Spiritual Formation and the Trinity

by

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A Term Paper

Presented to Professor Gary Simpson

Luther Seminary

As a Requirement in

Course CL8950 Trinity and Mission

St. Paul, Minnesota

2012
Introduction

This paper will explore how the doctrine of the Trinity informs the topic of spiritual formation in the missional church that finds itself in the increasingly global, pluralistic, late/post-modern era. I will pursue this exploration in four movements. First, I will establish preliminary definitions of the aforementioned terms in reverse order: *missional church*, *spiritual formation*, and *Trinity*. Second, I will briefly discuss the history of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Western church and demonstrate how this history has impacted the understanding of spiritual formation and has created a seeming dichotomy between the idea of spiritual formation as the *inner journey* and as *communal action*. Third, I will discuss how this dichotomy can be traced back to Augustine and how a reinvestigation of Augustine’s theology may lead to a helpful constructive move. Fourth, I will present a biblical image for spiritual formation in the missional church by attending to the upper room discourse in John 13-17.

An important aspect of the late/post-modern era is the acknowledgment of limited human perspectives, or horizons.\(^1\) In light of this, it is appropriate that I enter into this discussion in full disclosure of my own perspective. I am a middle-class, white, male, living in an upper Midwest, United States suburb. I am emerging from a Western, Protestant, Pietistic, American, Baptistic/Free-Church upbringing and currently transferring into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with an emerging...

missional imagination. I am aware of my natural biases as I approach this topic, and I am also aware that many of my biases and assumptions have not yet become evident in my evolving self-perception. This paper will, at times, become autobiographical as it is one more step in the journey of my own formation as I seek to understand spiritual formation in the missional church.

Defining the Terms

The following sections are not as much precise definitions as they are explanations of intent. These explanations will expose my working assumptions and provide the framework for the ensuing conversation.

What is the Missional Church?

I am using the term *church* to represent the universal body of people who are gathered around the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. This universal body is present in a myriad of denominational and local manifestations each following different historical traditions.

The term *missional* is a late twentieth century term that is best understood in its historical context. The Western European Church, during the Middle Ages, developed into Christendom. Christendom was an inward-focused State church that concerned itself primarily with protecting its boundaries and preparing people to enter the afterlife. Christendom developed a sense of *missions* as European nations began colonizing the rest of the world. Colonial Christendom envisioned missions as the process of bringing non-Western *heathen* into Christendom for the purpose of saving their souls and ensuring for them a place in Heaven. The twentieth century brought with it the decolonization of the
global south, the deconstruction of modernity and the Enlightenment project, and the need to reimagine the nature of the church in this new context.

The 1952 gathering of the International Missionary Council at Willingen began a conversation about an idea that came to be known as missio dei—the mission of God. God is a missionary God that is at work in the world to reconcile all nations. The church does not have a mission, the church by its very nature is missionary (missional). The missional church “views mission as definitive of what the church is because the church is a product of and participant in God’s mission.” The missional imagination has helped the Western church understand that the church is not euro, or West-centered, reaching out to the world geographically. Instead, the church is poly-centric and is sent to engage with the other from wherever it finds itself. The missional church is “called into a process of communal discernment and creative experimentation grounded in the Word of God as our imaginations for God’s world are shaped by the Spirit in our own communities and in conversation with our neighbors.”

What is Spiritual Formation?

The term spiritual formation is also known as spiritual growth, discipleship, or spirituality. I am using it to represent the biblical impulse that the church is in a process of movement toward a telos. Jesus encouraged his disciples to grow in his love and bear fruit. He sent his disciples into the world to baptize and teach the nations. All of this

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4 John 15.
was propelled by the hope that he would return and restore all things. The epistles use the imagery of plant growth, \(^6\) human development, \(^7\) building construction, \(^8\) and journey \(^9\) to depict the process of being conformed to the image of Christ and transformed until we all reach unity and maturity. It is with this in mind that we ask what spiritual formation looks like in the missional church, and how the doctrine of the Trinity informs the process.

What is Trinity?

The doctrine of the Trinity is a theological construct that attempts to reconcile the apparent dichotomy of the scriptural witness to the nature of God. On the one side, scripture indicates that God is one and there is one God. On the other side, scripture refers to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, ascribing divinity to each person. At this point it will serve our conversation to briefly trace the history of the doctrine of the Trinity in the West.

**A Brief History of the Trinity**\(^{10}\)

**A Brief Background**

The first Christians and their Trinitarian conversations were immersed in the Graeco-Roman culture which was dominated by Neoplatonism. Platonic thought divided

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\(^{5}\) Matthew 28:16-20.

\(^{6}\) Colossians 2:6-7.

\(^{7}\) Ephesians 4:11-16.

\(^{8}\) 1 Peter 2:4-10

\(^{9}\) Hebrews 12:1-2

\(^{10}\) This concise history is marked out clearly in Part I of Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); Zscheile, 8-13.
the cosmos into the realm of the eternal, non-material, immutable, ideal forms above, and the shadowy realms of the corruptible, illusory, material world below. Graeco-Roman philosophy sought, in its various iterations, to bridge the gap from below to above and find a way to shed the corruptible material world and return the immaterial mind/soul to the eternal realm.

