
THE TRINITY, LEADERSHIP, AND POWER

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Abstract: A rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity has been one of the major themes of western theology in recent decades. While substantial contributions in trinitarian ecclesiology have been made,¹ the leadership implications of this trinitarian resurgence have not been widely explored. In particular, the question of power and authority in religious leadership bears reconsideration in light of a trinitarian imagination. Solitary, monarchical, hierarchical, and authoritarian patterns of leadership have come under increasingly critical scrutiny in the church and academy—to say nothing of the wider culture. Today’s emerging postmodern cultural context provides a provocative opening for reclaiming one of the church’s ancient doctrines for renewed Christian leadership.

“The Symbol Functions”: Some Guiding Assumptions

The way in which we understand the nature of God and the way in which we envision and enact leadership within Christian communities are inexorably linked, whether recognized or not. One of the fruitful prejudices shaping this discussion is the assumption that our doctrine of God does in fact shape our life together in the church and world. As Elizabeth Johnson says pointedly, “The symbol functions.”² Our working

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¹ See, for instance, Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998), John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985).

² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

theology impacts our patterns of organization, communal practices, and norms of behavior, whether we consciously intend it to or not. Moreover, in Paul Ricoeur's words, "The symbol gives rise to thought."³ While the Trinity as a doctrine nearly ceased to function in the life of the western church for several centuries in the modern period, retrieving it holds rich promise for theologically re-conceptualizing religious leadership in the twenty-first century.

For Christians, this will be no surprise, given our doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Since we are created in the image of God, we can expect significant correlations between the life and character of God and our life and character, both in the church and outside of it. Catherine LaCugna writes, "The nature of the church should manifest the nature of God."⁴ To be the case, the *imago Dei* doctrine must be understood within the larger theological framework of the *missio Dei* (the Triune God's mission to restore all creation) and the *gloria Dei*, the eschatological consummation of communion.

A (Very) Brief History of a Doctrine⁵

The Trinity emerged out of the early church's reflections on how the Jesus they knew as Lord and the Spirit they experienced in community related to the God of Israel. As a doctrine, the Trinity is latent in the narrative of Scripture. It wasn't developed by the church until the fourth century. This took place primarily in the controversies surrounding the Council of Nicaea, in which the teachings of Arius (among others) prompted the definition and clarification of the church's

³ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 347ff.

⁴ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 403.

⁵ For a summary of the history of the doctrine of the Trinity, including recent theological developments, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

Another helpful overview may be found in Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

understanding of God as triune by such key figures as Athanasius.⁶

While the Council of Constantinople affirmed, in what we now call the Nicene Creed, the full deity of the Father, Son, and Spirit, it did not specify *how* the three persons comprise one God. Following Athanasius' lead, the Cappadocians—Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus—took up the task. They developed the idea that God is three persons (*hypostases*) and one being (*ousia*). In the process, the Cappadocians made a provocative philosophical move by defining God's being primarily in terms of *relationship*. While asserting the common divine *ousia* (the *what* of God), they placed equal emphasis on *how* God is God (as three persons in relationship).⁷ In the seventh century, John of Damascus applied the term *perichoresis* ("circulating around") to the Trinity as a way to describe the interdependent, dynamic, mutual indwelling of the three persons.⁸ This *social* understanding of the Trinity came to dominate the eastern theological tradition.

The western tradition developed in a different direction, largely under the influence of Augustine. Tertullian's translation of the Cappadocians' formula into *una substantia, tres personae* contributed to the tendency of theologians in the Latin tradition to emphasize the *single divine essence* rather than the relationality of persons.⁹ Under neo-platonic influence, Augustine articulated an

⁶ See William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

⁷ For a detailed discussion, see John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007).

⁸ *Perichoresis* is commonly mistranslated "circle dance" (see George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999). While there may be an intentional pun on the Greek term for "dance," they are in fact different roots. For a discussion of the word and its possibilities for theology today, see Jürgen Moltmann, "Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology," in *Trinity, Community and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000).

⁹ Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 9.

interiorized, psychological analogy for the Trinity based on the *imago Dei* (Lover, Beloved and Belovedness/Love), effectively transposing God's relationship with *us* in the pattern of salvation into relations that exist solely within God.¹⁰

The western stress on the one divine essence is reflected in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa*, where he begins with the one God (*De Deo Uno*) and only later develops the Trinity (*De Deo Trino*). Aquinas culminates the western tradition's tendency to separate how God is in God's self (the so-called immanent Trinity) from how God relates to the world (the economic Trinity).¹¹ The Protestant Reformers rejected medieval scholasticism's speculation on the inner life of God as being disconnected from the world and tended to subsume the doctrine of the Trinity into other doctrines, such as justification.

