

# **Perichoresis and participation: union between the persons of God and between God and humanity**

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## Abstract

There exists a lack of clarity concerning the concept of *perichoresis* in contemporary theology. Although most theologians hold a similar formal definition of this term which attempts to describe the union of the persons of the Trinity, the variety of ways with which it is being used as a tool renders it potentially unhelpful. The most serious area of theology which is affected by these differences of usage for *perichoresis* is that of human participation with the divine. In order to seek clarity and logical consistency between these two concepts, this thesis first provides a brief overview of trinitarian theology as it stands today and expresses why these concepts are of importance at this time. Secondly, it explores the origins of *perichoresis*, categorizes the different ways modern theologians utilize the concept, and provides a definition which may be useful when moving forward. Thirdly, the thesis examines the concept of human participation with God, starting with an overview of the Eastern concept of *theosis*, followed by a categorization of the different ways the concept of human participation is expressed today, and ending with a brief definition which may be helpful in future conversations about the topic. Finally, the thesis explores the theological movements which are logically allowable when one takes his or her doctrine of *perichoresis* to bear on the concept of human participation with God. I argue that there are ways of using *perichoresis* which logically necessitate certain understandings of participation and logically prohibit others. The twofold goals of this thesis are, first, to provide clarity of language when discussing the concept of *perichoresis* by categorizing the thoughts of theologians into an understandable framework, and second, to encourage scholars to examine carefully the ways in which their understanding of *perichoresis* affects their understanding of human participation with the divine.





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## THE TRINITY AND HUMAN PARTICIPATION

Good theological conversation, like any conversation, requires that all parties involved understand the meaning behind the words being discussed. Upon a general reading of theological texts surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity in recent years, it can be found that in many ways theologians are speaking past one another, using the same terms to mean different things. The solution to this problem lies in identifying concepts or terms which are being used in various ways, understand how those concepts are being utilized in the theologies of their proponents, explore the effects of those usages in other areas of their theologies, and propose a way forward. Although this is a monumental undertaking, it can be done when pared down to just one concept and its effect on one other area of theology. This dissertation seeks to do these tasks with concern to the concepts of *perichoresis* and human participation with the divine. Although most theologians hold a similar formal definition of *perichoresis*, the variety with which the term is being used renders it potentially unhelpful. This lack of clarity is easy to understand considering the term attempts at understanding a divine mystery about the inner-workings of the relations of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, it is important that scholars come to an agreement on the scope with which the term can be used. As will become apparent in chapter 4 below, the most serious area of human experience which is affected by these differences of usage for *perichoresis* is that of human participation with the divine. In order to accomplish this task of seeking clarity, I will first provide a brief overview of trinitarian theology as it stands today and express why these concepts are of importance at this time. Second, I will explore the origins of the terminology of *perichoresis*, categorize the different ways modern theologians utilize the concept in their theology, and provide a brief explanation of a

definition which I believe can be useful when moving forward. Third, I will examine the concept of human participation with God, starting with an overview of the Eastern concept of *theosis*, followed by my categorization of the different ways in which theologians use the concept of human participation with the divine in their theologies, and ending with a brief definition which may be useful when moving forward. Finally, I will map out the theological movements which are logically allowable when one takes his or her doctrine of *perichoresis* to bear on human participation with the divine. As we shall see, there are ways of using *perichoresis* which logically necessitate certain understandings of participation and prohibit others. The twofold goals of this paper are, first, to provide clarity of language when discussing the concept of *perichoresis* by categorizing the thoughts of theologians into an understandable framework; and second, to encourage scholars to examine carefully the ways in which their understanding of *perichoresis* affects the rest of their systematic theologies. We will begin with an overview of trinitarian theology today and why these concepts are important.

### 1.1 Resurgence of Trinitarian Theology

The twentieth century has seen a boom in the interest of theologians on the doctrine of the Trinity. Some of this has been due to overall theological trends such as a reexamination and appreciation of the church fathers and the developments that took place in theology in the first few centuries after Christ. Much of the theological discussion in that ancient time dealt with the identity of Jesus and led into important trinitarian debates. The fourth century, in particular, is riddled with theological conversations which explored the personal identity of God as Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For excellent overviews of the trinitarian debates during this era, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*

Before exploring the modern renaissance of trinitarian theology, we will first very briefly examine the fourth century debates.

Soon after Christianity was legalized in the Roman empire in 313 by the emperor Constantine, Christian thinkers were able to turn their full attention to intrafaith dialog. Rather than defending their faith from outside opposers, the Christian community was able to give greater thought to the differences amongst believers and to iron out those erroneous beliefs that would become known as heresies. The doctrine of the Trinity—that Christians remain staunch monotheists whilst professing Father, Son, and Spirit to be God—was among the first doctrines to be examined closely. Although the doctrine of the Trinity is implicitly pointed towards in Scripture, it is never explicitly stated in one verse that God is three persons and one essence. Thus, the topic of the Trinity has been a source of mystery and contention since the early church. The nature of Christ as distinct from the Father and yet fully God was exemplified in the Arian debates. Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, argued with his bishop, Alexander, about the nature of Christ in relation to God. The famous phrase which typifies Arius' position in this debate is referring to the Logos and states, "there was [a time] when he was not." Arius has become the example and namesake for the position which falls into one of Origen's two extremes: either emphasizing the unity of God to the detriment of the distinctions of His persons (Sabellianism) or emphasizing the distinctions of God to the detriment of His unity (Arianism). For Arius and those who are now categorized as his followers, maintaining the monotheistic faith and primacy of the Father was not

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(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Formation of Christian Theology*, (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), especially chapter 3 (I:61-122); and Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), especially chapters 4-Interlude.

compatible with the Logos also being God. Although they held that the Logos was certainly unique and primary over all creation, he was, however, still created by God and not of the same *ousia* as the Father. While combatting Arius and his idea that Jesus, as the begotten Son of God, was actually a created being, the orthodox community rallied together to form their views on the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit. The controversy came to a head at the Council of Nicaea in 325 which focused on the person of Christ, his relationship with the Father and the world, and whether or not he is of the same divine essence as the Father. This conversation was centered around the Greek term *homoousious* (ὁμοούσιος), which can be translated as ‘the same substance’ or ‘the same essence.’ However, the acceptance of a single word (*homoousious*) did not immediately spark consensus amongst the different sides. The term was designed with the intention that it would be unacceptable to those holding the Arian position and expose the differences marked by that heresy.<sup>2</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna went as far as to say, "Few words have provoked greater controversy than *homoousios*."<sup>3</sup> Despite the continued controversy over the proper use of the term *homoousious* and the fact that the majority of the creed was centered around Christ (and gave little more than a few words to the Holy Spirit), the Council of Nicaea marked a key moment in history when a group of Christian leaders gathered together to make an ecumenical statement that touched on the doctrine of the Trinity. Around three hundred bishops attended the Council at Nicaea in order to participate in and contribute to the proceedings in 325, and Athanasius was present as a deacon assisting bishop Alexander. When Alexander died a

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<sup>2</sup> See Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 68.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 36.

few years later, Athanasius took up the mantle of the argument (along with his title as bishop of Alexandria) and has now become known as a champion against Arianism.<sup>4</sup>

The next half century saw the clarification of the creed drafted at Nicaea as well as the defense of the divinity of the Holy Spirit through different debates led by the likes of the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus. During that time, a group of unorthodox theologians attempted to adjust the language of Nicaea to state that the Son was *homoiousian* (of a *similar* substance) to the Father, rather than being *homoousian* (of the *same* substance) with the Father. By making this small adjustment to the language of Nicaea, they hoped to provide for greater consensus among detractors, but this attempt failed because of the weakness that the term had in portraying the divinity of Christ. Athanasius came to argue for a vast distinction between God and creation, arguing that while there may be a spectrum of created things (a human made in the image of God compared to a maggot), this gradation is nothing compared to the canyon that separates the creator God from His creation. By proposing this great distinction, he was able to ask his opponents to explain on which side of that canyon stood the Logos. The vast expanse between the Creator and His creation is still a vital aspect of trinitarian theology today and marks a key point later in my argumentation.

Additionally, the church fathers clarified the terminology of the claim that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three *hypostases* which are the same *ousia*. This terminology allowed for a oneness of the essence of God whilst maintaining a distinction of persons between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Basil of Caesarea argued vehemently for the divinity of the Holy Spirit as equal to the Father and the Son

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<sup>4</sup> For an interesting perspective on this championing that Athanasius accomplished, see Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 105-17.

in essence. While he never stated in the same language that the Holy Spirit is *homoousia* with the Father or the Son, he did make the argument for the shared *ousia* of the Holy Spirit with the Father and Son without using the controversial term. By doing this, the clever bishop of Caesarea was attempting to preserve as much unity in the church as possible. Basil also argued against Eunomius and expressed how the different names of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) do not necessitate a difference in *ousia*, but a difference in *hypostases*. The persons of God can remain different and distinct while still sharing the same essence or substance.

By the latter portion of the fourth century, division was still rampant in the church and another council was called in order that all heresies might be eradicated.<sup>5</sup> The subsequent Council of Constantinople in 381 ratified the important developments made, especially in the doctrine of the Trinity, under the initial leadership of Gregory of Nazianzus.<sup>6</sup> The full divinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit was explored, argued for, and maintained by these great church fathers. Following the Council of Constantinople, we can observe the western developments of the doctrine of the Trinity in the work of Augustine, especially in his great work, *De Trinitate*. Augustine provides us with an excellent, comprehensive look into the whole doctrine of the Trinity at length, and acts in some ways as a summative work for fourth-century Latin trinitarian doctrine. The towering “colossus”<sup>7</sup> that is Augustine cannot be overlooked when exploring the doctrine of the Trinity (or the history of doctrine in the West in general).

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<sup>5</sup> See Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, I:118.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus did not preside over the entirety of the council, but instead became frustrated by political charges against him and by the conduct of the council in general, and he resigned as president of the council before it concluded. See Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, I:120.

<sup>7</sup> Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, 129.



Augustine made many ideas explicit which were previously only implied or underdeveloped, providing us today with great resources for exploring questions concerning the minutiae of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>8</sup> For example, the stress and clarity with which Augustine placed on the inseparable operations of the persons of the Godhead were critical to the conversation of the doctrine of the Trinity (even if they did not originate with him).<sup>9</sup> These arguments are certainly not settled (and different sides of the argument continue to surface in theology today), but Augustine provides a great and early example of defending the doctrine of the inseparable operations. Augustine also provides some analogies for the Trinity that attempt to avoid the pitfalls of Arianism and Sabellianism.<sup>10</sup> The most famous of these analogies is now termed the psychological analogy wherein Augustine likens the Trinity to the rational part of a human soul, where the three persons are compared to the mind, knowledge, and love. In another version, the persons are compared to memory, will, and intellect. Additionally, Augustine makes a move wherein he examines more closely the notion that God is love. He explores the different facets of the act of love in God as the lover, the beloved, and the love they share. In this style, Augustine provides a thoughtful analysis of many facets of the doctrine of the Trinity throughout his writings.

There are many other incredible developments that occurred in the doctrine of the Trinity during the fourth century by many other influential theologians (not least of all the beautiful exegetical discussions of Hilary of Poitiers). However, a general

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<sup>8</sup> Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, 133.

<sup>9</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 369.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine's analogies, while certainly imperfect, are much more helpful and complex than other analogies, such as an analogy of an egg (yolk, egg white, shell), water (solid, liquid, gas) or a man (husband, son, father). These other analogies most often fall into the heresy of Sabellianism.

background is sufficient for the purposes of my study.<sup>11</sup> These great church fathers provide for us an example of excellence (though certainly not perfection) in the art and science of theology. Today, many theologians look to those early centuries for guidance and as a foundation for the theological groundwork which paved the way for all the discussions since that time. Because the doctrine of the Trinity was so critical during that now-revered time, the doctrine has come up once again as central in many current theological discussions. However, to gain a fuller picture of the current climate of trinitarian discussion, it is important to follow a specific thread of theological thought which began almost 200 years ago with the monumental work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and continued through the developments of Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, and the advent of social trinitarianism in the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

### *1.1.1 Friedrich Schleiermacher*

Some scholars today have remarked that in the recent history before Karl Barth theologians left the doctrine of the Trinity as a mysterious afterthought to be dealt with after facing other more important issues. Robert Letham notes:

...the Trinity was increasingly viewed as an addition to the doctrine of God, as something for advanced thinkers, rather than at the heart of the Christian faith.

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<sup>11</sup> For a more in-depth study, see my recommendations in footnote 1 above.

<sup>12</sup> There are certainly many other important theologians throughout history in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. However, for space, I will only be examining a few key figures leading us to our current climate. For more in-depth study on the recent history of the doctrine, consider Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*; Christoph Schwöbel, "The Renaissance of Trinitarian Theology: Reasons, Problems and Tasks," chapter 1 in *Trinitarian Theology Today*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995); Stanley Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007); and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "The Trajectories of the Contemporary 'Trinitarian Renaissance' in Different Contexts," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3 (2009).

Charles Hodge, in his *Systematic Theology*, spends 250 pages on the existence, nature, and attributes of God and only then turns to the Trinity. Schleiermacher relegates the Trinity to an appendix in *The Christian Faith*.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Claude Welch wrote, “the controlling motive in Schleiermacher’s judgment of the Trinity is his conviction that the doctrine in itself is an unnecessary and unwarranted addition to the faith. It means well, one might say, but is misleading and over-reaches the mark.”<sup>14</sup> The most drastic of these claims against Schleiermacher, however, comes from Robert Jensen. Jensen accuses Schleiermacher of Arianism and Sabellianism, that he “drops” “inherited trinitarian propositions” and that he holds “a particularly simpleminded form of the disastrous old distinction of natural from revealed theology.”<sup>15</sup> These criticisms of Schleiermacher’s mistreatment of the doctrine of the Trinity have the potential to stigmatize Schleiermacher’s trinitarian views as either unimportant or unnecessary for modern trinitarian scholars.

However, in recent scholarship, Schleiermacher’s attention to the doctrine of the Trinity has been defended, and rightly so. One can see that Schleiermacher’s methodology in organizing his systematic work<sup>16</sup> had a specific purpose, and that his positioning of the doctrine of the Trinity near the end was not problematic at all.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 271-72.

<sup>14</sup> Claude Welch, *In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1952), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr, 1982), 134.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (London: T&T Clark, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> I agree with Holmes who disagrees strongly with Letham’s caricature of Schleiermacher and implores theologians to read “Hegel and Schleiermacher as earlier voices in our own conversation, not as alien voices from the past.” Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, 182.

Fiorenza remarks that “the charge that Schleiermacher has marginalized the doctrine of the Trinity by placing it at the end of the *Christian Faith* overlooks Schleiermacher’s innovative treatment of God.”<sup>18</sup> Schleiermacher’s affective systematic theology is one wherein he follows the route of a new believer experiencing the Christian faith systematically through the doctrines, rather than organizing the doctrines philosophically.<sup>19</sup> With this in mind, one could see why Schleiermacher places the doctrine of the Trinity near the end of his systematic work because that is the order in which a believer would come across the formal doctrine when moving through his or her own religious experience. For Schleiermacher, the doctrine comes with the “immanent reality of the ecclesial experience of redemption” as his focus and as “both the material and the formal principle for his dogmatics.”<sup>20</sup> Richard R. Niebuhr even comments that for Schleiermacher, “the doctrine properly belongs at the conclusion of *The Christian Faith*, for its authentic content is nothing else than the body of the theological exposition of the whole of the faith.”<sup>21</sup> This methodology is highly contrasted against more prevalent organizations of systematic theologies in which the

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<sup>18</sup> Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “Schleiermacher’s Understanding of God as Triune,” chapter 9 in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, ed. Jacqueline Mariña (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 175-76.

<sup>19</sup> One scholar describes Schleiermacher’s methodology in saying that he “took as the task of systematic theology the rigorous interrogation of that religious consciousness bequeathed to the Christian community by Jesus of Nazareth...in order to gain understanding of the transcendent reality that is its ultimate ground.” “Schleiermacher, Friedrich Daniel Ernst” in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Theologians*, Patrick W. Carey and Joseph T. Lienhard, eds. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002),

<sup>20</sup> John Webster, “Introduction: Systematic Theology,” chapter 1 in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Richard R. Niebuhr, *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion: A New Introduction* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), 156.

order of doctrines is based upon philosophical necessity. In other words, these other systematic theologians may organize their systems starting with philosophically fundamental doctrines such as theology proper (including the doctrine of the Trinity) or a doctrine of scripture before moving on to doctrines which progressively build philosophically. Were Schleiermacher to have claimed that he was organizing his systematic theology based on philosophical foundations, then placing the doctrine of the Trinity near the end of his work would have been problematic indeed. In whatever way one argues for or against Schleiermacher's placement of the doctrine of the Trinity in *The Christian Faith*, it can still certainly be said that in the era before Karl Barth, the doctrine of the Trinity was a doctrine that did not receive the attention it did after Barth (including through to today). Stephen Holmes writes of that time, explaining how some conservative theologians, "such as the Princeton school of Hodge and Warfield, still taught the doctrine in a carefully traditional form, but could find little use for it."<sup>22</sup> It was not until Karl Barth placed his work on the doctrine of the Trinity at the very beginning of his *Church Dogmatics* that the doctrine came into the limelight to be discussed at great lengths once again.

### *1.1.2 Karl Barth*

When reflecting on the contemporary conversation surrounding the Trinity, Fred Sanders rightly states "...it would be difficult to overestimate [Barth's] impact on the revival of trinitarian theology in the twentieth century. When he made the long-neglected doctrine central to his *Church Dogmatics* in 1931, he was definitely moving

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<sup>22</sup> Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, 2.

against the stream."<sup>23</sup> Hunsinger praises Barth's treatment of the doctrine, stating, "By front-loading the doctrine, jarringly, at the very outset of his dogmatics, he not only managed to reorient Protestant theology back toward the great catholic tradition. At the same time, he also sparked a major revival of interest in the ancient doctrine itself, one that surged in the second half of the twentieth century and that shows no signs of abating to this day."<sup>24</sup> Karl Barth brought the Trinity into the center of theological discussion in the opening chapters of *Church Dogmatics* when he discussed how the Trinity laid the groundwork for everything else in his theology of God.<sup>25</sup>

When faced with placing the Trinity as the forefront foundation of his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth reasoned, "It is the doctrine of the Trinity which fundamentally distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian - it is it, therefore, also, which marks off the Christian concept of revelation as Christian, in face of all other possible

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<sup>23</sup> Fred Sanders, *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner's Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, Issues in Systematic Theology, (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 50.

<sup>24</sup> George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Trinity, and Some Protestant Doctrines after Barth," ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering, *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199557813.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199557813-e-22>.

<sup>25</sup> Barth's position of the doctrine of the Trinity provides a foundation upon which he builds other doctrines. For an example of this in the doctrine of creation see Andrew K. Gabriel, *Barth's Doctrine of Creation: Creation, Nature, Jesus, and the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014). For an excellent volume discussing the impact of Barth on trinitarian theology, see Myk Habets and Phillip Tolliday, eds., *Trinitarian Theology after Barth* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2011). For defenses to Barth on the grounds of varied criticisms in recent debates, consider Iain Taylor, "In Defence of Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Trinity," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 1 (March 2003); George Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 2 (April 2008). A list of scholarship discussing Barth over the last few decades could certainly go much further, but these examples will suffice for the sake of my argument.

doctrines of God and concepts of revelation."<sup>26</sup> Barth recognized that the doctrine of the Trinity was such a unique and foundational element to the Christian faith that by starting with that doctrine we can know that we are no longer investigating any other religion or worldview. By looking at the three-ness of God we separate ourselves from the strong monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Islam. By viewing God as a unity we avoid connection with pantheism, panentheism, or any polytheist religions.

Christianity is the only religious system that accounts for God being three and God being one. Sanders commends Barth's decision to begin with the Trinity:

What is remarkable is that by moving the Trinity to the front of his system and engaging it with his central ideas, Barth has restored the doctrine to its original place in the structure of Christian faith. Instead of being a problem that needs to be solved, the doctrine of the Trinity functions as the solution to problems in other tracts of Christian doctrine. It has explanatory value rather than standing in need of explanation.<sup>27</sup>

The Trinity should not be a footnote in the end of our systematic theologies. It should not be an unknown mystery that we relegate to the appendix after we get to the more important theology of God. Instead, it should be the foundation from which we view everything else in our worldview, from the way we see God in creation (according to the will of the Father, by the Word of the Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit), the Incarnation (the Son sent by the Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit), our prayer life (to the Father, by the Spirit, in the name of the Son), and every other aspect of our theology. It is through the lens of the doctrine of the Trinity that we can better understand all other aspects of who God is and how we can be in relationship with Him.

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<sup>26</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.W. Bromiley, vol. I/1, ed. G.W. Bromiley & T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 346.

<sup>27</sup> Sanders, *Image*, 51.

After Karl Barth brought the Trinity back to the forefront of theological thinking, another Karl (Rahner) made a statement that launched the modern conversation.

### *1.1.3 Karl Rahner*

In 1969, Karl Rahner, a prominent Catholic theologian, wrote a relatively small book aptly called *The Trinity*. Although this book is only about 120 pages long (and is only one of the many excellent volumes written by Rahner over his esteemed career), there is a phrase early in the book that has dominated every work written about the doctrine of the Trinity since that time. That phrase, now called “Rahner’s Rule,” states, “the 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity.”<sup>28</sup> In these fifteen short words, Rahner opened up the debate about the connection between God as He is within Himself (also called the immanent Trinity, God *in se*, or God in Himself) and God as He is revealed to us (also called the economic Trinity, God *ad extra*, or God for us). For Rahner, the way God is amongst Himself is exactly the same as the way God is as He is revealed to us. In other words, Rahner would believe that the ways in which God the Son responded in prayer to God the Father when he was on earth are the exact same as the ways in which the Son has responded to the Father throughout all of eternity. The relationship that the Spirit has (proceeding from the Father and the Son, giving glory to the Son and the Father) is exactly the same in our history as it is throughout eternity with God. For Rahner, this statement created a solution to the problem that theologians were having with separating the immanent and economic Trinity, and it allowed him to learn truly about God *in se* as

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<sup>28</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Florent Donceel (London: Burns and Oates, 1970), 22.



he learned about God *ad extra*. The importance of this point comes across vividly as Rahner discusses the incarnation:

If we admit that every divine person might assume a hypostatic union with a created reality, then the fact of the incarnation of the Logos "reveals" properly nothing about the Logos himself, that is, about his own relative specific features within the divinity. For in this event the incarnation means for us practically only the experience that God in general is a person, something which we already knew. It does not mean that in the Trinity there is a very special differentiation of persons.<sup>29</sup>

In Rahner's mind, if there is a difference between the way each person of the Trinity interacts through revelation and the way that they interact in reality, then our revelation is false and we are not truly learning about the God of reality. There are obvious problems with revelation being disconnected with reality (either God is lying to us, hiding something from us, or we are so incapable of learning about Him that we truly cannot learn anything and must remain agnostic about God) and Rahner seeks to avoid those problems by making this blanket statement about that connection. To Rahner, a disconnect between the immanent and economic Trinity would be foolish and illogical, "A revelation of the Father without the Logos and his incarnation would be like speaking without words."<sup>30</sup> The two must coincide if we are to truly know God.

After Rahner's statement was made, almost every book written about the Trinity has comments about Rahner's Rule, with most authors designating a whole section to the discussion. While not every contribution from 1969 to today has been solely in the realm of debating the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity, many authors use Rahner's Rule as a starting point for their discussion and contribution. Like Barth, it is hard to imagine the modern conversation of the doctrine of the Trinity

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<sup>29</sup> Rahner, *The Trinity*, 28.

<sup>30</sup> Rahner, *The Trinity*, 29.

without Rahner's contribution and his "Rule." This brings us to our fourth category of background on the doctrine of the Trinity: the birth of social trinitarianism.

#### *1.1.4 Social Trinitarianism*

The modern movement now called "social trinitarianism" is one in which theologians hold a social or relational model for the persons of the Trinity. Social trinitarianism as a theological perspective may be traced in its current form to the early 1980s and has been championed by the work of Jürgen Moltmann<sup>31</sup>, John Zizioulas<sup>32</sup>, Miroslav Volf<sup>33</sup>, Patricia Wilson-Kastner<sup>34</sup>, Leonardo Boff<sup>35</sup>, Catherine Mowry LaCugna<sup>36</sup>, and Elizabeth Johnson<sup>37</sup>, to name but a few. Most basically, those who hold to a social model of the Trinity "propose that Christians should not imagine God on the model of some individual person or thing which has three sides, aspects, dimensions or

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<sup>31</sup> See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981). Moltmann's vision of the social Trinity is that of a free community of equals, and he connects this community to human relationships which ought to be lived out in freedom and equality.

<sup>32</sup> See John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985). Zizioulas has a vision of the social Trinity which is much more hierarchical and this plays into his account of ecclesiology in which sees the bishop as that which gives being to the church.

<sup>33</sup> See Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998); Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity Is Our Social Program': The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (1998), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00072>.

<sup>34</sup> See Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

<sup>35</sup> See Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

<sup>36</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

modes of being; God is instead to be thought of as a collective, a group, or a society, bound together by the mutual love, accord and self-giving of its members.”<sup>38</sup> In addition, and importantly for our discussion in this dissertation, social trinitarians hold that there is a practicality of the doctrine of the Trinity for human affairs.<sup>39</sup> Many scholars who would not self-identify as social trinitarians affirm the first distinction in some form, that the relationality of God is crucial to God’s constitution. However, the lengths at which those non-social trinitarians will push that fact differs greatly.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to focus on the second aspect of social trinitarianism: that the Trinity is practical and ought to inform human social interactions (either with God or with other humans). In other words, we should look to the doctrine of the Trinity when facing social or moral dilemmas in order to gain wisdom concerning how human relations are intended to proceed. This methodology has been utilized to argue for different models of church leadership, for gender roles, for political action, and for morality in ethically charged situations, in addition to exploring human participation in the divine.

This method of argument—from the Trinity to human relationality—is certainly an attractive one. Karen Kilby points out:

In the hands of these thinkers, [...] the claim that God though three is yet one becomes a source of metaphysical insight and a resource for combating individualism, patriarchy and oppressive forms of political and ecclesiastical organization. No wonder the enthusiasm: the very thing which in the past has been viewed as the embarrassment has become the chief point upon which to commend the Christian doctrine of God: not an intellectual difficulty but a

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<sup>38</sup> Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 957 (2000): 433, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb06456.x>.

<sup>39</sup> For a helpful overview of social trinitarianism beyond the scope of this argument, see Gijsbert Van den Brink, "Social Trinitarianism: A Discussion of Some Recent Theological Criticisms," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 3 (July 2014).

source of insight, not a philosophical stumbling block but something with which to transform the world.”<sup>40</sup>

If it is true that God intended human society to model divine society—that in some way the *imago dei* ought to include the inner-workings of intra-trinitarian relations—then we certainly should be delving into the immanent Trinity to find the answers to life’s relationality questions. This methodology is problematic, however, because of the mystery of the divine life. The ways in which one scholar emphasizes this or that minute structural aspect of his or her doctrine of the Trinity would have radical consequences down the line in the way they project those aspects into human relations. Many social trinitarians see the model of the Trinity as egalitarian; a society of three co-equal persons wherein authority and hierarchy have no foothold, and therefore they project this freedom and equality of community onto human gender relations in some form of egalitarianism. However some, most notably John Zizioulas in one of the earliest and most influential social trinitarian books, *Being as Communion*, point to hierarchy and authority in the Trinity, and then project this model of relating onto models of relating in human life, be it in the church or the family. For Zizioulas, himself the Eastern Orthodox metropolitan bishop of Pergamon, the hierarchy that can be found in the Trinity shows us how church organization ought to be constructed, in episcopal hierarchies centered around the Eucharist and ordered like the Godhead. In this model, the doctrine of the Trinity also shows us that there ought to be hierarchy and structure built into male-female relationships, both in marriage and in what is allowable in the church.

The same can be true of examining the topics of this dissertation: *perichoresis* and participation. A social trinitarian might have a very different opinion on whether or

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<sup>40</sup> Kilby, "Projection," 438.

not *perichoresis* is something that humanity ought to experience. If human relations ought to look like God's relations, then *perichoresis* is certainly something that humanity should expect, either in their relationship with God, their relationship with others, or both. Similarly, the level of participation that humanity should expect would differ based on how strongly one posits the practicality of the doctrine of the Trinity towards addressing human affairs. If God's model for relationships that we ought to strive for is seen in how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate, then we should expect extremely high levels of participation with the divine. In this way, the movement of social trinitarianism has forced theologians of all kinds to reexamine the ways in which humans ought to interact with each other and with God.

All of these influences (and many more) over the last two centuries have contributed to where we are today. After broadly examining the development of the doctrine of the Trinity from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Karl Barth and Karl Rahner and finally through social trinitarianism, we can now turn our attention briefly to the purpose of this study and the need for clarification in regard to the concepts of *perichoresis* and human participation with the divine.

## 1.2 The Need for Clarification

Early on in my studies for this dissertation I asked myself why it all matters. How would increased clarification in the terminology of *perichoresis* and human participation with God make any difference in the greater theological conversation or to the practical lives of everyday Christians? In order for any argument to hold value, it must be valid and effect some change, however big or small. In this next (brief) section I will examine why the clarification of these terms is valuable and what effect that

greater clarity would have on trinitarian theology and in the practical outpouring of Christians.

### *1.2.1 Clarity in Language*

As a brief introduction to this section on the need for clarification, I would like to explain why commonality in language is of such high importance. Language is an incredibly important tool. In general, society agrees upon rules of usage (grammar) and rules of terminology (vocabulary) that govern and dictate how we communicate with one another. It is absolutely vital that all members of a communicating group understand the rules to which everyone else is adhering in order to minimize confusion and translation error. The goal of any communication, after all, is the transference of ideas and concepts from one person to another. If one person understands a word to mean something other than what the rest of the group understands, then there is likely to be miscommunication. Let us take an example where one person asks another how much longer is allowed in order for a certain task to be complete. If the first person says, "I need it soon," then the gaps in their language become apparent. For the first person, "soon" could mean within the next few minutes or maybe hours. For the second person, "soon" could mean within the next few days or weeks. Neither answer is necessarily incorrect, but it is important that everyone involved understand what the other understands to mean by the vague word "soon." Problems could arise when a few hours go by and the first person asks the second why the task is not yet finished. Frustrations based on inconsistency or vagueness in language can be avoided with clarity and agreed-upon definitions of terms. If everyone involved understood that "soon" meant either within the hour or within the next week, then the problems previously noted could be avoided completely.

