

**Substantial Persons in Trinitarian Relationality:
Trinitarian Theology, Imago Dei, and Personhood¹**

Andrew D. Thrasher, MA²

Virginia Beach, VA

Spring 2017

¹ This paper was presented at the Eastern Regional Conference for the Evangelical Theological Society, March 31-April 1, 2017 in Lancaster, PA. It also serves as a central chapter to my ThM thesis at Regent University that is currently underway: “Trinitarian Hermeneutics and Cosmotheandric Theology.”

² Andrew D. Thrasher holds an MA in Interdisciplinary Studies from George Mason University (2014) and is currently pursuing a ThM from Regent University. He teaches Religion at Tidewater Community College, Virginia Beach campus as an Adjunct Instructor.

Introduction

In Trinitarian theology there are two main trends in which the history of Christianity has understood the essence of God: through the traditional Christian lens of substance ontology and what has arose as relational ontology in the last century's renewal of Trinitarian theology. What I seek to do is navigate between these two seemingly opposite ontologies not only to posit the reconciliation between them through what I will call the substantial relationality of Trinitarian persons, but also that through this lens one may posit a theological anthropology of the human person through the lens of the *Imago dei*. This paper could equally be entitled 'Substantial persons *and* trinitarian theology' but I draw out the meaning of personhood, both of the divine and human, precisely in a substance ontology of relationality to show the participatory link of the *imago dei* in Jesus Christ as what not only constitutes human personhood, but reveals a triune God.

I argue in this paper for systematic reflections of Christian theology that represents the Christological importance not only to the doctrine of the trinity, but also to a theological anthropology of the *imago dei*. To describe what might be called a Trinitarian theology of personhood I emphasize that how God reveals himself as trinity through the incarnation implies not only the reconciliation of creation and humanity, but particularly so through being conformed into the image of the Son. As the argument progresses I turn to develop a Trinitarian theology of substantial relationality as developed in the early church, guided and interpreted primarily through the thought of John Zizioulas, Christoph Schwobel, Colin Gunton, and Stanley Grenz to show the personhood of God and humanity as essentially relational.

Trinity Revealed: Trinity in Systematic Reflections

This section seeks to develop some systematic reflections on the trinity through analyses of a Christian understanding of history that reflects a biblical redemptive framework that starts with creation and the subsequent fall to consummation while being mediated by the incarnation of Jesus as the Son of God. Thus I argue in this section for systematic reflections of the doctrines of creation, Christology, and touching upon eschatology, that ‘God is love.’ To do this I highlight the Christian reading of history and the Christological importance of Jesus of Nazareth as the divine self-revelation and self-disclosure of who God is as triune. Here I emphasize the Christological importance of Trinitarian theology because it is with the incarnation that God reveals himself as trinity. I argue that the incarnation not only reveals God as trinity, but also that it reveals a purpose to creation and humanity that is reconciled by the redemption given at the cross of Jesus Christ.

Undercutting the theological framework of a revealed relationality in the biblical framework is an understanding of a God who actively and lovingly reveals himself through the biblical narrative by relating with and in his creation in a way that reveals his character as a dynamic expression of relational love that is embodied in the living expression of his self-revelation through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. I would argue that the notion of God’s self-revelation through the incarnation is expressed through a revealed relationality that is primarily seen through the biblical narrative and is embodied with and in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Linked to the biblical context and the development of Trinitarian theology in the early church what we find is a relational understanding of the triune God who works in creation to

bring it back to its original intention via his self-revelation in the person and work of Jesus Christ and in the reconciliation and work of the Holy Spirit in humanity and creation.³

Tied to the incarnation of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ are the theological underpinnings of a Trinitarian God who reveals himself in a biblically redemptive history that begins with a ‘good’ creation that fell and ultimately consummates in the reconciliation and redemption of a fallen humanity and creation that is set right before a holy God. What I am subtly pointing to here is that the theological doctrine of the Trinity in relation to a biblical-redemptive history is one that is reflected not merely within the biblical narrative as a whole on who God is, but it is also embodied in the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as the singular pivot by and in which the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is grounded.

