

## THE FUNCTION OF PERICHORESIS AND THE DIVINE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY

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### I. *Introduction*

Reformed Trinitarian theism best encapsulates the theology of Cornelius Van Til. He says, “Basic to all the doctrines of Christian theism is that of the self-contained God, or, if we wish, that of the ontological Trinity. It is this notion of the ontological Trinity that ultimately controls a truly Christian methodology.”<sup>1</sup> Again, “unless we may hold to the presupposition of the self-contained ontological Trinity, human rationality itself is a mirage.”<sup>2</sup> The ontological Trinity provides the architectonic principle in Van Til’s theology and apologetic.

However, the doctrine of the Trinity in Van Til’s thought is as controversial as it is foundational. Regarding the Trinity, Van Til makes the following statements, which, when taken together, provide a formulation which John Frame called “a very bold theological move.”<sup>3</sup> What is this bold move? Van Til argues:

It is sometimes asserted that we can prove to men that we are not assuming anything that they ought to consider irrational, inasmuch as we say that God is one in essence and three in person. We therefore claim that we have not asserted unity and trinity of exactly the same thing. Yet this is not the whole truth of the matter. We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person.<sup>4</sup>

Notice that Van Til does not assert that the person/essence formulation is false, or in need of replacement; instead, he argues that the statement “God is one in essence and three in person” does not yield the “whole truth of the matter.” Again Van Til says, “We must hold that God’s being holds an absolute numerical identity. And even within the ontological Trinity we must maintain that God is one. He is one person.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1972), 9.

<sup>3</sup> John Frame, *Van Til: The Theologian* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974), 229.

<sup>5</sup> Van Til, *Introduction*, 229.

The natural question that arises is, precisely what does Van Til's formulation provide that is lacking in certain person/essence formulae? In answering this question, I will attempt to place Van Til's formulation in its broader theological context by examining the central matrix of concepts in Van Til's theology that bear on his Trinitarian theology, including God's incomprehensibility and analogical reasoning. In that theological context, I will attempt to elucidate Van Til's formulations of God's Trinitarian existence, respond to objections regarding his formulations, and explain Van Til's reasons for stating the matter as he does.

Van Til's language regarding the Trinity may appear problematic, but it does not pose insuperable difficulties regarding the orthodoxy of his formulations; rather, we will see that Van Til is simply extending catholic, Trinitarian orthodoxy in the service of Reformed apologetics. In the course of developing the arguments below, I intend to substantiate two distinct yet related claims. The first claim is that Van Til's formulation of God as one person<sup>6</sup> depends upon his appropriation of the doctrine of perichoresis<sup>7</sup> as found in the great nineteenth-century defender of Reformed Orthodoxy, Charles Hodge. The second claim is that Van Til's Trinitarian formulation arises out of his apologetic concern to accentuate God's incomprehensibility in the context of "univocal reasoning." The first consideration helps us to understand Van Til's theological rationale for claiming that God is one person, and the second observation enables us to recognize an obvious apologetic reason for asserting that God is one person.

My basic contention is that Van Til recognizes in the doctrine of perichoresis an aspect of Trinitarian theology which entails that the formulation "one in essence, three in person," while intrinsically accurate, could be construed in such a way that it does not clearly yield "the whole truth of the matter" regarding God's Trinitarian existence. In other words, perichoresis entails that the formula "one in essence, and three in person" must explain the mysterious interpenetration of the persons in the Godhead. Also, the doctrine of perichoresis provides a distinctively Trinitarian explication of God's incomprehensibility. It is in this context that Van Til would place God's Trinitarian existence before the bar of "univocal" reason, which assumes that it has adequately represented the fullness

<sup>6</sup> As we will see, Van Til's language is appropriate, given the qualifications he provides in the course of his argument. It is outside the bounds of this study to enquire if Van Til could have made the same point(s) by using different (or more felicitous) terminology. However, as Calvin indicated in his debates with Caroli, the language utilized in Trinitarian formulae must remain flexible, since the primary concern is a faithful communication of the *content* of Trinitarian theology. My contention in this essay is that Van Til communicates perfectly orthodox theology in language that can be refined and clarified. In fact, this essay offers an attempt both to locate the precedent for Van Til's formulations and specify as precisely as possible the substance of Van Til's argument, which includes elaboration on the sense in which it is permissible to speak of God as one in essence and three in person, on the one hand, and one person, on the other hand. I also attempt to offer a formulation that preserves Van Til's concern that we avoid both the heresies of Sabellianism and Tritheism.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald O'Collins helpfully defines perichoresis as "the reciprocal presence and interpenetration of the three divine persons" (*The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* [New York: Paulist Press, 1999], 206).

of God's intratrinitarian existence by means of a person/essence formula that is articulated in a way that ignores or minimizes perichoresis.<sup>8</sup>

## II. *Van Til's Trinitarian Formulations: Perichoresis and Incomprehensibility*

### 1. *Trinitarian Orthodoxy: Essence, Person, and Perichoresis*

Van Til opens chapter 17 of *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, entitled "The Trinity of God," by making what some consider a novel move in Trinitarian theology.<sup>9</sup> In the opening paragraph of the chapter, Van Til indicates that orthodox Trinitarian theology must be guided by two assertions that we hold with equal vigor and tenacity. He says, "[W]e speak of God as a person; yet we speak also of three persons in the Godhead."<sup>10</sup> Stated from a more philosophical standpoint, this means that "[u]nity and plurality are equally ultimate in the Godhead," so that "God is a one-conscious being, and yet he is also a tri-conscious being."<sup>11</sup> From the very outset of the chapter, Van Til sketches an overview of his fundamental argument that runs throughout the rest of the chapter.