Similar statements could be made about theological terms and concepts, such as *perichoresis*. If two people are engaging in theological discussion, and both use the term *perichoresis* in their argument, it is important that each person understands what the other means by the word. If one person understands *perichoresis* to explain a co-inherence of the persons of the Trinity that is ineffable and one in which humanity cannot participate, then he or she will have a hard time continuing a discussion with someone who understands *perichoresis* to mean anything other than that. Likewise, if one person understands the concept of human participation with the divine to be similar to familial relationship and another sees participation as a metaphysical union of substances, then they will end up talking past each other and misunderstanding each other's arguments for lack of a shared definition. It is important that theologians use language carefully to communicate the concepts behind the words they use. For this basic reason, it is important first to understand how terms are being used by different groups of people, and then to decide on a shared definition in order to minimize confusion in communication in the future. Here, then, is the task of this project: to explore how *perichoresis* and human participation with the divine are being used in current theological discussions, and to propose a way to move forward with shared definitions of each.

### *1.2.2 Perichoresis and Participation - Impact of Clarity*

The question I am posing here is this: what impact do more clearly defined definitions of *perichoresis* and human participation with the divine have on systematic theology? At its most basic, the answer is that clarity ought to always be foundational

when seeking after truth, especially truth about God.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, as explained above, clarity of language in any context is necessary for good communication. However, the specific implications of accuracy on these doctrines (*perichoresis* and human participation with the divine) are more concrete than that. I will briefly explore some of the questions that arise when these doctrines are defined in different ways, starting with a look at trinitarian theology, then anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and finally eschatology.<sup>42</sup>

#### 1.2.2.1 Trinitarian theology

The term *perichoresis* helps us put words to the difficult concept of the unity of the persons of the Godhead. It helps us guide our thoughts as we consider why we, as Christians, worship one God and at the same time confess the deity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It helps us think more deeply about the ways in which each person of the Godhead is present and active together and uniquely in salvation-history. It helps us attempt to make sense of statements such as those found in the Quicumque Vult, “we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance.”<sup>43</sup> However, if we have different understandings of the concept

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<sup>41</sup> Of course, all of this is within a framework of recognizing and worshipping the mystery of God. This mystery which is not facts that cannot be known, but rather facts beyond our ken.

<sup>42</sup> For many of the questions explored below, there are different sides to the arguments with theologians arguing for each viewpoint. The exercise here is not to express which ones I believe are valid, but rather to express how differences in understanding *perichoresis* can affect our views of other aspects of our systematic theology.

<sup>43</sup> See Philip Schaff, *The Greek and Latin Creeds, with Translations*, vol. II, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, (New York: Harper & Brother, 1882), 66-70. Much of the Quicumque Vult deals with this question of unity in



of *perichoresis* then we might come to some very different conclusions in other areas of our systematic theology. For example, if we understand that the co-inherence of the persons of the Godhead is only experienced by God, then when we make statements about *perichoresis*, we understand that we are discussing only the three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, if someone else understands *perichoresis* to include humanity or even the whole created order, then when he or she moves to make statements about participation with God, the conclusions might be very different. This is the key purpose of this dissertation and can be seen in the bulk of my argument as found in chapter 4 below.<sup>44</sup> The way in which we view the relations of the Godhead, as either exclusively *perichoretic* or including humanity, affect issues such as immutability, simplicity and the Creator-creation distinction. Because *perichoresis* resides primarily as a tenet of trinitarian doctrine, its impact here is fairly obvious (different definitions change the view of the Trinity). However, the effects of these changes spread out into other areas of our systematic theologies.

#### 1.2.2.2 Anthropology

In anthropology, one could ask the question, “What does the image of God look like in humanity if *perichoresis* is or is not involved in it?” If the image of God in humanity involves a potential for *perichoretic* unity with God, then the consequences of our actions to ourselves and to our fellow humans reach back into the Godhead in

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Trinity, and the concept of *perichoresis* is a helpful one when attempting to understand how this might work.

<sup>44</sup> In my main argument in chapter 4 below, I move from different categories of usage of *perichoresis* into different categories of usage for participation. As I argue below, some of these movements are logically invalid because the concepts cannot be held together cohesively.

radical ways. The intimacy with which God understands and “feels” our suffering is exponentially increased with this kind of view. Additionally, if this *perichoresis* is reciprocal then the actions of created humans have a real impact on the nature of the uncreated God. Likewise, if the *imago dei* involves *perichoresis* with other humans, then one ought to expect deeper levels of union in the body of Christ. Taking this even further, if someone expects a level of union equal to what the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit experience but that person is not experiencing it, then he or she could be led to believe that something is wrong with them. Finally, if the *perichoretic* unity of the Godhead is complete and not subject to gradation,<sup>45</sup> and if humanity should expect to experience the same *perichoretic* unity with God, then any human made in the image of God who felt detached from God would not actually be experiencing that distance, but it would merely be an affectual response to our changing circumstances which held no weight on our status with God. Again, this has consequences that relate to our understanding of participation with God in that *any statement about humanity being perichoretically united to God is a statement about human participation with the divine*. If it is in our nature as image-bearers to experience *perichoresis*, then participation is something that is afforded to all humanity, whether or not they are saved. This brings us to our next category of theology: soteriology.

### 1.2.2.3 Soteriology

From a soteriological standpoint, the question becomes, “If all of creation is or is not perichoretically united to the Godhead, then what do salvation and damnation

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<sup>45</sup> I.e. the Father and Son experience the same *perichoresis* as the Father and the Holy Spirit, which is the same as that experienced by the Son and the Holy Spirit, which is the same as the *perichoresis* experienced by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

look like?” If all creation is already experiencing *perichoresis* with God, then can we reasonably expect some to experience eternity with God and others to experience eternal separation from God? What does participation with God look like for someone who has denied Christ and yet is experiencing *perichoresis* with God? Alternatively, if salvation involves the start of a *perichoretic* union with God, then there are ramifications when considering the perseverance of the saints and the nature of salvation itself. If *perichoresis* is the result of salvation, then the level of participation with the divine that the redeemed ought to experience is extremely intimate indeed, as intimate as that experienced by the eternal persons of the Godhead! However, this could provide helpful tools in comparing an extreme union with God for the redeemed (those who experience a *perichoretic* participation with God) and the damned (those who experience eternal separation and complete lack of participation with God). However, if salvation does not involve *perichoresis*, then one must account for the differences between those who are saved and those who are not in other ways, utilizing other theological tools. But if the act of salvation involves *perichoresis* between an individual believer and God, then surely those believers would then also experience *perichoresis* amongst each other.<sup>46</sup> This brings us to our next category, ecclesiology.

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<sup>46</sup> According to transitive properties of equality, if  $A=b$  and  $A=c$  then  $b=c$ . In this example, A is the Godhead, whereas b and c are individual believers, and the equality experienced amongst them all, in this model, is *perichoretic*. So if I experience *perichoretic* union with God and you experience *perichoretic* union with God, then it would seem reasonable that you and I should also experience *perichoretic* union with one another.

#### 1.2.2.4 Ecclesiology

In ecclesiology we can ask, “What does governance, worship, and purpose in the church look like if she is or is not *perichoretically* united to God?” If the church experiences a kind of communal *perichoresis* with God, then our models of leadership might look very different than if our relationship with God is one of adoption or reconciliation. Models of church governance that run hierarchically or congregationally would need to justify their model based on the kind of community they see in the Godhead. After all, if we are meant to model the Godhead, then at least our churches should look relatively similar to God’s relations. Additionally, the way we worship a God we are *perichoretically* united with will be different than the way we worship a God of whom we think primarily as our Father, or savior, or friend. Finally, the purpose and mission of the church changes drastically if the church is experiencing *perichoresis* with God and her members. Rather than focus on teaching or obedience or worship, the goal might be to achieve a more intimate community, or to have increased experiences of divine participation. The purpose of the church then leads us into our final category, the last things.

#### 1.2.2.5 Eschatology

Finally, in our eschatology we need to consider, “What is the *telos* of humanity when experiencing or not experiencing *perichoresis* with God?” If the end goal of human existence is *perichoresis* with God, then we ought to be striving for ever-increasing union with and likeness of God here on earth, with the expectation that we will be able, one day in eternity future, to experience complete, mutual interpenetration with our God. Maybe this *perichoresis* does not include humanity in our creation (i.e. in the *imago dei*) or in our salvation, or our communion with the saints, but maybe it

comes at the end of all time. If this is the case, then what does it say about the nature of God? Is God's nature, at the *telos* of salvation history, immutable? Or is God, as Robert Jenson states, "roomy" enough to include humanity in the divine nature?<sup>47</sup>

These are just a few of the ways in which differences in definitions for the relatively obscure term, *perichoresis*, and the concept of human participation with the divine could radically change the way we view the rest of our theological system. Systematic theologies are not like TV dinner trays where each food is carefully segregated into different sections and avoids interaction at all cost. Instead, they are like spaghetti, in which each noodle touches and is flavored by every other noodle, all combined into one, large, interconnected web. Every little change to any aspect of our systematic theologies has far-reaching consequences that affect the rest of the way we view God and His creation. In this way, the concept of *perichoresis* is inextricably bound up in many aspects of theology which reach beyond our attempts at understanding the relations of the persons of the Godhead.

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<sup>47</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: Volume I: The Triune God* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 226. See section 3.2.3.1 below.



*PERICHORESIS*

What is the connection that binds the Father, Son, and Spirit? How does God's oneness correlate with His threeness? How much does each member of the Trinity "experience" the actions of the others? The answers to these and other questions are sought<sup>1</sup> using a definition of the word *perichoresis* (περιχώρησις). This Greek word attempts to describe the theological idea of the interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity.<sup>2</sup> The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology defines the term as "referring to the co-inherence or mutual interpenetration (Latin circumincession) of the Persons of the Trinity."<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth defined it along similar lines as a term which "asserts that the divine modes of existence condition and permeate one another mutually with such perfection, that one is as invariably in the other two as the other two are in the one."<sup>4</sup> Finding a precise definition of the term is paramount if theologians expect to argue for any position in trinitarian theology. However, while all theologians agree on

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<sup>1</sup> The answers to these questions are importantly sought not found because of the mystery of God and the limited capacity of humans to be able to fully comprehend the divine Godhead.

<sup>2</sup> As we will see in section 2.1.1 below, the term *perichoresis* was originally used to describe the interpenetration of the two natures of Christ in the hypostatic union. However, because the overwhelming usage of the term over the last century has been in reference to the Trinity and not Christology, for the purposes of this study when I refer to the concept of *perichoresis*, I am referring only to the trinitarian interpenetration of the persons of the Godhead.

<sup>3</sup> "Perichoresis" in Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Thought, Ian A. McFarland, David A.S. Fergusson, and Karen Kilby, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), <http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/cupdct/perichoresis/0>.

<sup>4</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:425.

its base definition, the concept is used in a variety of different ways that move beyond these foundations. Oliver Crisp describes *perichoresis* as “a kind of theological black box” which has been used “as a means of filling a conceptual gap in reflection upon the Trinity and the hypostatic union in the incarnation.”<sup>5</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer remarks on the expansion of the definition of this term, stating that *perichoresis* has moved from a purely trinitarian discussion, “into a full-blown paradigm for expounding the nature of human being, the relation between God and human being, even the relation between God and the non-human world.”<sup>6</sup> Another scholar can describe how “Something like the trinitarian perichoresis is established between the exalted Lord and each several individual Christian... This union is metaphysically and ontologically possible because God is our Creator by a divine act, the ascended Christ, who is God the Son Incarnate, enters the human mind and we are given access in principle to his mind...”<sup>7</sup> And again another scholar can expand the concept even further, stating, “Just as God creates space with the perichoretic movement in all creation for creaturely participation, so should Christian community practice embrace, rather than exclusion”<sup>8</sup> and “Can we expand the image [of *perichoresis*] so that there is room for humanity—even for the whole of creation—to join in this dance within God’s own life?... If the doctrine of the Trinity is truly the story of God’s outward movement to include, *perichoresis* describes more than

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<sup>5</sup> Oliver D. Crisp, "Problems with Perichoresis," *Tyndale Bulletin* 56, no. 1 (2005): 119.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 157.

<sup>7</sup> David G. Atfield, "'I in You and You in Me': Perichoresis and Salvation," *Theology* 109, no. 852 (2006): 426.

<sup>8</sup> Molly Truman Marshall, "Inviting to Dance," *Review & Expositor* 101, no. 4 (2004): 766-67.



intratrinitarian relationships.”<sup>9</sup> Clearly, while some keep the term exclusively within the Godhead, others are comfortable expanding the definition to include inter-relatedness between God and humanity and between multiple individuals and groups of humans. Upon surveying the myriad ways in which modern scholars utilize the term, it can seem daunting to attempt to find common ground among different definitions.

It is important to note here that by seeking clarity, I am in no way attempting to deny any mystery in God. Oliver Crisp stated this succinctly when he wrote, “... a complete analysis of *perichoresis* with respect to the hypostatic union, or the ontology of the Trinity, is not possible because the Trinity and incarnation are divine mysteries. Since *perichoresis* is a theological concept that bears upon these two mysteries, by trying to make clear something of the ontology of the hypostatic union and the Trinity, it too touches upon things mysterious.”<sup>10</sup> God’s mystery is not something that is indefinitely out of reach for anyone outside of God but is rather those things about which God is choosing to reveal in His time. Some mysteries of God are things that we may never, even in the eschaton, fully understand. However, that does not mean that we

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<sup>9</sup> Molly Truman Marshall, "Participating in the Life of God: A Trinitarian Pneumatology," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30, no. 2 (2003 2003): 145-46.

<sup>10</sup> Crisp, "Problems with Perichoresis," 120. Crisp goes on to quote Peter van Inwagen who eloquently wrote, “[I]t may be that it is important for us to know that God is (somehow) three Persons in one Being and not at all important for us to have any inkling of how this could be—or even to be able to answer alleged demonstrations that it is self-contradictory. It may be that we cannot understand how God can be three Persons in one Being. It may be that an intellectual grasp of the Trinity is forever beyond us. And why not, really? It is not terribly daring to suppose that reality may contain things whose natures we cannot understand.” Peter van Inwagen, "And yet There Are Not Three Gods but One God," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 243.

are not to seek after God and the answers to these questions. On the contrary, the mystery is the invitation to join with God in seeking to know Him better.

Despite the differences between the definitions of the term, I have found that scholars fall into one of three general categories of usage. Theologians will tend to define *perichoresis* in categories which I am calling “strict,” “strict and metaphorical,” and “loose”. The “strict” users argue that the term should be reserved only for the relations between the persons of the Holy Trinity. For the “strict” users, these divine relations are the limits to the term and it cannot be applied to relations outside of these boundaries. As we will see, this is the majority view throughout history and today. The second group of theologians, those in the “strict and metaphorical” group, expand the application of the term and use it metaphorically to explain some relations within human experience with an analogous use of the concept. They find *perichoresis* useful as a concept not only in understanding God’s relations, but also in analogically understanding human relations. While they use the concept definitionally to only describe relations of the Godhead (i.e. they do not express that actual metaphysical *perichoresis* is experienced by humanity), they do utilize the concept metaphorically as a tool to understand ideal intra-human relations or human relations with God. Finally, the “loose” users argue that the term can be stretched to actually include humanity, not merely as a metaphor. Because of the hypostatic union, they often argue, humanity has been ontologically incorporated into metaphysical participation with the Godhead and we can enjoy oneness with the Godhead. Or, they argue, because God’s nature is *perichoretic*, so too are the natures of the creatures who have been created in His image. In order to understand the modern definition of the term, we will first briefly examine its origins before turning to the three categories of usage today.

## 2.1 Origins

The exact word—περιχωρησις—is a word which was appropriated from secular language in order to meet the needs of the Christian theology of God’s inner relations. Before it was used theologically as the noun περιχωρησις, the verb form of the word, περιχωρεω (inf. περιχωρειν), was utilized in extrabiblical Greek texts. Etymologically, the verbal form of the word is a compound of περι (around) and χωρεω (to make room for). There is a gross misconception that the etymology of the word can be traced to the idea of a dance. In a 1976 article for *The Jurist*, Robert Kress wrote that the term came from “the Greek word to dance.”<sup>11</sup> He went on to sing praises of this “most felicitous” word, stating, “Apart from all the technical modifications made by the theologians, the greatest value of this term is in its simple and basic meaning, that the divine being is a dancing together—that is, the very nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to dance together. Far from being mutually suspicious, envious, hostile or conflictual, the three persons of the Trinity are in such communion that they must be and can only be described as dancing together.”<sup>12</sup> This statement by Kress sparked a whole movement of using the term to express a divine dance in God, and because the imagery is so wonderfully poetic, this image has stuck in the minds of many who do a quick search for the term *perichoresis*. However, many have pointed out that the etymology of the term has nothing to do with the notion of dancing. Edith Humphrey explains this in detail:

The etymology of *perichōrēsis* (verb *perichōrēō*, not the verb *perichoreuō*) does not come from the root noun *choros* (meaning ‘chorus,’ as in Greek tragedy, or ‘dance’) but *chōra* (meaning ‘place’). Though the preposition *peri* often has the

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Kress, "The Church as Communio: Trinity and Incarnation as the Foundations of Ecclesiology," *The Jurist* 36, no. 1 (1976): 140.

<sup>12</sup> Kress, "The Church as Communio," 140.

connotation of ‘around,’ so that noun *can* mean ‘rotation,’ *peri* also means ‘about, near, by, above, beyond,’ and so *perichōrēsis* also takes on the meaning of ‘going beyond one’s place’ or ‘making room for.’ The ancient theologians used the word to refer to the reciprocity, alternation and interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity; in Latin, both the words *circumincessio* (interpenetration) and *circuminsessio* (mutual indwelling) were necessary to approximate the dynamic Greek. The point is that the term does not evoke anything so frivolous as a dance, but is used to describe the great mystery by which Persons of the holy Trinity occupy the same ‘space,’ yet are ‘near and toward’ each other, in their distinctness.”<sup>13</sup>

Kress eventually retracted his incorrect etymology in a later book, stating “Originally I had the impression that this term came from the Greek verb to dance, to dance around with... Unfortunately, I learned that perichoresis has a different etymology. Although the words look alike, perichoresis comes not from *perichoreuo* but *perichoreo*. Its original etymological meaning is, therefore, not to dance, but to go round about, to come round to, to come to in succession. In theology it acquires the meaning of to penetrate, interpenetrate...”<sup>14</sup> However, despite this retraction, the damage was already done in popular theology. Even though more than thirty years have passed since he retracted his statements, many pastors and theologians who search for the concept of *perichoresis* are still exposed to this misconception.<sup>15</sup> Humphrey expresses her frustration with this misconception when stating, “But *perichōrēsis* does not mean ‘a

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<sup>13</sup> Edith M. Humphrey, "The Gift of the Father: Looking at Salvation History Upside Down," chapter 3 in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 95fn9.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Kress, *The Church: Communion, Sacrament, Communication* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 17-18.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert Hamilton, "Individuation and Co-Inherence: A Manifesto," *Theology* 89, no. 727 (January 1986): 18; Joseph K Hogan, "Two Concepts from Eastern Spirituality: Perichoresis and Epiclesis," *Diakonia* 20, no. 2 (1986): 86; Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*, Kindle ed. (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016), Kindle location 439.

round dance,’ no matter how many would-be Greek specialists say so on the internet!”<sup>16</sup> Kress went on to defend the concept of dancing, even if the etymology was wrong, stating, “Now, although my etymology was wrong, I still think my general explanation remains correct and pertinent.”<sup>17</sup> I agree that an incorrect etymology does not necessarily negate the theological pertinence of its image (in this case, that of a dance). However, I do not find this image to be particularly helpful when attempting to understand the union of the persons of the Godhead, and therefore suggest that we step away from it entirely.

The original uses of the term in secular writing can be seen as early as 440 BCE when Herodotus, the Greek historian, used the term to mean “come to in succession” or “inherit” in his *Histories*.<sup>18</sup> We later see the term in 414 BCE when Aristophanes, a comedic playwright of Athens, used the verb to mean “encircle” in his play *Birds*.<sup>19</sup> Then, in the early third century CE, Cassius Dio Cocceianus used the term in his *Roman History* to indicate a group of senators “coming together” or “assembling.”<sup>20</sup> These

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<sup>16</sup> Humphrey, "Gift of the Father," 95.

<sup>17</sup> Kress, *The Church: Communion, Sacrament, Communication*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.210. King Cyrus is given a vision wherein he “was to die in the land where he was and Darius inherit his kingdom”—‘ἡ δὲ βασιληίη αὐτοῦ περιχωρέοι ἐς Δαρεῖον.” Herodotus, *The Histories*. trans. A.D. Godley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), Perseus, <http://data.perseus.org/texts/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0016.tlg001>.

<sup>19</sup> Aristophanes, *Ornithes*, 958. When presenting a sacrifice, the character Pisthetaerus says to a servant, “take the lustral water and encircle the altar” Aristophanes, *Birds*, *The Complete Greek Drama*. vol. 2. Eugene O'Neill Jr eds. (New York: Random House, 1938), Perseus, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0026%3Acard%3D941>.—“αὐθις σὺ περιχωρεῖ λαβὼν τὴν χέρνιβα.” Aristophanes, *Ornithes*, *Aristophanes Comoediae*. vol. 2. F.W. Hall and W.M. Geldart eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), Perseus, <http://data.perseus.org/texts/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0019.tlg006>.

<sup>20</sup> Cassius Dio Cocceianus, *Historiae Romanae*, 40.49.5. “The senators, indeed, did at once assemble on the Palatium late in the afternoon...”—“μίαςμα περιχωρήσειν

extrabiblical usages come closer and closer to the Christian appropriation of the concept which would eventually be understood as meaning “interpenetration.”

When the term was first used by Christians, it did not hold the theological weight it eventually carried. In the fourth century, Macarius of Egypt used the term to express the idea of “encircle,” “envelop,” or “encompass.”<sup>21</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus helpfully uses both the verb in question (from περιχωρέω, meaning to “go round”) and the similar word from which Robert Kress popularized the misconstrued etymology (from περιχορεύω meaning to “dance round”).<sup>22</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus also uses the

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ἤλπισεν ἑὺθὺς γοῦν τῆς δειλῆς ἐς τὸ Παλάτιον...” Cassius Dio Cocceianus, *Dio’s Roman History*. trans. Earnest Cary. vol. 3(London: William Heinemann, 1914), 480-81.

<sup>21</sup> Macarius of Egypt, *De patientia et discretione*, 5. “For the cloud of darkness which arises from the fire of the spirit of this world, envelops and veils the heart, obstructing the mind from approaching to God, and not suffering the soul to pray to God, or to believe in Him, or to love Him as it would wish.” Macarius the Great, *Institutes of Christian Perfection*. trans. Granville Penn(London1816), 74. —“Κύκλω γάρ τῆς γαρδίας τὸ κάλυμμα τοῦ σκότους περιχωρεῖ, τοῦ πθρόος, φημί, τοῦ κοσμικοῦ πνεύματος, ὅπερ οὔτε τὸν νοῦν ἐντυχεῖν τῷ Θεῷ, οὔτε τὴν ψυχὴν ἀφήσει κατὰ τὸ αὐτῆς θέλημα ἢ εὐξασθαι ἢ πιστεῦσαι, ἢ ἀγαπήσαι τὸν Κύριον.” (PG34.869A).

Hereafter, “PG” will denote Patrologia Graeca, Migne, J.-P., ed., 162 vols. Paris, 1857-1886.

“PL” will denote Patrologia Latina. Edited by ———. 217 vols. Paris, 1844-1864.

“ANF” will refer to *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Roberts, Alexander and James Donaldson, eds., 10 vols. 1885–1887, repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, accessed

[www.ccel.org/fathers](http://www.ccel.org/fathers)

“NPNF” will refer to *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Schaff, Philip and Henry Wace, eds., 28 vols. in 2 series, 1886-1889, repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, accessed [www.ccel.org/fathers](http://www.ccel.org/fathers)

<sup>22</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations*, 18.42. “Life and death, as they are called, apparently so different, are in a sense resolved into, and successive to, each other... In being freed from the vicissitudes, the agitation, the disgust, and all the vile tribute we must pay to this life, to find ourselves, amid stable things, which know no flux, while as lesser lights, we circle round the great light?” (NPNF2/7:269)—“Ζωὴ γοῦν καὶ θάνατος, ταῦθ’ ἅπερ λέγεται, πλεῖστον ἀλλήλων διαφέρειν δοκοῦντα, εἰς ἀλληλα περιχωρεῖ πῶς καὶ ἀντικαθίσταται... εἰ στροφῶν (34), καὶ ἰλίγγων, καὶ κόρων, καὶ τῆς αἰσχροῦς φορολογίας ἀπηλλαγμένοι, μετὰ τῶν ἐστότων καὶ οὐ ρεόντων ἐσόμεθα φῶτα μικρὰ,

term in *Oration 22* when speaking of pain and pleasure as they indwell and mix in our lives.<sup>23</sup> Gregory would then be the first to use the term theologically when referring to the interpenetration of the two natures of Christ in the hypostatic union as we will see below.

By the time Christians began using *perichoresis* with its more theological depth to describe relations in God, the concept concerned spatial relationships of placement within one another that included aspects that are both passive (sitting in) and active (moving towards). These two aspects would be later expressed using the separate Latin equivalents for *perichoresis*, which are *circumincessio* (the active, dynamic interpenetration), and *circuminsessio* (the passive, resting indwelling).<sup>24</sup> However, in order to understand the way the term was used in trinitarian theology, we must first trace its theological roots in Christology. Oliver Crisp distinguishes between the usage of *perichoresis* in Christology and trinitarian theology by calling them, “nature-*perichoresis*” and “person-*perichoresis*” respectively.<sup>25</sup> Nature-*perichoresis* describes

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φῶς τὸ μέγα περιχωρεύοντες ;” (PG35.1041A). Notice that the term which will be used theologically comes from the first term, περιχωρέω, not the second term, περιχωρεύω. This is what Kress got wrong when writing of the etymology of the term and describing it with the concept of a dance.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations*, 22.4. “...and our life is more than filled not only with all forms of pain but also of pleasure most sweet, all displacing and supplanting one another by turns” St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Select Orations*, trans. Martha Vinson, *The Fathers of the Church*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 120.—“και πλησμονή πάντων, οὐ τῶν ἀλγεινῶν μόνον, ἀλλ’ ἤδη και τῶν ἡδιστῶν, και πάντα εις ἀλληλα περιχωρεῖ τε και περιτρέπεται.” (PG35.1136A). It is interesting to note that Gregory uses the verb περιχωρέω to describe a mixture, rather than a more common word for that concept such as κιννάω.

<sup>24</sup> See Jürgen Moltmann, “God in the World — the World in God: Perichoresis in Trinity and Escatology,” chapter 20 in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2008), 373.

<sup>25</sup> See Crisp, “Problems with Perichoresis,” 121ff.

the relation of the two natures of Christ (both divine and human) which exist in the singular person of Christ. Person-*perichoresis* describes the relation of the three persons of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) which exist in the singular nature of God. Because of its usefulness in distinguishing between the two disparate concepts which have been expressed in the terminology of *perichoresis* in church history, I will adopt his terminology when making my own distinctions between the two concepts. However, because my overall argument concerns the usage of *perichoresis* within modern trinitarian theology, I will be referring to the trinitarian person-*perichoresis* when I am discussing *perichoresis* throughout the bulk of my argument.

### 2.1.1 Hypostatic Union

The concept of *perichoresis* was first used theologically to describe interpenetration in God when discussing the hypostatic union.<sup>26</sup> The two natures of Christ—the divine Logos and the human Jesus—are both fully present and completely interpenetrate one another in the person of Christ as found in the New Testament. In order to preserve the full deity of Christ as the Son of God as well as the full humanity of Jesus, the notion of the hypostatic union—in that this one person (Jesus Christ) has two complete natures (divine and human)—is vitally important. Rather than speaking of

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<sup>26</sup> Crisp follows Leonard Prestige in arguing that the concept of interpenetration as found in the term *perichoresis* only came about after John of Damascus misunderstood the work of Maximus the Confessor. Crisp writes, “The doctrine of perichoresis prior to John Damascene seems to be closer to, although perhaps not the same as, a doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* or communication of attributes. Thus, it appears, there was an important conceptual change in the way perichoresis was understood as the doctrine was developed.” Crisp, “Problems with Perichoresis,” 122. See Leonard Prestige, “Περιχώρεω and Περιχώρεσις in the Fathers,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 29, no. 115 (1928): 243-45. Compare Prestige with Randall E. Otto, “The Use and Abuse of Perichoresis in Recent Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 3 (2001 2001): 369.



the two natures as being separate, or even mixed, theologians sought a way to describe the complete interpenetration of the two natures in the one person of Jesus, allowing for one person to be completely filled with the fullness of two natures. *Perichoresis* came to be known at first as the word attached to this concept. In his *Letter to Cledonius the Priest Against Apollinarius*, Gregory of Nazianzus uses *perichoresis* to describe how the names of Christ intermingle like Christ's nature.<sup>27</sup> Verna Harrison points out that, for Gregory, "this interchange of names is grounded ontologically in the mutual interpenetration of natures which Gregory identifies elsewhere by the technical term *μῖξις*, *κρᾶσις* and *σύγκρᾶσις*."<sup>28</sup> At this point, however, Prestige points out that a concept of interpenetration is still not developed. Instead, Gregory (and later Maximus

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<sup>27</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistles*, 101. "If anyone assert that His flesh came down from heaven, and is not from hence, nor of us though above us, let him be anathema. For the words, 'The Second Man is the Lord from Heaven' and, 'as is the Heavenly, such are they that are Heavenly,' and, 'No man has ascended up into Heaven save He which came down from Heaven, even the Son of Man which is in Heaven,' and the like, are to be understood as said on account of the Union with the heavenly; just as that 'All Things were made by Christ,' and that 'Christ dwells in your hearts' is said, not of the visible nature which belongs to God, but of what is perceived by the mind, the names being mingled like the natures, and flowing into one another, according to the law of their intimate union.'" (*NPNF* 2/7:440)—"Ἐἰ τις λέγοι τὸν σῶμα ἐξ οὐρανοῦ κατεληλυθέναι, ἀλλὰ μὴ ἐντεῦθεν εἶναι καὶ παρ' ἡμῶν, εἰ καὶ ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς, ἀνάθεμα ἔστω. Τὸ γὰρ, Ὁ δεῦτερος ἄνθρωπος ἐξ οὐρανοῦ, καὶ Οἶος ὁ ἐπουράνιος, τοιοῦτοι καὶ οἱ ἐκουράνιοι, καὶ, Οὐδεις ἀναβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν, εἰ μὴ ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, καὶ εἴ τι ἄλλο τοιοῦτο, νομιστέον λέγεσθαι διὰ τὴν πρὸς τὸν οὐράνιον ἔνωσιν, ὡςπερ καὶ τὸ διὰ Χριστοῦ γεγονέναι τὰ πάντα, καὶ *κθτοικεῖν Χριστὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδιαῖς ὑμῶν*, οὐ κατὰ τὸ φαινόμενον τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ νοούμενον, κίρναμένων ὡςπερ τῶν φύσεων, οὕτω δὴ καὶ τῶν κλήσεων, καὶ περιχωρουσῶν εἰς ἀλλήλας τῷ λόγῳ τῆς συμφυΐας" (PG37.181B). When Prestige highlights this passage, he notes, "It will be observed that Gregory does not expressly apply the term *περιχωρῶ* to the natures of Christ, but to the descriptive titles which he derived from those natures: A reference to Christ as 'Man' comes to the same effect as a reference to him as 'God': the 'Second Man' came from heaven, though in fact his manhood did not come from heaven at all." Prestige, "Περιχωρῶ and Περιχωρεσις in the Fathers," 243.