Yahweh, the God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures,11 changed his mind, was involved in human history, became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, and manifest as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This understanding of God was foolishness to the Graeco-Roman mind. The Greek Christian leaders of the fourth century wrestled with the revelation of God’s three-ness—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in scripture as it related to the dominant Platonic idea of the immutability of the divine. How could God become flesh? The controversy came to the forefront of political life when emperor Constantine legalized the Christian faith and elevated it to the status of state religion. He convened the council of Nicaea to allow space for the Christian leaders to arbitrate the debate and canonize the definitive doctrine. Arius and Athanasius stand as the historical figures that represent the debate. Arius contended that God could not become flesh, thus proclaiming that Jesus was a created being and not fully divine. Athanasius, in defense of Christology, demonstrated how God could exist as three persons—hypostases—within one divine essence—ousia. He officially defeated Arianism by demonstrating the philosophical integrity of the Trinity within the framework of Neoplatonic thought structures.

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11 Here I am considering all of scripture—Old and New Testament—to be Hebrew Scriptures. It is important to remember that the Gospel writers and the apostolic authors of the epistles were Jewish men, steeped in the Hebrew mindset who understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of Jewish, Messianic prophecy.
While Athanasius won the battle of Christology, he created a fracture in theology that has led to many problems in the West. The fracture separates two realms in which the persons of the Trinity are discussed. The first realm is the *immanent Trinity* which describes how God is within Godself. God is three persons in one essence. The other realm is the *economic Trinity* which describes how God is revealed in scripture and how God relates to creation. God is three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who each have distinctive roles and characteristics in the biblical narrative. It was impossible, within the milieu of the Neoplatonic imagination, to reconcile the three persons of the economic Trinity with the one God of immutable essence. Therefore, the discussion of the Trinity became relegated to the immanent Trinity and the interaction of the historical Jesus and the Holy Spirit with the world became increasingly spiritualized and contained within the sacraments of the church. The final result was that the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit came to be seen as interchangeable parts of God. The Trinity became a functional monotheism in which God was equated with the Platonic ideal of the divine and the language of the Trinity appeared only in liturgy as vestiges of the patriarchal age.

This preeminence of the immanent Trinity in Western theology was propelled by Augustine and perfected in Medieval thought by Thomas Aquinas. The relationship between God and creature was one of complete separation. Salvation was defined as bridging the gap between the sin-stained realm of creatureliness and the realm of perfection in Heaven above. The rest of Medieval, Reformation, and Modern Western theological history was spent in a primarily soteriological debate over how to bridge the gap of sin.
A survey of Modern Western theological literature reveals little to no treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity. The distant, monotheistic God of the West gave way to Deism, and ultimately atheism, in the Modern era. A distant, unknowable God left humanity alone and the space was opened for thinkers like Kant and Descartes to shift the subject of knowledge from the external authority of God and church to the internal subjective authority of self. Faith was secluded to the enclave of private life while pure reason dictated the epistemic world of the public arena.\textsuperscript{12}

Karl Barth and Karl Rahner are twentieth century theologians that began to address the modern issues of the West by reengaging the doctrine of the Trinity. Their work sparked a series of theologians to rethink the divide between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. The trend in this thinking is to shift the focus away from the immanent Trinity and onto the economic Trinity as the primary means through which we can know God.\textsuperscript{13} This shift has two key components that pertain to this conversation. The first is that the Trinity has become identified with human history and the eschatological hope of the future reconciliation of society. Second, anthropology has been focused on the deconstruction of the modern self and the notion that the human self exists only

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within social action. These ideas will be explored later. For now, I will call this line of Trinitarian thinkers the **robust** Trinitarian group.\(^{14}\)

**The Current Situation**

The Western church at the beginning of the twenty-first century is faced with a dichotomy of Trinitarianism that has an impact on the topic of spiritual formation. On one side there is the group that holds to the classical Trinitarian doctrine as it was traced in the history above. This group tends to look back to theologians like Augustine for guidance in the study of spiritual formation. We will label this the *inner* group. On the other side we have the aforementioned *robust* group.

A sampling of definitions for the term *spiritual formation* will begin to make this dichotomy apparent. John R. Tyson defines it as “the relationship, union, and conformity with God that a Christian experiences through his or her reception of the grace of God, and a corresponding willingness to turn from sin and (to use a Pauline phrase) ‘to walk according to the Spirit.’ This relationship with God is made possible because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”\(^{15}\) Robert Mulholland Jr. defines it as “(1) a process (2) of being conformed (3) to the image of Christ (4) for the sake of others.”\(^{16}\) Dallas Willard says that “spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it


\(^{16}\) M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 15.
becomes like the inner being of Christ himself...[so that] the outer life of the individual becomes a natural expression or outflow of the character and teachings of Jesus.”