In the course of developing the rationale for his opening assertions, Van Til reflects on the orthodoxy of the ecumenical councils. In particular, Van Til notes with great approval that the Council of Nicea rejected both the heresies of Arianism and Sabellianism:

When the Nicene council met to state and defend the true doctrine of the Trinity, it rejected Arianism by stating that Christ is "homoousia to patri" and Sabellianism, by stating that the persons were persons in the ontological Trinity, and *not merely economical manifestations with respect to the world*.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note at this point that Van Til clearly rejects any Trinitarian formulation that would entail a proposition compatible with Sabellianism. This provides a helpful contextual clue that Van Til is very aware of the heresy and therefore crafts his Trinitarian formulations with an acute awareness of the dangers posed to the church in light of Sabellianism.

In the same paragraph affirming the fundamental correctness of Nicene Trinitarian theology, Van Til cites this Trinitarian insight from Charles Hodge:

As the essence of the Godhead is common to the several persons, they have a common intelligence, will and power. There are not in God three intelligences, three wills,

<sup>8</sup> In this sense, then, Van Til does not have the orthodox tradition in view; instead, he makes his formulations in light of *rationalistic distortions* of the orthodox position (i.e., the essence/person formulation construed in a way which denies or greatly minimizes the doctrines of perichoresis and incomprehensibility). Perhaps Van Til has in mind the rationalistic formulations of Gordon Clark.

<sup>9</sup> Regarding Van Til's insistence that God is one person, Gordon Clark asks the rhetorical question, "Could not one call it a novelty?" (*The Trinity* [Jefferson, Md.: The Trinity Foundation, 1990], 88).

<sup>10</sup> Van Til, *Introduction*, 220.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 225 (italics mine).

three efficiencies. The three are one God, and, therefore, have *one mind and will*. This intimate union was expressed in the Greek church by the word *perichoresis*, which the Latin words ‘*inextentia*,’ ‘*inhabitatio*’ and ‘*intercommunio*,’ were used to explain (Vol. I, p. 461).<sup>13</sup>

In short, Hodge argues that while the persons remain distinct hypostases, nevertheless they have “*one mind and one will*.” In the diversity of intratrinitarian life, Hodge takes perichoresis to entail a single will and mind in the Triune God. Perichoresis leaves the tripersonality of God intact, yet he affirms that the *three* persons nonetheless have *one mind*.<sup>14</sup>

Given the fact that within the Godhead there is a common mind, Hodge next observes that a common mind implies a common knowledge and consciousness. In Hodge’s own language, “a common knowledge implies a common consciousness.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the movement in view is as follows: one will, one mind, and one consciousness. To grant that the Triune God has one will and one mind implies that within the Godhead there exists one common consciousness. In other words, then, Hodge extends the perfectly acceptable observation that God has “*one will and mind*” to the insight that God has “*one consciousness*.” From this, Hodge makes the natural inference that it is appropriate to address God in this sense as “*a person*.”

Hodge moves on in his analysis of Nicene Trinitarianism to explain an important implication of perichoresis. He says, “This fact—of the intimate union, communion, and inhabitation of the persons of the Trinity—is the reason why everywhere in Scripture and instinctively by all Christians, God as God is addressed as a *person*, in *perfect consistency* with the tripersonality of the Godhead.”<sup>16</sup> Notice that Hodge understands perichoresis to imply that it is not only acceptable to refer to God in his unity as a person, but also that addressing God as a person is perfectly consistent with his tripersonality (i.e., the rejection of Sabellianism). Hodge stoutly maintains that the implications of perichoresis are consistent with the tripersonality of the Godhead. To speak of God as a person in no way entails the negation of the distinguishing personal properties within the ontological Trinity.

Hodge next argues that “[w]e can, and do pray to each of the Persons separately; and we pray to God as God; for the three persons are one God, one *not only in substance, but in knowledge, will, and power*.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, in light of the doctrine of perichoresis, Hodge thinks that the unity of God can and ought to be

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. (italics mine).

<sup>14</sup> From a historical perspective, T. F. Torrance reminds us of the origin of the term perichoresis in orthodox Trinitarian theology. He says, “it is to Gregory Nazianzen that theology owes the terminology for *perichoretic* relation applied by patristic theology to the way in which the Divine Persons mutually contain and interpenetrate one another while completely retaining their incommunicable differences as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. . . . In the Holy Trinity all subsistent relations are in eternal movement mutually containing and interpenetrating one another in such a way that in and through their distinctive properties they constitute a perfectly homogenous communion in one Being as Three in One and One in Three” (*Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994], 33).

<sup>15</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:461.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1:462 (italics mine).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

explained in terms that *move beyond* the use of substance terminology.<sup>18</sup> God is not only one in his essence, but he is one person in a manner consistent with his tripersonality, that is, the incommunicable personal properties that distinguish the hypostases of the Godhead.<sup>19</sup> These statements in Hodge amount to Trinitarian theology which rejects soundly any form of Sabellianism, but which is also not willing to allow a rationalistic formulation of an orthodox Trinitarian formula to obscure the implications of perichoresis.

Interestingly, Hodge avows that the church's affirmation of the doctrine of perichoresis involves profound mystery to the finite mind:

To expect that we, who cannot understand anything, not even ourselves, should understand these mysteries of the Godhead, is to the last degree unreasonable. But as in every other sphere we must believe what we cannot understand; so we may believe all that God has revealed in his Word concerning Himself, although we cannot understand the Almighty unto perfection.<sup>20</sup>

Hodge recognizes that the mysteries of God's intratrinitarian existence infinitely transcend the limitations of human reason, particularly in light of the perichoretic relationships. Perichoresis in Hodge's theology involves a description of God's unity which moves beyond a mere unity of essence (i.e., toward a unified person) without compromising the tripersonality of the Godhead, and such a formulation accentuates God's incomprehensibility.