Christoph Schwöbel captures this well in an extended passage:

The truly astonishing assertion of Christian faith as it finds expression in the New Testament in a way which starkly reflects the scandal of the Gospel, is that in Jesus the righteousness of God is realized in the finality and unconditionality which constitutes its universality for all who accept it in faith as their justification. This is at the core of the message of the resurrection of the one who was crucified. The claim made in these statements means nothing less than that the righteousness of God the creator, the eschatological truth of all meaning and being, is victorious in the temporal life, death, and resurrection of Christ as the reconciliation of God with the alienated creation. However, if the reconciliation of God with creation is truly unconditional, dependent on nothing but God’s being of love, then the relationship between the Father and Son which constitutes Christ as the agent of salvation cannot be a temporal and transitory accident of God’s being, but has to be seen as eternally rooted in God’s being.⁴

In the gospel of John we clearly see in Jesus’ own understanding of Himself in His relation to the Father in a way that reveals who He is *relationally* in and towards the Father; that is, by revealing himself through a humble relationality, or rather a self-disclosing revelation of who is he *in relation* to the Father.⁵ Schwöbel emphasizes this when he states: “This also

³ On the historical development of Trinitarian doctrine I would point the reader to Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 3-64.

⁴ Christoph Schwöbel, “Christology and Trinitarian Thought,” in *Trinitarian Theology Today*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 124.

explains why Jesus' addressing God as Father and the church's invocation of Jesus as the Son could become the paradigm for the use of all other Christological models, since the Father-Son relationship exemplifies the mutuality and reciprocity of God's self-identification in Jesus and the identification of Jesus through his relation to God."⁶

This notion of God's self-disclosure in the person and work of Jesus Christ certainly highlights the underlying dynamic of a relationality that expresses the nature of God or rather who he is as a Trinitarian God. Certainly the Christian tradition understands itself as reflecting the redeeming work of Jesus Christ on personal, social, and cosmic levels, but it also does all of this in an intimately relational way. It is all by the work of the Spirit, and was effectuated by the redeeming work of the Cross in Jesus Christ. Here the pneumatological dimensions of God's self-disclosure in the person and work of Jesus Christ takes on a dimension not merely in the shared love between the Father and Son as the Spirit of God, but also in the church where the Spirit is present to us in our loving actions towards others substantiating our personal relationships with others in the love of the Father through the Son in the Spirit. Commenting on the Trinitarian theology of Stanley Grenz, Jason Sexton articulates this point well when he states that, "Grenz affirmed that 'God's be-ing present involves the presence—the present-ing—of Trinitarian love which substantiates the other as person.' Explaining further, it is 'Love' that substantiates the other as other, thereby setting the other in a relationship that is personal."⁷

⁵ See, John 10:30, 14:10-11. Indeed the entire discourse between John 13-17 certain reflects Jesus own understanding of himself in relation to the Father that highlights a distinct and unique understanding of himself in relation to God the Father while simultaneously asserting his understanding of Himself as Equal to the Father. I will pick this up in the next section. See also, Athanasius position here as well in John Willis, S.J., *The Teachings of the Church Fathers* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 155-156.

⁶ Schwöbel, "Christology and Trinitarian Thought," 124.

⁷ Jason Sexton, *The Trinitarian Theology of Stanley J. Grenz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 113; C.f. Stanley Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 339-340.

This personal relationship with God the Father through the person of Jesus Christ in the Spirit presents to us a revelation of God in which we may come to identify ourselves as redeemed and conformed to the image of God presented to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Here I would quote both Sexton's analysis of Grenz and Schwöbel to articulate this point of God's self-revelation in the person and work of Jesus Christ and what it means to be in a constituting relationship with God. Both quotes exemplify not merely who God is, but also what it means to be in a relationship *with* Him. Quoting Schwöbel first:

The temporal particularity of God's self-identification is retained in the way in which the three identifying descriptions are related. The Spirit does not present another God than the story of Jesus and Jesus points away from himself to the one he calls Father. The believers who are brought into the fellowship of the Holy Spirit are by the grace of Christ included in his relationship of sonship to the Father....

