴ The former relationship extends to the latter in God's act of creation. The creative love of the triune God, represented by his free determination to create, functions as 'an expression of the perfection of the divine life'.¹⁵ The perfect triune life provides the grammar for the creative act of God. As Gregory of Nyssa put it, creation is to be thought of as 'a transmission of power beginning from the Father, advancing through the Son, and completed in the Spirit'.¹⁶

¹³ As Barth contends, God's knowing, willing, and acting in creation and providence presuppose one another; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 4 volumes in 13 parts (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), III/3, pp. 4-5. [Hereafter indicated by CD followed by volume/part number, and page number.] Pannenberg upholds the inverse relation: 'All that is said about God's ruling and preserving presupposes creation' (*Systematic Theology*, 2:37).

¹⁴ For a similar statement of this relationship, cf., Christoph Schwöbel, 'God, Creation, and the Christian Community', in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History, and Philosophy*, ed. by Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004), pp. 149-76; see p. 156; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, p. 1. Athanasius states this conceptual priority in his response to Arius' heretical claims against the primacy of God's Fatherhood over against his role as Creator: *Orationes Contra Arianos*, I.20 = *NPNF*, 2, vol. 4, p. 318.

¹⁵ Schwöbel, 'God, Creation, and the Christian Community', p. 159.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Eustathius* 3.1.100 = *NPNF* 2, vol. 5, pp. 326-30. This translation is taken from Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, p. 207.

The first article of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed designated God the Father as ‘maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible’. The Christian tradition specifies the Father as the accentuated person of the Godhead with respect to God’s creative activity. This accords with the relations of origin in the Godhead, according to which the Father is the source of the eternal processions of Son and Spirit, the fount of divinity. The Father is not only the fount of being, however, but also functions as the loving Father over creation just as he is a loving Father to the Son.¹⁷ So Weber pronounces, ‘the creation is the work of the Father, not “without” the Son and the Spirit, but it is not the peculiar work of the Son or of the Spirit’.¹⁸

Not only the Father, but the Son and Spirit also participate in the creative act. Holy Scripture testifies that God’s creative act is a triune act of God involving in particular ways both the Son (John 1:1-3, 10; Eph. 2:10; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:3) and the Spirit (Gen. 1:2; Job 33:4; Ps. 104:30). In Genesis 1:1, the reference to the plural *’ēlōhīm* as the subject of the creative act is a reference to God the Father as he is distinct from the Holy Spirit described in the next verse as ‘the Spirit of God hovering over the waters’. Gregory of Nyssa summarizes the trinitarian shape of God’s creative act: ‘The fountain of power is the Father and the power of the Father is the Son and the spirit of that power is the Holy Spirit and creation is entirely... the achievement of the divine power.’¹⁹

The doctrine of creation’s assertion that God created *ex nihilo* suggests that all created things have complete ontological dependence on God, even rational creatures (1 Cor. 11:12b). God created human persons in his Image (Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 8). This is the act, which Jürgen Moltmann has identified as the ‘culmination’ of creation.²⁰ Human persons, by virtue of the *imago Dei*, are given ontological, functional, and ethical dignity. The nature of these creatures as rational agents bearing the *imago Dei* was such that they were created free to act in accordance with their own intellect and volition. This freedom is not stifled, but rather ‘secured’ by God’s governance over his creation, which allows human persons to live faithfully unto the end for which they were created.²¹ This very freedom, along with the inchoate state of humanity’s existence, combined to allow

¹⁷ Barth, *CD* III/3, p. 28.

¹⁸ O. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, 2 vols, trans. by Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), vol. 1, p. 393.

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Spiritu Sancto*: 3.1.100 = *NPNF* 2, vol. 5, p. 320. This translation is taken from Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, p. 207.

²⁰ Moltmann, *The Trinity*, p. 116.

²¹ Webster, ‘On the Theology of Providence’, p. 170.

for the corruption of creaturely existence as such in the fall of humankind recorded in Genesis 3.

Before the despair aroused by the great loss entailed by the fall overwhelms, however, this event must be recast in light of the triune God's overcoming love for his creation. God, in his omniscience, knew this would happen when he nevertheless determined to create despite the self-inflicted curse of humanity (cf. Eph. 1:11; 1 Pet. 1:20). In choosing to grant the gift of existence to creatures despite their inevitable failure, God did not passively abandon them, nor did he only provide the possibility for human persons to mature beyond their former penultimate fellowship in the garden. God eternally decreed to bring reconciliation between himself and humanity so that certain creatures may proceed into the ultimate, everlasting, and perfect communion of mutual love and glory with their God.