Hodge's appropriation of perichoresis is also designed to avoid the danger of Tritheism. Hodge is simply reminding us that any attempt to explain or describe the Trinity as three independent, self-conscious centers within the Godhead implies three distinct wills and minds. Gerald O'Collins notes that such an individualistic conception of person,

when applied to the tripersonal God, leads one to the picture of independent, fully divine minds and wills, which could even slip into inadvertent conflict. Such a conception can hardly ward off Tritheism or the idea of three self sufficient subjects who enjoy a separate existence, always act together as a closely meshed community of divine individuals, but do not constitute one God.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to reference Bavinck's formulation that "[t]here is in God *one* mind, *one* will" (Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* [Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1991], 298). This statement comes immediately after the observation that "in God there is one eternal, omnipotent, omniscient nature." Hence, it seems that Bavinck, along with Hodge, is willing to move beyond the bare language of essence, nature, or substance to describe God's unity. Bavinck understands the unity of God to involve a unity of mind and will, not a mere unity of essence or nature. This is perfectly agreeable with the formulations of Hodge and Van Til.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to remember that Hodge understands his Trinitarian theology in general, and his position regarding the eternal generation of the Son in particular, as perfectly compatible with Calvin's position (*Systematic Theology*, 1:471-477). In fact, another advocate of Old Princeton orthodoxy observes that "Calvin's attitude on these matters is precisely repeated by Dr. Charles Hodge in his discussion in his 'Systematic Theology'" (B. B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Calvin and Calvinism* [ed. John E. Meeter; vol. 5 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000], 250).

<sup>20</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:462.

<sup>21</sup> O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 177.

In other words, O'Collins makes explicit what Hodge leaves implicit, namely, that "a threefold subsistence does not entail three consciousness and three wills, as if the three persons, each with their own separate characteristics, constituted a kind of divine committee."<sup>22</sup> Instead, "One consciousness subsists in a three-fold way and is shared by all three persons, albeit by each of them distinctively."<sup>23</sup> Hence, in a way parallel to Hodge, O'Collins affirms that the theological significance of perichoresis "means a supremely intense and blissful mutual presence, a reciprocal coinherence and participation in each other that, however, stops short of the three persons being swallowed up by each other or disappearing into one another."<sup>24</sup> For O'Collins, a vigorous advocate of catholic Trinitarian theology, perichoresis avoids both the dangers of Tritheism and Sabellianism.

This is precisely Hodge's point, and this is the context in view when Van Til quotes Hodge to the effect that, although there are three persons in the Godhead, nevertheless "they have a common intelligence, will and power. There are not in God three intelligences, three wills, three efficiencies. The three are one God, and, therefore, have one mind and will."<sup>25</sup> All of this implies that Van Til is perfectly within the confines of Princeton's catholic Trinitarian orthodoxy when he affirms that the person/essence formula, when formulated in a manner that neglects perichoresis, "is not the whole truth of the matter," since "God . . . the whole Godhead, is one person."<sup>26</sup>

These rather subtle points appear clearly in Van Til's formulations. Van Til notes that

God . . . is one person. When we say that we believe in a personal God, we do not merely mean that we believe in a God to whom the adjective "personality" may be attached. God is not an essence that has personality; He is absolute personality. Yet, within the being of the one person we are permitted and compelled by Scripture to make the distinction between a specific or generic type of being, and three personal subsistences.<sup>27</sup>

Perichoresis involves both an affirmation that God is one person and the differentiation of the personal subsistences within the Godhead. In other words, perichoresis helps to cut a straight course between the twin heresies of Sabellianism and Tritheism (and Arianism).<sup>28</sup> For Van Til, then, the persons of the Godhead are not artificially attached to an impersonal essence, since that would involve three distinct and independent centers of consciousness within the Trinity.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>25</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:461.

<sup>26</sup> Van Til, *Introduction*, 229.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 229-30.

<sup>28</sup> Van Til notes that when "Scripture ascribes certain works specifically to the Father, others specifically to the Son, and still others specifically to the Spirit, we are compelled to presuppose a genuine distinction within the Godhead back of that ascription. On the other hand, the work ascribed to any of the persons is the work of one absolute person. We are always in danger . . . of turning in the direction of Sabellianism by allowing the absolute unity of God to do despite to the

Instead, we ought to say that God is an “absolute personality” in such a way that the genuine distinctions among the persons are not obliterated or compromised. In Van Til’s words, “we need *both* the *absolute coterminity* of each attribute and each person with the whole being of God, *and* the genuine significance of the *distinctions* of the attributes and the persons.”<sup>29</sup>

In fact, just as Van Til wants to affirm that God is one person on the basis of perichoresis, while recognizing the unique properties that distinguish the persons within the Godhead, so also he affirms that “God is a one-conscious being, and yet he is also a tri-conscious being.”<sup>30</sup> Van Til grants that there is a “tri-conscious(ness)” in the Godhead, but he will not allow that insight to entail the Tritheistic error that there are three *independent* self-conscious centers in the Godhead. Instead, God is not only “three-conscious,” but he is also “one-conscious.” He is absolute self-consciousness. This formulation guarantees that Van Til’s recognition of a “tri-conscious” being does not imply the heresy of Tritheism, and his affirmation of a “one-conscious” God does not entail the heresy of Sabellianism.

It seems clear from Van Til’s reflections that he does not intend to *replace* a traditional Trinitarian formula; instead he wants to *supplement* a potentially deficient expression of the orthodox formula. Remember, Van Til affirms that the traditional formulation “is not the *whole truth* of the matter.”<sup>31</sup> The person/essence formulation is accurate and veridical so far as it goes. However, Van Til is convinced that such a formulation, if left as the sole statement of Trinitarian orthodoxy and articulated in a rationalistic manner which fails to take account of perichoresis, simply fails to explain adequately the complexity and richness of orthodox Trinitarian theology. Van Til’s formulation actually takes into account a critical contribution of orthodoxy and avoids a truncated version of Trinitarian theology.

