

Understanding, Appreciating, and Experiencing the Mystery of God: REFLECTIONS and NOTES¹ on the ECONOMY of the MYSTERY

by John Pester

That their hearts may be comforted, they being knit together in love and unto all the riches of the full assurance of understanding, unto the full knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ. (Col. 2:2)

And to enlighten all that they may see what the economy of the mystery is, which throughout the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things. (Eph. 3:9)

And I, when I came to you, brothers, came not according to excellence of speech or of wisdom, announcing to you the mystery of God. For I did not determine to know anything among you except Jesus Christ, and this One crucified....So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul"; the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit. (1 Cor. 2:1-2; 15:45)

In all the universe there is no greater mystery than the mystery of God. Throughout human history this mystery has been a constant source for debate, generating an unrelenting stream of questions related to both the existence and the purpose of God. The majority of the thought and text devoted to this mystery has focused on questions related to the existence of God. Despite the intense level of interest in this aspect of the mystery, a definitive answer, either in the affirmative or in the negative, eludes all of humankind. It is an answer that simply lies beyond the realm of empirical proof. Arguments that affirm God's existence, as well as those that deny His existence, are ultimately sustained by faith alone.² Given the intensity of the debate over the question of the existence of God, the second item of mystery, that of God's purpose, often goes unexamined. While an emphasis on the former rather than the latter question is understandable for an atheist, it is distracting and potentially destructive to the living faith of Christian believers. Christians should experientially know the One whom they have believed (2 Tim. 1:12), the One who cannot deny Himself (2:13), and therefore,

should be beyond the need for extensive rhetorical exercises in apologetics.³

Instead of these misdirected rhetorical arguments, Christians should focus on the deeper question associated with the mystery of God—the question of His purpose, the accomplishment of which involves His interaction with humanity in time and an understanding of which sheds the most light on the intrinsic reality of the Triune God. Both the purpose of God and God Himself are revealed in His economy,⁴ that is, in the arrangement by which He administers the affairs of His house for the accomplishment of His purpose. In order to understand and appreciate the mystery of God, however, we need to understand and appreciate the economy of the mystery (Eph. 3:9). To understand the latter is to know the former because the economy of the mystery is not separate from the mystery of God. To the extent that God was hidden in ages past, prior to the incarnation, the mystery remained hidden, and to the extent that the Triune God has been progressively revealed in His economy and in the believers' experience of His economy, the economy of the mystery has been revealed existentially and experientially.⁵

We live in an age in which all may see what the economy of the mystery is because God wills to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery, the content of which is nothing less than the manifestation of His very being in the person of Christ as the Spirit through the many members of His enlarged Body (Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26-27). The intrinsic focus of the economy of God is His desire to make Himself known. This is the purpose of God. If we understand this aspect of the economy of the mystery, we will better understand the mystery of the Triune God. The economy of the mystery is carried out by the revelation and impartation of the mystery of God, that is, through the process of His self-communication, in which He communicates, imparts,

Himself. Whenever God desires to engage and interact with humanity with the larger view of making Himself known, He first reveals Himself because the revelation of what He is implicitly reveals and confirms His purpose. This pattern can be seen in both the Old Testament with Moses and in the New Testament with the disciples following the death and resurrection of Christ.

In the Old Testament, as God was charging Moses to gather and disciple the children of Israel, bringing them out of Egypt, a type of the Satan-corrupted world, into the wilderness to serve Him and ultimately to live in the good land, a type of the all-inclusive Christ, Moses intuitively realized the need to know God's name, asking, "If I come to the children of Israel and say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they say to me, What is His name? what shall I say to them?" (Exo. 3:13). In response, Jehovah, the sending God (vv. 4, 6), who is also the sent One, the Angel of Jehovah (v. 2),⁶ revealed His name: "And God said to Moses, I AM WHO I AM. And He said, Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, I AM has sent me to you" (v. 14). In revealing His name, He also revealed that He is capable of accomplishing His purpose because He can deliver the children of Israel in the midst of any circumstance because the essence of His person is full totality of being, of existence itself. He is the God who is. If, for the children of Israel, there is a need for protection, He is protection; if there is a need for food, He is food; if there is a need for guidance, He is guidance. In the name that reveals His person, there is the assurance and confirmation that the children of Israel needed in order to follow Him and journey into the wilderness. The name reveals that God desires to be everything to His redeemed and chosen people and that, in fact, He is everything.

The name of God is also revealed in the New Testament at the point of the Lord's commission of the eleven disciples in Matthew 28:16-20. Just as Moses doubted his standing and capacity to lead the children of Israel, some of the eleven doubted as well (v. 17). Sensing their doubt, the Lord Himself reassured them of their calling with reference to both His authority and His name, unequivocally revealing for the first time the name of the processed and consummated God, a triune name, saying, "Go therefore and disciple all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (v. 19). In sending His disciples forth to call some out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation for a testimony to all the nations (Rev. 5:9; Matt.

24:14), the Lord reveals that God is triune for the first time in the New Testament. The significance of this economical revelation, coming at the consummation of the processes of the economical Trinity,⁷ is quite meaningful.

Prior to this declaration in verse 19, the Gospel of Matthew contains many references to both the Father and the Spirit. Of the over forty references to *Father*, many speak quite explicitly of the heavenly Father or the Father who is in the heavens. And of the approximately ten references to the *Holy Spirit* or *Spirit*, most can be read in a way that suggests both distinction and separation.⁸ Only after the incarnation and resurrection, at the point of economic consummation, the point at which the economy of the mystery becomes applicable and experiential to all those who would believe, is God unmistakably revealed to be triune by the Lord's own utterance of the economic name of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, the foundation for the revelation of the mystery of God, which is unveiled in the economy of the mystery, is laid in the New Testament, and as such, this foundation is profoundly economic in nature.

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We know of the Triune God because there is an economy, and what we know of God ultimately depends upon our understanding and appreciation of this economy.

The Revelation of the Economy of the Mystery Being a Revelation of the Economic Trinity

When considering the Trinity, however, the bulk of the seminal discourse throughout church history⁹ has focused on attempting to explain the ontological relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the holy Trinity, rather than on understanding and appreciating the economical revelation of the Triune God in the New Testament. This theological preoccupation is in contrast to the function of the creedal formulas, which defend the truth of the Trinity by simply declaring that the three persons (or hypostases) of the Triune God are distinct but not separate, being of the same one divine essence (or substance).¹⁰ In its defense of the biblical revelation of the Triune God, logical explanations were not the principle aim of the early church. Such explanations, being outside of the realm of faith, were never intended to be

incorporated into doctrinal statements related to the truth of the Trinity. Bloesch notes,

The doctrine of the Trinity signifies the culmination of biblical and apostolic reflection on the nature and activity of the living God. It is implied in the biblical witness and articulated by the fathers of the early church. It is neither an appendix nor a prolegomenon to theology but the apex and goal of theology. (166)

The biblical witness does not explain; rather, it conveys the mystery of the faith in which God can be substantiated. Many things are hidden from the wise and the prudent, only to be revealed to babes (Matt. 11:25-26). Even though, as babes, we may not be able to articulate the intricacies of the inner trinitarian relationships, there is a deep realization within every believer, implicit in the panting of our souls for God, that we can know the true God (Psa. 42:1; John 17:3).

The existence of divinely inspired Scriptures,¹¹ in and of itself, points to our capacity to know the Triune God, and it also points to God's desire that we know Him. As believers, we should never underestimate the significance of this point: The Scriptures are God's breathing out, God's divine self-communication to humanity, to whom He has given the capacity to understand and receive His self-communication. His thoughts may be higher than our thoughts, but this does not mean that they are incomprehensible to us.¹² His thoughts, like rain and snow from heaven, are sent forth from Him as operative words that do not return void (Isa. 55:9-11; Heb. 4:12). With comforted hearts, we can come to a full knowledge of the mystery of God, and with inhabited hearts, we can know aspects of God that transcend and surpass human knowledge, even the depths of God (Col. 2:2; Eph. 3:19; 1 Cor. 2:10).