In the Enlightenment period, the individualistic trajectory of the western tradition (with its origins in Augustine and Boethius) reached a new and heightened form as the Trinity was effectively eclipsed from theology. Alongside the classical western understanding of God as single divine substance emerged a variant of the long-condemned teachings of Sabellius: modalism, or the idea that God is a single acting subject that adopts three historical forms. God as *absolute subject* is found in Descartes, Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel. In this interpretation, the relational divine community of the Greek Fathers is replaced by a single "personal God" as a center of consciousness and ground of the individual soul.¹² Kant posits this monistic God for moral reasons but says, "the doctrine of the Trinity, taken literally, *has no practical relevance at all...*"¹³ Symbolically summing up

¹⁰ Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963).

¹¹ See LaCugna, *God for Us*, 143-80.

¹² See Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 13-16.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 264.

the diminishment of the Trinity in Enlightenment theology, Schleiermacher relegates it to the appendix of his *The Christian Faith* (1830).¹⁴

Implications for the Loss of the Trinity

Western theology is still coming to terms with the consequences of this eclipse of the Trinity. First, de-emphasizing God's dynamic involvement in creation and history through the three persons of the Trinity can lead to a view of God as disengaged, a monistic force aloof from the world—the God of Deism. Without the Trinity, Jesus is reduced to a mere moral exemplar or wise teacher, and the Holy Spirit is either eliminated altogether or severed from an integral relationship with Jesus. The cruciform character of God's life, in which God bears the suffering of humanity in a movement of genuine self-offering and exchange, is replaced by an impassible, detached God. A loss of a vision of God as a divine community comprised of the one and the many (in which otherness is constitutive of God's own life) can diminish the church's imagination for itself as a community of reconciled diversity, instead of uniformity.

Modern atheism's rejection of a distant, monistic "personal" God who appears to be merely a projection of human consciousness and aspirations (ala Ludwig Feuerbach¹⁵) is directly related to the loss of the Trinity. Moreover, monistic conceptions of God tend to foster monistic leadership—solitary, autocratic, aloof, and isolated, as Elizabeth Johnson says, "One single God reigning in absolute power calls for one emperor or dictator similarly ruling."¹⁶ It is not only atheist critics and feminists who point out the severity of the historical

See Gary M. Simpson, "No Trinity, No Mission: The Apostolic Difference of Revising the Trinity," *Word & World* 15, no. 3 (1998): 266.

¹⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. James Stuart Stewart and H. R. Mackintosh (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

¹⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1957).

Feuerbach's inversion of Hegel heavily influenced the three great "masters of suspicion" that followed him: Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche.

¹⁶ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 208.

consequences of this view of God. Many parts of the two-thirds world suffered cultural, political, and religious coercion and devastation in the era of colonial missions in part because of this non-trinitarian, non-perichoretic, non-cruciform God of the modern West. The mission implications of the Trinity's demise are profound.¹⁷

The Trinitarian Renewal

Within the past fifty years, there has been a resurgence of trinitarian theology within western thought. In 1989, Robert W. Jenson said, "It can fairly be said that the chief ecumenical enterprise of current theology is rediscovery and redevelopment of the doctrine of the Trinity. It can also fairly be said that Barth initiated the enterprise."¹⁸ While he has been criticized for his own modalistic tendencies,¹⁹ Karl Barth nonetheless paved the way for the trinitarian resurgence through his radical critique of the experiential basis of modern theology and reassertion of God's revelation in history. Karl Rahner sought to reintegrate what the medieval West so deftly severed: the inner life of God with God's participation in the pattern of salvation. In what became known as Rahner's Rule, he asserted: "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity."²⁰

This integration of God's triune nature and God's salvific history is the basis for much of the provocative theological work that has been done recently on relating the Trinity to Christian life. Barth and Rahner's critical successors, as represented by Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Robert W. Jenson, developed the historical and narrative character of the Trinity.²¹ Rather

¹⁷ See Simpson, "No Trinity, No Mission."

¹⁸ Cited in Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 34.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, 51-55.