Moreover, Van Til opposes Sabellianism with equal vigor. Lest he be misunderstood, Van Til affirms that there are three distinct persons within the Godhead, not merely three distinct manifestations of one Person. He says, “each of the persons of the Trinity is exhaustive of divinity itself, while *yet there is a genuine distinction between [sic] the persons.*”<sup>32</sup> In affirming that God is one person, Van Til quickly adds a qualification: “Nor is it to say that the distinctions of the persons are *merely nominal.*”<sup>33</sup> No Sabellian can affirm genuine distinctions among the persons of the Trinity which are *not merely nominal* in character. Consequently, Van Til denies the *sine qua non* of Sabellianism, and he argues that the differences among the persons of the Trinity are genuine differences that rest in distinct personal properties. It is therefore impossible to entertain seriously the

genuine personal distinctions in the Godhead, or of turning to Arianism by allowing the distinctions of the persons in the Godhead to do despite to the absolute unity of the being of God” (*Introduction*, 228-29).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 220 (italics mine).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 229 (italics mine).

notion that Van Til advocates a Trinitarian formulation that entails a proposition compatible with Sabellianism. His formulation of perichoresis, along with his explicit and vigorous rejection of Sabellianism, simply will not allow it.

In these ways, Van Til merely echoes what appeared in Hodge almost a century earlier. Hodge maintains that “the three persons are one God, one *not only in substance, but in knowledge, will, and power.*”<sup>34</sup> While affirming the person/essence formula as veridical, Hodge adds that perichoresis entails a unity in the Godhead which moves beyond the language of substance. Van Til’s affirmation is virtually identical. He argues that the person/essence (e.g., substance) formula is “not the whole truth of the matter,” and immediately adds that “God is a Person. . . . [Y]et, within the being of the one person we are permitted and compelled by Scripture to make the distinction between a specific or generic type of being and three personal subsistences.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Hodge argues that given the doctrine of perichoresis, the Triune God has “one will and mind,” is “addressed as a person,” but in such a way as to maintain “*perfect consistency* with the tripersonality of the Godhead.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, while Van Til affirms that “God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one Person,”<sup>37</sup> nevertheless, he argues with equal vigor that “there is a genuine distinction between [*sic*] the persons,”<sup>38</sup> so that it is wrong to assert that “the distinctions of the persons are *merely nominal.*”<sup>39</sup> God is not only “tri-conscious” but “one-conscious.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, in light of the doctrine of perichoresis, both Hodge and Van Til believe that we ought to express the unity of God in language which both incorporates *yet moves beyond* the language of substance, and neither Van Til nor Hodge sets God’s unity as one person over against God’s tripersonality. Finally, Hodge argues that “[t]o expect that we, who cannot understand anything, not even ourselves, should understand these mysteries of the Godhead, is to the *last degree unreasonable.*”<sup>41</sup> Van Til notes “as Christians we say that this is a mystery that is beyond our comprehension.”<sup>42</sup> The parallels are striking indeed and illustrate well the fact that Van Til is by no means innovative in his Trinitarian theology.

From this presentation, it seems rather obvious that Van Til is simply following Hodge’s Trinitarian formulations. Not only does Van Til quote Hodge regarding the perichoretic relationships within the ontological Trinity, but he draws inferences from perichoresis which are virtually identical to Hodge’s. Van Til’s formulations therefore find clear precedent in the Trinitarian theology of Old Princeton as articulated by Charles Hodge. One need look no further than Old Princeton to find both the *impetus and content* of Van Til’s Trinitarian theology.

<sup>34</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:462.

<sup>35</sup> Van Til, *Introduction*, 230.

<sup>36</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:462 (italics mine).

<sup>37</sup> Van Til, *Introduction*, 229.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 220 (italics mine).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 229 (italics mine).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>41</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:462.

<sup>42</sup> Van Til, *Introduction*, 230.

## *2. Divine Incomprehensibility and the Apologetic Function of Perichoresis*

Not only does Van Til have a strong theological reason for his Trinitarian formulations (i.e., the theological implications of perichoresis), but he also has a distinctive apologetic justification for formulating matters as he does. Notice again the obvious apologetic context Van Til has in mind when he speaks of his Trinitarian formulation:

[I]t is sometimes asserted that we can *prove to men* that we are not assuming anything that *they ought to consider irrational*, inasmuch as we say that God is one in essence and three in person. We therefore claim that we have not asserted unity and trinity of exactly the same thing. Yet this is not the whole truth of the matter. We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person.<sup>43</sup>

Van Til specifically targets those who would balk at the theological implications of perichoresis, specifically the apparently contradictory notion that God is both three persons and one absolute person.

It ought to be clear by now that, when Van Til refers to God as one person on the basis of perichoresis, he is not introducing a fourth person into his formulation. This is so because the sense in which we refer to God as one person is the result of the perichoretic relationships. As Hodge almost argued a century earlier, if God has one will, one mind, and one consciousness, then it is acceptable in this sense to refer to God as one person. Nor does Van Til's formulation introduce a fourth incommunicable personal property, which would be tantamount to introducing a fourth person into the Godhead. As both Hodge and Van Til insist, speaking of God as one person occurs in perfect consistency with the tripersonality of the Godhead. Van Til simply wants to maintain that God is both one-conscious and tri-conscious, without allowing either assertion to lead to the heresies of Modalism or Tritheism.

This sort of formulation brings the incomprehensibility of God to the theological foreground. From a theological perspective, Hodge and Van Til refer to God in his unity as a person. They also refer to the individual hypostases within the Godhead as persons. However, it is precisely at this point that our theological formulation must come to terms with the mystery of an incomprehensible God. On the one hand, God is tri-conscious, and we must maintain vigorously that the persons within the Godhead are distinguished by incommunicable personal properties in order to avoid the heresy of Modalism. On the other hand, we must affirm that God is one-conscious in order to avoid the heresy of Tritheism (i.e., three independent, self-conscious centers exist within the Godhead).