God speaks to the heart of humanity in order to reveal Himself as triune and thereby and therein to communicate Himself in His trinity (Rom. 10:8; Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:15).¹³ This twofold aim is consummately unveiled in Matthew 28:19. First, the Lord unveils His economic consummation in the utterance of His eternal triune name; and second, He unveils that in His economic consummation He can be imparted into redeemed humanity precisely because He is triune. God has given us the capacity as human beings to know and appreciate what He wishes to communicate—Himself in His trinity.

Consequently, the Bible, but particularly the New Testament, should be read as a record of the economical history of God in His relationship with humanity. It is not a philosophical tome, although it has generated many. It is not a guidebook for morality, although it reveals a moral and righteous God. The Bible represents an eternal

communication from God to humanity, and, when received as such, it sprouts forth, fostering and propagating God's continuing economical interaction in human history. It is intensely directed toward humanity and integrally related to the destiny of humanity: "O land, land, land, / Hear the word of Jehovah" (Jer. 22:29).

Because the church's approach to the Bible has not been rooted in an understanding and appreciating of the economy of the mystery, a chasm of indifference and misunderstanding has opened within the hearts of the believers concerning the truth that Bloesch describes as the apex of the truth. Our hearts are anguished and even confused on this point, desperately in need of comfort.¹⁴

An Emerging Appreciation for the Economic Trinity

The anguish created by knowing about God but not knowing God Himself (Job 42:5), has created a deep yearning within the believers. This yearning cannot be filled with creedal statements and doctrines, especially ones that focus merely on the inner trinitarian relationships within the Trinity. In recognition of this need, some exceptional scholarship and exposition in recent years has advanced the church's understanding of the Triune God by focusing less on the immanent Trinity,¹⁵ that is, God as He is in Himself in His intradivine, eternal being, and more on the economic Trinity, that is, God as He is for us in His salvific, self-communication to humankind.¹⁶

The most widely accepted work on this point has been advanced by Karl Rahner, especially in his book, *The Trinity*. Recognizing that the bulk of the data in the New Testament pertains to the economy of God, the actions and the persons of the Triune God as revealed in His salvific involvement in the history of humanity, Rahner notes that there must be "a connection between Trinity and man. The Trinity is a mystery of *salvation*, otherwise it would never have been revealed" (21). In response to this observation, he postulates a simple axiom:

The basic thesis which...presents the Trinity as a mystery of salvation (in its reality and not merely as a doctrine) might be formulated as follows: The "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity. (21-22)

Rahner's thesis is based on a reality that is at least implicitly understood by readers of the New Testament; namely, that it is a record of the economic Trinity, or as described by Paul, the economy of God (1 Tim. 1:4). The economy of God reveals the Triune God and depends upon the Triune God. Of the many verses in the New Testament, those that refer to the persons of the Trinity clearly present Them in relation to particular aspects of the accomplishment or the application of the economy of

God to the believers. The verses are simply too numerous to list and expound, but there are a few verses and passages worthy of note, including 2 Corinthians 13:14, Ephesians 1:3-14, 2:18, and 1 Peter 1:2, all of which present an economic Trinity actively involved in the accomplishment and application of the economy of God. Although Paul is viewed as the apostle who most clearly reveals this mystery, Peter also speaks of this economy. In his first Epistle, he speaks of being “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father in the sanctification of the Spirit unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ (1:2). Later, in his second Epistle he declares that through the precious and exceedingly great promises that have been granted by the Triune God in His economy, the believers have been made partakers of the divine nature (1:4). This is the essence of the economy of the mystery.

This partaking involves God’s self-communication, and Rahner is quite informative in his exploration of the implications of the term *self-communication*. In regard to *self*, he states, “The mystery of God’s self-communication consists precisely in the fact that God really arrives at man, really enters into man’s situation, assumes it himself, and *thus* is what he is” (88-89). While the essence of this statement is in reference to the incarnation of Christ in His assumption of humanity, the point that God Himself in His trinity actually reaches humanity and shares and partakes of humanity in His economy is vitally affirmed. The possibility of the impartation of divinity into humanity is then extended in Rahner’s discussion of *communication* to include all of humanity by virtue of God’s creation of a vessel that can receive His communication. He states,

The self-communication of the free personal God who gives himself as a person (in the modern sense of the word!) presupposes a personal recipient. It does not just happen that God communicates himself to him; the addressee of the self-communication must be such on account of the very nature of this self-communication. If God wishes to step freely outside of himself, he must create man. (89-90)

Although for Rahner, the economy of God begins with the outward activity of God in the creation, the creation of man also implies that the economy of God existed in the heart of the Triune God even before the act of creation in general and the creation of humanity in particular. Thus, in reality, the economy is an eternal

economy because it is according to God’s eternal will and desire for an enlarged expression, which is an eternal impulse of the One, who as Father, is eternally begetting the Son.

Rahner’s principal contribution is to refocus the church’s attention on the realizable reality of the economic Trinity, away from obtuse and unanchored philosophical speculation about the immanent Trinity. Without an appreciation for the mystery of salvation, realized through the self-communication of the economic Trinity, he sees the dangerous point that the church has come to in its philosophical pursuit and propounding of doctrines related to the immanent Trinity alone: “Despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere ‘monotheists’” (10). To avoid this, he sees the need to draw an explicit connection between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, and so he states,

There is only one outward activity of God, exerted and possessed as one and the same by Father, Son, and Spirit,

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according to the peculiar way in which each of them possesses the Godhead....

The activity which is common to all three persons and appropriated only to one is (as with the divine essence) possessed by each of the three persons in his own proper way. The threefold way of subsisting of this activity (considered *pricipiative*) is as intrinsic and necessary for its existence as it is necessary and essential for the divine essence to subsist as threefold. (76-77)

A careful reading of Rahner, to be sure, reveals his desire to gain insights from the economic Trinity in order to resituate the church’s discussion of the immanent Trinity on the foundation of the revelation of the economic Trinity. Nevertheless, the impact of his book on energizing a renewed theological interest in the Triune God as revealed in the New Testament is significant. If anything is missing in his discussion, it is an understanding of why the New Testament revelation is limited to a presentation of the economic Trinity and the implications that can be drawn from this point. And although he alludes to

the necessity of considering the role of the Spirit in God's self-communication, he does not develop this point.

The Self-revelation of the Economic Trinity

Although the revelation of the economic Trinity in the New Testament is contained in Epistles written by men, it should be equally clear that their speaking conveys the thoughts and intentions of the Triune God Himself. Just as the words of the Lord were not spoken from Himself, the words spoken by the apostles were taught by the Spirit and presented in the person of Christ (John 14:10; 1 Cor. 2:13; 2 Cor. 2:17). Hence, of the many thousands of things that were seen and heard by the apostles, both before and after the Lord's death and resurrection, the volumes of which could fill the earth (John 21:25), only a selection of these items has been revealed and delivered to the saints. First and foremost, the Bible reveals God: "In the beginning God" (Gen. 1:1), and in the New Testament, the Bible reveals the expression of God: "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1). And at the initiation of the apostles' work, the Lord, who is the expression of God, reveals that the God who desires to be expressed in redeemed humanity is triune (Matt. 28:19). But why is this revelation, which challenges all logical perceptions, which is beyond logical explanations, necessary, especially when it seems to be such a stumbling block?¹⁷

The God who desires to be enlarged and expressed seemingly equipped His disciples with an inexplicable and indefensible description of His being. How can the nations be discipled if He cannot be explained? It seems that it would have been better to present Himself just as "God." Period. But this is to speak as man for the sake of man, not as God for the sake of God.