B. Triune Redemption & Reconciliation through Incarnation, Atonement, and Resurrection. In advance of the broken covenantal relationship between the triune God and his beloved creatures, God elected to love them in a special fashion, providing a path toward perfect communion with himself. In the incarnation of the Son of God as Jesus Christ, God initiated the execution of this reconciliatory plan.²² By virtue of his active obedience, the sinless human life Jesus lived (Rom. 4:23-25; 5:16; 2 Cor. 5:21; Eph. 2:8-10), and his atoning work as the blood sacrifice for humanity (Matt. 26:28; 1 Pet. 3:18; Heb. 9:12; 1 John 2:2), he made it possible for God's creatures to live unto and eventually in perfect communion with the triune God. As a summit point in God's providential activity, Jesus Christ fulfilled perfect humanity by faithfully living as the quintessential image and likeness of God. By believing in the good news of the gospel, individual human persons are united to him in the *mortificatio* of the flesh and the subsequent *vivificatio* of the Spirit (2 Cor. 5:14-15). This is the accentuated role of the Son in the triune activity of God for the accomplishment of man's redemption and reconciliation with God (Col. 1:19-20).

The Father not only eternally begets the Son, but he (together with the Son and Spirit) also eternally decrees the incarnation of the Son for the redemption of human persons. The Father thus sends the Son, but he does not send the Son to be alone in the economic order, for he bestows the Spirit on him (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:35). From the very conception of Christ the Holy Spirit is actively present in the incarnate existence of the

²² Cf., Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* I.4 = *NPNF* 2, vol. 4, p. 38; Thomson, *Athanasius*, pp. 142-3.

Word of God. The incarnation of Jesus, who was sent by the Father, and anointed by the Holy Spirit, contains Christ's atoning sacrifice, which satisfies the justice of the Father (Rom. 3:25), and his resurrection, which accomplishes victory over death (1 Cor. 15:50-57). It is by virtue of Jesus' resurrection that the atonement is demonstrated to be efficacious, for it is not enough for human persons to die with Christ (*mortificatio*), but they need also to rise with him (*vivificatio*).

The entire process of redemption enacted by the Father through Christ in the Spirit can also be understood as recreation, which terminates in new creation. Christ, by entering with his human nature into the eternal glorification of the Word by the Spirit, made it possible for human persons also to enter into that perfect communion of mutual glorification.²³ Humanity, however, is incapable of laying hold of the reality exhibited in Christ's life and death. Another witness is thus required. This witness is the Holy Spirit, who bestows the gift of faith upon human persons so that in them the work of the Father in Christ is not only believed (*de dicto*), but is internalized (*de re*) in order to facilitate their union with Christ and subsequent sanctification.²⁴

C. The Triune God's Sanctification of All Things. The witness of the *missio Christi* is the Holy Spirit (John 15:26-27), the accentuated divine person of sanctification who brings to fulfilment the penultimate stage of God's plan for created existence by dispensing redemption (*fides qua receptio*) and sanctification. This work of the Holy Spirit involves both the Father and the Son as the *missio Spiritus Sancti ad creatio* emanates from the Father as the working out of the mission of Christ to restore human persons to right relationship with God. As Gregory of Nyssa intimates, 'the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit alike give sanctification, and life, and light, and comfort, and all similar graces'.²⁵

The progressive work of the Holy Spirit to make all things new, which one may call sanctification, is active from the beginning of creation until history's consummation, but this work takes centre stage when

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Solomon* 15 in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Song of Songs*, ed. by Brian E. Daley and John T. Fitzgerald, trans. Richard A. Norris, Jr. (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), pp. 496-7). Cf., Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 308-9; Moltmann, *The Trinity*, p. 176.

²⁴ Weber explains, 'Thus, the work of the Spirit consists, by appropriation, of opening man to the work of the Father in the Son, making man into a man for God because God is for man. This work is still best formulated with the old concept of "sanctification"' (Weber, *Foundations*, vol. 1, p. 395 n.142).

²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On 'Not Three Gods,' Ad Ablabium* = NPNF 2, vol. 5, p. 328.

Jesus Christ, the Logos incarnate, sends the Spirit to that already nascent *ekklēsia* made up of Jesus' followers (Acts 2). This momentous occasion at Pentecost marks the beginning of the new age of the Spirit promised long before to the prophets (Joel 2:28-32).²⁶ The ushering in of this age of the Holy Spirit marks the beginning of the end, the 'last days' (Acts 2:17: *en tais eschatais hēmerais*).²⁷

Sanctification is the final act in the enactment of God's plan to bring creation into perfect fellowship with himself. The Spirit's eschatological work of sanctification can be divided into two correlative acts: purification and perfection. The former applies specifically to the community of faith and the latter to the creation as a whole. Purification presupposes the giving of the Spirit to creation as a Gift. As the divine Gift, the Holy Spirit bestows his gift of faith unto certain human persons so that they might believe in the person and work of Christ and in the authority of his verbally inspired Word (John 16:13; 2 Tim. 3:16). The Holy Spirit then liberates these believers to be gradually conformed to the likeness of Christ, for, as Tertullian declared, 'the will of God is our sanctification, for he wishes his "image"—us—to become also his "likeness," that we may be "holy" just as he himself is "holy"'.²⁸ Purification, as the first act of eschatological sanctification appropriated to the Holy Spirit, is aimed at the achievement of perfect holiness in the pattern of Christ, yet such sanctity cannot be attained in this temporal life, but only in the eternal life to which believers direct their hope (Titus 1:1-2; 3:6-7).