But precisely how can we affirm that God is one person on the one hand, and that he exists as three hypostases on the other hand? At best, we can point out that the sense in which we speak of God as one person involves the interpenetration and coinherence of the persons within the Godhead. This interpenetration is so exhaustive and complete that it is appropriate to refer to triune God as

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 229 (italics mine).

possessing one will, one mind, and one consciousness. In this sense, then, he is one person. But he is one person in a manner perfectly consistent with the tripersonality of God and all that it involves. This means that we cannot allow the unity of God as one person to obscure in any way the discriminating personal properties that distinguish the persons within the Godhead.

One implication of this formulation is as follows. We cannot allow a single model of personhood to govern our Trinitarian formulations. If we do, it will obscure the fullness of God's Trinitarian existence and actually hamper the development of our Trinitarian theology. Within the mystery of the Godhead, it is appropriate (and even necessary) to speak of God both as tri-conscious and one-conscious, as three persons and one person.<sup>44</sup> When we speak of God as a person, we do so without invoking a distinguishing personal property. Nevertheless, as we saw above, an implication of perichoresis requires us to refer to God in his unity as a person. This model of personhood is not immediately reconcilable with the notion of personhood that defines person on the basis of the relationships within the Godhead—relationships identified by incommunicable personal properties. As a result, we are forced to factor in the incomprehensibility of God in our Trinitarian formulae.

This seems to be what Van Til has in mind in the quote above. In his formulations of Trinitarian doctrine, it seems rather evident that Van Til has in mind the incomprehensibility of God. For instance, immediately after asserting that God is one person and three persons, Van Til explains that "As Christians we say that this is a mystery that is beyond our comprehension. It surely is. God himself, in the totality of his existence, is above our comprehension. At the same time, this mysterious God is mysterious because he is, within himself, wholly rational."<sup>45</sup> Elaborating a bit, Van Til argues that "[i]f we speak . . . of the incomprehensibility of God, what is meant is that God's revelation to man is never exhaustively understood by man."<sup>46</sup> In fact, that incomprehensibility

<sup>44</sup> Robert W. Jenson reflects on the implications of addressing the entire Trinity as such and comes to conclusions strikingly similar to both Hodge and Van Til. Although Jenson asks different questions and identifies different concerns than Hodge and Van Til, his formulations are nonetheless stimulating. He asks, "Is there, then, a way of participating in the triune converse such that we address the Trinity as such, in whose converse we are enveloped? Clearly there can be no difficulty in crying out to Father, Son, and Spirit simultaneously, to the Trinity as association. . . . But, to continue with the distinction, it is the Trinity as community that might be a personality" (*Systematic Theology* [2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], 1:122). While favoring an articulation of God's oneness in categories derived from the Eastern tradition (i.e., the Father as the *arche* of the Son and Spirit), Jenson is also sympathetic to St. Augustine's psychological model of the Trinity, which entails that "[t]he Trinity here is understood as a person, and Father, Son, and Spirit, as the poles of the inner life that makes him personal" (*Systematic Theology*, 1:123). In speaking of the unity of the Godhead in Augustinian categories, Jenson suggests that it is indeed possible to speak of God's unity as a person in a manner consistent with the tripersonality of God: "When the Trinity is regarded as in *one way* personal, and the Father, Son, and Spirit as in variously *other ways* personal, then Father, Son, and Spirit can be fully acknowledged as persons and also interpreted as poles in the Trinity's personal life" (*Systematic Theology*, 1:123 [italics his]). It is curious that both Hodge and Van Til are omitted from Jenson's otherwise insightful discussion.

<sup>45</sup> Van Til, *Introduction*, 230.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 164.

"does not mean that God is incomprehensible to himself. On the contrary, man's inability to comprehend God is founded on the very fact that God is completely self-comprehensive."<sup>47</sup> Van Til is acutely aware that the doctrine of the Trinity brings us face to face with the incomprehensible God.

Analogical reasoning is an immediate consequence of Van Til's Trinitarian concept of incomprehensibility. Van Til wants to remind those who reason "univocally" that God's incomprehensibility, and the necessity of analogical reasoning, appears most forcefully and clearly when we consider perichoresis and its implications for Trinitarian theology. He even frames the Trinitarian concept of mystery over against the mystery of the "natural man." He reminds us that "Christians and non-Christians cannot pool or trade their mysteries as long as they are true to their positions . . . the Christian holds that the non-Christian worships brute fact, while he himself, though gladly admitting that he cannot exhaustively interpret facts, may turn to God because for God there are not brute facts."<sup>48</sup> Van Til then notes that "we all too readily begin our reasoning at the wrong end. We begin by assuming that we can reason about the triune God without presupposing him. We reason *univocally* instead of *analogically*."<sup>49</sup> Becoming a bit more specific, Van Til means by analogical reasoning that "God's thought is *determinative* of the objects of knowledge. In other words, [God] must be thought of as the only ultimate interpreter, and man must be thought of as the finite reinterpreter."<sup>50</sup> What makes God the final interpreter is his "absolute self-consciousness."<sup>51</sup> In the being and plan of the triune God synthetic and analytic categories are *mutually exhausted*. For this reason, comprehensive knowledge resides in the triune God alone. Therefore, image bearers must think God's thoughts after him on a creaturely level (i.e., a finite replica of God's absolute rationality) by submitting to inscripturated revelation.

Van Til develops the implications of this doctrine for human knowledge as follows:

*But man, as God's creature, cannot have a replica of that system of God. He cannot have a reproduction of that system. . . . He must be subject to the authority of God's system to the extent that this is revealed to him. . . . The system that Christians seek to obtain may . . . be said to be analogical.<sup>52</sup>*

Hence, Van Til describes his notion of the analogical system based on the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility. The doctrine of analogy is the direct result of a theological affirmation of God's incomprehensibility.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 231. It is important to note that Van Til sees the Christian concept of mystery (i.e., there is no mystery at any point for God, but there is mystery at every point for the creature) standing over against the non-Christian concept of mystery (i.e., there is mystery both for God and man). This is the sort of apologetic context that Van Til has in mind when discussing his doctrine of the Trinity.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>50</sup> Van Til, *Christian Theory*, 203.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 16 (italics mine).