It is, however, important to note that the temporal identification of God as Father, Son, and Spirit which is bracketed in the eschatological ultimacy of God's action for salvation of creation is, from very early on, combined with the identification of God as the unconditional ground of being, meaning and righteousness. Message, life, cross, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the ultimate and unconditional victory of God's righteousness. The reconciliation of the creator with his creation is seen as the consummation of the relationship God intended for the creation from the beginning... Because the Son and the Spirit are not external to God's being, the Son and the Spirit can be seen as active in all divine works from creation to the consummation of the Kingdom. The eschatological ultimacy of the temporal identification of the Father, Son and the Spirit requires a recognition of their ontological ultimacy for the being of God.⁸

This extended quote of Schwöbel draws out significant factors to understanding the trinity and the redemptive work of God in and to humanity and creation unto consummation. These factors include systematic connotations in Schwöbel's understanding of trinitarian theology that emphasize the primacy of God as creator over creation, who yet relates with creation for his purpose of redeeming it in love. What Schwöbel emphasizes as the Christological dimension of trinitarian theology implies the self-revelation of God in the person of Jesus, but also his purpose for creation and humanity. In turn, Sexton states Grenz's position thus:

...Where the unity of Jesus' person is displaying in its revelatory significance, connecting the divine disclosure to humans (epistemologically) with ontological participation, a vision is seen unfolding, bringing believers from the present community into the ultimate future reality, which is their destiny. It is therefore

⁸ Schwöbel, "Christology and Trinitarian Thought," 126-127.

Jesus as the revelation of the Son's eternal response to the Father within the intratrinitarian divine reality that 'constitutes the paradigm for creation.'⁹

This quote explicates not merely God's self-revelation to us as if he were merely a God presented to us, but also it reveals the purposeful dimension to creation and for humanity in the person and work of Jesus Christ; hence the reconciliation and redemption of a fallen creation where the Spirit is at work in history points us towards the community of God and the consummation of the Kingdom when Jesus comes again. Keith Ward reflects the self-revelation of God's love to creation well in a way that truly encompasses the reconciliation found in the biblical narrative with a theological understanding of God's intentional love embodied in the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Ward states:

Real, thick love requires the existence of a being or beings who are truly 'other' than oneself, who have a real independence, whose experiences and capacities are different from one's own, and who are dependent and developing in many ways. *If God is essentially love in this sense, then some form of creation of others may indeed be a natural expression of the divine being.* That does not mean that God must necessarily and always have created others to love. It means only that the expression of God's nature makes it natural that God will at some point create other persons in order *to realize* the divine nature as loving in relation to them.¹⁰

This quote explicates not merely God's self-revelation to us as if he were merely a God presented to us, but also it reveals the purposeful dimension to creation and for humanity in the person and work of Jesus Christ; hence the reconciliation and redemption of a fallen creation where the Spirit is at work in history points us towards the community of God and the consummation of the Kingdom when Jesus comes again. Keith Ward reflects the self-revelation of God's love to creation well in a way that truly encompasses the reconciliation found in the biblical narrative with a theological understanding of God's intentional love embodied in the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Ward states:

⁹ Jason Sexton, *The Trinitarian Theology of Stanley J. Grenz*, 116; c.f. Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 104-105.

¹⁰Keith Ward, *Christ and Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 180. My emphases.

The New Testament, taken as a whole, thus speaks of God as a dynamic, creative, and relational reality, a reality known in a basic threefold relation to the cosmic world. God envisages the world, takes form within it, and unites it progressively and synergistically—by cooperative and creative action—to the divine life. There is a real unfolding story of the Trinity, and it is in the unfolding of that history that God is Trinity.¹¹

What I have discussed above points to what Schwöbel calls the proto-Trinitarian depth structure of the Christian faith in Jesus as revealing the triune face of the living God that was experientially known in the early church, and indeed, in what I would venture to say all Christian communities where the Spirit of God is present. He makes it clear is that he is not claiming scriptural proof of the trinity, but rather that the Trinitarian life of God was experienced in the Christian community in a way that faith in Jesus as lord and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit was lived out in a community marked by God’s transforming grace through and in love. Schwöbel detects this trinitarian structure in the Christian practice itself where the presence of God was made manifest and provided a “focus for the identity of the Christian message and defined the framework for the pluriformity of the rich variety of expressions of Christian faith.”¹² This in turn set the stage for the orthodox theological development of the Trinity in the early church that was developed in response to Arianism through the communal reflections on the experience of the triune God in history and what this meant for believers in Jesus soteriologically.