<sup>28</sup> Verna E. F. Harrison, "Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1991 1991): 55. Here Harrison cites *Epistle 101*, *Oration 37.2* and *Oration 38.13*.

the Confessor) are using the term to denote a metaphor in which “two opposites are revealed as complementary sides of a single concrete object by the rotation of that object: the two natures reciprocate not merely in name...but in practical effect and operation.”<sup>29</sup> Maximus the Confessor built on Gregory and is the first to use the noun form rather than a verb form of the word. According to Prestige, Maximus uses the word to portray “a *reciprocation* of joint activity when he talked about the περιχώρησις of our Lord’s two natures or of their ‘natural energies’, not in the least a static condition of mutual fusion or permeation.”<sup>30</sup> It is important to note here that at this early stage in the use of the noun form of the term, Maximus did not use the term to explain a complete interpenetration of the natures of Christ. Prestige stresses this, stating, “He did not use the term in order to safeguard or explain the unity of Christ, but in order to explain the singleness of result and effect which proceeded from the two natures that were united in his Person.”<sup>31</sup> This distinction, however subtle, is helpful in understanding how John of Damascus then adjusted the word to its more complete definition.

John of Damascus adapted the language of *perichoresis* and is the first to give the word the meaning of co-inherence or interpenetration. As we will see in section 2.1.2 below, John of Damascus also made great strides in introducing the concept of *perichoresis* to the doctrine of the Trinity, but first we will focus on his use of the term

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<sup>29</sup> Prestige, "Περιχωρεω and Περιχωρεσις in the Fathers," 243.

<sup>30</sup> Prestige, "Περιχωρεω and Περιχωρεσις in the Fathers," 248.

<sup>31</sup> Prestige, "Περιχωρεω and Περιχωρεσις in the Fathers," 248.

in Christology. John of Damascus uses the term relatively often<sup>32</sup> considering the lack of its use before him, so we will focus our study on just a few archetypal instances worth noting. One main factor to remember in John of Damascus' christological use of *perichoresis* is the (mostly) one-sidedness of the co-inherence of natures. He places an emphasis (at least "in substance if not formally") on a "real transference of divine powers to the human nature of Christ" and less emphasis on the humanity of Christ being shared with the divine.<sup>33</sup> However, Prestige points out that John of Damascus guards himself from a form of monophysitism by ascribing a transference of names between the two natures, in that "no properties of either nature are actually transferred through it to the other, but the title derived from either nature may be applied to the

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<sup>32</sup> At least 10 times in the christological sense, according to Prestige, "Περιχωρεω and Περιχωρεσις in the Fathers," 249-52. See *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 3.7, 3.8, 3.17, 4.18 (three times), *De Imaginibus*, 1.21, *Contra Jacobitas*, 52 (twice), and 81.

<sup>33</sup> Prestige, "Περιχωρεω and Περιχωρεσις in the Fathers," 250. See John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 4.18, "For through the union it is made clear what either has obtained from the intimate junction with and permeation through the other. For through the union in subsistence the flesh is said to be deified and to become God and to be equally God with the Word; and God the Word is said to be made flesh, and to become man, and is called creature and last, not in the sense that the two natures are converted into one compound nature (for it is not possible for the opposite natural qualities to exist at the same time in one nature), but in the sense that the two natures are united in subsistence and permeate one another without confusion or transmutation. The permeation moreover did not come of the flesh but of the divinity: for it is impossible that the flesh should permeate through the divinity: but the divine nature once permeating through the flesh gave also to the flesh the same ineffable power of permeation; and this indeed is what we call union." (*NPNF* 2/9b:91) — "Διὰ γὰρ τῆς ἐνώσεως δηλοῦται, τί ἔσχεν ἐκάτερον ἐχ τῆς τοῦ συνυφεστῶτος αὐτῶ ἀρμογῆς καὶ περιχωρήσεως. Διὰ γὰρ τὴν καθ' ὑπόστασιν ἐνωσιν ἢ σὰρξ τεθεῶσθαι: λέγεται, καὶ Θεὸς γενέσθαι, καὶ ὁμοθεὸς τῷ Λόγῳ· καὶ ὁ Θεὸς Λόγος σαρκωθῆναι, καὶ ἄνθρωπος γενέσθαι, καὶ κτίσμα λέγεσθαι. καὶ ἔσχατος καλεῖσθαι· οὐχ ὡς τῶν δύο φύσεων μεταβληθειῶν εἰς μιαν φύσιν σύνθετον· ἀδύνατον γὰρ ἐν μιᾷ φύσει ἅμα τὰ ἐναντία φυσικά γενέσθαι· ἀλλ' ὡς τῶν δύο φύσεων καθ' ὑπόστασιν ἐνωθειῶν, καὶ τὴν εἰς ἀλλήλας περιχώρησιν ἀσύγχητον καὶ ἀμετάβλητον ἐχουσῶν. Ἡ δε περιχώρησις οὐκ ἐκ τῆς σαρκός, ἀλλ' ἐκ τῆς θεότητος γέγονεν· ἀμήχανον γὰρ τὴν σάρκα περιχωρῆσαι διὰ τῆς θεότητος· ἀλλ' ἡ θεία φύσις ἅπαξ περιχωροῦσα διὰ τῆς σαρκός, ἔδωκε καὶ τῇ σαρκὶ τὴν πρὸς ταύτην ἀρρητον περιχώρησιν, ἣν δὴ ἐνωσιν λέγομεν" (PG94.1184C).

Person in whom both natures are united.”<sup>34</sup> In this way, for John of Damascus’ christological use of *perichoresis* neither the human nor the divine nature of Christ share properties amongst themselves, but they are rather both fully present and shared with the *person* of Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup> In this way, for example, it was not through his human nature but through his divine nature which the person of Jesus performed miracles. However, the full and complete human nature was present in the person of Jesus when he did perform those miracles. This unity with distinction is a key factor which will be addressed further in section 2.1.2 below. Neither nature (divine or human) loses any aspect of its nature, nor do they create a new (third kind) nature. Instead, each nature remains full and intact, distinct from the other nature and completely present in its fullness in the other nature and in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>36</sup> This brings us to the turning point in the terminology of *perichoresis*: when John of Damascus began using the term to describe the unity of the persons of the Trinity.

### 2.1.2 Trinity

Long before the terminology of *perichoresis* was utilized to describe the mutual indwelling of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the concept was discussed with other language. As early as the fourth century, Hilary of Poitiers describes this mutual

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<sup>34</sup> Prestige, "Περιχωρεω and Περιχωρεσις in the Fathers," 250.

<sup>35</sup> See John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 3.8, “For being united in subsistence and permeating one another, they are united without confusion...” (*NPNF* 2/9b:52)—“ἡνωμένοι γὰρ καθ’ ὑπόστασιν, καὶ τὴν ἐν ἀλλήλαις περιχώρησιν ἔχουσαι, ἀσυγχύτως ἡνῶνται” (PG94.1013B)

<sup>36</sup> Person-*perichoresis* acts theologically in a similar fashion: the three persons of the Trinity each remain full and intact, distinct from the other persons and completely present in their fullness in the other persons and in the nature of the Godhead.

indwelling by stating that “The Beings can reciprocally contain One Another, so that One should permanently envelop and also be permanently enveloped by, the Other, whom yet He envelopes.”<sup>37</sup> However, for the purposes of this study we will move ahead to the time when *perichoresis* was used to describe this mystery.

According to Verna Harrison, it was thanks to John of Damascus that the term *perichoresis* received “currency in both East and West” as a theological term to be used

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<sup>37</sup> Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 3.1. Hilary was writing Latin, and although neither *perichoresis* (the Greek word) nor its later Latin counterparts (*circumincessio* and *circuminsessio*) are used, the full quotation is quite helpful for its conceptual clarity:

The words of the Lord, I in the Father, and the Father in Me John 14:11, confuse many minds, and not unnaturally, for the powers of human reason cannot provide them with any intelligible meaning. It seems impossible that one object should be both within and without another, or that (since it is laid down that the Beings of whom we are treating, though They do not dwell apart, retain their separate existence and condition) these Beings can reciprocally contain One Another, so that One should permanently envelope, and also be permanently enveloped by, the Other, whom yet He envelopes. This is a problem which the wit of man will never solve, nor will human research ever find an analogy for this condition of Divine existence. But what man cannot understand, God can be. I do not mean to say that the fact that this is an assertion made by God renders it at once intelligible to us. We must think for ourselves, and come to know the meaning of the words, I in the Father, and the Father in Me: but this will depend upon our success in grasping the truth that reasoning based upon Divine verities can establish its conclusions, even though they seem to contradict the laws of the universe (*NPNF* 2/9:62).

Affert plerisque obscuritatem sermo Domini, cum dicit: *Ego in Patre, et Pater in me* (John 14:11), et non immerito ; natura enim intelligentiæ humanæ rationem dicti istius non capit. Videtur namque non posse effici, ut quod in altero sit, æque id ipsum extra alterum sit ; et cum necesse sit ea, de quibus agitur, non solitaria sibi esse, numerum ac statum tamen suum, in quo sint, conservantia, non posse se invicem continere, ut qui aliquid aliud intra se habeat, atque ita maneat manesque semper exterior, ei vicissim, quem intra se habeat, maneat æque semper interior. Hæc quidem sensus hominum non consequetur, nec exemplum aliquod rebus divinis comparatio humana præstabit : sed quod inintelligibile est homini, Deo esse possibile est. Hoc non a me ita dictum sit, ut ad rationem dicti ea tantum sufficiat auctoritas, quod a Deo dictum sit. Cognoscendum itaque atque intelligendum est quid sit illud: *Ego in Patre, et Pater in me*; sit amen comprehendere hoc ita ut test valebimus: ut quod natura rerum pati non posse existimatur, id divinæ veritatis ratio consequatur (PL10.76A).

of the hypostatic union of natures in Christ and the trinitarian union of persons in the Godhead.<sup>38</sup> Jürgen Moltmann echoes this sentiment when saying that although “Gregory of Nazianzus may have been the first to use the word theologically...John of Damascus made it the key word for his Christology and then also for the doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>39</sup> Leonard Prestige describes the changes that John of Damascus made to the concept when he adapted it for his theology:

John of Damascus in his turn found the terms περιχωρέω and περιχώρησις in Maximus, from whose writings he quotes the latter...But he entirely missed their sense, being misled by the un-compounded verb χωρέω (= hold, contain) into thinking that they indicated a sort of penetration or permeation...He extended [the term] not in the semi-technical sense of ‘interchange’ or ‘reciprocity’ which was its proper meaning, but in the new and fully technical sense of ‘interpenetration’ in which he himself understood it, a sense really unsuited to Christology but admirably expressive of Trinitarian unity.<sup>40</sup>

John of Damascus’s understanding of *perichoresis* as interpenetration can be seen in several key places. He uses the term in order to describe how the Father, Son, and Spirit *have their being in* one another in response to both Sabellianism and Arianism.<sup>41</sup> Later, John of Damascus expresses the relations of Father, Son, and Spirit as being “in” one another and uses the term *perichoresis* explicitly for this purpose.<sup>42</sup> In book 4, chapter

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<sup>38</sup> Harrison, "Perichoresis," 53.

<sup>39</sup> Moltmann, "God in the World — the World in God," 373. See also Dănuț Mănăstireanu, "Perichoresis and the Early Christian Doctrine of God," *ARCHAEUS*, no. XI-XII (2007): 84; and Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program," 409.

<sup>40</sup> Prestige, "Περιχωρεω and Περιχωρησις in the Fathers," 243-44.

<sup>41</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 1.8, “For, as we said, they are made one not so as to commingle, but so as to cleave to each other, and they have their being in each other without any coalescence or commingling” (*NPNF* 2/9b:11).—“ ἐνοῦνται γὰρ, ὡς ἔφημεν, οὐχ ὥστε σθγχεῖσθαι ἀλλ’ ὥστε ἔχουσθαι ἀλλήλων· καὶ τὴν ἐν ἀλλήλαις περιχώρησιν ἔχοθσι δίχα πάσης σθναλουφῆς καὶ σθμφύρσεως” (PG94.830A).

<sup>42</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 1.14, “The subsistences dwell and are established firmly in one another. For they are inseparable and cannot part from one another, but keep to their separate courses within one another, without coalescing or mingling, but interpenetrating each other. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit: and

18 of *De Fide Orthodoxa* John of Damascus connects *perichoresis* to John 14:10, when Jesus states, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”<sup>43</sup> This is the first of many times throughout the history of the concept that *perichoresis* is used in order to understand the theology being expressed in John 14:10. There are several features of this usage that Prestige points out, most importantly that “περιχώρησις is not a consequence but an equivalent of unity,” and that it is “incompatible with separation in substance, in place, or time, in power, operation, or will.”<sup>44</sup> The completeness of this interpenetration of persons in the Godhead allows for the full unity experienced by the three persons who are one God. At this point, the concept of *perichoresis* was firmly established as it would remain (in its strictest sense) throughout the rest of its history.

Later minor developments occurred, especially when the word was translated into Latin. A single Latin term would not suffice for this concept, so two were used instead. *Circumincessio* was the first word to be used to describe the concept, and it held the active, dynamic aspects of the movement around and into the other (from *circum*=around and *incedere*=to move). Later, the similarly-spelled *circuminsessio* was used to describe the passive, resting indwelling aspect of the concept (from

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the Spirit in the Father and the Son: and the Father in the Son and the Spirit, but there is no coalescence or commingling or confusion.” (*NPNF* 2/9b:17)—“Ἡ ἐν ἀλλήλοις τῶν ὑποστάσεων μονή τε καὶ ἰδρυσις· ἀδιάστατοι γὰρ αὐταὶ καὶ ἀνεκφοίτητοι ἀλλήλων εἰσὶν, ἀσύγχυτον ἔχοθαι τὴν ἐν ἀλλήλαις περιχώρησιν· οὐχ ὥστε σθναλείφασθαι, ἢ σθγγοισθαι·, ἀλλ’ ὥστε ἔχεσθαι ἀλλήλων· Υἱὸς γὰρ ἐν Πατρὶ καὶ Πνεύματι· καὶ Πνεῦμα ἐν Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ· καὶ Πατὴρ ἐν Υἱῷ καὶ Πνεύματι, μηδεμιᾶς γινομένης σθναλοιφῆς, ἢ σθμφύρσεως ἢ σθγχύσεως” (PG94.860B).

<sup>43</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 4.18, “Again, others declare the indwelling of the subsistences in one another, as, I am in the Father and the Father in me” (*NPNF* 2/9b:90). — “τά δε τὴν ἐν ἀλλήλαις τῶν ὑποστάσεων περιχώρησιν, ὡς το, ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ Πατρὶ καὶ ὁ Πατὴρ ἐν ἐμοί” (PG94.1181B).

<sup>44</sup> Prestige, "Περιχωρεω and Περιχωρεσις in the Fathers," 249.

*circum*=around and *insedere*=to sit).<sup>45</sup> The concept was defined in session 11 of the Council of Florence in 1442, which states:

Because of this unity the Father is entire in the Son, entire in the Holy Spirit;  
The Son is entire in the Father, entire in the Holy Spirit;  
The Holy Spirit is entire in the Father, entire in the Son.  
No one either excels another in eternity, or exceeds in magnitude, or is superior in power.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, the concept of *perichoresis* as a theological tool to understand the unity of the persons of the Trinity can be aptly translated as “interpenetration” or “co-inherence,” but it must hold with it the understanding of both its active (moving from one person to another) and passive (receiving the other persons) aspects. For the remainder of this dissertation, I will refer to this concept as *perichoresis*, assuming all of this to be caught up in the term, unless another author makes specific mention of the Latin terms.

## 2.2 Categories of Modern Usage

Having briefly explored the origins of *perichoresis* we will now examine the modern usage of the term. While not all theologians utilize the specific word, many theologians discuss the semantic concept of *perichoresis* when describing the Trinity. For this study, I have surveyed the Greek term *perichoresis*, its Latin counterparts

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<sup>45</sup> Moltmann, "God in the World — the World in God," 373.

<sup>46</sup> Denzinger, 1331 (704). “Propter hanc unitatem Pater est totus in Filio, totus in Spiritu Sancto; Filius totus est in Patre, totus in Spiritu Sancto; Spiritus Sanctus totus est in Patre, totus in Filio. Nullus alium aut praecedit aeternitate aut excedit magnitudine, aut superat potestate.” English: Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* [Enchiridion Symbolorum et Definitionum], trans. Roy J. Defarrari, 30th ed. (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 1955), 226. Latin: Henry Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Et Definitionum*, trans. Roy J. Defarrari, 11th ed. (Freiburg: B. Herder, 1854), 243-44.



*circumincessio* and *circuminsessio*, as well descriptions of the concept implied by the terms without ever expressly using them outright.<sup>47</sup> As stated earlier, there are generally three categories of usage for this term in modern theology: those who use the term strictly to only refer to the relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, those who expand their use of the term to include metaphors referring to human experience, and those who use the term loosely and include persons outside of the Triune Godhead as participants.

### 2.2.1 “Strict” Perichoresis

“Strict” adherents to the concept of *perichoresis* use the word only for the relations composed of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. By this definition, these relations are the extent and limits to the term and as such it should not be used when speaking of human interactions with the Triune God or with other humans. *Perichoresis* is the word used to describe the mystery of the unity of the persons of the uncreated Trinity. The ways in which the Father, Son, and Spirit interpenetrate one another whilst maintaining their unique distinctions is critically important to maintaining a monotheistic faith. The Scriptures firmly teach that God is one, so any theology that describes multiple gods falls away from Scripture. However, the Bible is also clear that God is Father, Son, and Spirit. These three persons are not separate gods but they are instead described in theology as distinct persons within the Godhead. Theologians since

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<sup>47</sup> For semantic simplicity, I will refer to all three of these categories by the synecdoche “*perichoresis*.”

Tertullian have described the mystery of the Trinity as “one substance, three persons,” and it is this word, *perichoresis*, that we use to describe such a mystery.<sup>48</sup>

#### 2.2.1.1 Distinction and Union

We can begin to rightly distinguish the three persons of the Trinity by their relations of origins. The Father is unbegotten and invisible. While the Son and Spirit are equally uncreated and equal in divine identity with the Father, the Son is begotten of the Father and the Spirit proceeds from the Father (and the Son?<sup>49</sup>). In these initial instances of origin, the three persons of the Trinity are distinct. Additionally, each person of the Trinity plays a distinct role in salvation-history. It is the second person of the Trinity, the Son, the Logos, who was sent by the Father and became man. The important note here is that it was only the Son who was sent by the Father and born of the virgin Mary as a man. The Father did not fulfill this role, nor did the Holy Spirit. In a similar fashion, it was only the Father who sent the Son to live as a man and it was only the Holy Spirit who was sent by the Father (and the Son?) to empower believers. Each person is distinct in their ontological relation to one another and in the roles that they have fulfilled in the economy of salvation.

However, despite these differences in origin and role, each person in the Trinity *is* God. There is a unity in the Godhead that is unlike any unity that can be fathomed by

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<sup>48</sup> See Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 12 (PL2.1670D) and 25 (PL2.1870D).

<sup>49</sup> While the *filioque* conversation is important, a position on whether the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father or from the Father *and* the Son does not impact the theology presented in this thesis. Therefore, I will remain intentionally indecisive on this point.

human minds. This unity is described, in part, by using the word *perichoresis*.<sup>50</sup> For while the theology of the three-as-one God cannot deny the distinctness of the three (and thus fall into Sabellianism), it also cannot deny the unity of the three as one (and fall into Arianism). By applying a perichoretic unity to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we are able to effectively identify each person as God without confusing the persons or dividing the substance (as the *Quicumque Vult* describes).

For “strict” users of the term, this perichoretic unity is unique to the Godhead because it is only in God that such a unity-among-distinctions occurs. For them, the intimate connection between Father, Son, and Spirit is categorically different than any intimacy that can be found anywhere in the created order and, therefore, any use of *perichoresis* outside of the Godhead fails to realize the fullness of the word. The mystery of the eternal Trinity is the only instance wherein complete distinctness *and* complete unity can be expressed, and, therefore, it is the only arena in which the term *perichoresis* may be utilized fully. The limitation of the use of this term is further expressed in the divide between Creator and creation. This limitation is not a difference of degree such that human persons may be able to experience merely a less intimate *perichoresis*, as some “loose” users may propose. Instead, “strict” users argue that this intimacy is a categorical difference of kind, such that those who are created cannot experience the *perichoresis* that the uncreated God inherently enjoys.

The “strict” view has been upheld for defining *perichoresis* throughout most of its history. It is only recently that the term has been applied to persons outside of the Godhead. Because of this, most theologians do not explicitly argue in favor of a “strict”

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<sup>50</sup> Again, I am using *perichoresis* as a synecdoche for the Latin equivalents, *circumincessio* and *circuminsessio*, as well as corresponding concepts of interpenetration amongst the persons of the Godhead.

definition over a “loose” definition, because the “loose” definition simply did not exist. For this reason, it is not easy to find historical arguments *against* a “loose” or even a “strict and metaphorical” usage. Before the social trinitarian movement of the twentieth century, the “strict” definition was the only definition used for *perichoresis*, and so, throughout the history of the term, this usage has dominated.

#### 2.2.1.2 In Defense of “Strict” *Perichoresis* – Karen Kilby

Due to the new prevalence of more “loose” definitions in the very recent few decades, there have emerged a few modern theologians who have argued in favor of a “strict” definition over other options. In a paper presented at the Los Angeles Theology Conference in 2014, Karen Kilby argued for a “strict” definition of *perichoresis* while noting that “... something like perichoresis, a notion that we don’t really understand, has, precisely *because* it is paradoxical, elusive, and not really understood, a distinct flexibility.”<sup>51</sup> While flexibility can sometimes be an important quality in the utilization of theological terms, there is a point at which it can be dangerous. Too much flexibility can lead to a lack of clarity or a muddling of the definition of the term itself. Kilby goes on to write, “it is not hard to weave into [*perichoresis*] our best insights about the complexities of human identity, relationship, community. It lends itself, one could say, to conceptual play. Nearly *any* understanding I hold of self and other, individual and group, person and community, could be spun as perichoretic.”<sup>52</sup> This “conceptual play”

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<sup>51</sup> Karen Kilby, “Trinity and Politics: An Apophatic Approach,” chapter 4 in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 83. In this article, Kilby is responding to Miroslav Volf’s social trinitarianism as found in his article, Volf, “The Trinity Is Our Social Program.”

<sup>52</sup> Kilby, “Trinity and Politics,” 83.

could be seen as advantageous, and Kilby even argues that Volf's use of the term in his social trinitarian context has a certain "appeal" to it.<sup>53</sup> However, it is this very quality of flexibility that leads to what is "most problematic" with such a definition.<sup>54</sup> Merely spinning a word so that it fits into any context one has on an agenda removes the purity and weight of such a word, especially when engaging with words that are as theologically rich as *perichoresis*. She argues that Volf "becomes enthralled with the intellectual possibilities of the concept," and in doing so, "careful distinctions among the sources of our knowledge and cautious attention to the ways in which God is not like us disappear under the force of the speculative and dialectical attractions of the notion of perichoresis."<sup>55</sup> It is precisely this lack of attention to the differences between Creator and creation that theologians must not lose.<sup>56</sup> The ways in which God is not like us are the very ways that restrict *perichoresis* from being an applicable term in human experience. Only the eternal, perfect, omnipresent God can experience true *perichoresis* among the three persons in the Godhead.

For Kilby, the social trinitarian movement of "discovering in trinitarian relations the way we humans should relate" is an attractive one, but it is dangerous because it "seems able to bear interesting fruit precisely at that moment when the caution, the attentiveness to limits, slips away."<sup>57</sup> For Kilby, the caution that she espouses is

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<sup>53</sup> Kilby, "Trinity and Politics," 92.

<sup>54</sup> Kilby, "Trinity and Politics," 83.

<sup>55</sup> Kilby, "Trinity and Politics," 83.

<sup>56</sup> It is important to note here, on Volf's behalf, that his intended usage of the term *perichoresis* falls within my "strict and metaphorical" category. His desire to distinguish between the Creator God and created humans remains intact throughout his argument as I will show when I examine his thoughts in the next section.

<sup>57</sup> Kilby, "Trinity and Politics," 83.

necessary because of the mystery of God. She argues “I think it is perfectly possible to say ... that the doctrine of the Trinity should intensify rather than diminish our sense of the unknowability of God, that it presents us with a pattern we cannot understand, rather than with a specific set of insights and concepts on which we can draw.”<sup>58</sup> The mystery of God, for Kilby, needs to remain at the forefront of our minds as we engage in pondering the inner-workings of the Godhead, especially as we consider technical concepts such as *perichoresis*. In this way, she sounds very much like Gregory of Nazianzus, the originator of the term *perichoresis*.<sup>59</sup> When Gregory contemplates the Trinity, he “oscillates back and forth from the one to the three. When he considers the one, he is illumined by the splendor of the three. When he distinguishes the three, he is carried back to the one.”<sup>60</sup> The mystery of the Godhead causes him to worship and move back and forth between different aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity, not to nail down a concept and draw conclusions for human relationships from it. In this way, he is alike his fellow Cappadocian, Gregory of Nyssa, who famously wrote: “concepts create idols, only wonder grasps anything.”<sup>61</sup> It is only by wondering and worshipping in the mystery of God that we can grasp at an understanding of who He is, so we should be cautious with any concepts we create.

Kilby’s argument against a “loose” definition of *perichoresis* extends when she writes, “... not every element in Christian theology need have equally immediate

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<sup>58</sup> Kilby, "Trinity and Politics," 84.

<sup>59</sup> Although, as seen above, Gregory of Nazianzus used the term of the hypostatic union, not the Trinity.

<sup>60</sup> Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 379.

<sup>61</sup> See Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* (PG 44.377B).

practical relevance.”<sup>62</sup> For her, the concept of *perichoresis*, and other technical concepts that make up the interior structures of doctrines such as the Trinity, ought not be forced into every situation in Christian life and doctrine. Instead, terms like *perichoresis* should be allowed to remain in the one place where they were intended, without needing to interact with concepts that are not related to them. She goes on to argue,

... the notion that not every element of Christian theology needs to come into *direct* contact with our thinking about social programs and politics seems to me to have a certain plausibility, and I would think that some likely candidates for this kind of non-frontline role are in fact the technical concepts that have emerged *within* trinitarian theology—concepts such as persons, relations, processions, and perichoresis. We need these—or similar—concepts. They have a function, helping to hold patterns of belief in place and to articulate in brief form the rejection of heresies. But we shouldn’t put them under pressure to further justify their existence by supplying direct dollops of social or political wisdom. They are, we might say, backroom workers who should be allowed to remain in their back rooms.<sup>63</sup>

Kilby rightly desires to allow theological concepts to remain where they were intended to work, and not force them out into different situations to influence topics that should remain unrelated. Although it is important to recognize the Trinity throughout our theology, the doctrine of the Trinity does not need to do all the work that other doctrines should uphold. Her argument goes against Volf’s question, “What does the doctrine of the Trinity suggest about how to go about negotiating identities under conditions of enmity and conflict?” in relation to the “liberation movements of the sixties” or the “major concerns of the nineties ... about the recognition of distinct identities of persons.”<sup>64</sup> Of Volf, and other social trinitarians, I would like to ask, why does the doctrine of the Trinity need to provide any input on the current trends of social

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<sup>62</sup> Kilby, "Trinity and Politics," 85.

<sup>63</sup> Kilby, "Trinity and Politics," 86.

<sup>64</sup> Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program," 408.

psychology? While it is certainly true that theology in general needs to enter into discussion with modern culture and other academic disciplines, it is not necessary for the specific doctrine of the Trinity—let alone the concept of *perichoresis*—to weigh into every conversation that arises. Additionally, we do not need to bring out the “backroom workers”<sup>65</sup>, as Kilby calls concepts like *perichoresis*, to speak on the front lines of arguments with which they are not related. There are specific theological tasks that the doctrine of the Trinity and, more specifically, the technical concept of *perichoresis*, should be required to contribute towards, but they should remain in those tasks and not be forced into others.

In summary, the “strict” users hold to the traditional view that *perichoresis* describes the intimate and mysterious interpenetrative communion that the persons of the Trinity have in order to remain distinct persons while being united in their essence. They do not go beyond this usage and refuse to utilize the term when describing any relations outside of the Godhead. This is the most restrictive view and it leads us into the next category of scholars.

### 2.2.2 “*Strict and Metaphorical*” Perichoresis

For my second category of theologians, the concept of *perichoresis* is one that, in its purest and formal sense, can only be used of the Godhead, but the idea behind it can be extrapolated to become a useful metaphor in human experience. Of the metaphorical uses for the term in human relationships, the most common analogies presented are between a husband and wife in marriage and between Christ and the church. In marriage, some argue, a husband and wife mutually give all of themselves to

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<sup>65</sup> Kilby, "Trinity and Politics," 86.



each other, retaining their unique distinction while becoming one in matrimonial union. This, they argue, is a slight reflection of the ways in which each person of the Trinity mutually gives of themselves, remaining unique whilst staying united. Likewise, in the second analogy we have the bridegroom of Christ who has given himself for the church as his bride, and the church is to give of herself completely for Christ in return.

However, even in these situations, according to Michael Lawler, it is imperative that the transposition of the term *perichoresis* from the divine to the human relationships remain purely analogical. He states, “Compared to [the] divine communion, every other communion ... is communion only metaphorically. It images the communion of the three persons in one God only imperfectly. If we are to find *perichoersis* [*sic*] a useful theological category in which to explore marriage and church, we will have to understand in advance that in these cases it is even more metaphorical.”<sup>66</sup>

#### 2.2.2.1 Similarities to Either “Strict” or “Loose” *Perichoresis*

For these theologians, the concept is such that only the uncreated, eternal, Triune God can perfectly realize the full potential of the interpenetration that is referred to in this term. In this sense, they are similar to the “strict” users who do not connect the term directly or ontologically to human relations, either with God or with others. However, they also see value in understanding human relations more fully through the analogy that this term provides, and in this way they are more akin to the “loose” users. Of course, this group of scholars falls into a wide spectrum of use, some prescribing the term to more restricted usage and with only a limited and very qualified analogy, while

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<sup>66</sup> Michael G. Lawler, "Perichoresis: New Theological Wine in an Old Theological Wineskin," *Horizons* 22, no. 1 (1995 1995): 53-54.

others use the term to apply to almost any intimate relationship with few qualifications at all.