Dwight Zscheile adapts James Wilhoit’s words and defines spiritual formation as “the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit for the sake of the world.”

A comparison of these four definitions reveals some similarities and some marked differences. There are two similarities. First, they all contain a bi-directional relationship. Each definition speaks of the relationship between God and creature—we will call this the vertical relationship—and between creature and creature—the horizontal relationship. Second, they also contain a centrality to the role of Jesus in the process. Tyson states that the vertical relationship is with God and is made possible by the work of Jesus. Mulholland, Willard, and Zscheile speak of being conformed to or becoming like Christ.

There are some clear differences, however. The first difference is in the role and scope of the horizontal relationship. The horizontal relationship, in Tyson, is very weak, and perhaps only weakly implied, in the notion of turning from sin and walking according to the Spirit. A case could be made that Tyson’s definition is, in fact, only vertically focused. Mulholland and Willard place the horizontal relationship in a secondary or derivative position in relation to the vertical. The vertical relationship is cultivated first and then it exists for the sake of others as an overflow of spiritual

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18 Zscheile, 7. He is quoting and adapting a definition from Jim Wilhoit, Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 23.

19 It is unclear, however, whether he intends God to mean God the Father, or to mean God in the totality of the “Godhead” as a unified whole with Jesus and the Spirit playing a role in the relationship.
formation. Zscheile, however, integrates the vertical and horizontal by placing the vertical relationship within the context of the horizontal. It is a communal process for the sake of the world. This horizontal relationship has two dimensions. It implies that there is a community that is centered upon a vertical relationship (the first dimension) so that it can interact with the broader community of the world (the second dimension).

Another difference between these definitions is the role of the persons of the Trinity in spiritual formation. Tyson never mentions the Father. The relationship is only with “God.” The Spirit is mentioned more as an ethic than a person. In other words, to walk according to the Spirit is the opposite and preferred alternative to sin, not necessarily a walking with the Spirit in relationality. Jesus’ work—his death, burial, and resurrection—is the means by which the relationship with God is graciously made possible. This implies that Jesus’ work is finished and is no longer active. Mulholland gives no mention of the Trinity. The only person mentioned is Jesus, to whom we are to be conformed. There is an implied relationship in the passive phrase being conformed, but the subject of the conforming is unnamed. Willard does not mention the Father, but gives agency to the Spirit as the driving force of the internal transformation process. Jesus is the ethical standard to which the Spirit is forming the inner soul of the individual. Zscheile does not explicitly state the name of the Father but renders the relationship to being one with God, and becoming conformed to Christ (not Jesus) through the power of the Holy Spirit.

I have taken the time to compare and contrast these four authors for two reasons. The first is autobiographical. Tyson, Mulholland, and Willard represent the framework of spiritual formation that has been my standard for most of my life. The process of
studying missional ecclesiology over the past year, and especially the exposure to the Trinitarian thinkers in this class, has broadened my understanding and heightened my awareness of the need for Trinitarian thinking in the field of spiritual formation.

The second reason is theological. It becomes quickly apparent that Tyson, Mulholland, and Willard fall within the inner group. Their idea of spiritual formation has two strong components. (1) It is focused on an inner relationship between the individual believer and God. Any concept of community or external focus is, at best, a secondary or derivative component. (2) The role of the Trinity is ambiguous and secondary. The inner group tends toward a Christo-monist soteriological focus as the purpose of spiritual formation. Zscheile, on the other hand, represents a new trend in spiritual formation literature that engages the robust group.²⁰

The contrast between the inner group and the robust group could be summarized by the following question. Which is the truer statement: we are what we do or we do what we are? The robust group would answer we are what we do. Spiritual formation, then, would be completely defined by the formation of the communal action of the church in society. The inner group would answer we do what we are. Spiritual formation, for them, is the cultivation of the moral character of the inner person, through personal fellowship with God, that overflows into social interaction. We could restate this in a similar question. Is spiritual formation an inner journey of the individual soul, or is it a communal journey of action in society?

Is there a middle way? Perhaps we can find an answer to this question by investigating some basic assumptions behind the robust group’s critique of Augustine. In

²⁰ I must be fair to Zscheile at this point. I do not think he represents the robust group. His work is more representative of the middle way that I will propose in this paper.
this investigation we will see how the Trinity has always been at the heart of spiritual
formation and that the time is ripe to offer a dynamic spiritual formation for the missional
church.

Revisiting Augustine

I must speak autobiographically in order to clearly present the thesis of this next
section. My experience in the CML program at Luther, and especially in this course on
Trinity and Mission, has created a healthy tension within my own understanding of
spiritual formation. The authors that I have labeled *inner* represent the dominant
theological perspective from which I have operated most of my life. I have been in
conversation with the *robust* group tangentially for the past decade, but now have
intersected in such a way that it has broken open my understanding of *spiritual
formation*. In reading the *robust* literature I have found a common theme that has
casted me to see the *inner* literature through new lenses. That common theme is the
theology of Augustine.