Trinitarian Relationality and the Personal Communion of Love

In this section my goal is to develop a trinitarian theology that follows both the classical understanding of God through a substance ontology while reconciling it to a relational ontology by developing, [I am Arguing] through the thought of John Zizioulas and the theological contribution of the Cappadocian fathers, that the doctrine of the trinity implies the Being of God as communion because he is substantially relational. Here my arguments points to the

¹¹ Ward, *Christ and Cosmos*, 72.

¹² Schwöbel, “Christology and Trinitarian Thought,” 127.

reconciliation between substance and relational ontologies by understanding the Being of God as a personal substance in and through his relationality as communion. Situating my argument in the theological development of the early church I argue that the question of a substance ontology of God was understood relationally.

The dynamic ability of the early church was one that truly expressed an attempt to reconcile the Greco-roman emphasis of being as static with the Jewish-Christian understanding of an actively revelatory and relational God. In this development Zizioulas identifies through the theological development of Cappadocian fathers the Trinity as the ontological identification of God as a relational *person*.¹³ Commenting on Zizioulas, Grenz states that, “by connecting *hypostasis* with *prosopon*, Zizioulas concludes, the Cappadocian Fathers transformed ‘person’ into the constitutive element of a being, and the concept of being itself became relational. As Zizioulas states it, ‘*To be and to be in relation* became identical.’”¹⁴

What this indicates of the identity of God was primarily developed by the Cappadocians, according to Zizioulas, was that the trinity was understood in terms of personhood wherein the “person is identified by means of each one’s uniqueness rather than through a common nature or substance.”¹⁵ This emphasis on the personhood of God I would argue implies that the substance of God is in fact his relationality. In this guard against tri-theism the Trinitarian essence as relationality offers a significant understanding of God as one essence relationally constituting *and* subsisting his identity *as* God. This notion of relationality both constituting and subsisting

¹³ In Zizioulas’ context this is always shaped by his interest and emphasis on ecclesiology, that is the communion of the church as the image bearer with and of the communion of God. C.f. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 19.

¹⁴ Stanley Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 136. See also, John Zizioulas, “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution,” in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, ed. Christoph Schwobel (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 44–60; [47-49]; & Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 27-39, 88.

¹⁵ Stanley Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 137.

the essence of God emphasizes a crucial difference between God and Man: Man may be constituted by relations, but he cannot subsist in relations other than the indwelling of the Spirit of God within believers.¹⁶ Building from this notion is not merely the difference between human beings and God, but also this implies an insight into the nature of God himself as relational. Grenz, commenting on Zizioulas states that:

...The Cappadocians pointed out that in contrast to humans, the one and the many coincide in God, for the three Trinitarian persons are united in such an unbreakable communion that none of the three can be conceived apart from the others. Hence, their elevation of a fundamental relationality among the trinitarian persons undercut any suggestion that Father, Son, and Spirit are to be viewed as autonomous individuals.¹⁷

Rather, [Here] the relational God was to be understood as a relational unity of three persons who share the essence of love in communion with one another as God. Articulating Zizioulas' account of Trinitarian theology as the communal personhood of love, Kärkkäinen states that Zizioulas' thesis is that:

God is not first 'one substance' and only then exists as 'trinity'; rather the 'Holy Trinity' is a primordial ontological concept and not a notion which is added to the divine substance. In other words, [as] 'the substance of God, 'God,' has no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion, [as] mutual relationships of love. God's being coincides with God's personhood, which cannot be construed apart from communion. Biblically that is expressed by the idea of God as 'love,' which is 'constitutive of His substance, i.e., it is that which makes God what he is, the one God.' Hence, God is the person as the community of three persons. God's being coincides with God's communal personhood.¹⁸

Furthermore, Grenz states that, "according to Zizioulas, love is the expression of communion, for in love persons exist in 'ekstatic' relationship."¹⁹ Grenz states further:

In this manner, Zizioulas elevates love to ontological status. He is convinced that full personal identity, whether in the case of the human person or the three Trinitarian persons, is not ultimately connected to qualities [typically] associated with 'essence' or 'nature' but emerges only through a relationship that is so ontologically constitutive of personhood that it reflects the idea that relating is not appended to being *but is being itself*. And this relationship is love.²⁰

¹⁶ C.f. Anselm Min, "Panikkar's Radical Trinitarianism: Reflections on Panikkar's Transformation of the Christian Trinity into Cosmotheandricism," *CIRPIT Review* 6 (2015): 93.

¹⁷ Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 137-138.

¹⁸ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation, A Constructive Theology for the Pluralistic World 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 266, op. ct.

¹⁹ Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 141.

Building on this intuition, I would argue that Grenz offers a substantial account of the trinity as relational love when he states:

The eternal generation of the Son constitutes the first Trinitarian person as the Father of the Son and the second person as the Son of the Father, yet the two are bound together by the love they share, a bond that characterizes the divine nature as a whole but also emerges as a separate hypostasis in the third person, the Holy Spirit. In this way, the love that characterizes the relationship of the Father and the Son in the differentiation of each from the other means that they likewise share the sameness of the divine nature—that is, love. This shared love is the Holy Spirit, who nevertheless is neither the Son nor the Father and therefore differs from both. In this manner, the doctrine of the trinity teaches that the trinitarian persons share in the one divine essence, for there is but one God; yet they differ from one another, for each is a distinct person who cannot be equated with, or subsumed within the others.²¹

Crucially the theological development of the trinity as a communion of love substantiated in its relationality is grounded in the idea of *perichoresis*. Contextually, the doctrine of perichoresis was developed by the Cappadocians to articulate the mutual co-existence and “co-inherence of the three divine persons in the one identical being of God.”²² This mutually relational constitution and subsisting of God in and of himself maintains not merely the doctrine of the trinity as an abstract theory, but rather implies God’s unity as trinity because “the personhood of the three is relationally determined; each is a person-in-relationship to the other two.”²³ Here the roles of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit imply not only that God is revealed relationally but as relationality. Grenz goes further to say that:

The ingenious use of perichoresis to describe the manner in which the Trinitarian persons are constituted by the mutuality of relationships within the life of the triune God opened the way for the development of a dynamic ontology of persons-in-relationship or persons-in-communion. This ontology characterizes the essential nature of personhood as consisting of mutuality and interdependence... By offering the impetus toward a thoroughgoing relational ontology, the concept of perichoresis opens the way as well for an ontology that takes seriously and in fact ensures the integrity of both the ‘one’ and the ‘many,’ preserving both within the dynamic of interrelations.²⁴

²⁰ Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 141.

²¹ Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 321.

²² Thomas Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 32.

²³ Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 317.

²⁴ Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 317.

Trinity, Personhood, and Imago Dei: A Constitutive Dependency

The trinity thus becomes a model in which to understand God's relational character as one being, but yet a personal being in communion. Significantly Zizioulas links this aspect of a person to God and ultimately to a being characterized by communion. In my emphasis on the relational substance and persons of God I argue, building on Zizioulas, that the Cappadocian fathers express this sense of the communion of the divine person in a way that relates us back to the Trinitarian theological concept of relationality that reveals God as a triune Being subsisting in relations as love. Significantly, in the biblical redemptive history we see God as an actively relational and personal God who freely relates with and in creation by linking Man and creation back to God in a personal way through the incarnation and life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that offers a distinctive understanding of a personally relational God who loves us.

The focus of this section thus seeks to offer a constructive understanding of a theological anthropology in terms of the imago dei as based on a Trinitarian theology of relationality. What this sort of relationship looks like, I argue, is a communal participation in-dependency upon God for our personal identity. Or rather, who we are is based on our dependency upon God in that our identity is based upon our conformity to the image of Christ in the Spirit, through our participation in the life of God through the praxis of faith by living out the kingdom of God here on earth in repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Implicit to my argument is Zizioulas' understanding of a Trinitarian ontology of communion as the primary basis on which Christians can find their relational identity through the imago dei as the constitutive purpose of human identity. The Trinitarian theological development of a substantial relational ontology of communion in the early church, I argue, following Zizioulas and others, implies a theological anthropology of personhood defined by a relational dependency upon God. Thus this section

looks at trinitarian theology to understand how a relational ontology informs the idea of human personhood.