²⁰ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder, 1970), 22.

²¹ See Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1991).

than seeing the Trinity as *above* and detached from history, they reconceive the Trinity as the *culmination* of history. The Triune God creates the world for communion and draws the creation, under the travail of suffering, sin, and evil, into eschatological communion at the end of history.

Moltmann's trinitarian theology has been particularly seminal and warrants closer attention for ecclesial leadership. Moltmann retrieves from the eastern tradition the social, perichoretic view of the Trinity. For him, this means the Trinity is a non-hierarchical, egalitarian community rather than a monarchical one. On this basis, Moltmann critiques ecclesiastical and political forms of monarchy. Moreover, the divine community is radically open and outward-reaching: "The union of the divine Trinity is open for the uniting of the whole creation with itself and in itself."²² Moltmann rejects the impassibility of God and places the cross "at the center of the Trinity" as an event in which all three persons participate.²³ Out of this cruciform, empathetic, and mutual Trinity emerges a very different conception of freedom than that of the Enlightenment. For Moltmann, true freedom is freedom *for* one another, or the freedom of fellowship, not freedom *from* restraint. "An absolute sovereign in heaven does not inspire liberty on earth," he writes. "Only the passionate God, the God who suffers by virtue of his passion for people, calls the freedom of men and women to life."²⁴

Moltmann's influence is visible in the work of Leonardo Boff, the Brazilian Roman Catholic liberation theologian, who sees in the non-hierarchical, egalitarian Trinity an inspirational prototype for human

²² Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 96.

²³ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 218. Moltmann's own theological journey moved from resurrection hope (*Theology of Hope*, 1965) through cruciform solidarity (*The Crucified God*, 1972) to trinitarian communion (*The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 1980). See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), ix-xii.

community.²⁵ Another Roman Catholic theologian who richly develops the implications for human community of the perichoretic, mutual Trinity is Catherine LaCugna. She writes, “The truth about God and ourselves is that we were meant to exist as persons in communion in a common household, living as persons from and for others.”²⁶ For LaCugna, “*Trinitarian life is also our life.*”²⁷ Like Boff, LaCugna critiques historical forms of patriarchy, monarchy, and oppression in light of the doctrine of the Trinity. Miroslav Volf has developed a Free-Church trinitarian ecclesiology that stresses the equal participation of all believers and their gifts for ministry.²⁸

Roman Catholic scholar Elizabeth Johnson brings perhaps the sharpest critical voice to the trinitarian debate while simultaneously seeking to re-envision the Trinity on feminist grounds. Johnson points out how the classical masculine language for the three persons of the Trinity has operated destructively in the lives of women. Like Moltmann and others, she wants to go beyond the classical theistic doctrine of God: “Is not the transcendent, omnipotent, impassible symbol of God the quintessential embodiment of the solitary ruling male ego, above the fray, perfectly happy in himself, filled with power in the face of the obstreperousness of others?”²⁹ Johnson mines the biblical Wisdom literature for feminine names for God: “Spirit-Sophia,” “Mother-Creator,” and “Sophia’s Child (Jesus).” She uses the concept of friendship to describe the inner-trinitarian relationships because it is in her eyes the most equal and mutual of human relationships.³⁰

John Zizioulas, perhaps the leading Orthodox theologian alive today, has exerted major influence

²⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

²⁶ LaCugna, *God for Us*, 383.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁸ Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.

²⁹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

ecumenically through his trinitarian ecclesiology of communion. Zizioulas derives from the theology of the Greek Fathers an ontology of personhood based on the Trinity. For Zizioulas, to be a person (rather than a mere individual) is to be in interdependent relation with God and other persons: “being as communion.”³¹ Irreducible otherness characterizes the three persons of the divine community, their relationship with the world, and human persons’ relationships with God and each other. This means difference is normative in the church and human society—not as division under the sign of sin, but reconciled within the larger pattern of communion.³² Zizioulas argues for monarchy in the Trinity and hierarchy in the church, but only insofar as the “greater” one allows and empowers the “inferior” one to flourish in all his or her otherness, uniqueness, and integrity.³³ He interprets the Greek term *pantokrator* (“Father Almighty”) in the early creeds to refer not so much to *power to act* but *capacity to embrace and contain*, to establish a relationship of communion and love.³⁴

Re-imagining Leadership and Power in Light of the Trinity

What do these thinkers contribute to our evolving understanding of Christian leadership today? Before we attempt to answer this question, we must first recognize the limits of analogy between the Trinity and human community.³⁵ First, we live after the Fall; human nature is marred by sin. The church is a pilgrim community on the way, not one that has fully arrived. Second, the functioning of power within human communities always has the potential to be corrupted. Ironically, our attempts to create a more perfectly mutual community can end up

³¹ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 50-60.

³² Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 2-3.

³³ *Ibid*, 143.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 116.

³⁵ For a fuller discussion of limitations on correspondences between the Trinity and the church, see Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 198-200.

coercing those without equal access to power. Finally, trying to emulate the Trinity through our own best intentions won't get us there. Mere modeling isn't sufficient. Rather, we must look to the Triune God's own active leading in our midst through the Holy Spirit to remake our community in its own image.

Beginning with the Trinity in thinking about Christian leadership also means ending with the Trinity. One of the insights of the trinitarian resurgence is the importance of an eschatological horizon. God as a communion (*koinonia*) of distinct yet inseparably united divine persons shares a common life of mutual love and creativity. That love is not inward-looking or closed, but rather outward-reaching and generative. The Greek term *ekstasis* (literally "standing outside") suggests something of this other-oriented movement. The Triune God is always seeking to invite and draw all creation into the reconciled communion of the divine life.³⁶ That is the ultimate destiny of the church and indeed the cosmos. As such, it is the ultimate end or *telos* of Christian leadership.

This missional thrust of creating and sharing communion that reconciles differences into unity is reflected in the church's calling to be a sign, witness, agent, and foretaste of God's mission to reconcile all creation. It is striking to note that the word "mission" was used exclusively to refer to the inner-trinitarian procession of persons until the sixteenth century.³⁷ In recent decades, ecumenical missiology has stressed the trinitarian basis of the church's nature as a participation in the sending movement of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.³⁸ This eschatological and missional backdrop is critical for understanding the nature of Christian

³⁶ See John 1, 2 Cor. 5, Colossians 1.

³⁷ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 1.

³⁸ See Bosch, *Transforming Mission*. For a trinitarian ecclesiology that explores this missional view of the church, see Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995).

leadership within the life of the church and God's larger purposes.

Diversity-in-Unity

Christianity is rare among the world's religions in understanding holiness not as homogeneous, or uniform, but rather the yoking of heterogeneous, diverse members into a single body. The life of genuine mutuality of the three persons of the Trinity invites us to affirm the full humanity and giftedness of others around us as God-given and vital not only for the world's well being and growth, but for ours too. In a trinitarian perspective, otherness is not to be erased, diminished or overwhelmed, but rather treasured and enhanced within the pattern of a larger unity and purpose. Thus *reconciled diversity*, not uniformity or division, becomes normative for a trinitarian understanding of human community.

This principle holds significant implications for leadership and power. One of the ways in which power has been misused within Christian leadership historically has been in the coercive imposition of various forms of uniformity (cultural, ethnic, gender, etc.) on diverse others and on Christian communities. For leaders to understand their own particularity and that of others as unique gifts from God intended to be shared in a mutual life invites an imagination for diversity that transcends mere pluralistic tolerance. At the same time, a trinitarian imagination steers us clear of the modern western liberal conception of the church as a voluntary society in which the reconciling center of Christ is diluted to the point that everyone just believes whatever she or he wants to believe. Understanding irreducible otherness as constitutive of human community in the image of the Trinity is a key insight in today's multi-cultural, multi-perspectival world.

Cruciform Leadership

At the heart of the biblical narrative of the life of the Trinity are the Incarnation and Cross. God's manner of identification with humanity is one of self-emptying

power, prestige, and honor *into the other* (humanity) in order to serve and redeem us, as we read in Philippians 2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: “God is a God who *bears*. The Son of God bore our flesh, he bore the cross, he bore our sins, thus making atonement for us. In the same way, his followers are also called upon to bear, for that is precisely what it means to be a Christian.”³⁹ This pattern of pouring one’s life into the other’s to the point of utter identification, even at great personal cost, contrasts sharply with prevailing understandings of leadership, authority, and freedom—both in the ancient and modern worlds.⁴⁰

In Luke 22:24-27, when the disciples began to bicker about who among them is the greatest, Jesus distinguishes leadership for his followers from that of the world: “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.” Jesus explicitly rejects the *benefactor* tradition of leadership, in which a benevolent aristocratic or ruler shares out of abundance with those of lesser status in society.⁴¹ He redefines radically the nature of leadership and authority from “lording over” to *identifying with* those he came to lead even to the point of suffering the shame and horror of the Cross. Mere largesse is insufficient; cruciform leadership involves such a deep other-orientation that one’s own status, power, and prestige are put at stake in order that the other may flourish.