Simply put, the *robust* group blames Augustine for the problems of the West and
the *inner* group emulates Augustine’s theology. The real issue—at least in regard to our
discussion of spiritual formation—is that of *person*, or *self*. Most of the *inner* literature
tends to view spiritual formation as a personal, introspective, transformation of self. The
process, they claim, begins with self and moves toward relationship with God and then to
others. The *robust* group sees this as problematic for the church and the world and blames
Augustine for it. The *robust* group re-visions the idea of self in various ways. That will
be discussed later.
First, let us state the problem as the *robust* group understands it. LaCugna frames the whole discussion around the rupture between the *theologia* and the *oikonomia* of God. The *theologia*—immanent Trinity—relates to the nature of God within God’s self. The *oikonomia*—economic Trinity—is God’s condescension to creation through revelation.

Theological speculation prior to the Arian controversy was concerned primarily with Christology and therefore with the dynamic biblical vision of the *oikonomia* in which God’s plan unfolds in Christ…however, the distinction between *oikonomia* and *theologia* soon became sharply drawn once Nicaea and subsequent debates oriented theological speculation toward the nature of *theologia*. God’s relationship to Jesus of Nazareth faded in importance compared to the Father’s relationship to the Son.\(^{21}\)

LaCugna’s critique of Augustine can stand as a general representation of the *robust* group. She says,

After Augustine, in the period of scholasticism, the eternal, ontological relationships among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would be viewed largely independently of the Incarnation and sending of the Spirit. The divine processions—begetting of the Son, proceeding of the Spirit—would be understood as absolutely interior to God and explicated without reference to any reality ‘outside’ God. The way for this was prepared for by Augustine’s theology of relations in *De Trinitate*, which explicated the nature of the Trinity in itself.\(^{22}\)

One of the big problems for LaCugna is the Plotinian influence in Augustine’s theology. Plotinus taught that the *One* emanated to the human soul and the human soul longed to journey back to the One. Augustine proposed that the Trinity was imprinted on the human soul—this is the *imago dei*—and that the human soul, in a Plotinian fashion, longed to return to God. However, the journey to God was an inward journey into one’s own soul.\(^{23}\) LaCugna’s final critique is that Augustine’s theology shifted the focus of the

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\(^{21}\) LaCugna, 41-42.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 81.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 82-96.
economy of God to an inward journey in which “redemption and sanctification transpires within the soul of each individual, whose unique internal history bears God’s providential plan.”

Robert Jenson identifies the reason for Augustine’s theology. Jenson claims that Augustine was “mostly blind to Athanasius’ and the Cappadocians’ specific achievement, and where he saw it rejected it.” The achievement to which he refers is what Jenson calls the “Cappadocian rule.” It states that “the undividedness of an opus dei ad extra is constituted by a perfect mutuality of the agencies of Father, Son, and Spirit each in his triune role. As God acts toward creatures as the one triune God, just so his triunity itself must be active.” In other words, even though God’s actions toward creature are outside of the intra-Trinitarian relationship, there is no reason to attribute the actions equally among the persons of the Trinity. Each person of the trinity maintains the unique role within the action. Augustine, being influenced by Greek thought, confessed that he saw no difference between the ousia and the hypostasis as the Cappadocians and Athanasius had identified them. The reason Augustine did not recognize the difference is because of his “unquestioning commitment to the axiom of his antecedent Platonic theology, that God is metaphysically ‘simple,’ that no sort of self-differentiation can really be true of him.”

Jenson is bold in his critique of Augustine. He summarizes Augustine’s problem as the disconnect between the metaphysical impassibility of God conceived by the Greeks

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24 Ibid., 104.
25 Jenson, 111.
26 Ibid., 110.
27 Ibid., 111.
and the narrative of the gospel. Jenson says, “at this precise point, the Western tradition must simply be corrected…[a] reversal of Augustine’s misstep is vital.” The real problem is how this misstep shaped the Western concept of person and self. Ultimately the Western concept of selfhood—rooted in Augustine’s Trinitarian definition of person—was a “self-enclosure. And personality is ontologically the possession of an individual, the ‘I.’”

John Zizioulas traces the negative effects of the Western concept of self to Augustine’s emphasis on psychological experience and consciousness. “Western thought arrived at the conception of the person as an individual and/or a personality, that is, a unit endowed with intellectual, psychological and moral qualities centred on the axis of consciousness. Man’s distinctive characteristic became in this way identical with his ability to be conscious of himself and of others and thus to be an autonomous self who intends, things, decides, acts and produces results.” This is an ontological issue for Zizioulas. If the human is an individuum in substance through self-consciousness, then the uniqueness of the person is absorbed into the category of human being. This categorization is an Aristotelian move that seeks to find the one essence of substance by absorbing the particularities into the norm. Augustine’s theology operated from within this Aristotelian framework and, thus, by isolating the human self into the individuum, lost the uniqueness of the human self. The irony of this is that the Western longing to

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28 Ibid., 113.
29 Ibid., 120.
30 Zizioulas and McPartlan, 210-211.
“find oneself” through the inner journey ultimately loses oneself completely into the universal oneness in the category of human being.