When God speaks, He speaks truthfully and accurately, and when He speaks of Himself, He speaks truthfully and accurately about Himself. Although all of humanity are liars, God is true (Rom. 3:4). We may be faithless in unbelief, but He cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13). When He swears an oath, He can swear only by that which is reliable and faithful—Himself (Heb. 6:13). When His people ask Him His name, He speaks openly and honestly (Exo. 3:13-14). Weinandy,¹⁸ in referring to the work of Forte in *The Trinity as History*, reiterates this point:

Forte writes: "God in himself and the God who reveals himself are one and the same: the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. This correspondence is based on the very mystery of divine fidelity. The Trinity of history manifests itself as the Trinity of glory because 'God is faithful and cannot deny himself' (2 Tim. 2:13), cannot deceive us in revealing himself to us." (22)

When the Triune God reveals Himself, He reveals Himself as triune precisely because He is triune. But even in His revelation of His triune being, God is selective in what He reveals. If, as clay, we have no authority to question the Potter, is the Potter under any imperative to ontologically explain Himself or His actions (Rom. 9:20-21)? His revelation does not need explanation; He has a desire to impart, to communicate, Himself, not to explicate Himself. Consequently, He reveals the triune name because this name is equal to His being; thus, to be baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to be baptized into the Triune God. He reveals His name in the context of His economic operation. Rahner is right when he says that our "understanding of the 'immanent' Trinity must come from the 'economic' Trinity" (65-66).

In a footnote to this statement, Rahner briefly touches on the consideration of why there is a need for the theological development of the truth of the *immanent Trinity*, given the starting point of the believers' apprehension of the Triune God through their salvific experience of Him as the economic Trinity. And while he details the need for and the basis of this historical, theological development, he fails to ask the fundamental question of why there is a biblical revelation of the *economic Trinity*. In addition to the fact that God accurately, faithfully, and truthfully speaks of Himself, which is on God's side, there is another reason for this, which is on our side: In the genuine experience of the Triune God in His economy, we can comprehend His purpose and His desire because believers partake of Him, which is the essence of His economy. And by seeing this once-hidden purpose, which has now been revealed because the economic Trinity has been revealed, there is a further entrance into it.

In other words, our experience of the economic Trinity reveals the eternal will, the intentionality of the immanent Trinity, and in this enlightening, we can partake further and deeper of the organic dispensing that He immanently is and through which He economically flows. The Triune God is revealed economically in the New Testament to implicitly and subjectively communicate the axiomatic principles of His being, thereby convincing the believers of the reality of the possibility of fellowship, the communion of communication, within the sphere of the mingled, organic identity of God and man, first in the person and work of the incarnated Son and then in the enlarged sphere of the many sons of God. God portrays Himself truthfully in order that we can both know Him as He is and experience Him as He is. The revelation of the economy of the mystery reveals that the Triune God is economically communicating Himself, because, axiomatically, He is both organic and He exists as an eternal dispensing.

Axioms of the Economic Trinity

In the inaugural issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, an article on the Triune God by Kerry S. Robichaux, entitled, “Axioms of the Trinity,” was presented. This article, essentially, is a reflection on the immanent reality of the Triune God as derived from the economical revelation contained in the identifiers *Father, Son, and Spirit*. In the article, three axiomatic principles are presented, each of which, tracking Rahner’s thesis that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, can be equally applied to the economic reality of the Triune God. The terms *Father, Son, and Spirit*, according to Robichaux, indicate “at least three things concerning Him: 1) that above all He is an organic Being; 2) that by virtue of His organic identity He is eternally three and yet one; and 3) that as an organic Being He exists as an eternal dispensing” (7-8).

In relation to the first point of God being an organic Being, Robichaux writes in detail:

Even prior to notions such as begetting, procession, expression, and so forth, the very first notion that strikes us in these revealed names is that these are terms related to life (certainly the eternal, divine life) and that therefore God is an organic Being. Again, some may find a similar complaint with the term *organic*, seeing in it associations too natural to be ascribed to the supernatural God. The same defense could be offered by saying that associations related to the life found in creation are to be excluded but that notions proper to the eternal life of God are to be applied. The Son declared that “just as the Father has life in Himself, so He gave to the Son to also have life in Himself” (John 5:26); thus, it is proper to speak of God as a God of life and to see Him as an organic Being. (8)

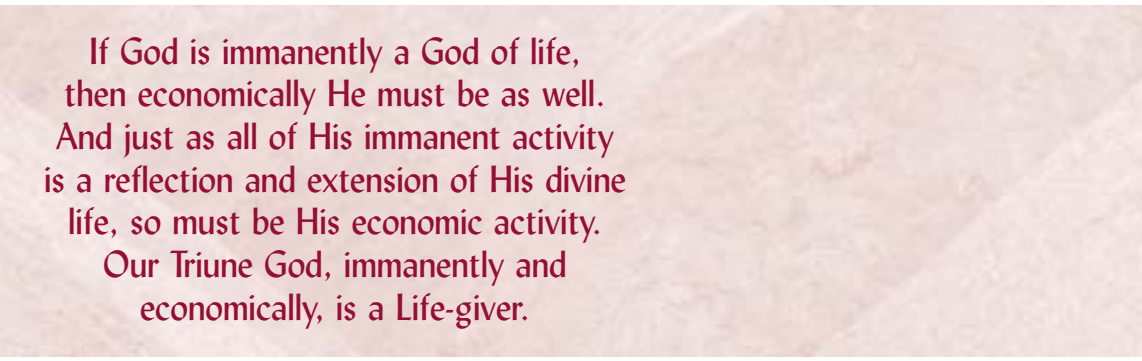
Although the above quotation focuses on our need to understand that God is intrinsically and ontologically an organic, living Being, it also points to the fact that this organic reality is meant to be experienced by the believers in the economy of the mystery. The passage from the Gospel of John, which speaks of the Father having life and giving to the Son to have life, for example, also clearly speaks of the Son giving this same life to all those who would come to Him (5:40). Our Triune God is a God of life, who gives Himself as life to the believers.

The economy of the mystery involves divine life, eternal life, realized and experienced by those who have been

redeemed and regenerated. Our understanding of the Trinity is a “product of a developing understanding of the significance of God’s redeeming action in human history and how this action mirrors the inner life of God” (Bloesch 168). God’s redeeming action is the issue of His life, and the effectiveness of this redemption is applied when His life is economically communicated to the believers. Weinandy comments,

When we come to faith and are baptized, we are taken into the very life of the Trinity and establish definable relationships with each of the divine persons. The Christian life is then lived within these specific relationships with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. (33)

If God is immanently a God of life, then economically He must be as well. And just as all of His immanent activity is a reflection and extension of His divine life, so must be His economic activity. Our Triune God, immanently and economically, is a Life-giver. When we see this, then the many references to life in the New Testament take on new meaning and significance. No longer is life just a



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sphere of activity carried out within a span of time, either eternal or temporal; rather, it is God Himself.

The life that God gives both to the Son to have in Himself and to the believers is an axiomatic indication that the Triune God is an eternal dispensing. His life is not static and distant from us, because He is active and present in us. Robichaux develops this point:

Within the eternal Trinity there is an eternal dispensing of essence. We normally think of the Trinity in static terms, but this view of an eternal dispensing leads us to think of the Trinity as a dynamic Being. The Father is ever dispensing the divine essence into the Son and thereby begetting Him eternally; the Son is ever receiving and expressing that dispensing and is thus eternally begotten of the Father; the Spirit is ever dispensed as the divine essence by the Father and eternally proceeds from Him. Because God is this way in His eternal existence, in time the economy of His salvation reflects this eternal, intrinsic trinitarian dispensing by being focused in the dispensing of Himself into His chosen believers. (11)

In the above passage, both the immanent and economic implications of the axiom of God as a dispensing are indicated. It is only when we begin to see that God desires to dispense, to impart, the divine life that He is into us that the economy of the mystery begins to be unfolded more clearly and experienced more deeply. At such a time, simple verses, ones that have been taken for granted and thus overlooked for years, become living and operative. The salutations and benedictions of the Epistles, for example, burst forth with new meaning: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Col. 1:2); “the Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you” (2 Tim. 4:22); “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2 Cor. 13:14).