While the concept of servant leadership has come to prominence through the work of Robert Greenleaf,⁴²

³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 92.

⁴⁰ See Gary M. Simpson, “God Is a God Who Bears!: Bonhoeffer for a Flat World,” *Word & World* 26, no. 4 (Fall 2006).

⁴¹ For a discussion of the benefactor tradition in the ancient context, see Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1982).

⁴² Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

there has also arisen in recent years a critique that this ideal simply perpetuates the abuse of historically marginalized people, such as women and racial minorities.⁴³ Much of this debate over servant leadership tends to understand Christ apart from the Trinity, however, primarily as a moral model for us to emulate. Yet, if Christ's self-emptying servanthood is seen within the framework of the mutuality and partnership of the Trinity, the picture changes. In the Trinity, the self-emptying for the sake of the other is not one-sided, but a *mutual* and interpersonal exchange. It is in the power of the Spirit that Jesus relinquishes all to the Father, not simply as a heroic individual act of self-denial. As Moltmann and others have argued, Christ's suffering sacrifice deeply involves all three persons of the Trinity. Our emulation of Christ's pattern of descent takes on a new light when considered not as an isolated individual act, but rather within an interdependent, reciprocal community.

Cultivating a Community

"Community" is perhaps the term with the most pregnant implications for a trinitarian re-imagining of Christian leadership. Rather than construing the leader as operating alone, wielding authority in isolation from others, the Trinity points toward a collaborative, shared, team-based approach. There are several levels to this. First, God does not create, govern or renew the world alone, but in inner-trinitarian partnership and in partnership with humanity. Trinitarian leadership is fundamentally *collaborative*.

Collaboration within the body of Christ emerges in part out of the variety of gifts given by the Spirit to the various members.⁴⁴ Diversity-in-unity operates not only in the form of social differences (race, class, gender, culture, etc.) but also charisms. Unified in baptism, the

⁴³ See, for instance, Jacquelyn Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood," in *A Troubling in My Soul*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

⁴⁴ Romans 12, 1 Cor. 12, Ephesians 4.

Spirit and the Lord, those gifts work collaboratively to build up the body of Christ, until all reach maturity (Eph. 4). There has been a fruitful renewal of baptismal ministry and spiritual gifts discernment in churches in recent years, with leaders recognizing in Eph. 4:11-13 their responsibility to “equip the saints” for ministry.⁴⁵ In a trinitarian perspective, equipping is not uni-directional (only from leader to follower), but reciprocal. That is, while those with leadership gifts have a particular charge to facilitate the development of the ministries of all members, those members in turn help equip the leaders.

For example, in the congregation where I serve as a part-time pastor, one of the members works in the local city government overseeing economic development. We have been in conversation together about how to “seek the peace of the city” (Jeremiah 29). On the one hand, the church is responsible for equipping him to exercise his leadership and stewardship of the city in alignment with the gospel and the reign of God. On the other hand, he can equip the church to minister to the city through his intimate knowledge of its needs and opportunities. The learning is mutual and bi-directional. Some years ago, when this member became aware of an abandoned hospital building that was available in the heart of the city, he worked collaboratively with local church and civic leaders to turn it into apartments for homeless youth. Leadership *in partnership* that is generative and directed creatively outward toward the world best approximates the character of the Trinity.

George Cladis has helpfully developed a vision for covenant-based team leadership in congregations based on the Trinity.⁴⁶ Yet trinitarian collaboration goes deeper than mere structure, organization, or practice. Perichoresis suggests that our very *identities* are

⁴⁵ While Ephesians operates out of the cephalic tradition (rather than the more radically egalitarian logic of the undisputed Pauline letters and the Gospels) by affirming hierarchical headship, it conditions that headship significantly relative to Greco-Roman norms.