In clarifying the nature of analogical reasoning, Van Til compares analogical reasoning to the pattern of reasoning utilized by the unbeliever. For Van Til, it is “of basic importance to understand what is meant by saying that the human system should be self-consciously analogical.”<sup>53</sup> The importance of Van Til’s observation emerges when we consider the fact that “[i]f man does not make human knowledge wholly dependent upon the original self-knowledge and consequent revelation of God to man, then man will have to seek knowledge within himself as the final reference point.”<sup>54</sup> If that is the case, then one

will have to seek an exhaustive understanding of reality. Then he will have to hold that if he cannot attain to such an exhaustive understanding of reality, he has no true knowledge of anything at all. . . . The only way by which this dilemma can be indicated clearly is by making plain that the final reference point in predication is God as the self-sufficient One.<sup>55</sup>

Van Til indicates that a rejection of “analogical reasoning” involves the futile attempt of a finite knower to provide a comprehensive account of reality—an account which only omniscience can provide. Only by beginning predication in light of the knowledge and revelation of the “self-sufficient One” can the problem of assumed creaturely omniscience (i.e., an autonomous reference point) be avoided.

When applied to the doctrine of the Trinity, Van Til notes that univocal reasoning will rest content with the rationalistic formulation that God is one in essence and three in person (i.e., when formulated without reference to perichoresis). However, in order to demonstrate the apologetic utility of God’s incomprehensibility from a consistently Christian standpoint, it is important to recognize the twin truths of orthodox Trinitarian theology: it is accurate to say that God is one in essence and three in person, but it is *also* accurate to say that God is one person and that God is three persons.

Van Til maintains first and foremost that “in stating its doctrine of the Trinity the Church affirmed its unswerving faith in a self-contained, mysterious God.”<sup>56</sup> Hence, it is particularly in the doctrine of the ontological Trinity that we come face to face with God’s self-contained fullness and therefore the mystery of divine incomprehensibility. In all of our philosophical and theological reasoning, we must *begin* by recognizing that our reasoning about God is analogical, and as a result no single theological formulation (or combination of formulations) will exhaust the fullness of the truth as it exists in the triune God.

Van Til states the doctrine of perichoresis in more philosophical categories when he observes that

In the ontological Trinity there is complete harmony between an equally ultimate one and many. The persons of the trinity are mutually exhaustive of one another and of

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. (italics his).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Van Til, *Introduction*, 228.

God's nature. It is this absolute equality in point of ultimacy that requires all the emphasis we can give it. Involved in this absolute equality is complete inter-dependence.<sup>57</sup>

In fact, Van Til coordinates ontological Trinity and incomprehensibility effectively when he asserts:

This ontological trinity is, as the Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards puts it, "incomprehensible." God dwells in light that no man can approach unto. This holds of His rationality as well as of His being, inasmuch as His being and His self-consciousness are coterminous. It follows that . . . we . . . are dealing with . . . the inexhaustible God.<sup>58</sup>

Van Til, following Calvin, affirms that God's Trinitarian existence is essentially incomprehensible. The implication for apologetics seems clear, since "to seek to present the Christian position as rationally explicable in the sense of being comprehensible to the mind of man is to defeat our own purposes."<sup>59</sup> To offer the Triune God of Scripture as comprehensible to man would amount to univocal reasoning and would therefore involve a denial of analogical reasoning.

From a theological perspective, then, we invoke perichoresis to the effect that "we need *both* the absolute coterminosity of each attribute and each person with the whole being of God, *and* the genuine significance of the distinctions of the attributes *and the persons*."<sup>60</sup> Van Til sees in this theological formulation a philosophical implication, namely, the impossibility of a brute fact within the Godhead. To the theological observation that "[o]ne consciousness subsists in a threefold way and is shared by all three persons, albeit by each of them distinctively" we can add the philosophical observation that in the Godhead "unity and diversity are equally ultimate."<sup>61</sup> This observation helps us avoid the "specter of brute facts."<sup>62</sup>

Van Til elaborates on the connection between God's incomprehensibility and the rejection of brute facts. He says,

If there is one thing that seems clear from Scripture it is that there are no brute uninterpreted facts for God. In God's being considered apart from its relation to the world, being and consciousness are coterminous. And *because this is so*, the facts of the world are created facts, facts brought into existence as a result of a fully self-conscious act on the part of God.<sup>63</sup>

A fully self-conscious God (i.e., a self-contained God who is both one-conscious and tri-conscious) entails the rejection of brute facts, and it is particularly in light of the perichoretic relationships that we see a consistently Trinitarian

<sup>57</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>60</sup> Van Til, *Introduction*, 229.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 231 (italics mine).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 230.

account of God's complete self-consciousness. The perichoretic relationships within the ontological Trinity provide Van Til with his consistently Trinitarian rationale for rejecting brute facts and opposing "univocal reasoning." In this sense, then, understanding perichoresis gives us a better handle not only on Van Til's Trinitarian theology, but on his apologetic orientation. Perichoresis safeguards God's incomprehensibility and helps avoid the danger of "univocal reasoning."

### *III. Misconceptions of Van Til's Doctrine of the Trinity*

#### *1. Van Til as Innovator*

Many critics of Van Til have in one way or another indicated that Van Til's Trinitarian theology is innovative.<sup>64</sup> Such a claim, as we have seen, does not seem substantiated in light of Van Til's reliance on the defender of Old Princeton's orthodoxy, Charles Hodge. Let us examine if it is acceptable to construe Van Til's Trinitarian theology as innovative or novel.

John Frame refers to Van Til's Trinitarian formulation of God as a person as "a very bold theological move."<sup>65</sup> Some might misunderstand Frame's language to imply that Van Til is actually a theological innovator when it comes to his doctrine of the Trinity. However, it appears that Frame does not intend to suggest innovation in Van Til's Trinitarian formulae. Let me explain why.