**The Robust Alternative**

The problem, as the robust authors see it, is that by separating the immanent Trinity from the economic Trinity and focusing on the intra-divine relationality of the persons of the Trinity, the West has fallen into two traps. The first is that they see no distinction between the *ousia* and the *hypostasis* with the Trinity, thus they collapse the Trinity into a functional monad that is the ousia, or being, of God. Second, by understanding the *imago dei* in humanity as being the internal psychological Trinity, they understand the substance of human nature to be a radicalized individual that stands in isolation from all other selves and beings in the universe. There are two negative results from this individualization. (1) There is no theological or philosophical basis for the unity or community of individuals that is either existentially apparent nor biblically imperative. (2) The reduction of self to psychological categories that can be assessed and analyzed annihilates the particularity of self, thus leaving the individual completely lost.

The negative implications of these observations on spiritual formation are significant. The typical pattern of Augustinian, or *inner*, spiritual formation is to begin with the experience of God within the individual consciousness of the self. This awareness is cultivated through inner disciplines such as prayer, meditation, silence, solitude, fasting, etc. These ascetic practices are borrowed from neo-Platonic practices in which the individual sought to become freed from the illusion of particularity and longed to become reunited with the One. This is actually the practice of Buddhist and other pantheistic spiritualities. How, then, is Christian spirituality of this type distinctively
different from these pantheistic ones? The robust writers would argue that they are not. In fact, the inner tradition of spiritual formation has no necessary reason for moving beyond the inner relationship with God and self. Most of the inner traditions, admittedly, have outer disciplines and speak of spiritual formation that results in the connection and good of others, but these elements are not essential to their practice philosophically or ontologically.

The robust Trinitarian thinkers offer a solution to this problem by reimagining the concept of personhood in light of a relational ontology. It begins with the deconstruction of the Western concept of self as is seen in the work of post-structuralists, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Paul Sartre. “The consequences of this deconstruction are nihilistic within secularist modernity itself, because it has no other reliance but the alleged autonomous nomadic self. But Christian theology may greet it as liberation from a conceptual straitjacket.” A person, then, should not be understood as a substantive set of qualities that are contained within the individual. Rather, “a person is basically different from being an individual or ‘personality’ in that the person cannot be conceived in itself as a static entity, but only as it relates to. Thus, personhood implies the ‘openness of being,’ and even more than that, the ek-stasis of being, that is, a movement towards communion which leads to a transcendence of the boundaries of the ‘self’ and thus to freedom.” A person finds her own particularity through the ontological relationality of communion, freedom, and love.

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31 Jenson, 121.

32 Zizioulas and McPartlan, 212-213.
The Western, individual self is divided by space and time from all other individual selves. It is also divided from itself, as mentioned above, through the logical deconstruction of self. A relational ontology, however, does not speak of division, but of difference. A person is ecstatic and finds its particularity in the relationship with that which is other. Ultimately, it is the ecstatic relationship of the creature to the personhood of the Triune God that rescues difference from division and annihilation into communion, freedom, and love eternally.

In other words, relational ontology states that a human person is only a unique personality as it is related to others and to God. When personality is imagined as a substantive quality inherent in the individual, it becomes a category of being that loses its particularity. It is only in relationality to the other that the particularity of the one has its being. It is not that the individual person chooses to be in community or not in community, it is that the relationality of being in communion is that which ontologically established the unique personality.  

A Critique of Robust Relational Ontology

Let us summarize the argument so far. (a) The inner spiritual formation group is based upon Augustinian theology that places the imago dei within the individualized soul. Spiritual formation, then, is the practice of the individual human soul growing in a personal relationship with the monadic being of God that contains an intra-divine Trinitarian relationality. (b) The robust group critiques Augustinian theology and names it as the root for the radical individualism, isolationism, and ultimate nihilism of

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33 The discussion of relational ontology is drawn from Zizioulas, especially “Human Capacity and Human Incapacity” 206-249.
contemporary Western culture. (c) The robust group seeks to conflate the immanent and the economic Trinity into a social Trinity in history and posits relational ontology as the corrective to the individualism of Western theology.

This leads us into three further questions. (1) Is the robust group’s critique of Augustine fair and accurate? (2) Does the robust group’s alternative offer a helpful framework for spiritual formation? (3) What does spiritual formation looks like in practice in this new framework?