While the exact location of a theologian on this spectrum between the “strict” and “loose” users is not presently crucial, the valuable purpose of this category is that these scholars tend to identify more or less to either of the two ends, *even if the logical ends of their theology works out to be different than their expressed position*. For example, while Lawler clearly states in the beginning of his argument that his understanding of the term is purely an analogical one, he moves in his discussion to eventually write, “The Spirit of God, in God, in Christian marriage, and in Church, is a Spirit who constitutes communion through *perichoresis*.”<sup>67</sup> In this way he sides with the more “loose” users and reveals his view that the Spirit, through *perichoresis* between God and man and between man and man, brings about communion and allows for a perichoretic unity that includes humanity. However, others, such as Nicholas Apostola, use *perichoresis* merely in passing as an almost hyperbolic gesture to describe the intimacy or interrelatedness of human relationships. He states, “Mutual accountability is one way of expressing the interdependence of all human persons with one another. From a deeper theological perspective, one could draw on the concept of the *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling) of the persons of the Holy Trinity as a way of understanding the true nature of the church and ultimately human society itself.”<sup>68</sup> In

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<sup>67</sup> Lawler, "Perichoresis," 65.

<sup>68</sup> Nicholas K. Apostola, "Mutual Accountability and the Quest for Unity," *Ecumenical Review* 50, no. 3 (1998): 301. Apostola uses the term only once in this article in this passing way and does not qualify or discuss this idea any further in his paper. Elsewhere, when describing the Trinity as an insufficient metaphor for ecclesiology, he writes, “It is hard for those of us who do not participate in the inner life of the Holy Trinity to imagine how we remain distinct while sharing everything.” Nicholas K. Apostola, "How Much Unity?: How Much Diversity?," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 50, no. 1-4 (Spr 2005): 120.

this way, none of his theology is hinging on a certain level of understanding of *perichoresis*. Instead, the term is merely used to amplify the deep connection that he believes humans share in community. There are no assumptions in his context that he is arguing for complete interpenetration (on the scale of the Godhead), but he is instead simply emphasizing his point.

There is a fine line between using the term metaphorically and using it loosely. In a “strict and metaphorical” sense, a husband and wife do not *actually* interpenetrate each other wholly as the persons of the Trinity do. However, they instead experience a unique form of intimacy that some may compare to the interpenetration of the Trinity. This connection by analogy does not necessarily entail any metaphysical realities that would be required by such interpenetration. Additionally, the metaphor can potentially be used bidirectionally. We can embed our understanding of the Trinity into our knowledge of marriage in order to gain insight into the depths of intimacy that can be achieved in marriage, or we can draw conclusions about the inner workings of the Trinity by the way we experience intimacy in marriage.<sup>69</sup> However, both of these directions pose problems for the careful theologian. On the one hand, trying to force an intimacy like that of the uncreated, triune God into a marriage made up of two created, fallen humans makes a category mistake and has potential for bringing about unrealistic expectations into human marriage. On the other hand, attempting to extrapolate our

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<sup>69</sup> Karen Kilby points this out as a danger with a three-stage process she calls double projection where, first, “a concept, perichoresis, is used to name what is not understood, to name whatever it is that makes the three Persons one.” Second, after this theoretical framework is in place, “the concept is filled out rather suggestively with notions borrowed from our own experience of relationships and relatedness.” Here we embed our own understanding of intimacy or unity in order to expand our created terminology. Finally, once the term is filled out with human experience, “it is presented as an exciting resource Christian theology has to offer the wider world in its reflections upon relationships and relatedness.” Kilby, “Projection,” 442.

experience of fallen, human marriage into the perfect unity of the Godhead diminishes the holiness of God and loses sight of the categorical difference between God and humanity.<sup>70</sup> Although God gave us symbols in our human experience to understand Him better, we cannot expect a perfect understanding of Him by use of those symbols, and should always be aware of the limitations of our language and knowledge.

#### 2.2.2.2 Careful Metaphors – Colin Gunton and Miroslav Volf

Of all the theologians who use *perichoresis* in the “strict and metaphorical” sense, Colin Gunton and Miroslav Volf qualify their analogical use of *perichoresis* the most carefully. While their theologies and conclusions are vastly different, we can place them into this same category because their method of presenting their “strict and metaphorical” use of the term is fairly similar. They each begin with a “strict” formal definition, then move to a preparation for analogical use, then to careful qualifications around their metaphors, before finally make it to the heart of their analogy with its theological consequences.

First, both theologians begin by providing formal definitions of *perichoresis*. Gunton’s explicit definition of the term as such fits nicely into the “strict” category and he explains that the purpose of the term is “to preserve both the one and the many in

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<sup>70</sup> The errors from analogy and shortcomings of human language experienced here are similar to the mistakes that are often made when trying to understand the Father in comparison to earthly fathers. Earthly fathers are fallen, imperfect, created, limited humans who make mistakes and let down their children, sometimes acting selfishly or not in the best interest in their children. These are not qualities of our heavenly Father so the analogy always falls short of the perfection of God the Father. This limitation holds regardless of whether a person’s experience of an earthly father is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ relative to the experience of other earthly fathers, for our heavenly Father is infinitely more good than any good father on earth.

dynamic interrelations.”<sup>71</sup> For him, the term suggests innately that each of the persons of the Trinity exist “only in reciprocal eternal relatedness.”<sup>72</sup> He explains this by providing the example that “God is not God apart from the way in which Father, Son and Spirit in eternity give to and receive from each other what they essentially are. The three do not merely coinhere, but dynamically constitute one another’s being...”<sup>73</sup> He recognizes that *perichoresis*, as a technical theological term, has enabled humans with the ability to put into words something about the infinite God that is unfathomable to the limited human mind. Similarly, Volf defines *perichoresis* as “the ‘mutual indwelling’ of the divine persons” and parses the word to mean “making room.”<sup>74</sup> He explains that *perichoresis* describes the “kind of unity in which the plurality is preserved rather than erased,” and that “the divine persons are not simply interdependent and influence one another from outside, but are *personally interior* to one another.”<sup>75</sup> For each of these theologians, then, the term holds metaphysical implications for the unity of the Godhead.

Next, after providing their formal definitions, the two theologians prepare their readers for the fact that the use they will propose soon is purely an analogical one. Closely following his definition, Gunton states, “... we have in the notion of *perichoresis* a human rational construct which has been developed under the constraints of revelation and inspiration, a process of thinking theologically under the impact of the

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<sup>71</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 164.

<sup>72</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 164.

<sup>73</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 164.

<sup>74</sup> Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program," 409.

<sup>75</sup> Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program," 409. Emphasis original.

economy of creation and redemption.”<sup>76</sup> Because the term is not found in the biblical text, it must be understood as a human idea; of course the term grew out of a tradition of attempting to faithfully know God from His revelation in Scripture, but it remains a concept of the divine as sought through the limited capacity of creaturely minds. Similarly, Volf prefaces his “strict and metaphorical” use in two tight theological moves that distinguishes Creator from creation. He begins by stating, “First, since ontically human beings are manifestly not divine and since noetically human notions of the Triune God do not correspond exactly to who the Triune God is, trinitarian concepts such as ‘person’, ‘relation’, or ‘*perichoresis*’ can be applied to human community only in an analogous rather than a univocal sense.”<sup>77</sup> Volf explains this by stating, “As creatures, human beings can correspond to the uncreated God only in a *creaturely* way; any other correspondences than creaturely ones would be wholly inappropriate.”<sup>78</sup> His second move is then to state, “Second, since the lives of human beings are inescapably marred by sin and saddled with transitoriness, in history human beings cannot be made into the perfect creaturely images of the Triune God which they are eschatologically

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<sup>76</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 164.

<sup>77</sup> Volf, “The Trinity Is Our Social Program,” 405. Both this statement and the next one appear to meet the requirements of Mark Husbards’ basic rule for identifying valuable proposals in the doctrine of the Trinity. This rule, which he explains in a chapter titled “The Trinity is *Not* Our Social Program”, states that trinitarian theology: “must preserve an ontological distinction between God and humanity in order to maintain an order consistent with their distinct natures.” However, Husbards goes on in his chapter to critique Volf’s theology for failing to maintain this distinction that he claims in the beginning of his argument. “The Trinity Is Not Our Social Program: Volf, Gregory of Nyssa and Barth,” chapter 5 in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 121.

<sup>78</sup> Volf, “The Trinity Is Our Social Program,” 405.

destined to become.”<sup>79</sup> In these two moves Volf effectively cuts off any ability for humans to *be* (ontologically) like God in a perichoretic sense because of our creatureliness as well as our sin, and he retains the mystery of God through the noetic shortcomings that we have for the same two reasons (createdness and fallenness). In these ways, both Gunton and Volf provide a theological safety net for their distinctive “strict and metaphorical” usage of *perichoresis*.

Thirdly, the theologians prepare their readers for the content of their newly proposed metaphor, by reminding them that their metaphors are not metaphysical, but only analogical. Gunton does this by maintaining a qualitative distinction between its “strict” use concerning the Creator versus the benefit of its analogical use for understanding relationships in the created realm:

Properly analogical thought is therefore essential if due allowance is to be made for the distinction in relation between God and the world. There is a difference in the *quality* of divine temporality and spatiality which is yet demonstrated by God’s free and transcendent relationality revealed in the incarnation of the Son and the work of the Spirit. Nothing finite so completely shares in the being of other finite realities without the subversion or dissolution of its own or the other’s proper being.<sup>80</sup>

By making these intentionally careful qualifiers, Gunton protects himself from slipping into a “loose” use of *perichoresis* wherein creatures are able to participate in a true perichoretic unity. He later qualifies his analogy even more by writing, “If the world is creation, then it has its own particular being, even if that being is not separable from its relation to its maker and redeemer. Our enquiry is whether the concepts generated by our consideration of the economy, particularly in this context the notion of *perichoresis*, have any light to throw on the being of that which is not God, but the creation of

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<sup>79</sup> Volf, “The Trinity Is Our Social Program,” 405.

<sup>80</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 165.

God.”<sup>81</sup> In this way he safeguards himself from implications that he is applying a pure sense of *perichoresis* to human interactions. For Gunton, any claims he makes about the value of *perichoresis* are thus protected from a completely "loose" reading. His cautious moves continue to protect his “strict and metaphorical” use from slipping to the “loose” category when he states, “If God is God, he is the source of all being, meaning and truth. It would seem reasonable to suppose that all being, meaning and truth is, even as created and distinct from God, in some way marked by its relatedness to its creator,”<sup>82</sup> and later, “Because it has long been taught that to be human is to to [*sic*] be created in the image of God, the idea that human beings should in some way be perichoretic beings is not a difficult one to envisage.”<sup>83</sup> The language of “image of God” and careful use of “in some way” mark off Gunton’s theology from being construed as a “loose” use of the concept where humans might, *in the same way as God*, experience *perichoresis*. Here we see again and again that Gunton prepares his theology in such a way that he should not be misunderstood as applying a pure sense of perichoretic unity to humanity, but rather this metaphor is limited.

In a similar vein, Volf also hedges his analogy in the careful rhetoric of limitations before reaching the core of his metaphor. He writes that at the creaturely level “only the *interiority of personal characteristics* can correspond to the interiority of the divine persons.”<sup>84</sup> The interpenetration of persons that is described by the term *perichoresis* in the Godhead is imaged in humans only in the ways in which human

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<sup>81</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 167.

<sup>82</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 167.

<sup>83</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 168.

<sup>84</sup> Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 211. Emphasis original.



persons replicate *characteristics* of one another; for him, the *perichoresis* is not related to our ontology or essence. Similar to the ways in which the *persons* of the Trinity interpenetrate one another, the *personal characteristics* of human beings can ‘interpenetrate’ each other.

Fourth and finally, after providing enough cautious qualifiers to protect their theology, these “strict and metaphorical users” eventually get to the heart of their metaphors. Volf does this by stating:

In personal encounters, that which the other person *is* flows consciously or unconsciously into that which I am. The reverse is also true. In this mutual giving and receiving, we give to others not only something, but also a piece of ourselves, something of that which we have made of ourselves in communion with others; and from others we take not only something, but also a piece of them. Each person gives of himself of [*sic*] herself to others, and each person in a unique way takes up others into himself or herself. This is the process of the mutual internalization of personal characteristics occurring in the church through the Holy Spirit indwelling Christians.<sup>85</sup>

For Volf, the analogy for *perichoresis* in human relationships is found in the way in which we impart our personal characteristics on others, and the way we receive personal characteristics from others. While he does not give any examples of what this sharing of personal characteristics practically looks like, one can assume that he is discussing the ways in which our environments (and the people within those environments) shape our personalities. For myself as a person of relative routine and structure, prolonged interaction with someone who is spontaneous will naturally impart some spontaneity into my own personality, no matter how significantly I consciously (or unconsciously) allow that personality trait to influence my own behavior. Directly after this proposed analogy, however, Volf is quick to qualify his claim by saying, “Because human persons cannot be internal to one another as subjects, their unity cannot be conceived in

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<sup>85</sup> Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 211-12. Emphasis mine.

a strictly perichoretic fashion, as is often suggested.”<sup>86</sup> The “strictly perichoretic fashion” to which he alludes, must remain only with reference to the interpenetration of the persons of the Godhead. Instead of a “mutual perichoresis of human beings” in the “strict” sense of the word, Volf argues that it is rather “the indwelling of the Spirit common to everyone that makes the church into a communion corresponding to the Trinity, a communion in which personhood and sociality are equiprimal.”<sup>87</sup> With this statement Volf redirects the argument in order to avoid hinging his understanding of Christian community on a “loose” sense of *perichoresis*. He goes on to remove the possibility for a truly perichoretic unity of humanity with God when he writes, “even the divine persons indwell human beings in a qualitatively different way than they do one another. This is evident already from the fact that the interiority of the divine persons is strictly reciprocal, which is not the case in the relation between God and human beings.”<sup>88</sup> All of the trappings of falling into a “loose” use of *perichoresis* are avoided for Volf with these rigid qualifications.<sup>89</sup> It is almost as if he were to introduce a model wherein he looks at a “strict” use of *perichoresis* in the Godhead as the ultimate example of deep unity, and then decides to discuss unity at deep levels among human

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<sup>86</sup> Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 212.

<sup>87</sup> Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 213.

<sup>88</sup> Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 211.

<sup>89</sup> Despite Volf’s caution in the term perichoresis, Husbards argues that throughout Volf’s theology he fails to maintain the “categorical distinction between the triune God and human persons” and instead he “draws a similarity between God and humanity at the level of moral action, presumably on the grounds of there being an ontological likeness between divine and human ‘persons’ and ‘relations.’” Husbards, “Not Our Social Program,” 123. Although Husbards’ criticisms may be true of Volf’s social trinitarian theology as a whole, the structure and caution that he provides when using the term *perichoresis* remains important for his placement in the “strict and metaphorical” category in my argument here.

persons, rather than trying to attribute *perichoresis* as such on any human level. An argument could be made, in this case, as to why one should reference the term *perichoresis* in this case at all. For Volf, every time he mentions *perichoresis* he avoids watering it down by introducing alternative terms such as “self-donation,”<sup>90</sup> “interiority of personal characteristics,”<sup>91</sup> and “catholicity.”<sup>92</sup> If such a fear of a “loose” use of *perichoresis* exists, then why draw human analogies from it at all? Why not simply state that the Godhead experiences *perichoresis* and we do not, in any way, experience *perichoresis*, but we experience something else entirely different that looks like unity, or intimacy, or communion, or even an “interiority of personal characteristics”<sup>93</sup>? Such an avoidance would render the integrity of the term *perichoresis* intact while still being able to describe intimacy in human relationships.

Similar to Volf, it is only after all of his careful and logical qualifications that Gunton is able to move forward with his analogies using *perichoresis*. His first analogy is a common one: Gunton uses *perichoresis* metaphorically to discuss the marriage relationship. He states, “a doctrine of human perichoresis affirms, after philosophies like that of John Macmurray, that persons mutually constitute each other, make each other what they are. That is why Christian theology affirms that in marriage the man and the woman become one flesh - bound up in each other’s being - and why the relations of parents and children are of such crucial importance for the shape that human

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<sup>90</sup> Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program," 412-16.

<sup>91</sup> Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program," 211.

<sup>92</sup> Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 209-10, 13.

<sup>93</sup> Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 211.

community takes.”<sup>94</sup> It is precisely in the fact that a man and a woman are united in marriage that they are related “perichoretically” in a metaphorical sense for Gunton. In a very biblical sense, these two separate persons become one flesh (Gen. 2:24) and their intimate unity-in-distinction is, for Gunton and others, metaphorically perichoretic. By referring to John Macmurray, Gunton is siding himself with statements of personal being wherein “the Self is constituted by its relation to the Other; that it has its being in its relationship; and that this relationship is necessarily personal.”<sup>95</sup> Gunton takes this philosophy and moves beyond marriage to state, “Our particularity in community is the fruit of our mutual constitutiveness: of a perichoretic being bound up with each other in the bundle of life.”<sup>96</sup> Here we see the use of *perichoresis* as referring to the way in which humans interact within communities. Gunton sees personhood as constituted by relation and utilizes a “strict and metaphorical” *perichoresis* to describe the unity that persons in relation experience in community with one another.

Gunton’s metaphors go beyond these analogies, however, and he applies this faint echo of *perichoresis* to connections throughout the created order. This deeper analogy holds bold claims about the nature of reality on all levels and I will quote Gunton at length here due to the cogency of his thought:

To speak theologically of the economy is to speak of the way in which God constitutes reality: makes it what it is through the activities we call creation and redemption. To speak of divine perichoresis is to essay a conceptual mapping, on the basis of that economy, of the being of God: God is what he is by virtue of the dynamic relatedness of Father, Son and Spirit. The question now is whether we can make significant moves in the reverse direction. Can we use the concept of perichoresis not only analogically but transcendentally, to lay to view

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<sup>94</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 169.

<sup>95</sup> John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, vol. 2, *The Form of the Personal: Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of Glasgow in 1953-1954*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 17.

<sup>96</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 170.

something of the necessary notes of being? If, as I am suggesting, the concept of perichoresis is of transcendental status, it must enable us to take a third step and begin to explore whether reality is on all its levels ‘perichoretic’, a dynamism of relatedness. Do we live in a world that can be understood relationally on all its levels? If things can be so understood, if to be temporal and spatial is to echo in some way, however faintly, the being of God, may we not find in this concept a way of holding things together that modernity so signally lacks? Does the concept enable us to find a framework, or, better because more dynamic, coordinates for our human being in the world?<sup>97</sup>

Gunton’s rhetoric places his extreme statements in the forms of questions as he warms readers up to his ever-encompassing idea that humanity potentially lives in a reality that is relational on all levels; that perichoretic, dynamic relations constitute the ‘coordinates’ of humanity in the world. The key distinction between Gunton’s “strict and metaphorical” use and what will be seen below as the “loose” category is his claim that this reality “is to echo in some way, however faintly, the being of God.”<sup>98</sup> The *perichoresis* that he is attributing analogically (or “transcendentally”<sup>99</sup>) is removed from and categorically different than the person-*perichoresis* that stands at the core of God’s Triune ontology. He proposes “... that we consider the world as an order of things, dynamically related to each other in time and space. It is perichoretic in that everything in it contributes to the being of everything else, enabling everything to be what it distinctively is.”<sup>100</sup> This usage, while clearly not falling in the “strict” category,

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<sup>97</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 165-66.

<sup>98</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 166.

<sup>99</sup> Lincoln Harvey describes Gunton’s “transcendental” terminology by stating that “the pattern of being found in God can also be found *alongside* God in the creaturely realm.” “The Double *Homoousion*: Forming the Content of Gunton’s Theology,” in *The Theology of Colin Gunton*, ed. Lincoln Harvey (New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), 92. For additional discussion on Gunton’s “transcendental” language, see Christoph Schwöbel, “The Shape of Colin Gunton’s Theology: On the Way Towards a Fully Trinitarian Theology,” chapter 12 in *The Theology of Colin Gunton*, ed. Lincoln Harvey (New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), 198-202.

<sup>100</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 166. Trevor Hart elaborates on Gunton’s thoughts here when he writes that we are “constituted” perichoretically by our

nevertheless remains “strict and metaphorical” (and not “loose”) because of Gunton’s prior insistence that any use of *perichoresis* outside of the divine Godhead must be purely by analogy. However, once again we can see here how a “strict and metaphorical” usage can easily slip into language that appears, for all intents and purposes, to be “loose.”

The “strict and metaphorical” category is a moving target. The common quality of all members of this group is that they all begin by saying (or implying) that *perichoresis* in its purest formal sense should be reserved for a description of a phenomenon experienced only by the persons of the holy Trinity. Where they differ, however, is in how far they are willing to take their analogies. For some, like Apostola, the metaphor is only in passing, an aspect meant to emphasize a point about deep relationships or interconnected community. For others, like Lawler, the analogical aspect of the term is so broadly utilized and deeply engrained in their theology that it is hard to tell where the metaphor ends and reality begins. For only a few, like Gunton and Volf, the metaphors are so carefully qualified—out of a fear of making metaphysical claims—that the “strict” use remains protected as they draw out the value of the metaphor. However, in these cases, the careful qualifications are so rigid that the metaphors stop looking like *perichoresis* in the “strict” sense, and begin to look more like family, community, or unity. It is my own conclusion, then, that the slippery slope of using *perichoresis* metaphorically, whether casually or with deep and careful logic, is one that tends to lean towards the “loose” use, despite the best of intentions by its users. For this reason, I propose that theologians should consider avoiding attempts to draw

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“relatedness to all that has been and all that will be, as well as all that is.” “Redemption and Fall,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 196.

out metaphorical applications of *perichoresis* in human relations and instead seek metaphors for unity that are more appropriate for created human beings.

### 2.2.3 “Loose” Perichoresis

We now turn to my third category of usage for the term *perichoresis*: “loose.” Theologians in this category argue that the term *perichoresis* can be applied to persons or agents outside of the Godhead, specifically to human persons who are living in relationship with God and with others. John Jefferson Davis goes as far as to say that perichoretic communion “... can be seen to be ‘properly basic’ to the Christian faith - to Christian salvation, life, and ministry. Christian existence is a life of interconnectedness, intersubjectivity, and interdependence - a participation in the life of the Trinity, in Jesus’ joyous fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>101</sup> Likewise, Verna Harrison states, “Perichoresis, which genuinely unites while preserving distinctness and enables mutuality and interchange of life itself among radically unequal levels of reality, thus stands at the heart of a Christian ontology of love.”<sup>102</sup> In the context of Harrison’s argument, this Christian ontology of love applies to “all varieties of created beings in a coinherence with God and with each other.”<sup>103</sup> By applying the word *perichoresis* to this communion, the expectation is that human beings would be able to achieve a categorically similar unity with each other and with God as the persons of the Godhead experience among themselves. These are not metaphorical comparisons

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<sup>101</sup> John Jefferson Davis, "What Is 'Perichoresis'—and Why Does It Matter? Perichoresis as Properly Basic to the Christian Faith," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 39, no. 2 (2015): 156.

<sup>102</sup> Harrison, "Perichoresis," 65.

<sup>103</sup> Harrison, "Perichoresis," 65.

between God and man; instead, these theologians are expecting that the perichoretic unity that is found in the Godhead can also be found in human relations (either with God or with other humans).

Davis utilizes several different arguments in order to advocate for a *perichoresis* that can be experienced by human persons. In order to begin his argument, Davis defines “*perichoresis*” and “person.” For a definition of *perichoresis* he provides, “In short, *perichoretic communion* could be understood as a ‘heart-to-heart’ or ‘heart-in-heart’ connection between two or more persons characterized by reciprocal empathy.”<sup>104</sup> This extremely open-ended definition of *perichoresis* provides the space Davis desires to be able to apply *perichoresis* to anyone who falls under the definition of a person. Davis defines a person as “an intelligent subject of experiences that has the capacity for self-consciousness and awareness of a relationship to God.”<sup>105</sup> Certainly, God and human beings would fall under this definition of person and allow for the “heart-in-heart” connection that he expects to be present in perichoretic unity. In order to argue that human persons are able to experience the same intimate connection that God enjoys, Davis looks to Johannine and Pauline texts in the New Testament.

#### 2.2.3.1 “Loose” *Perichoresis* Argued from Scripture – John Jefferson Davis

First, Davis argues from John 14, most notably in verses 10 and 20.<sup>106</sup> In verse 10, Jesus says to Philip, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in

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<sup>104</sup> Davis, "What Is 'Perichoresis'," 147.

<sup>105</sup> Davis, "What Is 'Perichoresis'," 149. Davis also notes that his definition is “deliberately formulated from within a biblical and Christian frame of reference.”

<sup>106</sup> For Davis’ complete argument in Johannine texts, see "What Is 'Perichoresis'," 147-48.



me?" (ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ πατρὶ καὶ ὁ πατήρ ἐν ἐμοί ἐστιν). Davis uses this verse as a marker for the perichoretic unity between the Father and the Son. He takes the Greek preposition ἐν to suggest that the Father is interpenetrating the Son and *vice versa*; their in-ness is the *perichoresis* that he wishes to discuss. All of this so far points to a rather traditional argument for a traditional, "strict" view of *perichoresis*. After presenting verse 10 as a basis for *perichoresis* using the word ἐν, however, Davis goes on to point out that in verse 20, during a discussion when Jesus is promising the Holy Spirit, Jesus says, "In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ πατρὶ μου καὶ ὑμεῖς ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ ἐγὼ ἐν ὑμῖν). By using the same preposition, ἐν, to describe the connection of the Father to Son as the connection between Jesus and the believer's he is talking with, Davis argues that the same level of interpenetration will occur with believers. Davis points out that "this perichoretic language of being 'in him', so enigmatic before his cross and resurrection, would become understandable after Pentecost and the reception of the Spirit, for the Spirit would take them 'inside' Jesus' interior experience, and allow them to have an experiential and subjective understanding of the meaning of his words."<sup>107</sup> The key for Davis here is that the mystery of *perichoresis* between Jesus Christ and believers is revealed and expressed through the work of the Holy Spirit after he is poured out at Pentecost. For Davis, all of Jesus' shrouded statements of being 'in him' throughout John<sup>108</sup> are to be understood as perichoretic in nature, and we should expect a unity with Jesus *of the same kind* that he experiences as the second person of the Trinity with the other members of the Trinity. Of course, Davis comments that this is only through the power of the Holy Spirit

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<sup>107</sup> Davis, "What Is 'Perichoresis'," 147-48.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. John 6:56; 14:17, 20; 15:4-7, 11; 16:33; 17:21; 1 John 2:24, 27; 3:9, 24; 4:4, 12-16; 5:20

because of the work of the Son and by the grace of the Father, but the extent to which he expects this perichoretic unity to extend towards believers is very far indeed.

The depth of this perichoretic unity, according to Davis, can be seen in the next Johannine passage that he uses to defend his position, which is Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17. In this passage Jesus prays "... that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us ..." (John 17:21). Although he does not explicitly state it, Davis seems to be understanding καθὼς to mean "in the same way" rather than "in a similar fashion" because he goes on to say, "In this enormously important statement, Jesus prayed that his disciples would ultimately experience the depth of unity in fellowship among themselves - and with himself and the Father - that he had experienced from eternity with the Father - as they experienced what it meant to be 'in us'."<sup>109</sup> Davis does not modify his claim to state that the type of unity that believers would enjoy with each other and with God would be of a different degree to the type of unity enjoyed between Father, Son and Spirit. This is the main difference between a "strict and metaphorical" user and a "loose" user. For a "strict and metaphorical" user, like Volf, the καθὼς in John 17:21 "may not be interpreted in the sense of identity, but rather must be interpreted in the sense of similarity."<sup>110</sup> For Volf, "human perichoretic unity does not necessarily follow from divine perichoretic unity; one must ask rather in what the comparison between divine and human unity consists."<sup>111</sup> Instead of supplying this divide between divine *perichoresis* and human

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<sup>109</sup> Davis, "What Is 'Perichoresis'," 148.

<sup>110</sup> Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 212.

<sup>111</sup> Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 212. Volf cites the commentaries on John from Rudolph Bultmann (Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John; a Commentary*, trans. George Raymond Beasley-Murray, Rupert William Noel Hoare, and John Kenneth Riches (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 513.) and Robert Lightfoot (R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel, a Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 299.).

“*perichoresis*,” Davis and other “loose” users expect that we, human believers created in the image of God, should experience the same depth of unity that the uncreated God experiences as a part of his eternal triune nature.

Davis also utilizes Pauline literature to back up his claims that Christians can experience a perichoretic unity to the same degree as the Trinity. To do this, he cites Paul’s language of “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17), “adoption” (Gal 4:4-6; Rom 8:15-16), and the “in you/me” language (Gal 2:20; Col 1:27) similar to the Johannine argument.<sup>112</sup> For Davis, all of these expressions make up “Paul’s language of perichoretic communion, of union with Christ and being in Christ,” which was “no mere figure of speech or merely a matter of being under the authority of Christ, but was the expression of a radically new metaphysical and ontological reality: the presence of God *within* the church and the believer, in an astonishing depth of intimacy through which God intended to impart all the fullness of his love for Christ his Son.”<sup>113</sup> Davis is not espousing an analogical comparison of the perichoretic unity of God with the unity of believers. Instead, he is emphatically setting forth a “metaphysical and ontological reality” that aligns human unity with God’s as truly perichoretic.

Understandably so, Davis explains that this *perichoresis* is not something completely attainable in this life, but is rather a perfection we can expect in eternity. He states, “Jesus’ high priestly prayer (Jn 17) pointed to the eschatological perfecting of the believer’s perichoretic communion with God and the people of God.”<sup>114</sup> For Davis, this

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These commentaries offer more in depth explanations for καθὼς being rendered in a sense of similarity or resemblance, rather than a sense of identity in John 17:21.

<sup>112</sup> Davis, "What Is 'Perichoresis'," 148-49.

<sup>113</sup> Davis, "What Is 'Perichoresis'," 149.

<sup>114</sup> Davis, "What Is 'Perichoresis'," 148.

unity that is as deep as the communion in the Trinity is something that we will eventually be able to experience as the *telos* of our sanctification and glorification in eternity. Such an expectation is important to note here because of its close ties to a theology of participation which will be discussed at length in chapter 4 below.