⁴⁶ Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church*.

interwoven as we live and serve together. Miroslav Volf calls this “catholic personality”—a personality deeply shaped by the otherness of Christians past and present.⁴⁷ Leadership communities in the image of the Trinity embrace a level of mutuality, reciprocal acknowledgement of each other’s gifts, vulnerability to one another, and genuine shared life that transcends simply getting the job done.

Thus cultivating a community in the image of the divine community—a community of reconciliation, interdependence, mutuality, difference, and openness—becomes central to leadership in a trinitarian perspective. This includes both the community *of* leaders and the community *led* by the leaders. One of the primary challenges facing church leaders in the United States today is cultivating congregational communities of committed Jesus-followers rather than consumers looking to get their spiritual needs met by a voluntary association. Scott Cormode uses the metaphor of the “gardener” to describe the leader’s role in tilling the soil and creating an environment for congregation members to live into the biblical story and grow together in responding to a changing world.⁴⁸ While church leaders must take on the role of “shepherd” and “builder” at different moments, Cormode argues, the adaptive challenges facing the church today call for leaders able to facilitate the learning, growth, and spiritual development of the community as a whole. Similarly, Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk stress the intentional engagement of grass-roots members in discerning God’s movement. “God’s future is among the regular, ordinary people of God,” they write. “It’s not primarily in great leaders or experts but among the

⁴⁷ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 281.

⁴⁸ Scott Cormode, “Multi-Layered Leadership: The Christian Leader as Builder, Shepherd and Gardener,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2002).

people, all those people most leaders believe don't get it."⁴⁹

The concept of the learning organization, popularized by Peter Senge,⁵⁰ has fruitful resonances with this vision for Christian leadership. In a learning organization, members at all levels are expected, equipped, and encouraged to identify and resolve the challenges facing the organization through creative, collaborative systems-thinking. The leader functions as designer, steward, and teacher.⁵¹ This means sharing power and authority by opening up space for others to act and pushing decision-making to the grass-roots level. Similarly, James Kouzes and Barry Posner identify "enable others to act" as one of the five exemplary practices of leadership.⁵² They say that leaders to do so by "facilitating positive interdependence."⁵³ Insofar as being a disciple of Jesus means being a student/learner, the church is the original "learning organization." These insights from organizational theory resonate with the openness, mutual empowerment, and interdependence of a trinitarian ecclesiology.

One of the foundational aspects of trinitarian community is trustworthiness. This is where issues of power and authority are so critical. For leaders to embody in their own lives and leadership practices the cruciform, open, other-oriented way of the Trinity rather than hoarding power and manipulating people to accomplish their own agendas is not only to reflect the *imago Dei*, it is also to invite trust in the longsuffering, biblical God who patiently forgives and forms a people. This brings to mind James MacGregor Burns' distinction

⁴⁹ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 20-21.

⁵⁰ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990).

⁵¹ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 339-60.

⁵² James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

⁵³ Kouzes and Posner, *Leadership Challenge*, 250.

between transactional and transformational leadership.⁵⁴ Leadership in the way of the Trinity is profoundly transformational, seeking the flourishing of the other rather than merely accomplishing a particular end or exchanging rewards for compliance. Viewed in light of an eschatology of communion, the end or *telos* of the Trinity's leadership is transformation at the ultimate level: the full reconciliation and flourishing of the whole creation in the loving communion of God.

Visioning and Sensemaking

Visioning is one of the critical functions of leadership. While there are prominent instances of solitary visioning in the Old Testament (such as Moses), in the New Testament, visioning is a communal process. Paul was knocked off his horse on the Damascus road by a revelation of Christ, but it took time with Ananias, Barnabas, and other Christian leaders for him to discern God's vision and call for his ministry. Similarly, the conflicts in Acts and the Epistles over circumcision, dietary laws, and other issues of gospel and culture were discerned not by the apostles alone, but in community with one another. It is the Holy Spirit who definitively shapes the visioning work in the New Testament and early church.

One of the great losses that accompanied the eclipse of the Trinity in modern western theology was a diminution of pneumatology. Moving beyond the I/Thou polarity of the modern western logic of God opens up the possibility of a renewed pneumatology of Christian leadership.⁵⁵ In this trinitarian pneumatology, the Spirit decisively shapes and reshapes the Christian community's imagination for its identity, purpose, and calling through a dynamic process. Vision is not a static entity but rather must be constantly discerned under the prayerful direction of the Spirit.