Even verses that have been trivialized by overuse and misuse take on added depth: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that every one who believes into Him would not perish, but would have eternal life” (John 3:16); “I have come that they may have life and may have it abundantly (10:10); “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). And verses that previously had no significance because they had no economic application in our experience become alive, being a constant source of nourishment: “As the living Father has sent Me and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also shall live because of Me” (John 6:57); “but he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit” (1 Cor. 6:17); “seeing that His divine power has granted to us all things which relate to life and godliness, through the full knowledge of Him who has called us by His own glory and virtue” (2 Pet. 1:3).

The axiom of dispensing, which applies to the perichoresis within the immanent Trinity equally applies to the perichoresis within the economic Trinity and between the Triune God and the believers. What He immanently is, we economically enjoy because He cannot deny Himself. The axiomatic point of being a divine dispensing was third in the list of Robichaux’s axioms, following the point that He is eternally three yet one. I reversed the order only to highlight the final point of reflection in this article, one which is needed for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the economy of the mystery. And this point relates to our understanding that even in the economy of the mystery the eternal three-yet-one being of God is maintained, especially as it pertains to the oft-overlooked third person of the trinity, the Spirit. The economic Trinity is a trinity, and a deeper understanding of the role of the Spirit, especially in His relationship and interaction with the Father and the Son, who has passed through the processes of incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection, is needed.

The Experience of the Economic Trinity: the Life-giving Spirit

In all of the discussions by Rahner concerning the identification of the immanent Trinity with the economic Trinity, most of the argumentation is directed toward a discussion of the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Trinity. Little is spoken of the Spirit. Even in the creeds, little is spoken of the Spirit. In part this is because the creeds were developed in response to significant doctrinal controversies, most of which swirled around the question of the deity of Christ and the dual natures of Christ, rather than in response to concerns related to the Spirit. The Nicene Creed of AD 325 merely affirms the Son’s incarnation by the Spirit and does not elaborate on the role and function of the Spirit.¹⁹ With the church consumed with Christological controversies and diverted to philosophical examinations of the immanent nature of the Trinity, apart from considerations of the economy of God, little attention has been devoted to the Spirit.

Rahner admits as much when, at the end of *The Trinity*, he indicates, “In pneumatology, we must construct a doctrine of grace which possesses a trinitarian structure. When all this happens, then the real doctrine of the Trinity is presented in Christology and in pneumatology” (120). The entirety of his book essentially is devoted to re-establishing a trinitarian structure for Christology, deriving new energy for the effort from his examination of the economic Trinity. Out of the constraints of time and burden, he does not discuss a trinitarian structure for pneumatology.²⁰

The eternal relationality of the Spirit with the Father and the Son, which exists in the immanent Trinity, however, also exists in the economic Trinity. Bloesch, in commenting on Barth, notes that he

was adamant that the divine act cannot be separated from the divine being. The threefoldness indicated by the terms “Father,” “Son,” “Spirit” is a threefoldness in the structure or pattern of the one act of God in Christ and therefore the structure of the being of God. (179)

There is a correspondence between the the structure of the being of God, the immanent Trinity, and the one act of God in Christ, the activity of the economic Trinity, because as Robichaux notes in “Axioms of the Trinity,” what “is important to note in the distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit is not simply that the three of the Trinity are eternal but that the three are eternally relational. Each exists eternally in relation to the other two” (10). The eternal relationality of the Triune God did not cease to be an axiomatic reality when God was manifested in the flesh within the bounds of time in the person of

Christ. This is why Paul states that in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2:9). And the eternal relationality of the Triune God did not cease to be an axiomatic reality when the last Adam in the flesh was resurrected as a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45).

First Corinthians 15:45 is the key to developing a pneumatology that possesses a trinitarian structure. When the role of the life-giving Spirit begins to be included in discussions related to the mystery of God's economy rather than shunned or decried, the mystery of God will open up in the understanding and appreciation of the church. In a footnote to the following statement, "The *Son* is the economic (historical) self-communication of the Father" (63), Rahner indicates a need for the development of a similar understanding in regard to the Spirit, saying, "The relation of this self-communication to the one given in the Spirit must be considered later" (63).

Affirmations of the simple identification of the last Adam with the life-giving Spirit should not be viewed as modalistic twistings. Instead, they should be viewed as coming out of a continuing tradition that respects the operation of the economic Trinity, which is structured according to the axiomatic being of God. In particular, the axiom of His being eternally three-one enables Him to conform the object of His desire for an enlarged expression, redeemed and regenerated humanity, to the image of His Son through the axiomatic dispensing of His divine life, which dispensing He is and which life He also is. The life-giving Spirit is the Triune God, processed and consummated in His economy for the sake of His impartation into and begetting of many sons, who will reflexively affirm His fatherhood in and through the fellowship and communion of the Spirit. How is the integrity of the Trinity maintained, it may be asked, if the Son is identified as the Spirit? In regard to the Son, Rahner notes that "the fact that the divine unoriginate communicates himself in no way threatens or impairs his absolute integrity" (84), and so it must be when the last Adam communicates Himself as the life-giving Spirit. If the communication of the Father in the Son does not create confusion nor undermine the relational distinction of the two, then the same must apply to the communication of the Son in the Spirit. And so the answer to the question of the integrity of the Trinity, both in the incarnation and the resurrection, is concealed in mystery, expressed in awe, and sustained by faith.

By faith we believe in the Son (Gal. 3:22); by faith we

receive the Spirit (vv. 2, 14), and by faith we participate in the continuing self-communication of the Triune God in His economy (v. 5). The church must come to the point of recognizing that it is through the Spirit that the impartation of our self-revealing and self-communicating, economical Triune God is effectuated and experienced.²¹ Today the Spirit of the economic Trinity and even of the immanent Trinity, following the death and resurrection of the last Adam, is the Spirit who was not yet because Jesus was not yet glorified in His resurrection. And so the Spirit is the life-giving Spirit, containing all of the obtainments and attainments of the last Adam, including all that was newly incorporated into the Trinity through His incarnation. All of the Godhead that dwelt bodily in Christ is now economically available to the believers in the Spirit: "When He, the Spirit of reality, comes, He will guide you into all the reality; for He will not speak from Himself, but what He hears He will speak;...He will glorify Me, for He will receive of Mine and will declare it to you" (John 16:13-14). The immanent Trinity has fully reached humanity as the economic Trinity with all that He is and has. We can be filled unto all the fullness of

Affirmations of the simple identification of the last Adam with the life-giving Spirit should be viewed as coming out of a continuing tradition that respects the operation of the economic Trinity, which is structured according to the axiomatic being of God.

God, we can be the fullness of the One who fills all in all. This is the intent behind the revelation of the economy of the mystery, this is the rationale for the Triune God's selective self-revelation, this is the intrinsic implication of the axioms of the economic Trinity, and this is the issue of our experience of the life-giving Spirit.

Conclusion

The extent to which we understand and appreciate the economy of the mystery is the extent to which we will understand, appreciate, and experience the mystery of God. This is because the economy of the mystery conveys and imparts the mystery of God and even is the mystery of God in our experience. When we experience God in His economy, we experience all that God has obtained and attained, all that God immanently is according to the axioms of His being. The immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, and the economic Trinity, having passed through the new process of incarnation to assume humanity and the new process of resurrection from death to divinize this humanity and to make the

unique God-man communicable in the divine life as Spirit, is the immanent Trinity. And just as the divine communication made possible by the incarnation in no way threatens or impairs the absolute integrity of the Triune God, so the divine communication made possible by the death of the last Adam and His resurrection as the life-giving Spirit in no way threatens or impairs His absolute integrity. Both economic operations entail mystery, and both are sustained by faith. Our understanding of the economy of the mystery must be broadened and our appreciation must be deepened so that our experience of the economy of the mystery can be fostered and advanced. May the grace of God, which is toward us, upon us, and in us not be in vain. **A^cC**

Notes

¹To attempt to write on the mystery of God in any way that is useful to the building up of the Body of Christ seems like an insurmountable endeavor. Much can be read and much should be read and considered—not only the various writings within theological circles, past and present, but also the text of the Word of God itself. In the course of such reading, many avenues for consideration are opened. The incorporation of these considerations into the main body of this article, I believe, would ultimately manifest itself as a series of unnecessary tangential points, which would distract from the central point. This point is that God reveals Himself to be triune, first, because He is true and faithful in His testimony of Himself, and, second, because this economical revelation comforts our hearts and confirms within us that God is imminently knowable and experiential precisely because He is triune. As such, the doctrine of the Trinity is not a minor point in the Bible.