#### 2.2.3.2 – Dangers of “Loose” *Perichoresis*

One of the dangers of such a position lies in the agents engaging in the *perichoresis*. When analyzing the theology of Jean Mouroux, T. Gerard Connolly,—another theologian who can be placed in the “loose” category of use for *perichoresis*—goes as far as to state that “there is perichoresis-circumincessio, albeit imperfect, in the relationship of the human person of faith and the divine Persons ... in proportion to the surrendering welcome ... to the divine self-donation and the person’s self-gift in return.”<sup>115</sup> The first question which comes to mind when faced with this statement relates to how *perichoresis* could be “imperfect.” How could complete interpenetration between two persons, uniting their substances while still allowing real distinction among their persons, be anything less than perfect? It seems that the unity to which Connolly is referring is something less than *perichoresis* and should be labeled accordingly. Terms such as unity or community might do better in a context where the connection between persons is less than perfect. The second question which comes to mind if we allow for a “reciprocal penetration of divine partners and human partners”<sup>116</sup> is how this interpenetration can be mediated by the proportion of the human person’s

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<sup>115</sup> T. Gerard Connolly, "Perichoresis and the Faith That Personalizes, According to Jean Mouroux," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 62, no. 4 (1986): 371.

<sup>116</sup> Connolly, "Perichoresis," 371.

acceptance of the divine self-donation. In what ways can a willing human person of faith open him or herself up to the imperfect interpenetration of the divine? What does this divine-human interpenetration look like? By allowing this “loose” *perichoresis* to include humanity, theologians enter into new realms of theoretical claims which amount to little more than theological guesswork. We ought, instead, to allow *perichoresis* to perform the terminological function for which it was designed: to help grasp at some unfathomable and mysterious aspects of the divine, and not try to force this theological backroom worker to do jobs it should never perform

### 2.3 Proposed Definition

In order to move the conversation forward and allow for a more cohesive and biblically-faithful rendering of the theology of *perichoresis*, a definition must be provided that takes into account the Scriptural evidence and the theological movements of church history. My own definition, which I will expand and defend below, follows in line with the “strict” users and with the historical use of the term, and is as follows: *perichoresis is the unique, mutual, and complete interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity which is the perfect unity of the divine essence and which does not erode, in any way, the real distinction of personhood in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

The unique nature of *perichoresis*—that it should be reserved only for relations in the Trinity—is most pressing in the modern theological conversation. I side with the “strict” users and argue for a use of the term which aligns with its original intention and distinguishes the divine persons from human persons. When considering the proliferation of the trinitarian context of the word *perichoresis* as found in the writings of John of Damascus, it is clear that an application of the word to human relationships was not intended at all. Charles Twombly rightly points out that John of Damascus “clearly

denies to the mutual indwelling *hypostaseis* [*sic*] any parallels from within the created realm.”<sup>117</sup> Instead, Twombly argues that John of Damascus used a type of “reverse analogy” wherein we see that “human life is such and such; God’s life is just the opposite.”<sup>118</sup> In order to emphasize his point, Twombly takes his readers back to the words of John of Damascus himself in *De Fide Orthodoxa* just a few chapters before he introduces *perichoresis* into the trinitarian discussion for the first time.

John of Damascus begins by providing an example of how we identify different persons in humanity, stating that “in actual fact Peter is seen to be separate from Paul” but that “the community and connection and unity are apprehended by reason and thought.”<sup>119</sup> On a metaphysical level, Peter and Paul are separate persons, without any metaphysical connection, for their “subsistences do not exist one within the other.”<sup>120</sup> However, when we consider in our minds that they are both “living creatures, rational and mortal: and both are flesh, endowed with the spirit of reasoning and understanding,” then we are able to group them together in community.<sup>121</sup> In other words, their unity is a construct of our minds that we create, while in actual reality, they are separate persons who “differ in time, and are divided in thought, and power, and shape, or form, and habit, and temperament and dignity, and pursuits, and all differentiating properties, but above all, in the fact that they do not dwell in one another but are separated.”<sup>122</sup> This

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<sup>117</sup> Charles Craig Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 43.

<sup>118</sup> Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood*, 43.

<sup>119</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide* I.8 (NPNF 2/9b:10).

<sup>120</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide* I.8 (NPNF 2/9b:10).

<sup>121</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide* I.8 (NPNF 2/9b:10).

<sup>122</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide* I.8 (NPNF 2/9b:10).

metaphysical separation is, for John, the reason that “we can speak of two, three, or many men.”<sup>123</sup> This idea is far removed, indeed, from the depth of ontological unity that is meant by the term *perichoresis*.

John then moves into his argument that distinguishes the unity in the Godhead as unique and distinct from any unity in humanity. He draws a sharp contrast between humanity and divinity when he states that in the holy Trinity “it is quite the reverse.”<sup>124</sup> For humans, distinction is the metaphysical “fact,” but for the Godhead, “community and unity are observed in fact.”<sup>125</sup> While human persons in a perceived community share similar qualities (yet hold them distinctly), the persons of the Godhead are completely united. The community of the Godhead is metaphysical and found “through the co-eternity of the subsistences, and through their having the same essence and energy and will and concord of mind, and then being identical in authority and power and goodness—I do not say similar but identical—and then movement by one impulse.”<sup>126</sup> John cannot stress enough how the three are one, not three that are similar, for he expounds upon this even more, “for there is one essence, one goodness, one power, one will, one energy, one authority, one and the same, I repeat, not three resembling each other. But the three subsistences have one and the same movement.”<sup>127</sup> For John, it is clear, there is no intention of muddling the unity of the Godhead with the unity that can be found anywhere in the created order. Instead, there needs to be a

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<sup>123</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide* I.8 (NPNF 2/9b:10).

<sup>124</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide* I.8 (NPNF 2/9b:10). Here is the “reverse analogy” that Twombly described above (see footnote 118 above).

<sup>125</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide* I.8 (NPNF 2/9b:10).

<sup>126</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide* I.8 (NPNF 2/9b:10).

<sup>127</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide* I.8 (NPNF 2/9b:10).

divide wherein *perichoresis* can only be said to be experienced among the three divine persons in the Trinity. In this rendering, the term should not be used when discussing any relationship that involves humanity, either a vertical relationship that pulls humanity into the Godhead, or a horizontal relationship that metaphysically unites a community of believers or a husband and wife. Instead, different terms and concepts need to be utilized for the intimacy that should be sought in marriage, in the church, between God and man, or between humans throughout all of creation.<sup>128</sup>

It could be said that the fact that the term was originally used in this exclusively divine manner does not necessarily require that it must be used in this way today. Certainly there are terms and concepts that are adjusted and molded to fit theology as it progresses throughout history. However, in the case of *perichoresis* I would argue that the “loose” users go too far in their attempts to add meaning to the term. While I do not wish here to argue against a social trinitarian theology, I would say that it may be beneficial for those who espouse such an ideology to adjust their vocabulary in reference to the unity that they attribute to humanity. The weight that is carried with a word such as *perichoresis* should remain in use for only the Godhead while other terms which convey a more appropriately human concept can be used when describing human relationships. “Loose” users, such as Jürgen Moltmann, are forced to remove the theological weight that the term carries in order to accommodate their hopes of applying it to human relationships. I agree with Stephen Holmes who, in his critique of Moltmann’s use of *perichoresis*, states, “For Moltmann, *perichoresis* rather becomes an account of how seemingly rather ontologically diverse beings might find unity.

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<sup>128</sup> The only human for whom the term *perichoresis* can be used is Jesus Christ, and in his case the term is being used to describe the interpenetration of the two natures of Christ in the hypostatic union.



Moltmann's critics are concerned that perichoresis is not adequate for this task: the unity established seems more like that of a family (an image Moltmann uses); togetherness rather than oneness."<sup>129</sup> Such a watered-down view of *perichoresis* has, of course, negative implications for our understanding of the depth of unity that is found in the Godhead. If the unity that is innate to the communion of Father, Son, and Spirit is similar to the unity that humans can experience as different persons in communion, then the Trinity can quickly become a tritheistic community: three separate persons who interact in community, rather than three persons who are ontologically united in the divine nature. Or, if the emphasis shifts to the other side, then all of the created order can be said to be "in God" in a theology that borders on panentheism. It is this very slippery slope that has led Moltmann's critics, such as George Hunsinger, to comment that Moltmann's theology "is about the closest thing to tritheism that many of us are ever likely to see."<sup>130</sup> A more robust and exclusive understanding of *perichoresis* as being used only in reference to unity in the Godhead can mark a radical avoidance of such pitfalls.

The other elements of the definition I proposed above are much less controversial, but shall be expounded upon as well. First, the *perichoresis* of the Godhead is *mutual*. This pertains to the fact that each person mutually interpenetrates

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<sup>129</sup> Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, 22. On the same page, Holmes goes on to compare Moltmann's Trinity with Nestorius's doctrine of the incarnation, saying, "for Moltmann's Trinity, despite all the rhetoric of unity, it is difficult not to conclude that everything metaphysically important does not remain three and separate."

<sup>130</sup> George Hunsinger ed., vols., 1983. Moltmann gets to this stage in more ways than simply a "loose" use of perichoresis, although it does have an impact on his theology. The theology that his critics claim is close to tritheism stems from his radical use of social trinitarianism. For a more thorough review of Moltmann's critics concerning his use of perichoresis, see Thomas H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010), 164-66.

each other person and persons. The Father interpenetrates the Son, and the Son interpenetrates the Father; the Father interpenetrates the Spirit and the Spirit interpenetrates the Father; the Father interpenetrates the Son and the Spirit together, and the Son and the Spirit together interpenetrate the Father; the Son interpenetrates the Spirit and the Spirit interpenetrates the Son; the Son interpenetrates the Father and the Spirit together, and the Father and the Spirit together interpenetrate the Son; the Spirit interpenetrates the Son and Father together, and the Son and Father interpenetrate the Spirit; and the Father, Son, and Spirit each interpenetrate each other. The mutuality of such a unity does not require one to take a stance on whether the relations of origin in the Godhead are hierarchical or egalitarian, but it rather states that each person interpenetrates and is interpenetrated by each other persons.<sup>131</sup> Second, the *perichoresis* of the Godhead is *complete*. Here we must walk a fine line between interpenetration and confusion. The complete nature of trinitarian *perichoresis* must, as Crisp states, “be robust enough to express this strong sense of interpenetration required for the Trinity to make sense. But it must also be fine-grained enough to ensure that it does not obscure or deny the fact that there are properties that individuate the persons of the Trinity that are not shared together in this perichoresis.”<sup>132</sup> In this way, theologians can account for the perfect unity of the divine essence while preserving the real distinction of personhood in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>131</sup> It goes without saying, that in this way, the ‘person-*perichoresis*’ of the Trinity (as Crisp calls it) is drastically different than the ‘nature-*perichoresis*’ of the hypostatic union. In Christ, the interpenetration of the two natures is not mutual, but asymmetrical, “the relation of coinherence originates in the divine and moves in the direction of the human nature only. There is no sense in which the human nature penetrates the divine nature of Christ either in origination or reciprocation.” Crisp, “Problems with Perichoresis,” 132.

<sup>132</sup> Crisp, “Problems with Perichoresis,” 140.

While I believe this definition to be the most basic and useful as possible, both in relation to our understanding of the Trinity and in our ability to move forward with the same language, it is important to note that its accuracy in referring to the reality of God's existence as three-in-one is limited. The definition does not, for example, explain *how* the three persons interpenetrate one another, or *how* their complete interpenetration retains their distinctions. And, quite frankly, I do not think that any definition of technical concepts that hold up the interior of our understanding of the inner-relations of the Holy Trinity, such as *perichoresis*, should necessarily give us answers to explain away the mystery of God. I side with Karen Kilby who says that "the doctrine of the Trinity should intensify rather than diminish our sense of the unknowability of God,"<sup>133</sup> and with Oliver Crisp who cedes, "This is a divine mystery before which theology must give way to doxology."<sup>134</sup> Such a mystery does not need to lead to frustration or confusion, but can rather be a guide to a worshipful understanding of our holy, Triune God.

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<sup>133</sup> Kilby, "Trinity and Politics," 84.

<sup>134</sup> Crisp, "Problems with Perichoresis," 140.



## PARTICIPATION WITH GOD

Participation with God is not a new concept, nor one that has gaps in the history of its doctrine. However, in the last century, one category of participation in particular has expanded from the Eastern church into the Western church. For much of history, the Eastern Orthodox church had its own unique ways of thinking about participation with God, namely found in the doctrine of *theosis*. However, Simeon Zahl points out that this doctrine, which for much of church history has been misunderstood by the West, is now becoming more and more central to Protestant theology. He writes, “much of the most exciting work in Protestant soteriology in the past few decades has centred around a recovery of the categories of participation and *theosis* as the primary models for salvation, often in explicit contrast to the traditional Protestant forensic and substitutionary models.”<sup>1</sup> Some of this renewed interest in the West has to do with the movement of social trinitarianism<sup>2</sup> and its emphasis on the relational aspect of God’s being. By understanding God’s constitution as a relationship between three persons, and by witnessing this triune, loving relationship emanate outward to humanity, it only makes sense that participation would come to the forefront. A.M. Allchin provides a beautiful picture of this participation:

Self-giving love is at the very heart of God...But this mystery of eternal love is not only at the root of all things, it is also at their consummation. It is the substance of the vision of heaven which captures the heart and mind of the man or woman of faith. And what was in the beginning and what shall be in the end is, in part, made present and made known, here in the meanwhile in this world of

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<sup>1</sup> Simeon Zahl, "Revisiting ‘the Nature of Protestantism’: Justification by Faith Five Hundred Years On," *New Blackfriars* 99, no. 1080 (18 December 2017): 133, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12347>.

<sup>2</sup> See section 1.1.4. above.

space and time, of alienation and death. It is made known especially in the Church's worship and above all at its heart in the sacrament of the divine love, the Holy Communion.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of *theosis* is certainly not the only category of participation in contemporary theology. However, because of its importance in the East and the newly kindled interest in it in the West, we will begin this section by examining the history of this doctrine.

### 3.1 Origins of Terminology - *Theosis*

In the following section, I will examine different categories of understanding for the concept of human participation with the divine. Critical to this discussion is an exploration of the concept of *theosis*, which is explored as my “high” category of participation. In order to understand that category, we will begin this section with a brief overview of the history of this concept. The doctrine of *theosis* (also called divinization or deification),<sup>4</sup> like any other doctrine of the Christian faith, has its roots in Scripture and was developed and defined through the hermeneutical and philosophical thought of Christian thinkers throughout history. The doctrine has remained a pillar of Eastern Orthodox soteriology, but has—in its most explicit forms—fallen largely out of focus in Western Christianity. Here we will trace the first theological developments of the concept undertaken by the early church fathers in order to understand the roots from which the most common versions of this doctrine trace their beginnings.

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<sup>3</sup> A. M. Allchin, *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition* (Wilton, CN: Morehouse-Barlow, 1988), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Although these terms may be used in slightly different ways by different theologians, I will be treating them as relative synonyms throughout my research. For simplicity's sake, I will generally be referring to the concept as “*theosis*” and the verb as “to deify” unless a quotation requires otherwise.

### 3.1.1 Foundational Contributions

In his seminal work on *theosis* in the early Greek fathers, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*,<sup>5</sup> Jules Gross provides an account of the formation of the doctrine throughout the first centuries. Gross begins by examining similar concepts to *theosis* in pre-Christian Hellenic literature, religion, and philosophy.<sup>6</sup> While these Hellenic thoughts are much less complete than the ones which would be developed after Christ, there are some similarities that could be construed as foundational for *theosis*. Gross outlines philosophies which posit that only God (or a Supreme Being or Idea) can be immortal and incorruptible, and that humanity does not have the innate capacity for immortality or incorruptibility. With this philosophy in view, Gross draws his own connections to *theosis* by first asserting that the Christian faith makes claims which promise everlasting life to those humans that believe in Christ. For Gross, the connection to be made is that this everlasting life must come by sharing in the immortal and incorruptible nature of God. Because human beings cannot alter their own nature, the eternal life must come about by participating in the divine nature. While this is a bit of a stretch and a few logical steps separated from the developed thought of the Greek Fathers, one can see how these thoughts could have influenced the first theologians.

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<sup>5</sup> Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, trans. Paul A. Onica (Anaheim, CA: A&C Press, 2002). This work was originally published in 1938 as *La divinisation du chrétien d'après les pères grecs: Contribution historique à a doctrine de las grâce*. My quotations, however, will come from the English translation.

<sup>6</sup> What follows is a summary of his complete argument which can be found in Gross, *Divinization*, 11-57.

Gross then traces ideas that precede formalized divinization throughout some of the apostolic fathers, most importantly in Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and the author of *The Shepherd of Hermas*, and through some later church fathers, namely Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hippolytus, and Methodius of Olympus. Although the thoughts of these early fathers are nowhere near as refined or explicit as those of the later fathers, one can see how the seeds of *theosis* were present even in those very early years after the death and resurrection of Christ. Additionally, themes of adoption, union, and sharing in God’s everlasting life are prevalent in those fathers, and Gross compares these themes with what would later become known as *theosis*.<sup>7</sup>

The early fathers saw the doctrine of *theosis* in the New Testament in three major ways: as a projected *telos* of sanctification, through the vast New Testament use of union-with-God language (specifically “ἐν Χριστῷ” language), and in a few key passages (such as 2 Peter 1:3-4 or Psalm 82:6). It is important to note here that Scripture does not explicitly teach any developed doctrine of *theosis*, but that instead it is a doctrine which was synthesized by the fathers as a conclusion from Scripture. According to them, any conclusions that could be called *theosis* (or concepts similar to it) must be recognized in Scripture as being fully reliant on the grace of God the Father through union with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The deification of humanity is not dependent upon any effort that a human brings about, but is wholly and completely a work of the Triune God in raising that person with Christ to union with Himself. Additionally—according to the early fathers—the main agent responsible for

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<sup>7</sup> Gregory Nazianzus is the first to use the Greek term *θέωσις* in *Orat.* 4.71 (PG 35.593B). However, despite coining the term, this Gregory is not as responsible for the conceptual development as other fathers, so his contributions will not be examined in this survey. For more on Gregory Nazianzus and the concept of *theosis*, see Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 214-25.



*theosis* in a Christian is the second person of the Trinity because of the role the incarnate Son has in uniting the human and the divine in the hypostatic union. Thus, the apostle Paul can say, “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life,”<sup>8</sup> and that we might live as a “new creation”<sup>9</sup> that is “alive to God in Christ Jesus”<sup>10</sup> by being “conformed to the image of his Son.”<sup>11</sup> It is because of this christological dependence that Gross can concur with the early fathers and say, “union with Christ is the condition and the means of the new life, and thus of salvation.”<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the fathers point out that throughout scripture we can see language of imitation of God,<sup>13</sup> taking on God’s nature,<sup>14</sup> human persons being indwelt by God,<sup>15</sup> being re-formed by God,<sup>16</sup> being con-formed to Christ,<sup>17</sup> and finding final consummation of this union in the age to come;<sup>18</sup> themes which all come together in the doctrine of *theosis*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Rom 6:4.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Cor 5:17.

<sup>10</sup> Rom 6:11.

<sup>11</sup> Rom 8:29.

<sup>12</sup> Gross, *Divinization*, 83.

<sup>13</sup> Matt. 5:48; John 14:12; Eph 5:1.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Pet 1:4; Ps 82:6; John 10:34.

<sup>15</sup> Job 32:8; John 14:17; Rom 8:16.

<sup>16</sup> John 3:6; Rom 12:2; Eph 4:24.

<sup>17</sup> Phil 3:21; Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; 1 John 3:2.

<sup>18</sup> Hab 2:14; Isa 32:17; 1 Cor 15:28.

<sup>19</sup> C.f. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2010), 2-4.

### 3.1.1.1 – Irenaeus

Irenaeus will serve here as an archetypal example of this development in thought in the first few centuries after Christ. This second-century bishop built on the foundational philosophies listed above of sharing in immortality through union with God. He did this most explicitly when writing, “[Christ] caused man to cleave to and to become, one with God...And unless man had been joined to God, he could never have become a partaker of incorruptibility.”<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus's main objective in this section of book three of *Adversus haereses* is in arguing for the true divinity of Christ. Only in connection with contemplating the hypostatic union does he consider the reciprocal consequences for the human person. Our salvation is only efficacious if Jesus Christ truly is fully divine and fully human. If he is only a human “receptacle of Christ,”<sup>21</sup> then he, in and of himself, would not have the power to raise humanity up to the divine. Likewise, if he is divine only and has no human nature, then his sacrifice would not have taken on the human sin that was required for the propitiation of sin.<sup>22</sup> However, because Jesus Christ is both human and divine, the salvation he offers is complete in its ability to remove sin and raise us to God.

Irenaeus becomes even more explicit (and closer still to a developed doctrine of *theosis*) when he goes on to say, “For we could not receive incorruptibility and immortality in any other way than by union with incorruptibility and immortality.”<sup>23</sup> The eternal life that we are promised in Scripture is only possible if a finite human

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<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.18.7 (PG 7.937A and ANF 1:448).

<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.16.1 (PG 7.919C and ANF 1:440).

<sup>22</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.16.1 (PG 7.919C and ANF 1:440).

<sup>23</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.19.1 (PG 7.939B and ANF 1:448).

person is joined in union with the infinite God. It is interesting to note here that Irenaeus also states, “But how could we be joined to incorruptibility and immortality, unless, first, incorruptibility and immortality had become that which we also are, so that the corruptible might be swallowed up by incorruptibility, and the mortal by immortality, that we might receive the adoption of sons?”<sup>24</sup> The first part of this statement goes right along the lines of argument that he is advancing concerning the two natures of Christ. Irenaeus sees the hypostatic union as being a necessary condition for the kind of salvation that is espoused by Jesus Christ. However, it is the second part of the statement—that part which implies one nature being “swallowed up” by another—that requires special care. This statement could be used to argue in favor of what I will categorize later in this paper as “highest theosis,” wherein the human person is swallowed up in the divine. However, my reading of Irenaeus here takes into account the fact that he is not discussing the human person as such being swallowed up in the divine, but rather the human qualities of corruptibility and mortality are being swallowed up by the divine qualities of incorruptibility and immortality. By being joined to God through Christ we are joined with perfect everlasting life and the effects of death and sin can no longer hold purchase on us.

### 3.1.1.2 – Clement of Alexandria

The major contribution to the development of *theosis* that I would like to point out in Clement of Alexandria is his use of language.<sup>25</sup> Clement of Alexandria, according

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<sup>24</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.19.1 (PG 7.939B and ANF 1:448-9).

<sup>25</sup> For more on the contributions of Clement of Alexandria to the development of this doctrine, see Gross, *Divinization*, 131-41; and Russell, *Deification*, 121-40.

to Gross and Russell,<sup>26</sup> is the first to use the term θεοποιέω<sup>27</sup> in reference to “the deifying action of the incarnated Logos in the Christian.”<sup>28</sup> This term is the verbal precursor to the term of this study, θεωσις. While Clement did not invent the term, for it was in use in pagan terms (though never in reference to human beings<sup>29</sup>), Clement was the first to use it in conjunction with the Christian. For Clement, the ongoing work of Jesus Christ in the Christian is to deify him or her, and this deification has two distinct purposes. First, there is the work of imitating Christ in his ethical and moral virtue. This aspect of *theosis*—which I find more similar to a theology of imitation, although a certain amount of participation in Christ’s righteousness is certainly experienced—is something that occurs gradually throughout the Christian’s life and makes them “like God” and “beautiful.”<sup>30</sup> Secondly, and more closely tied to modern doctrines of *theosis*, Christ brings the Christian to participate in incorruptibility and immortality, “Being baptized, we are illuminated; illuminated, we become sons; being made sons, we are made perfect; being made perfect, we are made immortal. ‘I,’ says He, ‘have said that ye are gods, and all sons of the Highest.’”<sup>31</sup>

As a final word on these initial developments, and to serve as transition into my next section, I would like to point out one clear and succinct way in which Irenaeus and

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<sup>26</sup> See Gross, *Divinization*, 134; and Russell, *Deification*, 122.

<sup>27</sup> See Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, 9 (PG 8.197C and *ANF* 2:195ff), 11 (PG 8.233A and *ANF* 2:202ff); and *Stromata*, 6.15 (PG 9.349A and *ANF* 2:506ff).

<sup>28</sup> Gross, *Divinization*, 134.

<sup>29</sup> Russell, *Deification*, 122.

<sup>30</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, 3.1 (PG 8.556C-D and *ANF* 2:271-2).

<sup>31</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, 1.6 (PG 8.281A and *ANF* 2:215). Clement is citing Ps. 82:6 from the LXX.

Clement of Alexandria paved the way for the more concrete synthesis of the next century. In the preface to book five of *Adversus haereses*, Irenaeus states that Jesus Christ “did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in chapter 1 of *Protrepticus*, Clement of Alexandria wrote, “The Logos of God has become human in order that you may learn from a human being how humankind can become god.”<sup>33</sup> The similarity of these statements to the most famous *theosis* statement made by Athanasius (discussed at length below) is striking.<sup>34</sup> For Irenaeus and Clement, and as we will see in the more developed thought of the fourth century, the divine Son descended to humanity in order to bring humanity up to the divine. The salvation that man receives from God is salvation *from* sin and death, *to* eternal life in God, and—for these early fathers—always because of the incarnation and the cross.

### 3.1.2 Explicit Analysis - Athanasius

The explicit analysis of the doctrine of *theosis* occurred in the fourth century, mainly through the work of Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa. The most well-known (and most often quoted) of the early church writings on *theosis* is from Athanasius in the fourth century. In *De Incarnatione Verbi*, Athanasius famously wrote, “For he

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<sup>32</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 5.preface (PG 7.1120B and ANF 1:526). “Qui [Jesus Christus] propter immensam suam delictionem factus est quod sumus nos, uti nos perficeret esse quod est ipse.”

<sup>33</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, 1 (PG 8.64D and ANF 2:174). “ὁ Λόγος ὁ τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἄνθρωπος γενόμενος: ἵνα δὴ καὶ σύ παρὰ ἀνθρώπου μάθῃς, πῆ ποτε ἄρα ἄνθρωπος γένηται θεός.”

<sup>34</sup> Russell, *Deification*, 169. Russell points out that this similarity was pointed out in Hermann Sträter, *Die Erlösungslehre Des Hl. Athanasius* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1894), 40.

became man in order that we might be deified.”<sup>35</sup> Because this text is one to which most scholars of *theosis* return, it is important that we give it full attention here.

Throughout *De Incarnatione Verbi*, Athanasius argues for the divinity of Christ against the heresies that were prevalent in his day—specifically those espoused by the Arians. In the section just before the one on which we are focusing, Athanasius points out as a “proof of the Godhead of the Savior” the fact that Jesus was able to “single-handedly” debunk “the whole system of idol worship” and expose “every man’s error...carrying off all men from them all.”<sup>36</sup> Jesus, Athanasius argues, was able to turn even the most devout of the Greek pagans away from their religion and into a saving relationship with him. This transformation away from darkness and towards light is key for Athanasius. From there, Athanasius moves on to describe how we ought to test whether the works of Jesus were of man or God. He concludes by exclaiming, “things divine have been revealed to us by such humble means, that through death deathlessness has been made known to us...For he [the Logos] became man in order that we might be deified.”<sup>37</sup> In the original text, the phrase is “Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνηθρώπησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν.”<sup>38</sup> The two terms ἐνηθρώπησεν and θεοποιηθῶμεν need special care

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<sup>35</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi*, 54 (PG 25.192B and NPNF 2/4:65). The popular—and more quotable—translation of this text is “For he became man in order that we might become god.” It was not unprecedented for the perfected Christian to be called a god or gods (θεός) in keeping with Psalm 82:6, although she is never called the God (ὁ Θεός) in this or any other orthodox text; c.f. Russell, *Deification*, 122n15. However, because of Athanasius’s use of the verb θεοποιέω, the same word used by Clement of Alexandria, a more accurate translation is “deified.”

<sup>36</sup> See Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi*, 53 (PG 25.189B and NPNF 2/4:65).

<sup>37</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi*, 54 (PG 25.192A and NPNF 2/4:65).

<sup>38</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi*, 54 (PG 25.192A and NPNF 2/4:65). In Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca*, the term “θεοποιηθῶμεν” is incorrectly spelled with an omega (“θεωποιηθῶμεν”).

because of their theological weight. The first term, ἐνηθρώπησεν, carries the root word for man (ἄνθρωπος) and entails putting on (ἐν) humanity. Just as ἐνηθρώπησεν carries the meaning of becoming man (or becoming incarnate), so does θεοποιηθῶμεν carry the meaning of becoming deified.

Elsewhere, Athanasius uses a similar sentence structure to describe Christ's mission in the incarnation. In *Epistula ad Adelphium*, Athanasius is arguing for the fact that Christ's glory and consubstantiation with the Father was not diminished in the incarnation when he writes, "For he [the Son of God] has become man, that he might deify us in Himself."<sup>39</sup> The language here is somewhat less poetic—which is probably the reason that this statement is quoted far less in discussions of *theosis*—but the message is the same: the Son descended in order that we might ascend. The purpose of the incarnation was to bring people into union with God, making them immortal and incorruptible. In the same sentence, Athanasius goes on to connect this *theosis* with 2 Peter 1:4, "and he has been born of a woman, and begotten of a virgin, in order to transfer to Himself our erring generation, that we may become henceforth a holy race, and 'partakers of the divine nature,' as blessed Peter wrote."<sup>40</sup> Again, we see here that, for Athanasius, the purpose of the incarnation was to provide those who believe in Christ with the ability to become partakers in the divine nature.

Athanasius presented *theosis* as an accepted doctrine, one that did not need much evidence. He even used what he saw as the already agreed-upon fact of Christ's deifying work in Christians as proof for Jesus's true divinity, the main focus of his

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<sup>39</sup> Athanasius, *Epistula ad Adelphium*, 4 (PG 26.1077A and NPNF 2/4:576). "Γέγονε γὰρ ἄνθρωπος, ἴν' ἡμεῖς ἐν ἑαυτῷ θεοποιήσῃ." Compare with Athanasius, *Orationes Contra Arianos* 1.39 (PG 26.92C and NPNF 2/4:329).

<sup>40</sup> Athanasius, *Epistula ad Adelphium*, 4 (PG 26.1077A and NPNF 2/4:576).

theological career. Athanasius argues, “if He [the Logos] was Himself also from participation, and not from the Father His essential Godhead and Image, He would not deify, being deified Himself. For it is not possible that He, who merely possesses from participation, should impart of that partaking to others, since what He has is not His own, but the Giver’s.”<sup>41</sup> The fact that we are deified by Christ is used here as a premise in this argument for Jesus’s divinity.<sup>42</sup> Gross points out that this same form of argument is also found throughout Athanasius’s other works, and is even used by him to argue for the consubstantiation of the Holy Spirit with the Father and Son.<sup>43</sup> The conclusion that Gross makes from this evidence is that *theosis* is, for Athanasius, “not a more or less secondary and casual element, as with the majority of the earlier fathers, but the central thought of his theology.”<sup>44</sup> While I would not go as far as to say that *theosis* is the central thought of Athanasius,<sup>45</sup> this does show that *theosis* was not an unknown question residing in the outskirts of his thought. In fact, Russell points out that Athanasius uses technical terms for deification—most often preferring the term

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<sup>41</sup> Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 51 (PG 26.784B and *NPNF* 2/4:477). The words translated as deify (“He would not deify” and “being deified”) are cognates of θεοποιέω.