[I now turn to a construction of a theological Anthropology of human personhood]. Zizioulas' contribution to a Trinitarian ontology of God offers an understanding of communion that addresses a theological underpinning for understanding the utter transcendence of the Father that is immanently seen in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the life of the Spirit. Equally so, this Trinitarian relationality points us to the sense of participation or communion with and in the otherness of God as he reaches out towards us in love in time and history through the incarnation of his Son and the presence of the Spirit. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen states that Zizioulas' 'ontology of communion' radically emphasizes that, "to be a 'person' in contrast to an 'individual,' there needs to be communion, relation, and opening to the other" which marks not only God as communally triune but also that human existence "reflects the communal, relational being of God."²⁵

Consequently this conception of a relational ontology based on the communal love and personhood of the triune God points to a conception of human personhood defined by their otherness *and* relation to the triune God. I would argue that the notion of the otherness and relation within the triune God offers a fundamental foundation for the possibility of a relationship between humanity and the creator God precisely because the incarnation establishes the possibility of the relationship with God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. As created creatures, there is an infinite distance between us and the transcendent creator that is only mediated by the Son through the incarnation of the Logos in the person of Jesus Christ. This infinite distance implies the otherness between our human finitude and God, but through the incarnation we may enter into a relationship with this infinite creator. At the basis of the

²⁵ Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity*, 90.

incarnation is where infinity and finitude meet in the person of Jesus Christ, the God-Man mediator between Man and God. What is essential to notice here is not merely that Jesus was both divine and human, but that he is the true *Imago Dei*, the true image of humanity in and as the image of God.

[Here] I seek to offer a constructive understanding of a theological anthropology in terms of the *imago dei* as based on a Trinitarian theology of relationality. What this sort of relationship looks like, I assert, is a communal participation in-dependency upon God for our personal identity. Or rather, who we are is based on our dependency upon God in that our identity is based upon our conformity to the image of Christ in the Spirit, through our participation in the life of God through the praxis of faith by living out the kingdom of God here on earth in repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Implicit to my argument is Zizioulas' understanding of a Trinitarian ontology of communion as the primary basis on which Christians can assert their personhood in light of the triune God. The model of divine personhood in the trinity serves as the foundation for human personhood in their participation in the divine personhood.

This heightened Christology of Jesus implies not merely the incarnation of God in his self-revelation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but also it implies a highlight of what it truly means to be human. To be human means also to be divine. What the *imago dei* implies is that it is only through being conformed into the image of the Son that we become divine; that is, it is through human participation with the triune God in and through the Son that our relationships to others and to creation are fulfilled. Grenz draws out the patristic notion of *theosis* well when he states “that humans are theological beings, as is evident in the biblical declaration that they are created in the divine image. Linking this to the biblical description of Christ as the *imago dei* led the Greek fathers to conclude that Christ is the grand archetype of humanity. The essential nature

of the human person, in turn, lies in the archetype and therefore is not exhausted by biological existence.”²⁶

Here I am also saying that the nature of our human existence is as creatures completed as personal beings in relationship with God as the image of God based on the archetype of the *imago Christi*. Even our human relations fail to complete us as human persons because it lacks the ultimate purpose of being loved and loving God, and thus ultimately is only given fully in our relationship with God by being conformed into the image of his Son. Gunton states that what it means to be human lies primarily in our relationship with God in that:

The relation to God takes shape through the Son and the Spirit. To be in the image of God is to be created through the Son, who is the archetypal bearer of the image. To be in the image of God therefore means to be conformed on the person of Christ. The agent of this conformity is God the Holy Spirit, the creator of community. The image of God is then that being human which takes shape by the virtue of the creating and redeeming agency of the triune God.²⁷

This effectual constitution of humanity in light of Christ implies not merely the *nature* of being human, for this implies what Zizioulas articulates as our death, mortality, and individuality, but also *how* to be human, which implies our uniqueness, life, and immortality, precisely because we are relationally constituted after the image of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.²⁸ The relational constitution of humanity as *imago dei* thus implies that the relationship in which one participates with and in God implies that relationality is a common constituting factor not only to God, but also to Man. The crucial difference between the identity of Man and the identity of God however, lies not in our relational constitution, but rather in the human lack to subsist as relation.