The revelation of the Triune God in His economy is the living testimony (1 John 5:11), the proof, to the believers that God is not distant, nor merely judicial in His actions, but, in fact, that He is an organic, living, dispensing being by virtue of the intrinsic axioms of His inner trinitarian reality, His intrinsic nature which calls forth the need for begetting, expression, and fellowship, not only relationally within Himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, but also relationally within the many sons who were predestinated unto glory in eternity past according to the eternal will of God as an extension of the ontological impulse of His divinely trinitarian nature.

Given this concern, the word *Notes* and even a superscripted number has been added to the title of this article with the intention of drawing attention to this note and those that follow. Within these notes, I am incorporating some of the potentially tangential avenues mentioned above. It is not necessary to read any of them, but I hope that the reader would engage them all, because they hopefully do add to the weight of the argument. At this point, I would suggest that you ignore the notes as you encounter them in the article. After reading the article, however, come back and read them in their context as further reflections on the mystery of God in His marvelous economy.

“To Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all the generations forever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:21).

²It may seem simplistic to some, but, as Watchman Nee suggests in *The Normal Christian Faith*, to state with certainty that there is no God, one must be God, having the attributes of omniscience and omnipresence. The finite nature of knowledge, that is, the selective nature of all epistemological boundaries, in and of itself, is enough to repudiate the certainty of the atheist. A belief that there is no God is simply that, a belief. Even a confidence in the explanatory power of science, being predicated upon similarly selected and, therefore, limited epistemological moorings, is ultimately a matter of faith. Admitting that one believes in God, at the very least, is a more honest acknowledgment.

³The fact that many Christians have difficulty moving beyond apologetic pursuits, which focus on proving lofty considerations as the existence of God, the deity of Jesus, or the resurrection of Christ, or on validating more pedantic matters such as the age of the earth or the presence of dinosaurs on Noah’s ark, indicates more than anything else that they have been fundamentally deluded by a false understanding of faith within the economy of God.

Faith is not mere mental assent, a conviction that arises out of things that have been seen and/or proven to the satisfaction of the rational human mind. Faith is the conviction, the certainty, of things not seen. It is not something gained from rational discourse; it precedes and then supercedes such discourse because it belongs to a spiritual realm. Within a believer, the Spirit of God, knowing the things of God, and the spirit of man, knowing the things of man, are joined as one spirit, and out of this organic union there is both the substantiation and the conviction of spiritual realities, which express themselves in, through, and as faith.

The need to prove the existence of God ultimately is a futile endeavor; it distracts believers from entering into the economy of God. This economy begins in the regenerated human spirit that has been enlivened with the life of God (Rom. 8:10), not in the mind that still is in need of transformation (12:2). This priority of the regenerated spirit over an untransformed mind is reflected in the apostle Paul’s prayer that we would have a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him (Eph. 1:17). And like the apostle John, we too receive revelation when we are in spirit (Rev. 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). To know the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ requires that we be strengthened with power through the Spirit into our spirit, our inner man (Eph. 3:16, 19). This inward operation of God produces faith, and this faith does not waver in response to outward claims from our physical and rational existence, which, as in the case of Abraham, seemingly call God’s promises and, therefore, the existence of a promising God, into question. Even though Abraham counted his body as already dead, he was empowered by faith, having hope where there was no rational basis for hope (Rom. 4:18-21). “Blessed are the people whose God is Jehovah” (Psa. 144:15).

⁴The Greek word *oikonomia* along with its derivations, which appear throughout the New Testament, especially in the

Epistles of Paul (Eph. 1:10; 3:9; 1 Tim. 1:4; Eph. 3:2; 1 Cor. 9:17; Col. 1:25), means

household law, implying distribution (the base of this word is of the same origin as that for *pasture* in John 10:9, implying a distribution of the pasture to the flock). It denotes a household management, a household administration, a household government, and, derivatively, a dispensation, a plan, or an economy for administration (distribution); hence, it is also a household economy. God's economy in faith is His household economy, His household administration,...which is to dispense Himself in Christ into His chosen people that He may have a house to express Himself, which house is the church (3:15), the Body of Christ. The apostle's ministry was centered on this economy of God (Col. 1:25; 1 Cor. 9:17). (Recovery Version, 1 Tim. 1:4, note 3)

In addition to Paul's letters, the term *economy* or *economic* has been commonly employed in theological writings throughout the history of the church, and it is commonly understood to refer to the actions of the Triune God in His interaction with the world and humanity in time. This distinction is seen in the terms *economic* and *essential* or *immanent Trinity*, terms which are well-accepted and much debated as will be demonstrated in subsequent sections of this essay.

⁵Elsewhere I have written of this correspondence, reflecting on the hypostatic nature of the economy of God. The economy of God does not involve merely the actions of God, objective and apart from His intrinsic being; it is God subjectively involved and imparted through His economy. The actions He has taken in His economy have been compounded into His being through the process of incarnation, death, and resurrection. The elements of these economical processes can be applied and realized in our experience only because He Himself in His processed and consummated trinity has been imparted and realized in our experience.

Consider the matter of the fellowship into which we have been called (1 Cor. 1:9): Apart from compounding the efficacy of His redemptive death into His very being and applying this redemption through the sealing of the Spirit (Eph. 1:7, 13), what possibility would there be for fellowship with the Triune God (1 John 1:3), knowing that there is no communion between light and darkness (2 Cor. 6:14)? But through the impartation of the redeeming Christ, we, who once were darkness, are now light in the Lord (Eph. 5:8), and through Him we have access in one Spirit unto the Father (2:18); we have fellowship. We participate in the economy of the mystery only to the extent that we appreciate and know the processed and consummated Triune God.

The content of this mystery was not made known to the sons of men in other generations. It was hidden in God, and only as the Triune God was progressively revealed, first as the Son with the Father by the Spirit in incarnation and then through the Spirit as the Son with the Father in resurrection, was it possible for this revelation to be made known to the sons of men. This is because the economy of God, the mystery of God and the mystery of Christ (Col. 2:2; Eph. 3:4), is not separate from the Triune God Himself. The economy of God is God. Therefore, as the Triune God was progressively revealed, the economy of the mystery progressively unfolded. (Pester 35)

⁶The intrinsic qualification for sending is to be sent. Jehovah called and sent Moses in Exodus 3:4-6 and 10 based on His standing as the Angel of Jehovah in verse 2. The Sender, in effect, sends Himself, and thus He can, in His economical capacity as the sent One, send others and commission others. This is a prefigure in type of the economical self-communication of the Triune God. See also Zechariah 2:8-11, where Jehovah of hosts is the sent One in verse 8 and also the sending One

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in verses 9 and 11. The sending One being the sent One involves the economy of the mystery.

All genuine sending in the Bible originates from One who has been genuinely called and sent Himself. Without the economy of the mystery, which brings the Son into time through incarnation, there would be no basis for the "Great Commission" in Matthew 28. Only after the Triune God has passed through the economical process of incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection, and whose coming as the life-giving Spirit baptizes the believers into one Body, is there a possibility of discipling the nations. True discipling begins with the believers' baptism into the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, the name of the Triune God, that is, with the believers' organic union and incorporation into the fellowship of the Triune God.