In the context of the quotation, Frame is simply drawing attention to the fact that Van Til makes the paradox of intratrinitarian existence *explicit*, whereas most "[t]heologians are generally most reluctant to express the paradoxicality of this doctrine so blatantly."<sup>66</sup> A couple of observations may prove helpful. First, Frame argues that Van Til's move is "very bold," but that is not to assert that Van Til's move is "very innovative." A bold move is not necessarily innovative. For instance, it is bold to assert that Christ is the Son of God, but it is certainly not innovative! Second, Frame's language that theologians are "generally" most reluctant to express the paradox so "blatantly" clearly makes room in Frame's mind for the expression of the doctrine in church history. Frame's

<sup>64</sup> See Gordon Clark's *The Trinity*, 88. See also Robert Reymond's comments which suggest Van Til is an innovator in *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson Word, 1998), 108-9. Unfortunately, Reymond also mistakenly asserts that Van Til, "rejecting the traditional distinction that God is one in one sense (essence) and three in another sense (person)," advocates a heterodox doctrine of the Trinity (108). As we saw above, however, this is simply not the case. Van Til argues that the essence/person distinction is true as far as it goes, but will not allow theological rationalism to obscure the implications of perichoresis. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Reymond seems to deny altogether the doctrine of perichoresis (324). It seems that Reymond's rationalistic formulations and his rejection of classical Trinitarian theology can be avoided in the much more balanced approaches of Hodge and Van Til, who allow perichoresis its due place in Trinitarian theology. For an insightful and trenchant analysis of Reymond along these lines, see Robert Letham's review of *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* in *WTJ* 62 (2000): 314-19.

<sup>65</sup> Frame, *Van Til: The Theologian*, 14.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

point seems to be simply that Van Til made explicit what many theologians in the history of the church have left implicit. Statements that contain an implicit truth are certainly not contradicted by statements that make the truth explicit. For these reasons (at least), Frame does not seem to be saying that Van Til's Trinitarian theology is exceptional or radically unique. This interpretation of Frame finds substantiation in his most recent work on Van Til, in which Frame observes that "[a]s with all doctrinal formulations, Van Til's doctrine of the Trinity begins with an affirmation of the ancient creeds and the Reformed confessions."<sup>67</sup> Frame then moves on to summarize the standard character of Van Til's formulations in the light of Scripture and the history of doctrine.

Moreover, we have seen that Van Til is anything but innovative in his doctrine of the Trinity. The echo of Hodge is virtually inescapable in Van Til's Trinitarian formulae. Hodge's ideas and language are matched point by point by Van Til, so much so that it raises the question whether there is *anything* innovative in Van Til's doctrine of the Trinity. Did Van Til really say anything about the Trinity that Hodge had not already stated or implied?

There *is* innovation, in fact, when it comes to Van Til's *application* of the Trinity to unbelief. In other words, the innovation is not found in Van Til's theological formulation but in his apologetic application. As indicated above, Van Til asserts the doctrine of perichoresis in order to safeguard the intrinsic incomprehensibility of the Triune God. No single formulation can exhaust the truth as it resides in the Triune God. Van Til reminds us that "in everything with which we deal we are, in the final analysis, dealing with this infinite God, this God who hideth himself, this mysterious God . . . the incomprehensible God . . . the infinitely inexhaustible God."<sup>68</sup> Perichoresis provides a vivid reminder that we can "only touch the hem of the garment of Him who dwells in light that no man can approach unto."<sup>69</sup> The "innovative" aspect in Van Til's thought resides in his apologetic application of perichoresis to univocal (e.g., rationalistic) thought. Hence, it is best to say that Van Til's theological formulations are not innovative, but his apologetic application of the Trinity to "univocal" reason is rather innovative.

## 2. *Van Til as Absolute Idealist*

As strange as it may sound, given the developments above that focused on Van Til's extension of Old Princeton's Trinitarian theology, some have argued that Van Til's theological formulations are the direct result of his compromise with British Absolute Idealism. John Vander Stelt attempts to tie Van Til's theology to the baneful influence of the British Absolute Idealists, who searched for the concrete universal (e.g., the solution to the one and the many problem) in

<sup>67</sup> John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), 63.

<sup>68</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

their quest for comprehensive coherence and explanation.<sup>70</sup> Vander Stelt contends that references to God as the “one-conscious” and “tri-conscious” as well as the metaphysical “equal ultimacy of unity and diversity” grow directly out of Van Til’s concessive appropriations of British Absolute Idealism.<sup>71</sup> However appealing Vander Stelt’s critique may appear, it has at least two considerable problems.

First, Van Til’s Trinitarian theology is clearly motivated and regulated by his appropriation of perichoresis, which he found in Charles Hodge. As such, Van Til in no way indicates that he is formulating his Trinitarian theology as a concession to or appropriation of British Absolute Idealism. In fact, Van Til references no Absolute Idealist in the entire chapter on the Trinity! To assert that Van Til nevertheless owes his formulations to Idealist thought simply refuses to recognize the precedent Van Til found in Hodge’s doctrine of perichoresis, and as a result fails to understand Van Til’s doctrine of the Trinity in light of the context which Van Til himself provides. Added to this point, Van Til elsewhere affirms, “We do not first set out without God to find our highest philosophical concept in terms of which we think we can interpret reality and then call this highest concept divine. . . . It is *this process of reasoning* from which we have been redeemed.”<sup>72</sup> Hence, Van Til denies in principle the very method that Vander Stelt claims lies just beneath his doctrine of God. Van Til refuses to find an abstract, philosophical notion of ultimate reality in terms of which we must formulate and adjust our notion of God.