²⁶ Grenz, *The Social God and Relational Self*, 324.

²⁷ Colin E. Gunton, “Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the *Imago Dei*,” in *Persons: Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 58-59.

²⁸ C.f. John Zizioulas, “On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood,” in *Persons: Divine and Human*, ed. Christoph Schwobel and Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 33-46; Zizioulas, “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: the Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution,” 55-58.

This points to the reality that what it means to be in a relationship with God means that one is dependent upon God for our being; especially for us to be fully perfected as a human being precisely because in our dependence and contingency upon God we are made complete and whole in light of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within us, conforming us into the image of the Son. It is here in the image of God, i.e., conformed into the image of the Son, that our personhood is derived and constituted as sons of God. Thus what it means to be a person is to be in-dependency upon God as not merely constituting our being, but living in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, subsisting in a relation of love that no human could provide. This intimate access to God through the Spirit is the love that constitutes us as human, renewing our identity and life in the redeeming work of the Son, being conformed into the image of God.

Thus the Trinitarian model of personhood defined by otherness, relation, and love, combined with human participation, implies that human personhood finds the fullness of its identity through the participation in God as the *imago dei* being conformed into the *imago Christi*. Here the Imago Christi becomes the model by which true humanity finds its personhood through its participation in the Spirit being conformed into the image of the Son. The model of human personhood thus is grounded not merely after being conformed to the image of Christ, but that to be in the image of God implies that human personhood is grounded in the participation in the Trinitarian personhood of otherness, relation, and love. The Trinitarian theological development of a substantial relational ontology of personhood implies a theological anthropology of personhood defined by a relational dependency upon God. Thus I have argued for a trinitarian theology of personhood to understand how a relational ontology informs the idea of human personhood.

Conclusion

This paper has developed crucial reflections in Christian Trinitarian theology that sought to highlight the Christological importance and biblical redemptive narrative in which God as trinity is revealed through the incarnation of Jesus Christ as a substantially relational love through an ontology of communion that sets not only the foundation of human personhood but that the purpose of human personhood to be conformed to the image of the God in the Son through the human dependency upon the Spirit. Thus my development in trinitarian theology includes Christology as a major focus in the development of a relational ontology of substance in a communion of love that articulates the purpose of creation to be in communion to God constituting their identity as created beings.

Bibliography

- Grenz, Stanley. *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- . *The Named God and the Question of Being*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.
- . *Theology for the Community of God*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994.
- . *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- Gunton, Colin E. “Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the Imago Dei.” In *Persons: Divine and Human*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991.
- Karkkainen, Veli-Matti. *The Trinity: Global Perspectives*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.
- . *Trinity and Revelation. A Constructive Theology for the Pluralistic World 2*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014.
- Min, Anselm K. “Panikkar’s Radical Trinitarianism: Reflections on Panikkar’s Transformation of the Christian Trinity into Cosmotheandricism.” *CIRPIT Review* 6 (2015): 75–100.
- Schwobel, Christoph. “Christology and Trinitarian Thought.” In *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995.
- . , ed. *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995.
- Schwobel, Christoph, and Colin E. Gunton, eds. *Persons: Divine and Human*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991.
- Sexton, Jason S. *The Trinitarian Theology of Stanley J. Grenz*. New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2013.
- Torrance, Thomas. *Trinitarian Perspectives*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994.
- Ward, Keith. *Christ and Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Willis, John R., ed. *The Teachings of the Church Fathers*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002.
- Zizioulas, John. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Crestwood, N.Y.:

St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.

———. “On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood.” In *Persons: Divine and Human*, edited by Christoph Schwobel and Colin E. Gunton, 33–46. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991.

———. “The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution.” In *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, edited by Christoph Schwobel, 44–60. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995.