**Regarding Augustine**

Ellen Charry does not agree with the robust assertions regarding Augustine and directly speaks to LaCugna and Jenson.³⁴ Charry’s position is that the robust group has misread Augustine. Charry identifies two basic critiques leveled from this group against Augustine. First, they claim that Augustine is responsible for the separation of soteriology from theology proper and as a result it has been narrowly defined as the forgiveness of sins and relegated to a sub-set of Christology. Charry says that this accusation is anachronistic to Augustine because his soteriology is grounded in dwelling in the fullness of God. Augustine did not separate the economic Trinity from the Immanent Trinity ontologically. He treated them separately in De Trinitate “to be sure that speaking about the activities of the divine Persons in history would not be misconstrued as talking about different or lesser gods but the one God.”³⁵ She claims that

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³⁴ Charry specifically addresses Rahner, LaCugna, Jenson, and Gunton. These four authors overlap the robust group identified in this paper. LaCugna is closely connected to Rahner’s position and Zizioulas draws heavily from Gunton. Charry’s argument, which I will represent, is from “Dwelling in the Dignity of God: Augustine of Hippo,” Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 120-152.

³⁵ Ibid., 121.
“it is ironic that Augustine, whose soteriology was grounded in theology in the proper
sense of the term—that is, in the being of God—is blamed for the loss of the very
doctrine he championed.”

Second, Charry highlights the accusation that Augustine’s focus on the
psychological Trinity has led to the burdensome individualism of the West and its
ultimate contempt for the world.

Apparently none of these writers has stepped back from Western theology enough
to see that Augustine did not belong to the soteriological, atonement-driven
tradition they assume. Augustine’s soteriology was patristic, not medieval and it
was ontological not functional. But understanding these important nuances of the
discussion probably would not matter. Rahner, LaCugna, Jenson, and Gunton are
the most recent voices in the liberal movement to liberate Christian theology from
residual platonic thought, with its talk of essences and eternity, which has tended
to remove Christian piety from the realm of action…these thinkers advocate a
modern understanding of personhood that embraces growth and change and views
personhood as constituted by action, not character. This fits with the theological
judgment that salvation is constituted by God’s acts in Jesus Christ, not by the
being of God. God is best served not by reforming ourselves to be in harmony
with the beauty and goodness of God, as Athanasius taught, but by doing, on the
model of God’s own intervention on our behalf. A slogan for this approach might
be ‘We are what we do.’

Charry is skeptical of reducing God to the economy in this way. She cites Phillip
Carey and notes that these robust thinkers are informed by romantic expressivist
anthropology that seeks intimacy as its highest goal through complete and total self-
disclosure. Cary argues that self-disclosure is impossible and would ultimately rob each
person of the freedom to give themselves to be known. He contends that the epistemic
gap between God and creature protects the freedom of God from curious seekers. Charry

36 Ibid., 122.
37 Ibid., 125.
ultimately believes that the problem in the conversation is that the robust group is not engaged in the same conversation with Augustine. They have made it about soteriology when Augustine has made it about who we are in God.

Charry’s project is to note the difference between scientia and sapientia. Scientia is the rational acquisition of knowledge. Sapientia is wisdom and the virtuous use of knowledge. It is only when the seeker sees herself as the imago dei—homologous with the threeness of God—that she can dwell in the sapience of God and begin to fully know what it means to be human. “For Augustine, formation through the economy, the mystery of the Trinity, and the unity of God is the only firm foundation for social and interpersonal relations…he would object to the division between the active and contemplative life because everyone’s life must be guided by sapience…an identity constructed by relationships and actions can easily lose sight of its spiritual grounding.”

Charry concludes that it is necessary to begin with one’s identity in God that is known through the material but that leads us to the spiritual, so that we can live life in the material full of wisdom and in the manner of God. Augustine taught a “concept of both God and ourselves, so that we formulate what we do based on who we are as homologs of the Trinity.”

Simon Chan is another theologian who challenges the robust group. Chan is a Chinese Pentecostal theologian who speaks to this conversation from outside the Western tradition. He recognizes and agrees with the robust group’s corrective to the overly Platonic and hierarchical tendencies of Western Trinitarianism. However, he sees this

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39 Charry, 148.

40 Ibid., 149.
move as an overreaction that runs the risk of “distorting the Trinitarian doctrine in two ways, first by an overemphasis on the threeness of God at the expense of his unity, and second by collapsing the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity. The overall effect of these modern emphases is to weaken the doctrine of divine transcendence. This has serious implications for the spiritual life.”

Chan critiques the robust writers in that their arguments are limited to the context of the West. He states that Moltmann’s social trinity is a move to protect the marginalized from hierarchy and abuse of power, but that, in some contexts, God’s aseity is a symbol of hope in that a God above the created order can bring order out of chaos. Chan states, “it needs to be emphasized again that the doctrine of the Trinity is not about the threeness of God per se but about the mystery of the God who is both one and yet three, both a God-in-himself and a God-for-us in his Trinitarian existence. A proper Trinitarian spirituality can only be developed from a doctrine that gives equal place to unity and to plurality in God, both to transcendence and to immanence.”