Second, leading British Absolute Idealists understood the Absolute to transcend the polarities of personal and impersonal categories. Regarding F. H. Bradley’s concept of the “Absolute,” G. Watts Cunningham remarks that “[t]he truth is, the Absolute is neither personal or impersonal.”<sup>73</sup> Cunningham simply affirms Bradley’s own statement to the effect that “persons are *so included* in the Absolute that they ‘are there transmuted and have *lost their individual natures*.’”<sup>74</sup> For Bradley, “Reality” demands a loss of distinct, personal identity within the being of the Absolute. As a result, the Absolute transcends the distinction between personal and impersonal categories, which is overcome in ultimate Reality.

The second great British Absolute Idealist, Bernard Bosanquet, held that the Absolute is impersonal. Although Bosanquet insisted on taking account of “the spirit of the whole”<sup>75</sup> and construed this totality of experience as a “system,”<sup>76</sup> Cunningham nevertheless reminds us:

<sup>70</sup> John Vander Stelt, *Philosophy and Scripture: A Study in Old Princeton and Westminster Theology* (Marlton, N.J.: Mack Publishing Company, 1978).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 231–33. Vander Stelt’s comments could equally apply to language that refers to God as “absolute personality” or “absolute Person.”

<sup>72</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> G. Watts Cunningham, *The Idealistic Argument in Recent British and American Philosophy* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1969), 110.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., (italics mine).

<sup>75</sup> Bernard Bosanquet, *The Principle of Individuality and Value: The Gifford Lectures for 1911* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 7.

<sup>76</sup> Bernard Bosanquet, *Implication and Linear Inference* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 39.

[I]t is clear that the absolute must be the ultimate self-contained and all-inclusive system. It is clear also that the Absolute must be said to be spiritual; it is precisely the ‘whole’ which comes alive in finite conscious centers and is there imperfectly realized. *But the Absolute cannot be a person; it is not characterized by will, and it is not to be identified with the God of religion.*<sup>77</sup>

Bosanquet denies as vigorously as Bradley the proposition that the Absolute is a person. Hence, it is very difficult to sustain the charge that Van Til referred to God as a person, or absolute personality, or one-conscious being on account of the influence of British Absolute Idealism. The two leading exponents of British Absolute Idealism simply denied that the Absolute is a person.

British Absolute Idealism for these reasons simply cannot provide the impetus for Van Til’s reference to God as one person. Consequently, any attempt to tie Van Til’s doctrine of the Trinity to Absolute Idealism would require a much more specific argument than Vander Stelt provides—an argument which both exegetes Van Til in terms of the context Van Til himself provided *and* which takes account of the various strands of development in the fragmented and multifaceted movement we call Absolute Idealism. Hence, it seems difficult in the extreme to tie Van Til’s Trinitarian theology to the influence of British Absolute Idealism.

In summary, then, far from being a form of theological innovation or displaying compromise with British Absolute Idealism, Van Til’s doctrine of the Trinity finds its impetus in Charles Hodge’s doctrine of perichoresis and actually stands over against the “Absolute” countenanced in British Absolute Idealism.

#### IV. Summary and Conclusion

It seems evident that Van Til’s doctrine of the Trinity avoids the Scylla of Sabellianism and the Charybdis of Tritheism. Van Til, following Hodge, will not allow the implications of perichoresis to entail a negation of the discriminating personal properties that belong to each person of the ontological Trinity. Moreover, Van Til will not grant that the incommunicable personal properties leave us with merely a tri-conscious God, or a group of beings with three independent centers of self-consciousness. Van Til’s formulation seeks to do justice *both* to the personal properties that distinguish the persons of the Trinity *and* the mutual interpenetration and reciprocal presence of the persons within the Godhead. Van Til’s Trinitarian theology provides the sort of balance that is rare in many modern treatments of the Trinity.

Van Til also contributes a distinctively Trinitarian way to bring the incomprehensibility of God to the foreground in the context of univocal reason (i.e., theological and philosophical rationalism). His formulations safeguard both Trinitarian orthodoxy and divine incomprehensibility in a manner consistent with presuppositional apologetics.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 140 (italics mine).

Those who wish to argue that Van Til is a theological innovator, a heretic, or an Absolute Idealist in Christian clothing simply have not taken into account the evidence internal to Van Til's own discussion of the Trinity in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*. Our investigation has yielded the following conclusions. First, Van Til's Trinitarian formulations are by no means innovative. The precedent, catalyst, and theological content of Van Til's doctrine of the Trinity find expression in the Reformed *Systematic Theology* of Charles Hodge. Second, for this reason it is simply misreading Van Til, or worse, failing to read him in the context he provides, to charge that British Absolute Idealism provides the rationale for the content of Van Til's Trinitarian theology. Van Til is clearly not an innovator, and he certainly is not making innovations in Trinitarian theology based on a compromise to a foreign British Absolute Idealist framework.

In fact, to make the charge that Van Til has compromised with British Absolute Idealism involves at least two fundamental mistakes: (1) a mistake concerning the Reformed theological background and context for Van Til's Trinitarian formulations (i.e., Old Princeton and Charles Hodge); and (2) an error regarding the nature of British Absolute Idealism, since the leading proponents of the movement denied that the Absolute is a person, an absolute personality, or a tri-conscious and one-conscious being. While more certainly can be said regarding Van Til's rejection of various forms of Absolute Idealism, it seems clear that the Absolute Idealists cannot be the influence on Van Til's Trinitarian formulation that God is both one person and three persons.

Van Til's Trinitarianism helps us avoid the dangers of theological rationalism, the specter of brute facts, the twin heresies of Sabellianism and Tritheism, and brings to focus an aspect of Trinitarian theology which we cannot forsake: the doctrine of perichoresis. Perhaps those who balk at Van Til's "bold theological move" have not paid close enough attention to Van Til's deep commitment to Old Princeton's Trinitarian theology. The time has come to appreciate anew the present implications of an ancient, catholic, and eminently orthodox aspect of Trinitarian theology.

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