<sup>42</sup> Other examples in Athanasius include *Orationes Contra Arianos*, 2.67 (PG 26.289C and *NPNF* 2/4:384-5), 2.69 (PG 26.293A and *NPNF* 2/4:386), 3.33 (PG 26.393A and *NPNF* 2/4:411-2); *Contra Gentes*, 9 (PG 25.21A and *NPNF* 2/4:8-9); *Epistula ad Epictetum*, 9 (PG 26.1064C and *NPNF* 2/4:573-4); *De Incarnatione Verbi*, 44 (PG 25.173C and *NPNF* 2/4:60-1).

<sup>43</sup> Gross, *Divinization*, 164. See Athanasius, *Epistula ad Serapionem*, 1.23-25 (PG 26.585A-589B).

<sup>44</sup> Gross, *Divinization*, 164.

<sup>45</sup> Athanasius was far more concerned with defending the divinity of Christ against the Arians.



θεοποιέω—statistically more frequently than any other previous writer.<sup>46</sup> *Theosis* was, for Athanasius, an understood truth from which one could argue theologically for other truths.

In one of his most explicit discussions revolving around *theosis* we see Athanasius explaining that when a mortal man comes into unifying contact with the immortal Christ, the former is necessarily deified, taking on the nature of the latter:

For man had not been deified if joined to a creature, or unless the Son were very God; nor had man been brought into the Father's presence, unless He had been His natural and true Word who had put on the body. And as we had not been delivered from sin and the curse, unless it had been by nature human flesh, which the Word put on (for we should have had nothing common with what was foreign), so also the man had not been deified, unless the Word who became flesh had been by nature from the Father and true and proper to Him. For therefore the union was of this kind, that He might unite what is man by nature to Him who is in the nature of the Godhead, and his salvation and deification might be sure.<sup>47</sup>

Here we see different aspects of the work of Christ applied to believers that are connected with *theosis*, namely, that the Christian who is “joined” with Christ is “brought into the Father’s presence” and “delivered from sin and the curse.”<sup>48</sup> For Athanasius, this deifying work is closely related to the salvation that we receive by being united “to Him who is in the nature of the Godhead.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Russell, *Deification*, 167. Russell points out, however, that the majority of Athanasius’s use of the terms occur in relatively few texts.

<sup>47</sup> Athanasius, *Orationes Contra Arianos*, 2.70 (PG 26.296B and NPNF 2/4:386).

<sup>48</sup> Athanasius, *Orationes Contra Arianos*, 2.70 (PG 26.296B and NPNF 2/4:386).

<sup>49</sup> Athanasius, *Orationes Contra Arianos*, 2.70 (PG 26.296B and NPNF 2/4:386).

There are some who read Athanasius and conclude that his idea of *theosis* involved a complete assimilation of the human person to God.<sup>50</sup> However, it is important to take in the complete thought of Athanasius and see that he did not want to equate *theosis* with becoming God in the way that the Son is God or the Father is God:

Although there is only one Son by nature, true and only-begotten, we too become sons, not as He in nature and truth, but according to the grace of Him that calls us, and though we are men from the earth, we are yet called gods, not as the true God or His Word, but as has pleased God who has given us that grace; so also, like God, do we become merciful, not by being made equal to God, nor becoming in nature and truth benefactors (for it is not our gift to benefit, for that belongs only to God), but in order that what has accrued to us from God Himself by grace, these things we may impart to others, without making distinctions, but largely towards all extending our kind service.<sup>51</sup>

There is a clear distinction here between the type of unity that the Father has with the Son and the type of unity that the redeemed has with the Father through the Son (and by the Spirit). In this passage we see that Athanasius does not believe that the redeemed are made equal to God; it is only the Son (and the Holy Spirit) who is truly God by nature and truth. Instead, Christians are immortal and incorruptible (“gods”) only because of the grace given to us by the Father through the Son (in and by the Holy Spirit). According to Athanasius, therefore, there is a categorical difference between the type of unity that redeemed humanity can experience with the Godhead and the type of unity experienced within the Godhead.

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<sup>50</sup> See Gross, *Divinization*, 172-3. Gross cites Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma* [Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte], trans. Neil Buchanan, 4th ed. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1897), 160-2.

<sup>51</sup> Athanasius, *Orationes Contra Arianos*, 3.19 (PG 26.361C-364A and *NPNF* 2/4:404). See also Athanasius, *Orationes Contra Arianos* 3.24-25 (PG 26.373A-377A and *NPNF* 2/4:406-7) and *De Decretis Nicaenae Synodi*, 31 (PG 25.473A-473D and *NPNF* 2/4:171).

Athanasius can therefore be marked as the first of the church fathers to assume and develop the doctrine of *theosis* in explicit terms. However, his development of the doctrine only started what Gregory of Nyssa would later bring to maturity.

### 3.1.3 Explicit Analysis - Gregory of Nyssa

Gross describes Gregory of Nyssa as the “witness par excellence of the Greek doctrine of divinization” after Athanasius.<sup>52</sup> His poetic and mystical writings are full of descriptions of the union that the believer can experience with God, and his clear logical arguments, especially when defending the divinity of the Son and the Spirit, place him rightly alongside his brother Basil and friend Gregory of Nazianzus as one of the most influential theologians of the fourth century. Not unlike his contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity, Gregory’s constructive advancements in the doctrine of *theosis* work invaluable, even if they are a bit cryptic at times. We will begin with a look into some ways Gregory was similar to Athanasius and built upon the work of his predecessor.

Gregory uses a similar rhetoric as Athanasius when he argues that the incarnation was, in part, an act of the divine taking on the human nature in order that humanity could participate in the divine nature. He states, “[God] was transfused throughout our nature, in order that our nature might by this transfusion of the Divine become itself divine.”<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere, “the God who was manifested infused Himself into perishable humanity for this purpose, so that by this communion with deity mankind

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<sup>52</sup> Gross, *Divinization*, 176.

<sup>53</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio Catechetica*, 25 (PG 45.65D and *NPNF* 2/5:493).

might at the same time be deified.”<sup>54</sup> For Gregory (like Athanasius) the incarnation was God’s act of enfleshing the divine in order to allow for the deification of the human. Elsewhere, Gregory speaks of the central role of Christ in allowing human beings to take on the divine nature: “[Christ] laid the entire sheep on his own shoulders...having placed the sheep on his shoulders, it becomes one with him by partaking his divinity.”<sup>55</sup> In his ever-poetic way, Gregory shows the complete reliance that a human being has on Christ to be transformed in her nature. Christ must take our entire selves upon his shoulders, and it is only when we rest fully in him that we partake in the divine nature and become one with God. And while the primary agent in the deification of the Christian is Christ the Son, Gregory assumes that the entire Godhead is involved in *theosis*. In *Orationes de beatitudinibus* he states, “he who has tasted the Lord...who has received God into himself, becomes full of that for which he has thirsted and hungered, in accordance with the promise of the one who said, ‘I and my father shall come and we shall make our abode with him’, the Holy Spirit having of course made his home there first.”<sup>56</sup> It is with all three persons of the Godhead, not only of the Son, that the redeemed human has union. However, this unity was not, for Gregory, a loss of identity.

The bishop of Nyssa was very clear that *theosis* does not entail complete assimilation. He limited his doctrine of *theosis* to understanding that we are able to

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<sup>54</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio Catechetica*, 37 (PG45.97B and *NPNF* 2/5:504). See also Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, 5.4 (PG 45.697D-701B and *NPNF* 2/5:178-9).

<sup>55</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Adversus Apollinarem*, 16 (PG 45.1153A-B).

<sup>56</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Orationes de Beatitudinibus*, 6 (PG 44.1248A). Gregory is citing John 14:23.

partake of the divine nature only “as far as possible.”<sup>57</sup> The greatest charge against this idea is founded upon a reading of *Oratio catechetica* 37:

For, in the manner that, as the Apostle says, a little leaven assimilates to itself the whole lump, so in like manner that Body to which immortality has been given it by God, when it is in ours, translates and transmutes the whole into itself. For as by the admixture of a poisonous liquid with a wholesome one the whole draught is deprived of its deadly effect, so too the immortal body, by being within that which receives it, changes the whole to its own nature.<sup>58</sup>

If one incorrectly understands the leaven to be analogous with an individual human person in this section, then the idea of loss of individuality in an act of complete assimilation is understandable. However, the leaven in this metaphor is grammatically connected to—and rightly represents—the divine nature, not the individual person. It is the divine nature that is transmuted throughout the entire person, not the other way around. Gregory’s emphasis here is not on the loss of the individuality of the person in assimilation to the divine nature, but rather that the *whole* person is changed. We are not given everlasting life, immortality and incorruptibility *in part*, but are rather given it *in whole*. Elsewhere, Gregory presents the analogy of a seed which is sown in “corruption...weakness...dishonour...a natural body” but then raised in “incorruption...power...glory...a spiritual body.”<sup>59</sup> However, even though it undergoes these changes, it “has not left and lost itself” but instead “grows...though in many points it has made an advance upon itself.”<sup>60</sup> According to Gregory of Nyssa’s

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<sup>57</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Opificio Hominis*, 12 (PG 44.161C and *NPNF* 2/5:396).

<sup>58</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio Catechetica*, 37 (PG 45.93A-B and *NPNF* 2/5:503).

<sup>59</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima et Resurrectione* (PG 46.153C and *NPNF* 2/5:465).

<sup>60</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima et Resurrectione* (PG 46.156A and *NPNF* 2/5:465).

understanding of *theosis*, the individual human person is not assimilated and lost in the sea of the divine nature, but instead it is changed and transformed by union with God.

For Gregory of Nyssa, the limits to *theosis* are present because we, as human beings, are merely imitations of the original divine nature. He states, “man was fashioned as a imitation of the divine nature, preserving his resemblance to God...yet being of necessity of a nature subject to change.”<sup>61</sup> Gregory argues that if man participated fully in the divine nature, if “it had not a difference in some respect, being absolutely without divergence, it would no longer be a likeness, but would in that case manifestly be absolutely identical with the prototype.”<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere, Gregory insists that the nature of a human being is distinct from the nature of the divine Godhead, and that “it would no longer be an ‘image’ if it were altogether identical.”<sup>63</sup> Gregory rejects this notion of complete assimilation and emphasizes that there are, at all times, distinct differences between God and man, no matter how much a human being partakes of the divine nature in *theosis*. The source of this distinction is the fact that God is uncreated, while human beings are from creation, “and this distinction of property brings with it a train of other properties.”<sup>64</sup> The Cappadocian delves into the differences that created human beings have from their Creator throughout his work, especially in *De opificio*

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<sup>61</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio Catechetica*, 21 (PG 45.57D and *NPNF* 2/5:490).

<sup>62</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Opificio Hominis*, 16 (PG 44.184C and *NPNF* 2/5:404).

<sup>63</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima et Resurrectione* (PG 46.41C and *NPNF* 2/5:436).

<sup>64</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Opificio Hominis*, 16 (PG 44.184C and *NPNF* 2/5:404). Gregory continues with an analogy and explains that just like the stamp on coins are said to be in the image of Caesar, and the nature of the image is vastly different from that of the prototype, so too is the human nature—as the image of God—vastly different than the nature of the Divine.

*hominis*. The divine nature is “immortal,” “pure,” and “everlasting” while the nature of man is “mortal,” “passible,” and “shortlived.”<sup>65</sup>

Finally, the perfection of *theosis* is, for Gregory of Nyssa, something that will not occur in this lifetime. His language informs his readers that the inaugurated eschatology will not reach its consummation in this life when he writes: “those who follow this leader, their nature does not admit of an exact and entire imitation, but it receives now as much as it is capable of receiving, while it reserves the remainder for the time that comes after.”<sup>66</sup> Before that time, the change of the person’s morality will be gradual, but in the age to come, the Christian will undergo a complete change, even if “the human being does not lose itself.” Instead, the human person will share in the “immortality,” “incorruption,” “glory and honour and power and absolute perfection; into a condition in which its life is no longer carried on in the ways peculiar to mere nature, but has passed into a spiritual and passionless existence.”<sup>67</sup>

While closing my thoughts on Gregory of Nyssa, I would like to emphasize that while Gross calls *theosis* the “crux of all [Gregory of Nyssa’s] theology,”<sup>68</sup> he only rarely utilizes the actual verb θεοποιέω. Russell points out that he uses the term in a spiritual context only twice, and instead “he prefers in general to speak of ‘participation’ in the divine attributes and of the attainment of ‘likeness’ to God.”<sup>69</sup> This is an important note to make because of the reluctance that some modern theologians

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<sup>65</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Opificio Hominis*, 16 (PG 44.180B and *NPNF* 2/5:403).

<sup>66</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio Catechetica*, 35 (PG 45.88D and *NPNF* 2/5:501).

<sup>67</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima et Resurrectione* (PG 46.156A and *NPNF* 2/5:465).

<sup>68</sup> Gross, *Divinization*, 188.

<sup>69</sup> Russell, *Deification*, 226.

(mainly in the west) have with using terminology related to *theosis*. This hesitation may be more acceptable given the fact that there seemed to be a similar reticence of language even amongst the writings of the mystic of Nyssa.

The doctrine of *theosis* has developed and changed greatly since the fourth century, taking different turns throughout history and reaching its peak in the Eastern Orthodox church. However, themes of union with God, even when they are not called *theosis*, are prevalent throughout the Western church as well (in Catholic and Protestant denominations). It is to the modern era that we now turn our attention as we examine the different ways in which modern theologians envision this human participation with the divine.

### 3.2 Categories of Modern Models of Participation

Now that we have briefly explored the concept of *theosis*, we will examine the modern usage of the concept of human participation with the divine. As stated earlier, there are generally three categories of usage for this term in modern theology: those who view the participation of humanity with God as being similar to relational communion, those who see a metaphysical unity with God as possible, but only with certain limits, and those who wish to express the possibility for complete metaphysical unity between humanity and divinity. We will now turn to an in-depth look at each of these three categories.

#### 3.2.1 “Low” Participation - Communion

The first category of participation is what I am calling “low” participation. Those whose theology falls within this first category recognize the biblical basis of



participation with God, yet do not go as far as to make a complete union with God, even God's energies,<sup>70</sup> possible. Most theologians in the Western church, Protestant and Catholic, fall into this category,<sup>71</sup> but for the focus of this study I will examine the work of Ben C. Blackwell most closely. Proponents of what I am calling "low participation" tend to shy away from language that is found among "high" or "highest" users of the term such as "becoming god," "deification," or "divinization."<sup>72</sup> Instead, they often take their cue from the language of 2 Peter 1:4 and talk of "participating in God," "partaking in the divine nature" or having "communion" or "union" with God. For the focused purposes of this study, I will not be examining ideas of participating with God in his mission or empowerment of the Holy Spirit to do the works of God. While these may be peripherally connected and important topics that could be explored in future studies, I will be limiting this particular study to the more narrow topic of metaphysical participation in the divine nature because of its definitional connection to the doctrine of *theosis* and the other forms of participation in this study.

Along with the resurgence of interest in studying the church fathers in recent decades, Western Christians have seen a rediscovery of a more developed concept of participation, particularly in relation to *theosis* or *divinization*. By reevaluating the concept in the context of patristic theology and Pauline reinterpretation, modern theologians have attempted to recover the ideas summarized by participation and recognize its importance in a complete systematic theology. T.F. Torrance commented,

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<sup>70</sup> See section 3.2.2.3 below.

<sup>71</sup> This is not without obvious exceptions, most notably Robert Jenson as seen in section 3.2.3 below.

<sup>72</sup> Usually avoiding the term "*theosis*" as well, often for fear of semantic confusion and the baggage that accompanies the term.

“Let us not quarrel about the word *theosis*, offensive though it may be to us, but follow its intention, not to allege any divinization of man but to speak of the fact that man in the weakness and lowliness of creaturely human being is by God made free for God through the power of the Creator Spirit who is not and will not be limited in his acts by man’s weakness or creaturehood or his lack of capacity.”<sup>73</sup> A.M. Allchin goes as far as to say, “...the doctrines of Trinity, incarnation and deification belong together in an indissoluble knot.”<sup>74</sup> Oliver Crisp roughly defines *theosis* as “the notion according to which the destiny of those who are elect is to become partakers of the divine nature, drawing on the Petrine language of 2 Pt. 1:3-4.”<sup>75</sup> Paul Gavrilyuk points out that in the midst of the reexamination of *theosis* by modern theologians, many historical western theologians have been found to have taught on *theosis* as well. He states, “A growing number of Western theologians—Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, John of the Cross, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Lancelot Andrewes, John and Charles Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, even the Radical Reformers, and so on—have now been claimed to have taught a version of deification.”<sup>76</sup> By rereading the text of these

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<sup>73</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 243.

<sup>74</sup> Allchin, *Participation in God*, 45.

<sup>75</sup> Oliver D. Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards on God and Creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 166.

<sup>76</sup> Paul Gavrilyuk, "The Retrieval of Deification: How a Once-Despised Archaism Became an Ecumenical Desideratum," *Modern Theology* 25, no. 4 (2009): 648. Gavrilyuk cites texts that claim to do just that. C.f. N.R. Kerr, "St Anselm: *Theoria* and the Doctrinal Logic of Perfection," in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), A.N. Williams, *The Ground of Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), David B. Hart, "The Bright Morning of the Soul: John of the Cross on *Theosis*," *Pro Ecclesia* 12, no. 3 (Summer 2003), Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Allchin, *Participation in God*,

Western theologians through the lens of a new (perhaps proper) definition of participation or *theosis*, the term has become more palatable to Western Christianity in general. A Western definition of *theosis* must be examined in order to understand this “low” category of participation.

Michael Gorman defines *theosis* in several different ways, all avoiding any claims of sharing in God’s nature. Instead, he emphasizes that the Christian shares in the character of God in Christ. He states, “Theosis is about divine intention and action, human transformation, and the *telos* of human existence—union with God.”<sup>77</sup> This participation is extremely Christocentric in that we are conformed to Christ, not to the trinitarian divine nature. Gorman goes on to state, “*Theosis* is transformative participation in the kenotic, cruciform character of God through Spirit-enabled conformity to the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected/glorified Christ.”<sup>78</sup> Additionally, Gorman emphasizes that the union that believers experience with God is not a static state, but rather a becoming, which “clearly places emphasis on a process, for that is what participation in Christ — transformation into the image of God in Christ (or *theosis*) — truly is.”<sup>79</sup> This process of participation in Christ has been called many names throughout Christian theological history, and Gorman highlights this when he

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S.T. Kimbrough, "Theosis in the Writings of Charles Wesley," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, no. 52 (2008). Richard B. Steele, "Transfiguring Light: The Moral Beauty of the Christian Life According to Gregory Palamas and Jonathan Edwards," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, no. 52 (2008).

<sup>77</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God : Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009), 5.

<sup>78</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel : Paul, Participation, and Mission*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 7, 162.

<sup>79</sup> Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 10.

says, “There is no ‘official’ definition of the term, but it is commonly expressed in phrases such as union with God, becoming like God, sharing (or participation) in the divine life, human transfiguration, restoration to full humanity in Christ, sharing in Christ the God-man, and even ‘Christification.’”<sup>80</sup> For Paul, according to Gorman, “...the mode by which...salvation is *received* is best described not as *faith* in the sense of intellectual assent but as faith in the sense of full *participation*, a comprehensive transformation of conviction, character, and communal affiliation.”<sup>81</sup>

### 3.2.1.1 Christosis

A major aspect of the Western view of participation in modern theology is one which locates the believer primarily in Christ. This view is semantically and logically unique from a participation in the divine (in general), because the focus on identity, transformation of the soul, and union with God is found through relationship with the person of Jesus Christ (by the power of the Holy Spirit and to the ultimate glory of the Father), rather than a participation with the divine nature *per se*. Rather than the believers participating with the entire *ousia* of God, we are able, by the free gift of God, to participate in the *hypostasis* of the incarnate Son. In his monograph aptly titled *Christosis*, Ben C. Blackwell provides a hermeneutical framework for reading Pauline views of participation and union with Christ through the lens of some of his early interpreters. Blackwell focuses on the lens that Irenaeus and Cyril of Alexandria give to modern readers of the Pauline corpus in order to come to the conclusion that union with

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<sup>80</sup> Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 3fn9. Gorman does not cite any example of the use of “Christification” here or anywhere else.

<sup>81</sup> Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 23.

God is first and foremost union with Christ, identification with the person of Jesus Christ in his life, death, and resurrection.

Blackwell begins by examining the ways in which Irenaeus and Cyril read Paul in a way that leads them to make conclusions about human participation in God. Blackwell observes, “in Irenaeus’ view of deification there is no hint of absorption ... or loss of humanity, as some might naively think, but rather the opposite. Humans become most like God, participating in the divine likeness of immortality and glory, when they recognize most fully their distinction from Him.”<sup>82</sup> He later brings this important distinction to bear on Irenaeus’ emphasis on the *imago dei*, stating, “Understanding the *basis* of deification as by grace rather than nature and the *means* of deification as through participation in the divine presence, we now turn to the *result* of deification, which is likeness to God...The concept of image fits hand in glove with participation because it maintains a *distinction* between nature and grace but also allows *similarity* with regard to attributes.”<sup>83</sup> The image language that Irenaeus employs is extremely decisive in his ability to maintain a distinction between the Creator and his creation, even in *theosis*. For Irenaeus, says Blackwell, the idea of image, rather than identification, requires that the image is necessarily distinct from that which it is imaging. Additionally, Blackwell observes that Irenaeus and Cyril both make claims that, when wrongly taken out of the context of the rest of their theological systems, can be taken to look as if they are blurring the Creator-creation distinction:

The often unqualified language regarding believers as gods can sound as if mere ‘likeness’ has been transcended so that the distinction between God and humanity is lost. That is, humans may seem to become divine as God is divine, or they become what he is in essence. However, Irenaeus and Cyril clearly

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<sup>82</sup> Ben C. Blackwell, *Christosis: Engaging Paul's Soteriology with His Patristic Interpreters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016), 59.

<sup>83</sup> Blackwell, *Christosis*, 93.

affirm a fundamental distinction between the divine and human that cannot be crossed, and it is this firm distinction that allows them to make such unqualified statements about this human transformation. The human-divine separation is evidenced through their distinction between nature and grace and a theology of creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>84</sup>

In addition even to this, Blackwell removes any thought of absorption from the patristic concept of deification as a whole and states, “Absorption assumes an impersonal god whose essence is shared in some manner by disembodied souls, which is as far from the patristic conception as possible. Any of the following factors would refute this assumed problem of absorption, but the weight of them all excludes any hint of absorption: 1) the Creator-creature distinction, 2) a Trinitarian God, 3) likeness through participation (which entails distinction; otherwise, it would be identification), and 4) new creation as re-creation (namely, somatic immortality).” These four pillars of patristic theology effectively separate Blackwell’s interpretation of the patristic doctrine of *theosis* from my “highest participation” category. By holding the entirety of their theological systems in place, one will not, according to Blackwell, misinterpret a patristic doctrine of *theosis* as something wherein humanity loses its humanity and becomes subsumed in the Godhead. Instead, the patristic definition of deification (*theosis*), according to Blackwell, can be described as “the process of restoring the image and likeness of God, primarily experienced as incorruption and sanctification, through a participatory relationship with God mediated by Christ and the Spirit. Through the Son and the Spirit believers become adopted sons of God, even gods, by grace and not by nature, because they participate in divine attributes.”<sup>85</sup> For Blackwell, this patristic distinction between nature and grace is extremely important. A patristic doctrine of *theosis* is one in which

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<sup>84</sup> Blackwell, *Christosis*, 106.

<sup>85</sup> Blackwell, *Christosis*, 109, 253.

humans participate by grace in the divine attributes of immortality and incorruption. It is not by nature that we achieve this participation, but it is by the grace of God that our mortal and corrupt selves can be transformed and inherit eternal life and moral perfection.

Blackwell explains the semantic differences between the patristics and the Pauline texts. For Paul, salvation is “about embodying the life of God.” Blackwell identifies that this “comes through a transformation wrought by the Spirit by incorporation into the life of Christ,” and it “may be described as glory (2 Cor 3:18), life (4:10-11; 5:14-15), new creation (5:17), or righteousness (5:21), but in each case believers embody the life of Christ through a participatory relationship with Christ and the Spirit.”<sup>86</sup> This participatory relationship is what Blackwell identifies with the patristic view of *theosis*. However, he also recognizes that Paul differs from the patristic writers in the language he uses:

The primary difference between Paul and our patristic writers, in this regard, is the nature of explicit language. Paul does use some explicit participation language (e.g. Phil 2:1; 3:10), but he primarily makes use of a variety of prepositional phrases and oblique cases to describe the divine-human relationship. The variety and distribution shows the importance of participation for Paul but also that no one phrase holds the centre for him. Both Irenaeus and Cyril move away from this use of prepositional phrases, presumably because of its ambiguity. In fact, they resolve the ambiguity in Paul’s letters by using the terminology of union, communion, and participation regularly. Even with these obvious developments and the different emphases that arise from a change in terminology, ‘participation’ plays the same structural role within the soteriology of each. That is, divine activity is not merely external but internal, within believers through the presence of Christ and the Spirit.<sup>87</sup>

Participation in the divine life, through the active presence of the person of Christ because of the work of the Holy Spirit, is what brings immortality and incorruption to

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<sup>86</sup> Blackwell, *Christosis*, 237.

<sup>87</sup> Blackwell, *Christosis*, 258-59.

the human person. Blackwell's argument is that Paul meant what Irenaeus, Cyril, and other patristic writers would later clarify, and that they all held an understanding that humanity is saved by participating in the divinity of the Godhead only through the Son in the Spirit. He goes as far as to say, "Based on Col 2:9-10 alone, we would not be unjustified for arguing that Paul taught a form of deification, in that the deity that dwells in Christ also fills and transforms believers."<sup>88</sup> He also aligns Paul with the patristic writers in their use of adoption terminology<sup>89</sup> and their emphasis on "an ontological transformation that entails a participation in the divine attributes not in the divine essence."<sup>90</sup> He writes, "...Paul's soteriology if it is to be characterised as deification, must be characterised as attributive deification in distinction to essential deification. That is, believers remain ontologically distinct from the divine primarily due to a difference between the Creator and the creature, but humans are ontologically changed as they share in particular divine attributes such as immortality."<sup>91</sup>

With all of this in mind, Blackwell's conclusion is that Paul and his early interpreters held a similar vision of what participating in divinity looks like in the life of the believer. However, he argues that perhaps *theosis* is not the best term to describe this participation. Instead, he proposes *christosis* as a better alternative to describing the experience of the believer according to Pauline soteriology. He suggests that this term is

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<sup>88</sup> Blackwell, *Christosis*, 263.

<sup>89</sup> Blackwell, *Christosis*, 263. Blackwell asserts that the adoption terminology maintains the distinction between God and humanity while emphasizing the closeness and intimacy found when believers are "drawn close to God in participatory relationships" with Him.

<sup>90</sup> Blackwell, *Christosis*, 263.

<sup>91</sup> Blackwell, *Christosis*, 267. Here, Blackwell is mapping his understanding of Paul's soteriology onto Gross's categories of usages for *deification* in the early Greek fathers (cf. Gross, *Divinization*).



superior for two reasons. First, he argues that the nature of this participation is by nature “christo-form”:

The Spirit is central to Paul’s portrayal of the believer’s experience of the divine, but this experience is christo-telic in nature, such that believers embody the Christ-narrative in death and life through the Spirit. Consequently, *christosis* properly captures this christo-telic emphasis, but it cannot be separated from conceptions of the triune divine encounter. One cannot separate *christosis* from *theosis* (or Christ from God). Viewing χριστός in light of its original meaning of ‘being anointed’, just as Jesus Χριστός is a person elected by God and anointed by the Spirit to lead a cruciform and anastiform life, believers too are called by God and anointed by the Spirit (cf. 2 Cor 1:21-22) to be conformed to the image of the dying and rising Christ. Thus, *christosis* (or *christopoiesis*) captures the christo-telic nature of Paul’s soteriology, but this can only be properly understood in the context of the work of God and the Spirit.<sup>92</sup>

One can see how using the term *christosis* rather than *theosis* and thus placing an emphasis, even in the terminology, on the union that the believer experiences specifically with the person of Christ can be semantically beneficial when discussing something as unique as participation with God. Substantively, one could see how this clarification could perhaps clear up some modern misconceptions with the views held in a doctrine of *theosis*.

Secondly, Blackwell argues that *christosis* is a superior term pragmatically because of the associations that modern theologians have with the term *theosis* as compared to the assumptions made by its earliest users. He argues that the patristic writers held a strong association between immortality and divinity:

Since immortality and divinity were inseparable in the ancient world, the association between *theosis* or *theopoiesis* and immortality was clear. However, this association no longer remains in the modern mind, and many people do not easily understand this important connection and can be misled by the connotations the term *theosis* engenders. A related terminological problem is the fact that *theosis* encompasses a range of ideas...As a result, the term *theosis* can be ambiguous with regard to its referent because of its varied use in ancient and

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<sup>92</sup> Blackwell, *Christosis*, 265-66. Blackwell does not italicize anything in this quote, but I have done so in my citation of him for consistency with my own italicization of *theosis*.

modern contexts. As a relatively new term *christosis* has less baggage and allows us to focus on the christo-form nature of Pauline soteriology without the potential confusion of *theosis*.<sup>93</sup>

Blackwell's hope is that the introduction of a fresh term will bring with it the removal of any baggage that the ancient word *theosis* brings, allowing modern theologians to understand exactly what is meant by *christosis*. This aligns well with Alan Torrance's warning when utilizing human language to describe thoughts about the divine, "the use of a theological term presupposes a community which provides the context of its use, that is, the rules of use of the term. Terms are used in the context of social participation with respect to which certain rules of use apply."<sup>94</sup> Human language is incapable of separation from its context and the communities in which it is expressed, so every use of a term effects not only the conversation in which the word is used, but also effects the word itself, allowing the word to change and adapt to fit the situations in which it is utilized. For this reason, theologically rich terms such as *theosis* (or *perichoresis*, for that matter) must be carefully defined to reduce historical semantic baggage. Blackwell then provides just such a succinct definition of *christosis* to sum up his thoughts: "As believers participate in the divine form of life, particularly noted as glory, through conformation to Christ and by the presence of the Spirit they become like God."<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Blackwell, *Christosis*, 266. Again, specific words have been italicized by me for consistency. When discussing patristic participation models summarized by the terms *theosis* and *theopoiesis*, T.F. Torrance notes that these terms "...were used to carry in a succinct form the evangelical promise that, while God alone has immortality, through communion with him we human beings are admitted into an intimate sharing of what is divine." Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 95-96.