⁷This point is directly based on the work of Witness Lee, who saw the operation of the economic Trinity as the centerpiece of the divine revelation, and who unhesitatingly said amen to the economical references to and implications of the Triune God's operation in the New Testament, especially as it pertains to the Spirit. He speaks with candor of the implications in the Lord's utterance of the triune identity at the apex of His

process in the Gospel of Matthew, and it is worthy of lengthy citation:

There are many hints in the Old Testament through which we can know that God is triune, but it is difficult to see in the Old Testament that the Triune God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is not until the end of the first Gospel in the New Testament that we see the composition of the Divine Trinity (Matt. 28:19b). The composition of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit was not clearly and completely unveiled until after Christ's resurrection. After His resurrection, and before His ascension, He came back to the disciples and charged them to disciple the nations, baptizing them, the new believers, into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In the Acts the apostles baptized people into the name of Jesus Christ (8:16; 19:5). This means that Jesus Christ equals the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Before the man Jesus became the life-giving Spirit, the Divine Trinity was not fully consummated.

The Second of the Divine Trinity is the Son. He is the only begotten Son of God (John 3:16) and the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29). Before Christ was incarnated, He did not have humanity; before His incarnation the Son was only divine. Furthermore, before His resurrection the Son was God's only begotten Son, not the Firstborn. In this sense, the Second of the Divine Trinity was not fully consummated before His resurrection. He needed to pick up humanity through incarnation, and He needed to become the firstborn Son of God through resurrection (Acts 13:33). So after His incarnation and resurrection, the Second of the Trinity was completed, consummated.

Now we need to consider the Third of the Divine Trinity—the Spirit. Before the incarnation and resurrection, the Spirit was only the Spirit of God, not the Spirit of Man. The Spirit of Jesus is the Spirit of Man. In the Spirit of God prior to the incarnation, there was no human living, no all-inclusive death, and no element of resurrection. In other words, before the incarnation and the resurrection, the Spirit of God was not compounded. It was through incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection that the Spirit of God was compounded with humanity and with Christ's death and resurrection. So after Christ's resurrection, the Third of the Divine Trinity was also consummated. After the resurrection, the Spirit of God is the life-giving Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and the Lord Spirit. All these aspects of the Spirit are for the consummation of the Triune God. The Triune God was consummated in Christ's resurrection, so after His resurrection the Lord came back to say that we are to baptize people into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (*Spirit* 32-33)

When speaking of the economical Trinity, many theologians, focusing on the incarnation, are able to discern a distinctively new operation in the Trinity, especially in regard to the Son's actions to carry out the Father's purpose and plan. Others recognize that the incarnation was not just a new activity of God but that it also produced something intrinsically new about God Himself. In *God for Us* LaCugna discusses the need for some conceptual clarification to Rahner's axiom that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, pointing to Walter Kasper's argument in *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984):

Walter Kasper's fundamental reservation about Rahner's axiom is that, taken at face value, it does not convey that there is something *new* about God because of God's entry into history. It is necessary, he tells us, to allow the economic Trinity its full historical distinctiveness and to "take seriously the truth that through the incarnation the second divine person exists in history in a new way." (220)

Witness Lee's point concerning the third of the Divine Trinity in the above citation, in effect, is an extension of Kasper's argument as it relates to God's continuing "entry" into history through the resurrection. Just like the incarnation, the resurrection resulted in something new about God. Through the resurrection the third person of the Trinity exists in history in a new and consummated way. And since the economical Trinity is distinct but not separate, we should more accurately say that both the Son and the Spirit exist in history in a new way, a fact which is implied in Paul's succinct utterance: "The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45).

In resurrection the second of the economical Trinity is newly identified with the Spirit, and the Spirit is newly imbued with an economic operation that comes out of His intrinsic being—giving life. With the glorification of the Son in resurrection, the Spirit who was not yet, now is (John 7:39). And in His newness of being, He can be received and flow out of the innermost being of the believers. More attention needs to be paid to the economy of the mystery as it applies to the Spirit, and more liberty needs to be granted to foster such a discussion.

⁸All three persons of the Trinity are seldom spoken of together or within the immediate context of one another in Matthew, so it is understandable if one fails to see a triune relationship prior to 28:19. One instance—the baptism of Christ (3:16-17)—where the triune operation is clearly demonstrated, often is used to support arguments that deny the identity and coinherence of the persons of the Trinity and thus implicitly support a position of complete separation within the Trinity. In "The Divine Trinity in the Divine Economy," Kerry S. Robichaux comments on this tritheistic misinterpretation with reference to Augustine's *The Trinity*:

In His baptism, both the Father and the Spirit operated. Though Christ in incarnation was intrinsically related to the Spirit from the moment of His conception, at His baptism the Spirit came upon Him now for His ministry

ahead. At the same moment, the Father testified from heaven concerning His beloved Son and implicitly declared His approval of the initiation of Christ's ministry. We should be careful not to fall into the common error of thinking that the baptism of Christ demonstrates a separateness of the three in the Godhead. It is lamentable that many Christians look to these verses to prove that the three are separate, rather than to see that the three operate inseparably though distinctly. Augustine helps us here:

Not that the voice could be produced without the activity of the Son and Holy Spirit (the triad works inseparably); but it was produced to manifest the person of the Father alone, just as the three produced that human being of the virgin Mary and yet it is the person of the Son alone—the invisible three producing what is the visible person of the Son alone. (110) (40)

⁹These include: St. Anselm. *Basic Writings*. Trans. S. Deane. LaSalle: Open Court, 1968; St. Athanasius. *Selected Writings and Letters. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 4*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987; St. Augustine. *On the Trinity*. Ed. and trans. E. Hill. Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991; Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. Trans. English Dominican Fathers. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947. An excellent survey of the doctrine of the Trinity is contained in Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, specifically Volume 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, and Volume 2, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, published by Chicago University Press in 1971 and 1974 respectively.

¹⁰Although Johnson points out in *Experiencing the Trinity* that the doctrine of the Trinity was determined, "not by aimless philosophical speculation, but through the early church's experience of the resurrected Christ" (14), it is clear that the creedal debates opened the door for rampant and often meaningless philosophical speculation about the intrinsic relationships within the Trinity. This is the principal point of LaCugna's criticism of Rahner's continuing emphasis on the immanent Trinity. The preoccupation of the church with inner trinitarian relationships, coupled with a perceived need for some semblance of a rational explanation of these relationships, has resulted in dangerous oversimplifications of the doctrine and also the outright rejection of it in the minds of different believers.

Illustrations of these varying reactions can be seen in correspondence generated by Living Stream Ministry's E-mail service known as eManna (www.emanna.com), which provides daily portions of the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee.

Most of the E-mails do not generate comments, but portions that touch on the Trinity invariably produce mixed reactions. For example, in a comment on the March 13, 2003 eManna on the Lord's word in John 7:39 concerning rivers of living water, which associates the believers' economic realization of the Spirit who was not yet with the economic process of the Son's glorification, one reader critically responds by pointing to his understanding of the absolute distinction and separation of the Trinity:

At the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Father were both made manifest. Are [you] trying to tell me that Jesus was the Holy Spirit while He was in the waters and before He was ever even raised from the dead? This is only one example of the TRIUNE GOD-HEAD. There are many others to testify to this truth. Also, Jesus was standing at the right hand of God at the time of Stephan's stoning (Acts 7).

Stephan, the Scripture says, was a man filled with faith and the HOLY SPIRIT. So what you would have to force that passage to say is that Jesus was in Stephan and also at the right hand of the Father. Ever since Jesus became

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flesh He was and is limited to physically being in one place at one time. That is why He told His disciples that it is better that He go away so that the Comforter would come and could be with all of them regardless of geographical location (John 16:7-15), something Jesus could not do since He became Incarnate. (Comments, 14 March 2003)

In the above response, the confusion related to the Trinity and even to the "limitations" of the resurrected God-man, Jesus Christ, speaks for itself. In an eManna from July 9, 2003, concerning the Lord's word in John 14:6-9 and 10:30, which points to the economical identity and coinherence of the Father and the Son, Witness Lee states,

Again I say, we cannot explain this matter adequately because it is very difficult for our limited mentality to understand how They two could be one. In our limited understanding, the Son is the Son, the Father is the Father, and the two are distinctly separate one from the other. But the Lord tells us clearly that the Son and the Father are one. Here I strongly say that the Lord never says that He and the Father are two. We have to

take the mystery of the Trinity according to the Lord's definite and clear word, not according to our suppositions.