Perfection, on the other hand, is the end to be accomplished by virtue of the 'experience of the Spirit,' which comes with these last days: '[beginning] the completion and perfecting of the creation of human beings and all things'.²⁹ The Holy Spirit makes holy the nature of humankind, opening her 'to the work of the Father in the Son, making man into a man for

²⁶ The Holy Spirit should not be abstracted as merely consonant with the *Zeitgeist* of the modern day, however, but is specified by his identification as the 'Spirit of Christ'. The Word functions as the rule by which the Christian knows what is of the Spirit. Ephraim Radner attempts to combat this kind of pneumatological abstraction in 'The Holy Spirit and Unity: Getting Out of the Way of Christ', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16 (2014), 207-20.

²⁷ Thus, Moltmann: 'In the Spirit people already experience now what is still to come. In the Spirit is anticipated what will be in the future. With the Spirit the End-time begins' (*The Trinity*, p. 124).

²⁸ Tertullian, *On Purity* I = ANF vol. 4, p. 50.

²⁹ Moltmann, *The Trinity*, p. 125. As Weber notes, 'the two notions of creation and of vocation to divine communion are always associated' (*Foundations*, vol. 1, p. 395 n.142).

God because God is for man'.³⁰ In other words, the perfecting aspect of this transfigural sanctification is the gradual transformation of all created things, in accordance with their nature, to their elected *telos*. Yet, this activity is never completed, but always in process until the return of Christ at which time creation will finally be rendered new so that the people God has prepared for Himself will share in communion with his perfect triune life.

The Holy Spirit's eschatological work also contains the glorification of the Son and the Father (Phil. 2:10-11): 'the Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus the Son and the through him God the Father.'³¹ The creature comprehends this *operatio externa trinitatis* in reverse order, however, experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit by which the person and work of Jesus are glorified, which is also to glorify the Father who sent Him. It is the final state of eschatological unity bound up in mutual love and glorification that stands as the fulfilment of the Spirit's work of sanctification. The end of creation is the entrance of God's beloved into the circle of mutual glorification known as Father, Son, and Spirit.³² By virtue of our triune Provider's activity in creation, redemption, and sanctification, this perfect end will indeed be accomplished.

III. CONCLUSION: PROVISIONAL AXIOMS

The perfect communion of mutual love and glory between the triune God and his sanctified creation quite literally is the *raison d'être* of all *operationes externae trinitatis*. Divine providence is in its broadest form this all-encompassing enactment of God's plan to bring about his end for creation. This broad construal of the enactment of God's providential care for creation in his teleological triune activity *ad extra* substantiates the declaration of Moltmann that 'the teleological principle of thought penetrates the very heart of the Christian message'.³³ Despite the recent proliferation of theological reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of providence has remained nearly unaffected. In many cases the questions of contemporary theology have set the terms of theological inquiry rather than the normative formulations of ancient Christianity. However, the expository task of theology must be undertaken before apologetic concerns are satisfied. For these reasons, the present project has taken its contribution to be one of expository rehabilitation rather

³⁰ Weber, *Foundations*, vol. 1, p. 395 n.142.

³¹ Moltmann, *The Trinity*, p. 126.

³² Cf. Anatolios on Gregory of Nyssa, *Retrieving Nicaea*, pp. 209-10.

³³ Moltmann, *The Trinity*, p. 90.

than that of making apologetic claims about the still important topics of causality, science, human freedom, or evil.

I conclude this reorientation to providence doctrine by setting forth two explicit axioms of the approach:

(1) The triunity of the Christian God necessarily shapes Christian doctrine: Specifically, this model provides resources to enhance the generically monotheistic accounts most often put forth concerning divine providence; in contrast to these standard considerations, divine activity in the world, on the part of the Christian, needs to be considered in terms of God's tripersonal identity.

(2) The providential activity of the eternal and omniscient God encompasses his election and creation: Providence is not merely the action God takes once he elects and creates, but instead comprises all divine activity *ad extra*, for the eternality of God does not fit with a temporal sequencing of divine activity that suggests that he is merely figuring things out as he goes along.

The preceding account has necessarily taken the form of an adumbration, but hopefully one that will function as the impetus for an extended exposition of God's providence under the guise of these trinitarian and teleological insights. It is within this framework that the Christian theologian is empowered to deliberate upon contemporary apologetic questions.