<sup>94</sup> Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 336.

<sup>95</sup> Blackwell, *Christosis*, 267.

### 3.2.1.2 Alignment and Distinction

This “low” category of participation associated with Western Christian theology has important distinctions from the “high” category associated with Eastern Christian theology and the “highest” category which many theologians fear. While Eastern Orthodoxy maintains a sharp distinction between God’s *essentia* and His *energeia*<sup>96</sup>—and this distinction is what allows for a separation in the midst of union between the Creator and his creation—Western Christianity holds no such distinction and finds the separation of Creator and creation in other ways. Myk Habets draws a line between an ontological and metaphysical union when he states, “A Reformed doctrine of *theosis* posits an ontological, not a metaphysical union. A metaphysical union is the underlying idea of a pan(en)theistic concept of union in which the believer becomes dissolved into the essence of the divine nature so that he or she ceases to exist as a distinct entity. Working within a Reformed understanding of *theosis*, we may say that humans can participate in the divine nature, but this is a thoroughly personal and relational experiencing of the triune relations.”<sup>97</sup> Similarly, Crisp argues that “this doctrine must be distinguished from the idea that union with God entails the merging of the creature with the creator in some sort of pantheism. Theosis is concerned both with the gradual transformation of the Christian by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit while she is a *viator*, that is, a pilgrim on the road of faith prior to death and glorification *as well as* the connection between this phase of human life and postmortem existence in the

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<sup>96</sup> See section 3.2.2.3 below.

<sup>97</sup> Myk Habets, “Reformed Theosis?: A Response to Gannon Murphy,” *Theology Today* 65, no. 4 (2009): 494. The dissolving or absorption of the human person into the divine is what most Christians are afraid of, and what characterize the logical end result of my “highest” category of participation.

presence of God.”<sup>98</sup> The “low participation” category does not allow for any sort of panentheism or loss of human identity. It similarly does not allow for humanity to instantiate the divine as if adding to the fugue that is the divine life—to take a metaphor from Robert Jenson.<sup>99</sup> In contrast to the Eastern Orthodox theologians, Habets argues that the essence/energy distinction is unhelpful (and possibly even detrimental) when discussing participation:

Thus, we can see a basic difference between Reformed theology and Eastern Orthodoxy. The *homoousion* means that God reveals himself not simply through his impersonal *energies* but in a very real way through his personal *essence*: in the Incarnation God gives *himself* in grace. Unlike Palamite divinization, *theosis* in the Nicene theologians represents communion through Jesus Christ in the Spirit. We must continue to insist that in Jesus Christ we can participate in God. While this participation in God has creaturely limitations and goes beyond anything we may comprehend, and thus there is an apophatic character about it, this does not necessitate the distinction, as in Eastern Orthodoxy, between God’s unknowable *essentia*, understood as God’s being, and his impersonal *energeia*, understood as God’s act. In fact, it positively denies it. Such an Orthodox understanding actually undermines a doctrine of *theosis*. It also reduces the act of God to something other than a revelation of his being, thus demoting Christ and the Holy Spirit to intermediaries of God, not God himself.<sup>100</sup>

Habets wants to be careful not to separate the essence of God from His energies, and thereby affirm in some way that there is a God behind God that is completely inaccessible. Instead, he argues that the union we experience is truly with God (through the Son, in the Spirit).

It is important to end this discussion with the aspects of process and progress in this communal participation with God. The process of participation and transformation is one that begins in this life and continues on throughout eternity. There is never a moment, in this category, where the human believer and the divine Godhead are

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<sup>98</sup> Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards*, 166.

<sup>99</sup> See section 3.2.3.1 below.

<sup>100</sup> Habets, “Reformed Theosis?: A Response to Gannon Murphy,” 494.

identified wholly and completely as one. There always remains a distinction between the divine Creator and the human creations which is never breached. Oliver Crisp describes this growth like an asymptote reaching a line, getting ever closer but never becoming one, expressing that the believer is “brought into closer and closer union with the divine nature, yet without becoming merged with the Godhead.”<sup>101</sup> There is certainly a progression of human communion with God that begins with the initiation of God as the believer is called into relationship with Him, and continues as the believer grows in his or her relationship with Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit and to the glory of the Father.

The most important distinction between this “low participation” and the other categories is the extreme christocentric emphasis that it maintains. Rather than positing a direct and final participation in the divine nature as a whole, this “low” category places an emphasis on the restoration of the image of God in man as a *telos* found by participating in the exact representation of God as found in the person of Jesus Christ. When the believer participates in God by being in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, she experiences an aspect of Pauline soteriology that can rightly be called “low” *theosis* or *Christosis*, as Blackwell does.

### 3.2.2 “High” Participation – Theosis/Divinization

My second category of participation is what I am calling “high” participation, which is most notably found in the Eastern Orthodox understanding of *theosis* or

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<sup>101</sup> Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards*, 166. Crisp acknowledges this as an element of the theology of Jonathan Edwards, a claim that McClymond also makes in Michael J McClymond, *Encounters with God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New Ork: Oxford University Press, 1998), 57.

*divinization*. In this category of thought, the distinction between the Creator and creation is maintained, and the human person is not absorbed into the Godhead, but rather has union or participation with the “energies” of God. This is the category in which most Eastern Orthodox theologians would be placed. As such, there is a vast range of thought which would be considered in this category, but I will focus on the views held by Vladimir Lossky as an archetypal modern example of accepted Eastern Orthodox theology concerning the doctrine. While Lossky certainly does not speak for all Eastern Orthodox Christians, his views are considered to be exemplary by many within and without his tradition.<sup>102</sup> Additionally, for the purposes of this study, Lossky provides a clear and developed model of *theosis* that matches well with the views provided in its origins. In order to give proper weight to this category as it sits in the Eastern Orthodox Church, I will first briefly explain the doctrine’s importance for Eastern theology, then highlight the critical Creator-creation distinction, followed by how the Eastern distinction between essence and energies attempts to avoid violating that Creator-creation distinction, before moving into properly defining the doctrine of *theosis* in this “high” category.

### 3.2.2.1 Importance of *Theosis* in Eastern Orthodoxy

The doctrine of *theosis* is not a peripheral doctrine in the theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church. On the contrary, the goal of *theosis* is said by many to be *the* goal of

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<sup>102</sup> C.f. Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Partakers of Divine Nature*, trans. Stanley Harakas (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing Company, 1976). Paul Negrut, "Orthodox Soteriology: Theosis," *Churchman* 109, no. 2 (1995).

the Christian life in the Eastern Church.<sup>103</sup> Clendenin explains that “it is not too much to say that the divinization of humanity is the central theme, chief aim, basic purpose, or primary religious ideal of Orthodoxy.”<sup>104</sup> Likewise, Stavropoulos writes, “we live on earth in order to live in heaven, in order to be ‘divinized,’ in order to become one with God,”<sup>105</sup> and also, “as human beings we each have this one, unique calling, to achieve Theosis. In other words, we are each destined to become a god; to be like God Himself, to be united with Him.”<sup>106</sup> And similarly, Lossky himself writes, “one can say with a certain boldness that for Orthodox theology the inhabitation of God in us (our adoption or ‘sanctification’ in the Roman Catholic sense), would be rather a means, and the acquisition of uncreated grace, transforming our nature, the end.”<sup>107</sup> With this in mind it is important to note here that I will not be able to do complete justice to the intricacies and nuances of this doctrine for the Eastern Church in the space provided, nor is this my purpose in this argument.<sup>108</sup> Instead, I will highlight how this understanding of *theosis*

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<sup>103</sup> In addition to the following citations, c.f. Archimandrite George, *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life*, 4th ed. (Mount Athos: Holy Monastery of St. Gregorios, 2006).

<sup>104</sup> Daniel B. Clendenin, "Partakers of Divinity: The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37, no. 3 (September 1994): 366.

<sup>105</sup> Stavropoulos, *Partakers of Divine Nature*, 11.

<sup>106</sup> Stavropoulos, *Partakers of Divine Nature*, 17-18.

<sup>107</sup> Vladimir Lossky, "The Doctrine of Grace in the Orthodox Church," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 83.

<sup>108</sup> There are other wonderful texts which explain this doctrine in more detail. For contemporary Eastern perspectives on this doctrine see Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (London: Mowbrays, 1975); Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1957); Stavropoulos, *Partakers of Divine Nature*.

makes up the category of usage that I am calling “high participation.” To start with this understanding, I will now turn to the all-important Creator-creation distinction.

### 3.2.2.2 Creator-creation Distinction

The main issue at stake in the conversations surrounding higher versions of participation, such as *theosis*, for the Western church, and the main reason that Western theologians often fear such a doctrine, is the issue of losing or minimizing the Creator-creation distinction.<sup>109</sup> The Creator-creation distinction is absolutely critical to Lossky (and the majority of theologians from the East and West alike), even in discussions surrounding the doctrine of participation or *theosis*. Because a doctrine of *theosis* could easily convolute this distinction, Eastern theologians are careful to address it. Lossky points out that “if we were able at a given moment to be united to the very essence of God and to participate in it even in the very least degree, we should not at the moment be what we are, we should be God by nature. God would then no longer be Trinity, but ‘μυρωπόστατος’, ‘of myriads of hypostases’; for He would have as many hypostases as there would be persons participating in His essence. God, therefore, is and remains inaccessible to us in His essence.”<sup>110</sup> Similarly to God’s nature or essence, we are not able to participate in one (or more) of the persons of the Trinity: “even though we share the same human nature as Christ and receive in Him the name of sons of God, we do not ourselves become the divine hypostasis of the Son by the fact of the Incarnation. We are

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<sup>109</sup> Macarius of Egypt emphasizes this distinction clearly in stating, “The one is God, the other is not God; the one is Lord, the other is servant; the one is Creator, the other is creature; the one is Maker, the other is the thing made, and their natures have nothing in common.” Macarius of Egypt, *Homilia*, 34 (PG 34.816B).

<sup>110</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 69-70.



unable, therefore, to participate in either the essence or the hypostases of the Holy Trinity.”<sup>111</sup> For Lossky, this distinction is absolutely necessary when addressing interactions between the Uncreated God and God’s creation. As such, he (along with the rest of the Eastern Orthodox tradition) does his best to maintain this distinction in the midst of this doctrine of *theosis*.

### 3.2.2.3 Essence-Energy Distinction

In order to avoid violating the Creator-creation distinction (and fall into the “highest” category of participation), Eastern theologians hold to a distinction between the essence and the energies of God. Fred Sanders provides a Western explanation of the Eastern essence-energies distinction in relation to his argument concerning the economic and immanent Trinity.<sup>112</sup> Attempting to stay true to “dogmatic monopatrism”<sup>113</sup> during the *filioque* controversies of the ninth century, the Eastern church was faced with Scriptural evidence of the Son sending the Holy Spirit.<sup>114</sup> However, the Eastern church also did not want to deny that missions reveal processions and so disconnect the immanent from the economic Trinity. In order to avoid this discrepancy and a violation of their views in the *filioque* debate, Patriarch Gregory II of Cyprus and later Gregory Palamas posited a new “realm of relationship” that rested between procession and mission, between immanent and economic; this is the “realm of

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<sup>111</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 70.

<sup>112</sup> Sanders, *Image*, 33-36.

<sup>113</sup> Sanders, *Image*, 33.

<sup>114</sup> See John 16:7.

the divine energies.”<sup>115</sup> According to Sanders, “at the level of energies there can be an eternal relation which does not define a person because it is not a relationship of origin.”<sup>116</sup> Sanders goes on to point out that “The Orthodox doctrine of theosis, when described in terms of the essence-energies distinction, enables Eastern theologians to affirm that we participate in uncreated grace, a personal communion with nothing less than God, while at the same time remaining utterly apophatic about the divine essence, denying that it is opened up to us, and therefore affirming that it remains mysterious and transcendent.”<sup>117</sup> Because this distinction is really the only thing that separates the “high” from the “highest” categories of usage for *theosis*, it is important here to look at how contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologians define it.

Vladimir Lossky, who is acting as our archetypal example of this “high” category of *theosis*, describes this distinction himself. He explains the different categories of being and relationship in the Godhead as person, nature, essence, and energy:

Alongside the three Persons (*hypostases*) and the one nature (*physis*), patristic thinking distinguishes in God, in the very nature common to the Persons of the Trinity, essence (*ousia*) or nature strictly speaking, unknowable and inaccessible—and ‘that which is next to nature,’<sup>118</sup> the divine operations or energies, ‘what can be known about God,’ in the words of Saint Paul: ‘his eternal power and deity ... clearly perceived in the things that have been made’ (Rom 1:19-20). Because, ‘if the energies come down to us, the essence remains

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<sup>115</sup> Sanders, *Image*, 33. Alternatively, according to Lossky, the distinction between essence and energies was born out of “need to establish a dogmatic basis for union with God.” Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 71.

<sup>116</sup> Sanders, *Image*, 34.

<sup>117</sup> Sanders, *Image*, 34-35.

<sup>118</sup> Here Lossky cites John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa* 1.4 (PG 94.800 and *NPNF* 2/9b:3) and Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations*, 38 (PG 36.317 and *NPNF* 2/7:346).

absolutely inaccessible,' says Saint Basil.<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless these operations are not external acts, works of the divine will, which, as such, would be as it were foreign to the divine essence, as are for example the act of the creation of the world, acts of Divine Providence, as well as other acts in which God is present only as Cause. The operations or energies are not acts, but rather 'processions,' 'overflowings' we could say, of the divine nature, by which God exists outside of his essence, 'the Same and the Other.'<sup>120,121</sup>

The true distinction, however, between the essence and energies is a difficult one to define, even for Lossky. He provides a few analogies but qualifies his analogies by stating, "the distinction between essence and energies is more radical, and at the same time their unity is infinitely greater, even to the point of identity."<sup>122</sup> It is in this unity of essence and energies that the "inaccessible God—*Deus absconditus*—in his essence becomes knowable and accessible, allowing us to participate in his perfection by giving himself to us in his energies."<sup>123</sup> Elsewhere Lossky reiterates the unity and distinction of the essence and energies when he writes, "the energies express by their procession an ineffable distinction—they are not God in His essence—and yet, at the same time, being inseparable from His essence, they bear witness to the unity and the simplicity of the being of God."<sup>124</sup> However complex this unity and distinction may be, it is crucial for the Eastern position and allows for God's presence to be really accessible in His energies while maintaining the separation of the essence of God from creation.

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<sup>119</sup> Here Lossky cites Basil of Caesarea, *Epistula ad Amphilocheus* (PG 32.869 and *NPNF* 2/8:274).

<sup>120</sup> Here Lossky cites, Dionysius the Aeropagite, *De Divinis Nominibus*, 9.1 (PG 3.909).

<sup>121</sup> Lossky, "Doctrine of Grace," 76. See also Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 70.

<sup>122</sup> Lossky, "Doctrine of Grace," 77.

<sup>123</sup> Lossky, "Doctrine of Grace," 77.

<sup>124</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 76.

God's true presence in His energies must be understood to be real. Lossky explains that the divine energies are not merely "the presence of a cause operative in its effects: for the energies are not effects of the divine cause, as creatures are; they are not created, formed *ex nihilo*, but flow eternally from the one essence of the Trinity. They are the outpourings of the divine nature which cannot set bounds to itself, for God is more than essence."<sup>125</sup> He goes on to describe the energies as "that mode of existence of the Trinity which is outside of its inaccessible existence."<sup>126</sup> Elsewhere, Lossky describes this same connection between essence and energies: "God—one essence in three persons—is more than an essence: He overflows His essence, manifests Himself beyond it, and, being incommunicable by nature, communicates Himself. These processions of deity outside the essence are the energies: the mode of existence proper to God in so far as He pours the fullness of His deity upon all those who are capable of receiving it by means of the Holy Spirit."<sup>127</sup> In this way, the integrity of the inaccessibility of God's essence remains intact, while participation in God (in God's energies) can be real and experienced by created persons who do not have access to His inaccessible essence.

#### 3.2.2.4 *Theosis* in this Context

The distinction between essence and energies is what allows an Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* to make claims about participating in God's energies without affecting God's essence. Lossky first points out how this allows for God to

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<sup>125</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 73.

<sup>126</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 73.

<sup>127</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 240.

come down to us by stating, “this doctrine makes it possible to understand how the Trinity can remain incommunicable in essence and at the same time come and dwell within us, according to the promise of Christ (John 14:23).”<sup>128</sup> He then proceeds to explain how it affects our ability to be divinized without removing the Creator-creation distinction:

The distinction between the essence and the energies, which is fundamental for the Orthodox doctrine of grace, makes it possible to preserve the real meaning of St. Peter’s words ‘partakers of the divine nature’. The union to which we are called is neither hypostatic—as in the case of the human nature of Christ—nor substantial, as in that of the three divine Persons: it is union with God in His energies, or union by grace making us participate in the divine nature, without our essence becoming thereby the essence of God. In deification we are by grace (that is to say, in the divine energies), all that God is by nature, save only identity of nature... We remain creatures while becoming God by grace, as Christ remained God in becoming man by the Incarnation.<sup>129</sup>

It is precisely this distinction which allows for a “high” understanding of participation: one which maintains the Creator-creation distinction while still allowing for the radically intimate unity of God and man (in God’s energies).

Like other formulations of human participation with the divine, the “high” category sees this union as being progressive, where participation with God is possible in this life, but fullness and completion of this work is only available in the eschaton. Lossky explains, “the deification or *θέωσις* of the creature will be realized in its fullness only in the age to come, after the resurrection of the dead. This deifying union has, nevertheless, to be fulfilled ever more and more even in this present life, through the transformation of our corruptible and depraved nature and by its adaptation to eternal life.”<sup>130</sup> Also similar to other formulations of the doctrine, the work of *theosis* is done

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<sup>128</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 86.

<sup>129</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 87.

<sup>130</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 196.

because of the incarnation of Christ and affected through the work of the Holy Spirit. Lossky writes, “the descent (κατάθασις) of the divine person of Christ makes human persons capable of an ascent (ἀνάθασις) in the Holy Spirit... Thus the redeeming work of Christ—or rather, more generally speaking, the Incarnation of the Word—is seen to be directly related to the ultimate goal of creatures: to know union with God.”<sup>131</sup>

For many Western Christians, the doctrine of *theosis* is avoided for fear of denying the Creator-creation distinction or diminishing the goodness of creation. However, Lossky points out that this is because of Western theology biases which do not recognize essence-energies distinctions as real. He writes, “Western theology which, even in the doctrine of the Trinity, puts the emphasis upon the one essence, is even less prepared to admit any distinction between the essence and the energies.”<sup>132</sup> Instead, Lossky and other Eastern Orthodox theologians see the integrity of the essence of God as remaining unaffected by the union that God’s energies—and not God’s essence—has with the believer. Likewise, the redeemed do not lose themselves in the sea of divinity, but instead remains distinct and individual. Lossky emphasizes this point in stating, “the personal character of a human being who has entered on the way of union is never impaired, even though he renounces his own will and his natural inclinations.”<sup>133</sup> On the contrary, Lossky states that a human person who is united to the divine energies is the human person who is most human. He states, “it is just by this free renunciation of all which by nature belongs to it that the human personality comes to its full realization in grace. What is not free and definitely conscious has no personal value... One who has

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<sup>131</sup> Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 97-98.

<sup>132</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 88.

<sup>133</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 217.

reached perfection is fully conscious in all his acts of will; he is freed from all constraint and from all natural necessity.”<sup>134</sup>

A final aspect of Orthodox trinitarian theology that comes to bear on notions of human participation in *theosis* is the incredible emphasis on the personal nature of the Triune God. The *hypostases* of the Godhead are, in an ever-encircling way, personally instantiating one another in their ontological relations (the Father begetting the Son, the Son being begotten of the Father, the Father spirating the Spirit, the Spirit being proceeding from the Father). It is in a similarly relational fashion that this *theosis* takes place in the eschatological life of the believer. Georges Florovsky emphasizes this personal focus by stating, “The term *theosis* is indeed embarrassing, if we would think of it in ‘ontological categories’. Indeed, man simply cannot become ‘god’. But the Fathers were thinking in ‘personal’ terms, and the mystery of personal communion was involved at this point. Theosis means a personal encounter. It is the ultimate intercourse with God, in which the whole of human existence is, as it were, permeated by the Divine Presence.”<sup>135</sup> The means of *theosis*, therefore, is a personal encounter with the Triune God, and the result of *theosis* is human transformation from corruptibility to incorruptibility, from mortality to everlasting life. Florovsky points this out by stating, “Man ever remains what he is, that is—creature. But he is promised and granted, in Christ Jesus, the Word become man, an intimate sharing in what is Divine: Life Everlasting and incorruptible. The main characteristic of *theosis* is, according to the Fathers, precisely ‘immortality’ or ‘incorruption.’ For God alone ‘has immortality’—ó

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<sup>134</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 217.

<sup>135</sup> Georges Florovsky, “St Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers,” chapter 7 in *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, Collected Works (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Company, 1972), 115.

μόνος εχων ἀθανασίαν (1 Tim. 6:16).”<sup>136</sup> This form of participation is therefore one which comes from a personal encounter with the Living God, through the Son and in the Spirit, and which provides fallen human beings with access to participating in the immortality (i.e. that which is divine) of God.

In these ways, this “high” category participation respects and maintains the Creator-creation distinction, the inaccessibility of the essence of God, and the goodness (and persistence) of created human persons, all while affirming an extremely intimate union with God that is possible for the redeemed in Christ by the Holy Spirit.<sup>137</sup>

### 3.2.3 “Highest” Participation – Identification

The “highest” category of participation belongs to those theologians who call for an assumption of the human person into the divine nature in the eschaton. This level of communion with God goes beyond the “low” and “high” categories which have been explored above in the fact that the divine essence, and not just the divine energies, are shared metaphysically, not just metaphorically or relationally, with human persons. It is this “highest” category of participation that most Western Christians have in mind when they express fear of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*.<sup>138</sup> This is the category that

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<sup>136</sup> Florovsky, "St Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers," 115.

<sup>137</sup> I should note again that this portion of my argument is not meant to validate this position, nor is it to argue for its accuracy or completeness. Instead, I am only trying to place those who hold to this view in a category which can help explain the position in relation to others who speak about human participation in the divine in different ways.

<sup>138</sup> As has been shown above, this is not what Eastern Orthodox theologians have in mind themselves when arguing for *theosis*. However, the concept of *theosis* is often misunderstood as this kind of identification or absorption participation by Western theologians.



is most closely associated with panentheism and the potential loss of the human identity and the Creator-creation distinction. For this “highest” version of participation, I turn my attention especially to the work of prominent Lutheran theologian, Robert Jenson. His views on participation with God as a reality of eschatology are the direct result of the rest of his theological system, specifically his understanding of Trinity and ecclesiology. In order to understand his arguments for the purposes of this study, we will first turn briefly to these other foundational doctrines which will give us purchase to understand his doctrine of participation.

### 3.2.3.1 Jenson’s Doctrine of the Trinity

To begin, we must look at Jenson’s doctrine of the Trinity. Jenson’s trinitarian theology is well developed throughout his work and I will certainly not be able to do justice to the intricacies of his thought here.<sup>139</sup> However, for the purposes of this study we can focus on Jenson’s understanding that the Triune God is “constituted in dramatic coherence”<sup>140</sup> and known by the proper name “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” as it is revealed in Scripture.<sup>141</sup> First, the narrational constitution of God’s being is a concept that is present in Jenson’s works throughout his career<sup>142</sup> and plays an important

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<sup>139</sup> See Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984)., Jenson, *Triune Identity*., *Systematic Theology: Volume I: The Triune God* (Oxford University Press, 1997), and *Systematic Theology: Volume II: The Works of God* (Oxford University Press, 1999). Hereafter, *Systematic Theology* will be noted as *ST* with volume and page numbers following.

<sup>140</sup> Jenson, *ST* I.64, 66; *ST* II.68.

<sup>141</sup> Jenson, *Triune Identity*, 9ff.

<sup>142</sup> See James J. Buckley, "Intimacy: The Character of Robert Jenson's Theology," chapter 2 in *Trinity, Time, and Church: A Response to the Theology of*

foundational role in his understanding of participation. Not only is God identified *by* the events that take place throughout creation-history, but God is identified *with* those events. Jenson states, “For the doctrine of the Trinity is but a conceptually developed and sustained insistence that God himself is identified by and with the particular plotted sequence of events that make the narrative of Israel and her Christ.”<sup>143</sup> The works of God not only reveal who God is, but they reveal who God is revealed *with*—namely, the people of Israel and the people of Christ. As God’s chosen people, Israel and the people of Christ were intended to be God’s representative on earth, revealing God to the nations. Jenson takes this dramatic coherence even further by stating that God is not only identified *by* and *with* events, but God is identified *as* personal events: “God...is a fugue, a conversation, a personal event.”<sup>144</sup> God’s being is constituted precisely *in*, *through*, and *as* the actions that he takes in the world. Jenson does this in order to avoid any separation between the economic and immanent Trinity, which, for him, would be an admittance of a God behind God.<sup>145</sup> Jenson insists that the “‘immanent’ Trinity is simply the eschatological reality of the ‘economic.’”<sup>146</sup> He connects this with human participation by stating, “If God is a God identified by and with the events of Israel’s

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Robert W. Jenson, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 14-17.

<sup>143</sup> Jenson, *ST* I.60.

<sup>144</sup> Jenson, *ST* II.35. Jenson’s fugue image returns in *ST* I.236, and *ST* II.35, 38, 369.

<sup>145</sup> See Jenson, *ST* I.59-60. Sanders categorizes Jenson in his “radicalizers” group of scholars who take Rahner’s Rule at face value and imply a closest possible identity between the economic and immanent Trinity. Sanders, *Image*, 6, 107-12. Wolfhart Pannenberg (also listed as a “radicalizer” for Sanders) even stated that, for Jenson, “the difference between the ‘immanent’ Trinity...and the ‘economic’ Trinity almost vanishes.” *A Trinitarian Synthesis*, Wolfhart Pannenberg ed., vols.,

<sup>146</sup> Jenson, *Triune Identity*, 140.

history, Israel's 'deification' will be simply that the corresponding relations on our part are realized, that we come to be identified by and with events in the life of God."<sup>147</sup> For Jenson, the personal event that constitutes God's being, by and with which we know God, is *the event* in which we are able to participate in the eschaton.

Secondly, Jenson's trinitarian theology is exhibited in his understanding that "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is the proper name for God as revealed in Scripture.<sup>148</sup> Jenson places immense weight on the proper names of things and persons throughout his first chapter of *The Triune Identity* and identifies several proper names for God throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament, he sees "Yahweh" as the name given by God to identify himself to his people and linking God to the event of the exodus.<sup>149</sup> Then, in the New Testament, Jenson sees that God is identified as "whoever raised Jesus from the dead," and links God to the event of the resurrection.<sup>150</sup> As *the definitive* proper name for God, then, Jenson identifies "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" because it is the name given to us in Scripture<sup>151</sup> and because "it packs into one phrase the content and logic of this God's identifying descriptions."<sup>152</sup> From this name, Jenson unpacks the logic and life of the Trinity, closely linking the two, calling the logic "not an abstract possibility" but "the structure of the church's historical experience."<sup>153</sup> If, then, this

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<sup>147</sup> Jenson, *ST I*.71.

<sup>148</sup> Jenson, *Triune Identity*, 9ff.

<sup>149</sup> Jenson, *Triune Identity*, 5-7.

<sup>150</sup> Jenson, *Triune Identity*, 7-9.

<sup>151</sup> Jenson, *Triune Identity*, 9-10.

<sup>152</sup> Jenson, *Triune Identity*, 21.

<sup>153</sup> Jenson, *Triune Identity*, 28.

personal God is a communal life that can be known by us in His three-fold name, then we are able to participate in that communal life with God through that same name. Elsewhere, Jenson describes this openness in the Trinity when writing, “Father, Son, and Spirit are persons whose communal life is God. Can they indeed bring other persons into that life...?...The point here to be made is the affirmative: God can indeed, if he chooses, accommodate other persons in his life without distorting that life. God, to state it as boldly as possible, is *roomy*.”<sup>154</sup> Once again, it must be emphasized that Jenson is not here discussing a metaphorical or relational openness, but a metaphysical one. He describes God as being “hypostatically present to and in our community.”<sup>155</sup> This openness in the event that is the Godhead is absolutely fundamental in allowing Jenson to bring humanity into this communal life, as we will see below.

### 3.2.3.2 Jenson’s Ecclesiology

Even more than in his doctrine of the Trinity, Jenson locates his doctrine of participation most explicitly in his ecclesiology.<sup>156</sup> For Jenson, Christ’s body is the church—literally.<sup>157</sup> He takes Paul’s statements concerning the body of Christ<sup>158</sup> at their

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<sup>154</sup> Jenson, *ST I*.226.

<sup>155</sup> Jenson, *ST I*.228.

<sup>156</sup> Jenson makes similar identifying connections between God and Israel, especially in stating, “God is identified *with* Israel in that he is identified *as* a participant *in* Israel’s story with him.” Jenson, *ST I*.77. As with any theological system, Jenson’s ecclesiology is also heavily influenced by his Christology, which will be evident in the following pages.

<sup>157</sup> For a more complete ecclesiology from Jenson, in which he defines the church as “the people of God, the temple of the Spirit, and the body of Christ,” see especially chapters 25 and 26 of *ST II*.

<sup>158</sup> See Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12-27; Eph 3:6, 5:23; Col 1:18, 1:24.

face value to answer the question, “But what can Paul *mean*, speaking so of Christ’s body?” with the answer, “The obvious first suggestion, which turns out to work perfectly on the texts, is that he speaks of the ‘body of Christ’ as he speaks of ‘bodies’ generally.”<sup>159</sup> Jenson’s understanding of a Pauline definition of body is “simply the person him or herself insofar as this person is *available* to other persons and to him or herself, insofar as the person is an *object* for other persons and him or herself.”<sup>160</sup> With this as his foundation for his ecclesiology, Jenson can boldly say,

The subject that the risen Christ is, is the subject who comes to word in the gospel. The object—the body—that the risen Christ is, is the body in the world to which this word calls our intention, the church around her sacraments. He needs no other body to be a risen man, body and soul. There is and needs to be no other place than the church for him to be embodied, nor in that other place any other entity to be the ‘real’ body of Christ. Heaven is where God takes space in his creation to be present to the whole of it; he does that in the church.”<sup>161</sup>

For Jenson, then, the risen body of Christ *is* the church, not figuratively or representationally but *actually*. Jenson is not describing the church as a metaphorical body, but an actual body. Lest we interpret Jenson’s language as mere analogy or word play, he emphatically writes, “No metaphor or ontological evasion should be intended.”<sup>162</sup> The bold language that Jenson employs here and in other parts of his systematic theology is intended to form a new metaphysic, and as such is intended to be taken to its full implications. Therefore, when Jenson argues with strong language that the risen Christ is actually found in the sacraments, we need not water down his

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<sup>159</sup> Jenson, *STI*.205.