⁵⁴ James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

⁵⁵ See Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

Our emphasis on individualism, self-reliance, autonomy, and heroic ideas of leadership in modern American culture have tended to foster a solitary conception of visioning, in which the leader huddles with God privately and then returns to dictate the vision to the people.⁵⁶ A collaborative, trinitarian approach calls instead for the leader to listen attentively *in community* for God's movement in its midst and in the world, particularly at the grass roots. Biblically, God's vision, call, and truth often come from the margins, not the centers of power—whether through prophets or people once shunned as unclean (such as Samaritans or Gentiles). Ronald Heifetz's concept of *leading without authority* echoes this pattern, in which people who do not hold formal authority often perceive the truth of the situation most clearly and can exercise pivotal influence from the edges.⁵⁷

The leader's role in defining reality—what has come to be called narrative or sensemaking leadership—parallels this interdependent, collaborative visioning work. The sensemaking dimension of leadership can be seen as early as 1957 in Philip Selznick's *Leadership in Administration*, which reflects the assumptions of Weberian bureaucracy and instrumental reason as the leader dictates the mission to the organization.⁵⁸ More recent work by Karl Weick, who can be credited with giving fresh attention to this aspect of leadership, construes sensemaking as a dynamic, social process.⁵⁹ When leadership is seen primarily as setting direction, making decisions, and enforcing compliance, as it so

⁵⁶ Even Cladis falls prey to this individualistic approach: "The leader receives and articulates the vision." See *Leading the Team-Based Church*, 58.

⁵⁷ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁵⁸ Philip Selznick, *Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation* (Evanston, IL: Row, 1957).

⁵⁹ Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995). For a recent exploration of sensemaking leadership in the church, see Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

often has been in the modern West, it is easy for authority to be abused and for people to be excluded from power and full participation in the organization. A trinitarian approach would suggest that one of the primary responsibilities of Christian leaders is to tell the story of how God is at work in our midst, framing past, present, and future reality in light of God's redemptive history and promises. The key question is *how* this takes place.

One of the more provocative threads within the trinitarian resurgence has been to understand the three divine persons as a dialogic community.⁶⁰ Just as the work of Jürgen Habermas has sought to retrieve the tradition of communicative reason (alongside the more dominant strain of instrumental reason in modernity),⁶¹ the Trinity offers a rich symbol for considering how communities can come together in reciprocal, collaborative dialogue for transformation and discovery. Sensemaking in this light is not simply a process of leaders interpreting reality on others' behalf; rather, it involves a deep, relational conversation of listening and speaking in which all parties risk learning as well as changing. Leaders then have the opportunity and challenge of creating spaces for authentic, mutual conversation among and with members of the church. For pastors used to being the experts who hold the answers, this may represent a major redefinition of role.

Yet it is critical for the church in the United States today, where questions of identity and purpose in a post-Christian society loom large. Too often the failure of churches is fundamentally a failure of imagination—they don't see themselves as part of a larger narrative with a divine author. Exercising sensemaking leadership that takes seriously the voices, hopes, fears, and dreams of those at all levels of the church and interprets them

⁶⁰ See David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

⁶¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

communally in light of the biblical narrative is critical to answering the major questions facing us. When we lose the story that gives us our identity (both on the personal and communal levels), we lose our future. The power of that story to stir hope, energy, and fresh initiative should never be underestimated by leaders. The renewal of a historical, narrative, and eschatological understanding of God's self-revelation as three persons invites Christian leaders to help their communities place themselves within God's unfolding plot.

Iconic Leadership

Christian leadership is not ultimately for its own sake, but so that the world may see and know the love of God in Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." In the gospels, particularly John, Jesus is constantly pointing beyond himself to his relationship with the Father and forward in anticipation of the coming of the Spirit. Christian leaders are also called to point beyond themselves in their life, words, and deeds to the trinitarian life in which they share.

In this sense, leaders are like icons. Icons are written within long-established patterns and traditions, but each is uniquely expressive. Icons exist to foster insight, experience, and contemplation not of themselves, but that to which they point. John Zizioulas suggests that the church and its leaders function as icons in that they depend ontologically on the life of the Trinity.⁶² When Christian leaders, in the power of the Spirit, cultivate and guide communities of unity and diversity, mutuality and openness, creativity and concern, passion and participation, they live into the promise of Jesus' prayer:

⁶² Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 137-38.

“As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that they world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.”⁶³

⁶³ John 17:21b-22.