In response, a reader writes quite confidently, "If God who made all and us, allows us to change the same thing, like ice to water and water to vapor, then surely the Trinity of Jesus our God is not such a big mystery to understand" (Comments, 10 July 2003). Unfortunately this analogy does not uphold the truth of the Trinity; rather, it undermines it by relying upon an essentially modalistic metaphor of the Trinity. When ice becomes water it ceases to be ice, and when water becomes vapor it ceases to be water; in both transformations the relational aspect of the three substances ceases to exist. This is not the case with the Triune God. Johnson reiterates this point and makes a further one, when he challenges the ice-water-vapor metaphor:

But the fact of the matter is when applied to the threeness of God, the analogy illustrates modalism: the same reality manifests itself in different modes under different conditions. "Ah!" say the chemistry students among us, at the so-called "triple point," at .0098 degree centigrade, 4.579 mm pressure, water can exist simultaneously as ice, liquid and gas. Such a phenomenon can help us believe that the mystery of the Trinity is not an absurdity. But what the triple-point phenomenon illustrates is "tri-theism": for at the triple point three different molecules exist in three different states. (44-45)

Confusion and overconfidence do not necessarily undermine faith, although they may limit it. The church's fascination with attempts to rationally explain the Trinity, however, also has had a more pernicious effect on faith, as illustrated in a comment on the same eManna of July 9, 2003, which states, "I have to say that on the subject of the Trinity you have erred. It is Christianity's self inflicted wound and a HUGE stumbling block for many many that have not believed on account of it. Thank you for all you do otherwise" (Comments, 10 July 2003). In follow up correspondence, the same writer elaborated,

I...no longer believe in a trinity. Many religions have one; as well, Christianity adopted its [trinity] around the 3rd century. As a former trinitarian, I can say I have seen it act to the detriment of the Gospel, as so many Jews will not believe it....It was hard for me to even study the subject, but I do want to know, and truth is the ultimate goal. No, I am not a heretic, and I do have the "gifts" of the spirit in my life. Still even though a hard subject to learn, I finally was able to put aside religion and tradition and see He is the son of God, not God the Son. (Comments, 16 July 2003)

In the mind of this reader a rational explanation of the Triune God is needed in order for one to believe, because if an explanation cannot be given, many will not believe. This response illustrates the danger of the stumbling block of attempting to rationally explain the doctrine of Trinity, not the doctrine of the Trinity itself, which though codified in AD 325 was

clearly articulated in Matthew 28:19. Who has been stumbled if not this reader? Bloesch makes a salient point:

The Trinity can be stated in paradoxical and symbolic language, but it cannot be resolved into a rational system. It reminds us that the mysteries of faith stand above reason though not necessarily against reason. Once accepted they make sense of the experience of faith, but they cannot provide a viable rationale for the decision of faith. (167)

In this regard Rahner states a related point when he notes that the terms *hypostases* or *subsistences*, which appear in the creeds, are not included for the sake of explanation, but rather for reference to realities that are intrinsically mysterious: "We said that the doctrine of the Church speaks of *three* 'hypostases,' or 'subsistences.' It makes no attempt to explain independently from this context what a 'hypostasis' or 'subsistence' is" (73).

Elsewhere, he points out that the creeds are defensive in nature, rather than explanatory; that is, they provide a standard as to what is not the truth, thereby protecting the believers from falling prey to heretical deviations, especially tritheism and modalism:

Insofar as these concepts [substance and essence] belong to the *dogma* of the Church, they intend to be only a logical, not an ontic explanation. They are an explanation of the state of affairs which they wish to express—one which, in Scripture and in the pre-Nicene tradition, and even in later doctrinal pronouncements of the Church, could be expressed and has in fact been expressed (and as it still may be expressed today), without reference to such concepts. This does not mean that they are not important even for the expression of the dogma as such. They are quite well suited, almost necessary, to safeguard the dogma against tritheistic or modalistic or subordinationalistic misunderstanding. This safeguard function itself shows that these two concepts, rather than directly representing for us the thing which is meant, refer us to the dark mystery of God. (54-55)

A more important insight of Rahner relates to recent theological attempts to sidestep the difficulties inherent in the use of the term *persons*, as in the popular hymn, "God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity!", by primarily focusing on relational distinctions among the three of the Trinity. He notes,

By pointing to the relationality of the divine persons we derive some help against the basic logical difficulty against the doctrine of the Trinity, namely, how can there be three really distinct persons in God, if each of them is really identical with the one, simple essence of God. Appealing to the pure relationality of the persons does not intend positively to solve this difficulty. Otherwise we might as well solve the mystery of the Trinity rationalistically. (69)

We cannot solve the mystery of the Trinity rationalistically; this

was never God's intent. He did not create humanity so that humanity could study Him, and by virtue of this study, understand and relate to Him in an objective way. He created humanity in His image and likeness with a view to their bearing the image of His Son through their organic and economic identification with Him, made possible by the communicable life and nature of God. According to His life and nature, God is axiomatically a dispensing (see "Axioms of the Trinity," *Affirmation & Critique* 1.1 (January 1996): 6-11. Available online at http://www.affcrit.com/archives/ac_96_01.html). And He is realized in the believers' experience through His economic dispensing into the tripartite being of redeemed humanity.

¹¹I speak in faith, feeling neither an inclination nor a need to provide rational proof for this claim.

¹²Weinandy makes a similar point related to our capacity to know God as evidenced by the existence of His communicated Word in his criticism of Tityu Koev. He makes the point while discussing the distinction between the begetting of the Son and the procession of the Spirit:

While the mystery of the Trinity cannot be fully grasped by the human mind, it would be wrong to think that we cannot come to any knowledge of it. Thus to say, as Tityu Koev does, that the distinction between the "begetting" of the Son and the "proceeding" of the Holy Spirit "is a mystery of the Divine Life, which is completely beyond the human mind"

("The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity on the Basis of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol of Faith", *Theological Dialogue Between Orthodox and Reformed Churches*, Vol. 2, p. 70) does injustice both to man and to God since God must have thought we could, in some incomplete but fruitful manner, grasp it in that it was he himself who revealed it to us. To be in complete ignorance about this distinction does not lead to holy wonder and awe, but to complete intellectual frustration. (67)

¹³I use the terms *Trinity* and *triune* interchangeably with reference to the same reality. In part this apparent inconsistency is habit, a habit that could be avoided with assiduous proofing and fastidious correction. In part, however, it is a reflection of not being overly encumbered with terminology. My personal preference is the term *triune* because it signifies both three (*tri*) and one (*une*) in the same word. But I also recognize that the term *Trinity*, within the literature and discourse of the church, historically has been used to connote the same reality.

¹⁴The eManna comments in note 10 above reflect this confusion and anguish.

¹⁵While the term *economic Trinity* is the standard referent

for the Triune God in His interaction with humanity, several terms are common when referencing the Triune God as He is in His eternal existence, apart from time, including *immanent Trinity* and *essential Trinity*. To the extent that these latter terms are used in this article, no distinction of meaning is intended.

¹⁶The two most noted books on this point are *The Trinity* by Rahner and *God for Us* by LaCugna. Rahner's book, published in 1970, generated much of the original scholarly discussion on the identity of the economic Trinity with the immanent Trinity, while LaCugna's book, published in 1991, summarized and generated further discussion, especially on the limitations of Rahner's thesis. Weinandy also provides an excellent bibliography on pages 1 and 2 of *The Father's Spirit of Sonship* of what he describes as this "renewed theological interest" in the Trinity (1).