Chan summarizes his view of the Trinity and offers a helpful global perspective:

The doctrine of one God in three persons is a foundational Christian belief that distinguishes the Christian concept of deity from other monotheistic concepts. It is basic to a distinctive Christian spirituality. Many modern Trinitarian reflections have grown out of certain Western sociopolitical contexts that have limited their usefulness for Christians living beyond those contexts. The current preoccupation

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42 At this point Chan brings Jürgen Moltmann into the conversation. Of course, Moltmann is included in the group I have labeled robust even though I have not directly engaged him. I would also include LaCugna and Jenson as conversation partners with Chan in this section.

43 Chan, 45. This view is also supported by Balthasar. Stanley Grenz says that Balthasar walks a fine line to keep a tension between the two views of Trinity. For him, “the economic Trinity becomes the epistemological source of the immanent Trinity, but the immanent Trinity remains the ontological source of the economic Trinity.” Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 183-200.
with “the social analogy of the Trinity” is just one example. Yet as Ted Peters reminds us, Trinitarian talks are “second-order symbols” that grow out of specific contexts. Their truth is tested by how they function contextually. In situations outside the Western world where hierarchy (not necessarily domination and oppression) may be the basic structure of society; where worldviews are characterized by “god many and lords many”; where the summum bonum is an ordered community rather than individual rights (though the latter is not denied), we may need to return to the “primary symbol” of one God in three persons, a God who is both transcendent and immanent, beyond the world an yet within it.

Augustine’s psychological analogy may be just as significant as the social analogy. In affirming these prereflective symbols, we are confessing divine mysteries (although some may suggest that this is anti-intellectual). But in so confessing, we hope to highlight the vast and complex world in which the Christian life is lived, a world that no single theology of the Trinity can adequately encompass.44

Has the robust group treated Augustine fairly? Yes and no. Yes, they have rightly observed the trajectory that Western theology has taken since the time of Augustine. No, they have failed to recognize that it was the subsequent misunderstanding of Augustine due to changing soteriological lenses that led to Western individualization. Augustine, when read on his own terms, strove to maintain the essential connection between the economic and the immanent Trinity for the purpose of forming the soul, the church, and society into the image of God. There may still be helpful implications for spiritual formation from Augustine’s concept of the homolog of the Trinity. However, it would be worth exploring the possibility of revisioning the nature of this homology. Rather than it being a psychological trinity, perhaps it would be better to think of the homologous structure of mind, spirit, and body.45

44 Chan, 55.

45 It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this further. I hope to investigate in the future how the mind, spirit, body structure could be a helpful way to imagine a missional spiritual formation. This would connect with the Enneagram that is based upon a polycentric, triad self.
Regarding the Helpfulness of the Robust Revision

The robust group has provided some helpful contributions to the topic of spiritual formation in the missional church, and it has created some new problems of its own that may end up being as troublesome as the Western ones it is trying to correct.

The most important contribution is that of breaking the Western church out of its radical individualism. Some form of relational ontology is a necessary element for a holistic missional spirituality. As long as we perceive ourselves as isolated, atomistic individuum, then we will continue to bounce off of each other rather than find communion. We will be defined by the division and distance between us, rather than understand ourselves as unique particularities constituted by the relationality of the community that is in itself constituted by its relationality with God the Father, through Jesus the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

One danger created by the robust group is that they may go too far in two ways. First, the attempt to regain the economic Trinity has swung the pendulum too far to the point that God is lost in human history. Jenson, for example, does not say that God is revealed in history, he says that God is history. God is an event and the church is the event of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection incarnated in the eucharist and in dialogue with the world. This whole person/event is the historical movement that is propelled by God’s futurity. This seems to eliminate God’s otherness to the point that we are left only with history as it is. Jenson’s only basis for talking about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the scriptural revelation, yet, if God is only the event of history, then on what basis is scripture authoritative revelation? Why does the Exodus story have redemptive

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46 Jenson, 221-222.
value as God moving for redemption? How is it not simply a competing story in humanity’s attempt to make sense out of circumstances? Jenson is attempting to counteract Barth’s complete transcendence of God by jumping the gap. However, perhaps he goes too far into immanence and comes to the same conclusion.

**Toward a Constructive Theology of Missional Spirituality**

**Bridging the Gap**

We have briefly surveyed a small piece of the theological landscape regarding Trinity and spiritual formation. It seems that the conversation tends to bifurcate into either/or extremes. There is the immanent/economic Trinity bifurcation, the human-soul-as-individual-self/self-as-related-to-other bifurcation, the I/Thou tension, and the spiritual-formation-as-inward/spiritual-formation-as-communal split. These bifurcations can be reduced to that of transcendence/immanence. There is a perpetual gap in this dualism. Either God is completely transcendent other, thus unknowable, or God is completely immanent present and thus dissolved and equally unknowable. This situation is not much different than the Platonic dualism that plagued the early church. Each theological speculation throughout history has been an attempt to bridge the gap.

Perhaps the gap filler is the Trinitarian nature of God itself. Jenson’s comment on the role of the Holy Spirit is helpful at this point. He says, “if there is to be freely given love there must be a third party in the meeting of “I” and “Thou.” If you and I are to be free for one another, someone must be our liberator.” The gap is caused by a bipartite

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48 Jenson, 156.
stalemate that leaves us with a perpetual either/or scenario. The very essence of God as a tri-unity breaks up the possibility of a stalemate.