In addition to these works, which are limited in their reach by the density of their language and the breadth of their reference to other theological writings, most of which are beyond the grasp of many (I largely count myself in this group), the much more accessible writings of Witness Lee present many of these

According to His life and nature,
God is axiomatically a dispensing.
And He is realized in the believers'
experience through His
economic dispensing
into the tripartite being
of redeemed humanity.

same points in simpler style and with reference primarily to the Scriptures alone. His ministry, in fact, is a reflection of a lifelong pursuit of knowing God in His economy, and almost all of his discussion of the Triune God is framed with reference to the economic Trinity, including His obtainments and attainments in His economical and consummating process. A short series of booklets, outlining these points, include *The Four Major Steps of Christ* (1969), *The All-inclusive Spirit of Christ* (1969), and *The Parts of Man* (1969). The points in these booklets are more extensively developed in *The Economy of God* (1968), *God's New Testament Economy* (1986), and *The Divine Economy* (1986). All of the booklet titles and *The Divine Economy* are available in their entirety online at www.ministrybooks.org.

¹⁷But, in fact, He is a stumbling block in both His person (Rom. 9:32-33; 1 Cor. 1:23; 1 Pet. 2:8) and His work (Gal. 5:11).

¹⁸The three principal theological sources for this article are books by Rahner, LaCugna, and Weinandy. I would be remiss to not point out the existence of Weinandy's substantial disagreement with LaCugna's arguments. This disagreement extends to the point of including an excursus in his book in direct response

to LaCugna (123-136). In part, he views LaCugna's work as a direct challenge to Rahner's axiom, which serves as the basis for his work in *The Father's Spirit of Sonship*. He notes, "LaCugna is one of the few contemporary theologians who wishes to abandon this axiom. The whole of *God For Us* examines instead the relationship between *theologia* and *oikonomia* with regard to the Trinity" (5). I find this criticism, for the most part, misplaced. Building upon his point, he states,

LaCugna contends that theology should abandon the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity as it has been understood within contemporary theology. She believes that such a distinction segregates "God in himself" from "God for us", and so fixes a gap between them, rendering God irrelevant to the Christian life. In contrast, LaCugna proposes, and this is the theme of her entire book, that the whole trinitarian enterprise must be executed within a soteriological context.

However, since the Council of Nicea the history of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity has focused, both in the East and in the West, on the immanent Trinity and the intradivine relationships between the persons. (123)

Weinandy's criticism comes from several directions, all of which are evident in the above passage. First, he exhibits a strong deference to the creeds of the early church, and subsequently, he gives primacy to them as the unquestioned arbiters of the faith. LaCugna, in contrast, is critical of the creeds but not, to my sense, in the way that Weinandy believes.

She does not discount the creedal statements as descriptors of the truth; rather, she faults the direction that their adoption imposed upon the church, albeit unintentionally, that is, the tendency to examine the immanent Trinity to the neglect of the economic Trinity. In arguing for increased attention to the economy of God, the *oikonomia*, she does not diminish the teaching of the church, the *theologia*. She states,

To be sure, the doctrine of the Trinity is more than the doctrine of salvation. Theology cannot be reduced to soteriology. Nor can trinitarian theology be purely functional; trinitarian theology is not merely a summary of our experience of God. It is this, but it also is a statement, however partial, about the mystery of God's eternal being. *Theologia* and *oikonomia* belong together; we cannot presume to speak about either one to the exclusion of the other. A theology built entirely around *theologia* produces a nonexperiential, nonsoteriological, nonchristological, nonpneumatological metaphysics of the divine nature. A theology built entirely around *oikonomia* results in a skepticism about whether how God saves through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is essentially related to who or what God is. The unity of *theologia* and *oikonomia* shows that the fundamental issue in trinitarian theology is not the inner

workings of the "immanent" Trinity, but *the question of how the trinitarian pattern of salvation history is to be correlated with the eternal being of God*. (4)

It is not evident to me that the sense of creedal rejection that Weinandy feels in LaCugna's writing is actually present in her writing. A call for a corrective to the theological impulse to give primacy to the immanent Trinity, however, is strongly present and in many cases is most welcome.

A second source of Weinandy's criticism is an extension of this point. It is evident that he focuses on the economic Trinity with the intention of working back to the immanent Trinity, thereby evidencing the fault that LaCugna finds with post-Nicean theology. LaCugna, however, is more concerned, although not exclusively, with the actions of the Triune God as they personally impact the believers and through which the believers can know God. She states,

We can make true statements about God—particularly when the assertions are about the triune nature of God—only on the basis of the economy, corroborated by God's self-revelation in Christ and the Spirit. *Theological* statements are possible not because we have some independent insight into God, or can speak from the standpoint of God, but because God has freely revealed and communicated God's *self*, God's personal existence, God's infinite mystery. Christians believe that God bestows the fullness of divine life in the person of Jesus Christ, and that through the person of Christ and the action of the Holy Spirit we are made intimate partakers of the living God (*theōsis*, divinization). (2-3)

¹⁹The Council of Constantinople in AD 381 did address the matter of the deity of the Holy Spirit and further identified the Spirit with the phrase *the Lord, the Giver of life*.

²⁰Weinandy draws upon Rahner's axiom in *The Father's Spirit of Sonship*, utilizing the economic revelation of the operation of the Spirit to define more clearly the role of the Spirit and to give the Spirit more personal identity within the immanent Trinity itself. He states,

Theologians continue to explore the correlation between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity. If we are to know the true God, he must reveal himself as he is in himself. The temporal missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit necessarily disclose the inner life of the Trinity itself. (4-5)

Weinandy's focus is to work from the economic Trinity back to the immanent Trinity, as he clearly sets forth in his preface.

I was prayerfully considering and studying Romans 8:14-16—a passage that now possessed experiential relevance: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." At one point

the thought came to me that if we, who are Christians, are conformed into sons of the Father by the Spirit through whom we are empowered to cry out in the same words as Jesus, then the eternal Son himself must have been begotten and conformed to be Son in the same Spirit in whom he too eternally cries out “Abba!” (ix-x)

In his conclusions about the role of the Spirit in the immanent Trinity, he makes a concise statement concerning the coexistence and coinherence of the three persons of the Trinity, a conclusion that he arrives at by examining the economical role of the Spirit as revealed in the New Testament. He states,

A proper understanding of the Trinity can only be obtained if all three persons, logically and ontologically, spring forth in one simultaneous, nonsequential, eternal act in which each person of the Trinity subsistently defines, and equally is subsistently defined by, the other persons. (14-15)

What is interesting about Weinandy’s observations is that although his starting point is the economic Trinity, he fails to associate his subsequent conclusions about the immanent Trinity back to the economic Trinity. The same simultaneous, nonsequential, eternal act of coexistence and coinherence, which subsistently defines each person in the immanent Trinity, is in operation within the economic Trinity and within the lives of the believers. Thus, there is distinction and coexistence (last Adam, life-giving Spirit), and coinherence but not separation (became) in the persons of the Son and the Spirit in the economic Trinity. The subsistence of the Son is defined and defines the subsistence of the Spirit in the believers experience of the economic Trinity, which is just our experience of the Triune God.

²¹The scope of this article, being a reflection, makes it impractical to delve more deeply into considerations of how a trinitarian operation involving the life-giving Spirit can be adequately articulated to avoid unintentional misunderstandings on the part of the readers. Much needs to be written in this regard and hopefully future articles can more thoroughly and exclusively address this point. Willful misunderstandings, on the other hand, cannot be avoided; only God can judge these. I, however, have faith that within the members of the Body, within whom my Triune God lives and operates, there is a willingness and deep desire to enter into the economy of God, and therefore a willingness to begin to consider the role of the life-giving Spirit in our understanding of the truth, but even more in our experience of this Spirit of reality.

To a large extent, my burden in this article has been to extend the church’s consideration of the economy of God beyond the incarnation and toward its operation in the resurrection of

Christ as the life-giving Spirit, and in the process I hope to provide a foundation for this consideration—one that can be sustained by the current and accepted scholarship related to the economic Trinity but, more importantly, by the revelation of the economy of the mystery in the holy Scriptures.

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