At this point we can bring Gadamer’s fusion of horizons into the conversation.\(^{49}\) When two limited human horizons intersect, how do they fuse? What prevents the interaction from becoming a power struggle in which the stronger person imposes her horizon over the weaker? The fusion can only happen if there is a third party present to arbitrate. This is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is at work liberating all the bipartite stalemates.

A missional spirituality can be formed by fusing the horizons of Augustine’s homologue of the Trinity with Zizioulas’ relational ontology. Humanity, both as particulars and collectively, has the *imago dei* of the robust Trinity imprinted on/in us ontologically. The image of the robust Trinity is this: God is three-in-one and one-in-three. God is transcendent, immanent, and relationality. God’s transcendence is the immanent Trinity which is constituted by relationality. This relational Union is wholly other from its creation. God is also immanent in the economic Trinity. The Father is arche, the Son incarnate is the demonstration of God’s love and the great victor over death. The Spirit is the animator and mediator of life and relationality. God is also relationality that constitutes all being and out of which human particularity is formed. Humanity is created in the *imago dei*. We are homologues of the robust Trinity described above. We are many-and-one and one-and-many. We are individual selves constituted by the relatedness to each other, to nature, and to God, the transcendent other.

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If this is true, being itself must, then, have multiple perspectives. In our human particularities we are limited to finite horizons. Each particularity has a unique reflection of one small part of the infinite God. The Biblical language tells us that we are each a part of the body of Christ, or one stone in the structure of God’s temple. No person is complete within herself, but is a unique particularity that must contribute to the whole of communion that happens between others. This communion happens in multiple dimensions. It happens individually between the particular human and the Triune God. It happens between the particulars of individual humans bringing horizons to intersect. It happens collectively as the communion of fused particular horizons, called the church, is called by God and gathers around the Eucharistic presence of Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, to glorify the Father. It happens between the church and the world as these collective horizons interact and through the power of the Holy Spirit begin to fuse to broaden the collective horizon and be in relation with the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit.  

The Perichoretic Table: The Upper Room Discourse as a Framework for Missional Spirituality

A brief survey of the upper room discourse found in John 13-17 will demonstrate a biblical image helpful for envisioning spiritual formation in the missional church based upon a balanced Trinitarian perspective.

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51 It would be beyond the scope of this paper to fully develop this idea. Here I provide a simple sketch to give a basic idea. I hope to pursue this more fully as I think there is great potential for developing a biblical framework for missional spiritual formation.
It begins with Praxis

Jesus begins by washing the disciples’ feet. This act of service demonstrated to them, through action, the message he wished to present in the rest of the discourse. He showed them that the heart of leadership in God’s kingdom is that the leader is servant of the other. The focus is not self, but other, not preserving position, but putting others first.

It is About Dwelling

The Greek father, John of Damascus, first used the term perichoresis to describe the Trinity. The word denotes the interweaving patterns of particulars to form a whole. Jesus uses the word meno—to remain or to dwell—as a central theme in the discourse. He goes to prepare a place in his Father’s house were there are many dwelling places. The Father dwells in the Son and the Son dwells in the Father. The Father and the Son send the Spirit dwell in the disciples. Jesus invites the disciples to dwell in him so that he may dwell in them.

This dwelling has multiple facets that demonstrate a relational ontology. (1) The Father, Son, and Spirit share a mutual indwelling. This is the immanent Trinity. (2) The three persons of the Trinity, in their relationality, create and sustain life. The Father is the vine grower. The Son is the Vine. And, the Spirit is the life energy that flows like sap through the vine and the branch to produce fruit. Apart from a mutual indwelling with the vine the branch ceases to be and is discarded into the fire. (3) The church dwells in the world.\(^{52}\) Jesus prayed that the Father would not take the church out of the world, but that he would protect the church from the evil one. The church is sent into the world to dwell

\(^{52}\) I am extrapolating the church here in that Jesus cites all the disciples that would follow him on account of his original disciples’ witness.
with the other, to demonstrate the mutual indwelling and unity of God and the church, so that the world will also know the love of God.

**It is About Being Formed into Fruit**

Here, then, is the place of spiritual formation in the church. The goal of the indwelling is the production of fruit that can be enjoyed by the world. This is the *so that* of the priestly prayer. The church focuses on its mutual indwelling, not so that individual souls can go to Heaven when they die, but that the whole world can taste and see that the Lord is good.

**Conclusion**

We posed this question earlier. Which is true: *we are what we do*, or *we do what we are*? Is spiritual formation an inner journey of transformation that overflows into the community, or is it a communal process in which the praxis of missional life forms the inner person? Does it have to be one or the other? Is it a matter of emphasis, or starting point? Could the starting point be based upon one’s place in life—which is a combination of external, social location elements with unique personality traits?

Perhaps the answer is this. *We are in whom we dwell.*
Bibliography