<sup>160</sup> Jenson, *STI*.205.

<sup>161</sup> Jenson, *STI*.206.

<sup>162</sup> Jenson, *STI*.206.

statements into mere analogy or symbolism. We ought to take his new metaphysic as he provides it.

The next question that must be asked of Jenson is what happened to the physical body of Christ after he ascended into heaven? Jenson answers this question by stating that we no longer need to look for a physical body because we, the church, are the physical body of Christ, “The church...is the risen body of Christ.”<sup>163</sup> Elsewhere he elaborates on this topic: “But, of course, God does in fact have a body, the body born of Mary and risen into the church and its sacraments... What must here be emphasized is that the discourse that is God’s life is not in fact another discourse than that between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit, with which we join.”<sup>164</sup> This statement has radical consequences for the metaphysical reality of life in the church. If God is constituted by the discourse of God’s life, and if, as Jenson states here explicitly, the church is able to join into that discourse, then we, the church, can expect to participate in the constitutive life of God. Along these same lines, Jenson says, “As the church speaks and hears the gospel and as the church responds in prayer and confession, the church’s life is a great conversation, and this conversation is none other than our participation in the converse of the Father and the Son in the Spirit.”<sup>165</sup> It is as the actual body of Christ that we, the church, have communion with God, even now. We are metaphysically joining into the communal life that is the triune Godhead because Jesus is present in us as the church.

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<sup>163</sup> Jenson, *ST I*.205.

<sup>164</sup> Jenson, *ST I*.229.

<sup>165</sup> Jenson, *ST I*.228. And also, “The body of Christ is at once his sacramental presence within the church’s assembly, to make that assembly a community, and is the church-community herself for the world and her members.” *ST II*.168.

The church is the actual body of Christ and, as such, can be described as “above all and decisively *communion* with Christ and among her members.”<sup>166</sup>

It is here, in the identification and communion of the church with God in Christ, that Jenson later develops implications for human participation in the divine. For we need not look in any other place for the risen Christ because “the entity rightly called the body of Christ is whatever object it is that is Christ’s availability to us as subjects; by the promise of Christ, this object is...the gathering of the church...[t]here is where creatures can locate him, to respond to his word to them.”<sup>167</sup> In this model, then, the physical body of Jesus died on the cross, was raised from the dead on the third day, then met with his disciples and was revealed to people on earth for a short time before he ascended into heaven, at which point the physicality of the man Jesus was replaced by his presence as the church. For Jenson, because we live in the inaugurated eschatology, the church is now the real body of Jesus, and, as such, is currently (but not fully) living a heavenly life of communion with the Father. It is from this metaphysical connection and communion that Jenson is able to speak of the union between God and man in the eschaton.

### 3.2.3.3 Jenson’s Eschatology

With a basic understanding of Jenson’s foundational doctrines of Trinity and ecclesiology, we can now turn to his thoughts on the topic at hand as it is seen in his eschatology. When Jenson reads, “that God may be all in all” in 1 Cor. 15:24, he

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<sup>166</sup> Jenson, *ST* II.211.

<sup>167</sup> Jenson, *ST* I.205. Jenson also talks about the presence of Christ in the eucharist, and although his sacramentology influences his Christology and ecclesiology, it does not affect his understanding of *theosis*, and therefore will not be discussed here.

understands Paul to be describing a metaphysical reality that will come fully to creation in the eschaton. He writes, “the advent of Christ in judgment...will consign to the past sin, death, and *all division* of God’s people from each other and so *from him*. In its own positive meaning, it will establish and constitute the new reality of the Kingdom, that is, a new and final participation in the triune life.”<sup>168</sup> Jenson knows that he is making statements that are somewhat extreme. While he does not detract from—or apologize for—any of them, he does understand the limits that language can have on a topic as mysterious as the eschatological realities of human persons participating in the divine life. He states, “The discourse of this book has regularly skirted the edges of what language can do; in this ultimate part and penultimate chapter, the risks are especially great.”<sup>169</sup> This appeal to mystery and human limitations, however, does not change the fact that Jenson makes specific claims about the eternal life of the redeemed.

In his eschatology, Jenson explains that there will be changes to the missions of the persons of the triune Godhead. While describing these changes, he identifies the redeemed as being one with Christ, as the *totus Christus*:

Christ will know himself as his people with no more reservation; he will be the head of a body that he does not need to discipline. Thus he will eternally adore God *as* the one single and exclusive person of the *totus Christus*, as those whom the Father ordained for him and whom the Spirit has brought to him. The Spirit will no more bring and join the Son’s people to him, for they will be with and joined to him. Thus the Spirit will be Freedom with no burden, Freedom to play infinitely with the possibilities of love between the Father and the embodied Son. And the Father will no more *exert* power but simply rule and love and be loved.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Jenson, *ST* II.338. Emphasis mine.

<sup>169</sup> Jenson, *ST* II.339. This is actually the antepenultimate chapter and is titled “The Great Transformation.”

<sup>170</sup> Jenson, *ST* II.339. Jenson goes into more detail concerning the *totus Christus* in *ST* I.81-86.



For Jenson, there is a metaphysical unity between the church and Christ in the eschaton, and this unity is complete and final. It is a unity that does not require any sustaining work from the Spirit, but is instead a fulfillment of the unifying work that the Spirit is now doing in the church. The unity that the church and Christ experience on earth will transform into an identity where Christ is identified with the church as the “single and exclusive person of the *totus Christus*.”<sup>171</sup> Instead of bringing the redeemed into a closer unity with the Godhead—for no closer unity will be possible—the Spirit will be able to focus on the task it had before creation, the task of purely loving the Father and the Son (who now is also the church). The final chapter in Jenson’s *Systematic Theology* takes up less than half a page, and describes the *telos* of salvation-history:

God will reign: he will fit created time to triune time and created polity to the *perichoresis*<sup>172</sup> of Father, Son and Spirit. God will deify the redeemed: their life will be carried and shaped by the life of Father, Son, and Spirit, and they will know themselves as personal agents in the life so shaped. God will let the redeemed see him: the Father by the Spirit will make Christ’s eyes their eyes. Under all rubrics, the redeemed will be appropriated to God’s own being... The point of identity, infinitely approachable and infinitely to be approached, the enlivening *telos* of the Kingdom’s own life, is perfect harmony between the conversation of the redeemed and the conversation that God is.<sup>173</sup>

Whether or not Jenson explicitly states here that the human person is metaphysically subsumed into the Godhead is irrelevant. His statement that “under all rubrics, the redeemed will be appropriated to God’s own being” gives us reason to

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<sup>171</sup> See previous note.

<sup>172</sup> It is interesting to note, for the purpose of this study, that Jenson uses *perichoresis* even in this end to only discuss the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While he certainly then brings humanity into that unity, he never once describes humanity as being *perichoretically united* to the Godhead. Although his understanding of human participation with the divine certainly falls into this “highest” category, Jenson remains in the “strict” category of usage for *perichoresis*. This will be highlighted in the coming chapter.

<sup>173</sup> Jenson, *ST* II.369.

believe that “all rubrics” includes metaphysically. His discussion of fitting the church into the *perichoresis* of the Godhead also gives us reason to think that he believes that this is a complete metaphysical union. No matter what his previous hesitations about language may hope to express, if this is the case, then the identity of the human person is subsumed and overwhelmed by the perfection of the divine Godhead in a future eternity that blurs the line between Creator and creation.

It is interesting to note that these conclusions seem to be departures for Jenson from his earlier thought on the topic of *theosis*.<sup>174</sup> In a 1993 article for *Dialog* Jenson argued that the Eastern Orthodox view of *theosis* is not the boogie-man that Catholics and Protestants tend to think it is. He wrote, “Through all the controversies and centuries, Eastern theologians have denied that the deification they assert is what Westerners keep insisting it must be: our coming additionally to instantiate the divine nature by which God is God.”<sup>175</sup> He also stated, “We indeed could not share divine *nature* without ceasing to be human and without God ceasing to be unique, just as Western critics have said. But the East never affirmed such sharing. What the East has said is that we become participants in the *life* that God is, and *so* become gods.”<sup>176</sup> Additionally, even in his *Systematic Theology*—albeit in a footnote—Jenson tries to disassociate himself from this extreme. He emphasizes “with all possible vigor” that “the patristic doctrine is the precise opposite of the idealist doctrine that appears in Neo-

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<sup>174</sup> Either Jenson had a change of opinion, or he does not acknowledge that his theology takes him to a place that he does not want to go.

<sup>175</sup> Robert W. Jenson, "Theosis," *Dialog* 32, no. 2 (Spring 1993 1993): 109.

<sup>176</sup> Jenson, "Theosis," 110. It seems, however, that while the Eastern position has never asserted this conclusion, he has.

Protestantism.”<sup>177</sup> And while one might read his work and associate him, too, with the Neo-Protestantism that he so fears, Jenson seems to self-identify (wrongly, in my opinion) with the Eastern Orthodox position as following the patristics. He states, “The patristic church proclaimed deification; why do not we?”<sup>178</sup> However, if the fear of Western theology is that humans would instantiate the divine nature in *theosis*, then I am unsure of how his statements of humans being “appropriated to God’s being”<sup>179</sup> in the *perichoresis* of the Godhead could provide any consolation. While one could argue for metaphorical language in statements regarding a fugue, story, or other metaphors, it is hard to argue for anything other than appropriation or identity when Jenson uses the very words.

All in all, Jenson presents the archetypal view of this “highest” category of participation throughout his theological system, and it is present in his understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, in his ecclesiology, and most explicitly in his eschatology. Permeating through all this theology is an expectation of a complete metaphysical unity between God and his people, and an absolute erasure of the Creator-creation distinction. In this “highest” category for *theosis*, the believer becomes subsumed into the Godhead in a final act of the Triune God becoming identified with the redeemed of creation.

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<sup>177</sup> Jenson, *ST* I.71fn56. As the prime example of this feared idealism in Neo-Protestantism, Jenson cites Emanuel Hirsch’s praise of Fichte in Emanuel Hirsch, *Geschichte Der Neuern Evangelischen Theologie*, vol. 4 (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1952), 383-85.

<sup>178</sup> Jenson, "Theosis," 112.

<sup>179</sup> Jenson, *ST* II.369.

### 3.3 Proposed Definition

Similar to my own definition of *perichoresis* above, I would like to propose my own position on participation, based on my understanding of the concept and its place in a biblically faithful systematic theology. My own definition aligns with the “low” participation category and can be stated in this way: human participation in the divine *is the gradual, ongoing process in the redeemed in which they participate relationally in the divine life through union with Jesus Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.* I will look at each part of this definition below.

To begin, participation is a *process* which contains *gradual and ongoing* progress. The union that humanity experiences with the divine is not one that occurs in an instant. Instead, this process is one in which the redeemed participates in the divine life more and more through time, continuing on throughout eternity. This process does not ever reach a final state, but instead is continually moving ever closer to completion, similar to a function reaching an asymptote.<sup>180</sup> The believer moves towards perfect union with God without ever achieving complete identity with God. The two aspects of the process of human participation in the divine are that it is *gradual* and *ongoing*, and these two aspects go hand in hand. While the progress towards perfect participation begins at a definite point in time, it continues gradually from that starting point. And similarly, the gradual process is ongoing and continues on throughout eternity.

Next, participation is only a process in which *the redeemed* participate. Inanimate objects and non-human creatures do not participate in this kind of union with God.<sup>181</sup> This qualification safeguards against any kind of pantheism or panentheism

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<sup>180</sup> See Oliver Crisp’s comments highlighted in section 3.2.1.2 above.

<sup>181</sup> This statement also excludes angels who experience a participation with God which is different than that which is experienced by redeemed human beings, namely in

wherein God can be truly identified with the world or in all things. Only human persons, persons who are made in the image of God and who are regenerate in Christ by the Holy Spirit ought to be categorized as participating at this level in the divine life. Similarly, it is not the human body that participates with the divine or even the human soul, but the human person. This is why a bodily resurrection is possible, because it is more than just our souls which are united to God, it is our entire person. Additionally, the participants are the redeemed, not all humans. There are some created human beings who choose to deny God and distance themselves from his free and open gift of reconciliation. God allows those people to miss out on the participation that is afforded to those who choose to believe in Christ and accept his salvation.<sup>182</sup>

Third, the notion that the redeemed *participate relationally in the divine life* is the aspect of this definition that requires the most nuance. This participation is not the sharing of the same space (two objects with physical matter co-existing in the same location at the same time), but the relational sharing of persons. When two or more persons engage in a relationship, whatever that relationship may be, they share their person with one another. In this instance, the kind of relationship is that between a created human being and the uncreated divine God. Because of the disparate nature of those two roles, this relational participation will not be mutual. I will not bring as much (or anything) to the relationship when compared to what God provides for me. However, because it is a true relationship, and not an impersonal act of a higher being

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that the angelic participation with the divine is static and does not progress throughout time. Additionally, this definition is for human participation with the divine, and so only describes that which is experienced by humans.

<sup>182</sup> Although this is my perspective on those who are redeemed, my definition also allows for those who posit a universal salvation. If it were the case that all of humanity is redeemed, then all of humanity (the redeemed) would experience this participation.

upon a lower one, there are ways in which humans can contribute to the relationship by choosing to participate with, obey, and worship the God with whom we participate. As part of this *participation in the divine life*, it is important to note that the believer is both passive and active in this process. He or she is primarily passive, in that the participation is always initiated, enacted, and completed by God. The believer can do nothing apart from the power and desire of the God who gives to the believer, so the believer is completely dependent on God in the relationship. However, because of the gift of free will, humanity has the option to participate actively with God or not. The level of participation with which the believer chooses to participate with God will have an effect on the level of participation the believer experiences.<sup>183</sup>

Fourth, the process is primarily enacted through *union with Jesus Christ*. Union with Christ is the conduit through which God allows us to participate with Him. Firstly, this is because Jesus paved our way to relationship with God through his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. It is only through participation in Jesus's life, death, and resurrection that we are able to enter into the presence of God, let alone participate with God. Additionally, Jesus is the Great High Priest who carries us into relationship with God. He is the one through whom we receive forgiveness for our sins and reconciliation with God because of His sacrificial death on the cross. Because of the resurrection of Christ, we too, are able to experience the new life which includes relational participation with the living God. This kind of union, because it is a relational participation with God through union with Christ, can aptly be labeled "Christosis" as

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<sup>183</sup> It is important to note here that this is not a formulaic experience where a believer who tries to participate relationally more with God will receive an equal amount of participation with God. Sometimes, God's way of providing for us is in times of relative silence. God increases our relational participation with Him in accordance with His will, not with our efforts.

Ben C. Blackwell calls it.<sup>184</sup> It is a participatory union that goes beyond any human relationship, that binds believers to God through union with Christ in a way that is not encountered anywhere else in human experience.

Finally, the *indwelling of the Holy Spirit* is what activates this process in the believer. While it is through union with Christ that this participation is enacted, it is through the work of the Holy Spirit that the participation and its gifts are bestowed upon the believer. The indwelling Holy Spirit enables and empowers the believer to start in this relationship, and then continues to uphold the believer in the participation throughout his or her life (and on into eternity). No one can claim that they participate with God on their own merit, for it is only through union with Christ by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit that the believer experiences this relational participation with the One True God.

As stated above, I believe that “Christosis” is an appropriate term for this level of participation. While *theosis* is certainly a helpful term, the confusion that often comes to Western Christians who do not understand the essence/energies distinction means that many Protestant and Catholic theologians miss out on the wealth of understanding that can come from it. Additionally, by utilizing the term “Christosis,” the focus remains on the union with Christ that the believer experiences, a union which is foundational to the scriptural understanding of participation with God. I would like to see Blackwell’s term be used more in academic circles.

After examining our three categories of usage for *perichoresis* and explaining my own definition for the term, then doing the same for the concept of human participation with God, we now arrive at the ways in which these concepts interact with

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<sup>184</sup> See section 3.2.1.1 above.

one another by exploring the nine movements from each category of usage of *perichoresis* to each category of understanding human participation with the divine.



## LOGICAL CONNECTIONS FROM PERICHORESIS TO PARTICIPATION

Here we will turn our attention to the argument at hand: how does the use of *perichoresis* affect our understanding of human participation with the divine? In some ways this may seem fairly straight-forward and obvious: those who involve humanity in the *perichoresis* of the divine Godhead are obviously making claims about human participation. These claims may be explicitly linked to their own theology of participation, or they may only be implicit. For some, the logical outpourings of their claims about *perichoresis* flow naturally and succinctly to their claims about participation. However, not all scholars are logically consistent in this way. Some even make claims about *perichoresis* that lead to direct contradictions in their explicit formulations of participation as found elsewhere in their systematic theology. In this chapter I will push my different categories of *perichoresis* through to their logical conclusions as pertinent for understanding the participation of humanity with the divine. For each category I will then evaluate the ways in which members of these categories either perform this logical task well or do it poorly. Finally, I will provide my own observations about which direction is most beneficial when moving forward and considering the use of the term *perichoresis*, given its implications for human participation with God.

I would like to begin with a few caveats in this constructive portion of my argument. Firstly, I recognize not all scholars are consistent when pursuing the logical conclusions of their stance on *perichoresis*. Someone might imply conclusions of *perichoresis* that fall into my “loose” category, but then inconsistently restrict the level of participation that humanity can enjoy in the Godhead. In many ways, this is precisely

why this project is important. The purpose of this endeavor is to encourage greater clarity and caution when making statements about the inner life of God and how those statements affect our entire theological system. Pursuing consistency in our theological systems (or admitting when they are inconsistent) is important for maintaining an holistic and encompassing worldview. When we tweak our theology in one area, we need to be willing to follow the ripple effect of that new change and appropriately adjust the rest of our system. Because of the recent prolific use of *perichoresis* by so many scholars to mean so many different things, it is about time that we clarify what we mean and stay consistent with our understanding of this topic.

Secondly, because usage for each of these concepts in all categories falls along a spectrum rather than in tight, punctiliar categories, some fairly broad statements will be made that are not intended to provide rules without exceptions. Especially in the case of my “strict and metaphorical” use of the term *perichoresis*, I am making some bold claims about the slippery slope of using metaphorical language. That being said, I recognize that there are exceptions to the rule and there are examples of scholars who speak metaphorically about *perichoresis* in such a way as to not allow their language to fall into the “loose” category. However, because these examples are exceptions, rather than the broad consensus, I will point them out as such.

Finally, I understand that scholars do—and should—change their minds throughout their theological careers.<sup>1</sup> My statements are not intended to pigeon-hole scholars into boxes within these categories. The development of theological thought is important as we pursue greater understanding of God and His creation, so the fact that

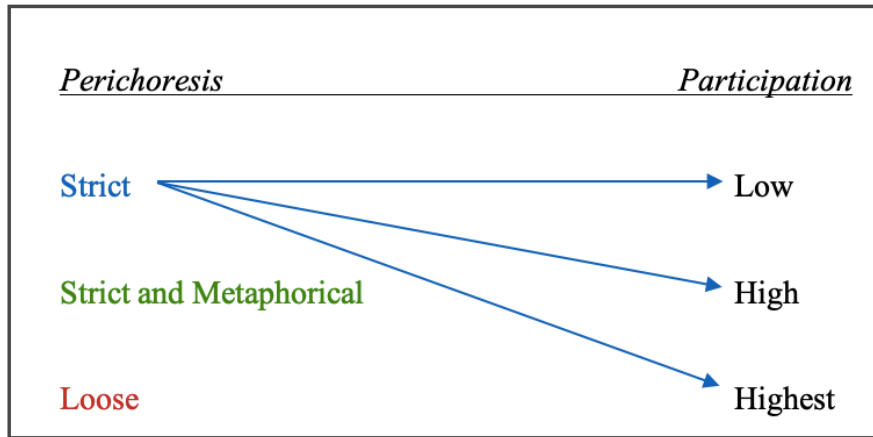
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<sup>1</sup> A necessary aspect of every scholar’s work is reassessing his or her thoughts when new information is presented. This openness to change is a scholarly virtue that should be praised when appropriately expressed.

theologians adjust their thinking is an academic virtue worthy of imitating. However, like the first caveat, when new information brings an adjustment to a theological idea in someone's thought, that person ought to be consistent to follow that idea through to the rest of his or her theological system. Instead of placing immovable boxes around the thoughts of others, I am hoping that these categories will provide a starting place from which to begin a thoughtful discussion on the proper use of the concept of *perichoresis*.

In order to progress through my argument, I will show how each of my three categories of usage for *perichoresis* logically leads to or denies each of my three categories of usage for *participation*. One at a time, I will examine each of the nine possibilities: from "strict" *perichoresis* to "low," then "high," then "highest" participation, followed by "strict and metaphorical" *perichoresis* to "low," then "high," then "highest" participation, and finally from "loose" *perichoresis* to "low," then "high," then "highest" participation. In each section I will first explain the logic of that movement, then examine an example of someone attempting to make that movement, followed by an analysis of whether or not that movement is logically or theologically valid and consistent, and ending with a brief look at the impact of that movement on other areas of systematic theology. To begin, we will look at what is logically allowable for "strict" users of *perichoresis*.

#### 4.1 Participation Categories Available to “Strict” *Perichoresis*



*Figure 1*

“Strict” *perichoresis* provides the greatest range of usage for *participation* in my system. This openness is due to the fact that humanity is not mentioned when describing *perichoresis* at all. Scholars in this category use *perichoresis* only to describe relations within the Godhead, and so they do not allow the term to describe any part of the human experience.<sup>2</sup> Because this use of the term has nothing to do with humanity, it says nothing about the kind of interaction that humans can have with the Triune Godhead. A scholar who uses *perichoresis* only in the “strict” way as I have described it is free to discuss participation in a “low” (communion), “high” (theosis), or “highest” (identification) way, and can be visualized by Figure 1 above. The “strict” category of usage for *perichoresis* does not have any direct, logically required routes to any specific category of human participation. This will be demonstrated below.

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<sup>2</sup> Except in reference to the hypostatic union, as seen in section 2.1.1 above, which is a unique case of a person in the Godhead, not extended towards humanity in general.

4.1.1 “Strict” Perichoresis to “Low” Participation – T.F. Torrance

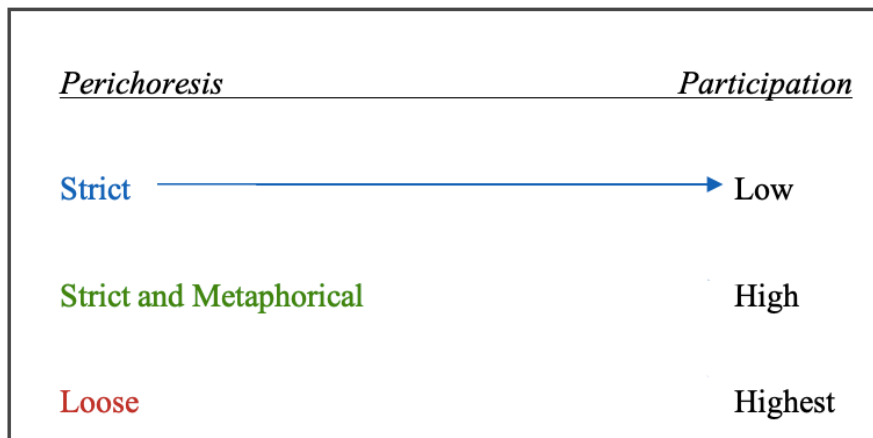


Figure 2

The first option available to theologians who utilize *perichoresis* in only its “strict” form is a position of “low” participation. The logic is simple here and states that because the theologian excludes humanity from any interaction with God in their understanding of the concept of *perichoresis*, he or she is free to describe a “low” form of participation with God.

An easy example of this movement can be found in the thought of T.F. Torrance. Torrance’s use of the term *perichoresis* fits starkly in my “strict” category because of his rigidity in using the term exclusively when referring to the relations of the Godhead. Torrance provides a very brief etymological history of the term, noting that it began as a christological concept to describe the hypostatic union. He then goes on to explain that the term was appropriated for use in the doctrine of the Trinity, to “speak of the way in which the three divine persons mutually dwell in one another and coinhere or inexist in one another while nevertheless remaining other than one another and distinct from one another.”<sup>3</sup> Along with this transition in usage, Torrance

<sup>3</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 102.

recognizes that “the notion of perichoresis [was] refined and changed to refer to the complete mutual containing or interpenetration of the three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in one God,” and that this “had the effect of defining it in such a way that it may not be applied to the hypostatic union of divine and human natures in Christ, without serious damage to the doctrine of Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Because of Torrance’s strictness in using the term he recognizes that even taking the trinitarian usage of the concept of *perichoresis* and importing it back into the hypostatic union was too much for the concept. He identifies that when this movement has been attempted, “it has resulted in some form of docetic rationalizing and depreciating of the humanity of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Later, Torrance goes on to demarcate the concept more fully when he agrees with Athanasius in stating that the “reciprocal relation” whereby the persons of the Trinity mutually indwell one another, “is thinkable only in relation to God himself and of which we learn only in God’s revelation of himself.”<sup>6</sup> If this was not enough proof that Torrance belongs in my “strict” category, he goes even further when following his most complete definition of *perichoresis* with, “Each Person contains the one God in virtue of his relation to the others as well as his relation to himself for they wholly coexist and inexist in one another. Human beings do not exist within one another, but this is precisely what the divine Persons of the Holy Trinity do.”<sup>7</sup> Here we see the strict distinction between the Godhead and humanity, one where God is capable of perichoretic union among persons, but created human beings are not. Torrance is a clean

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<sup>4</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 102.

<sup>5</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 102.

<sup>6</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 169. Torrance cites Athanasius, *Orationes Contra Arianos*, 3.1-6, 4.1-5, and *De Synodis*, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 170-71. Emphasis mine.

example of my “strict” category because of the staunch precision with which he uses the term exclusively concerning the Godhead.

Torrance also recognizes the limits of human language and the “fear and trembling” required when formulating thoughts on the holy and divine mystery of God.<sup>8</sup> He quotes Cyril of Alexandria and remarks, “...remember that the wealth of divine Glory is being mirrored in the poverty of human expression.’ This is surely how we must think of perichoresis in our attempt to speak as carefully and faithfully as we can, within the limited range of our creaturely capacities, about the ineffable Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity of the inter-hypostatic onto-relations in the transcendent Life of God.”<sup>9</sup> Torrance approaches his understanding of *perichoresis* in just such a way when he explains the concept more fully. He writes, “*perichoresis* has much to say about the *order* or τάξις that obtains between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in their relations with one another...They all coexist enhypostatically in the Communion of the Holy Trinity without being confused with one another, and without differing from one another in respect of their homoousial Being and homogeneous Nature.”<sup>10</sup> He goes on to elucidate that “*perichoresis* asserts the full *equality* of the three divine Persons...in all but the incommunicable properties which differentiate them from one another as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, they share completely and equally – each of the divine Persons is entirely united to those with whom he is enjoined as he is with himself

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<sup>8</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 172.

<sup>9</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 173. Torrance cites Cyril of Alexandria, *In Joannis Evangelium*, 10.33, and remarks that the same point was made by Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, 2.2; Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 5.10.9; 7.4.7; and John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.13.3, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 175.

because of the identity of Being and Power that is between them.”<sup>11</sup> And furthermore, “*perichoresis* affirms the real *distinctions* between the divine Persons in their hypostatic relations with one another, as well as their real oneness, and does so by providing the frame within which we may think and speak of the three divine Persons in their proper differences without detracting from their complete equality, in line with the order given in Baptism into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.”<sup>12</sup> Never once does Torrance provide any hint towards the notion that humanity could somehow participate in this *perichoresis*. The perichoretic unity that is experienced by God is exclusively experienced by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in their relations as divine persons of the Godhead.

From this very “strict” use of the term *perichoresis*, we can see that Torrance is very free indeed to continue to exclude humanity from complete, perichoretic union with the Godhead in his descriptions of human participation with God. Torrance’s position is quite typical of the “low” participation category I am calling simply “communion.” In fact, very near to his descriptions of the concept of *perichoresis* Torrance describes the communion of God with humanity:

Since God is Spirit and God is Love, we must understand the *perichoresis* in a wholly spiritual and intensely personal way as the eternal movement of Love or the Communion of Love which the Holy Trinity ever is within himself, and in his active relations toward us through the Holy Spirit from within his homoousial relations with the Father and the Son. In this homoousial way the Holy Spirit is in himself the *enhyposstatic* Love and the Communion of Love in the perichoretic relations between the Father and the Son, and as such is in himself the ground of our communion with God in the Love of the Father and the Son.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 175.

<sup>12</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 176.

<sup>13</sup> Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 171.



Notice that Torrance here does not state that *perichoresis* is the ground of our communion with God, but that the Holy Spirit is the ground of our communion with God. We are invited to participate in the life and love of God because of the work of the Holy Spirit. While we certainly participate in communion with each of the three persons of the Godhead because they are perichoretically united, we do not participate in that *perichoresis*. Instead, we are invited by God to enter into communion with Him by the invitation of the Father, through the life, death, and resurrection of the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

After examining this example of moving from “strict” *perichoresis* to “low” participation, let us turn our attention towards a brief analysis of the validity of this movement. Because the “strict” usage of *perichoresis* makes no commitments concerning humanity (as it is completely left out of any discussion of the perichoretic relations), it is perfectly valid to move to a “low” participation. Torrance provides us with an excellent example of utilizing *perichoresis* only to describe the unique interpenetration of the persons of the Godhead, and thereby avoids any association of the term with human participation. Those who follow this movement are well within logical reason to speak of *perichoresis* in such a “strict” way and then also discuss human participation with the divine in a “low” (communion) way.

Finally, the impact that this movement has on other doctrines is fairly straightforward because the concepts are logically unconnected. In trinitarian theology, the concept of *perichoresis* can perform the theological task of describing the interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity without weighing in on other concepts such as the metaphysical “roominess” of the Trinity or how strongly the economic and immanent Trinity are identified. These conversations can be had, but the (non)connection of the concepts of *perichoresis* and participation need not inform them.

Next, the field of anthropology is similarly untouched because the concepts are unconnected. A “low” view of participation certainly informs one’s anthropology, but the concept of *perichoresis* has no bearing on it in this movement. This movement also has minimal impact on the nature of salvation because there are no claims being made about salvation outside of any formal notions of participation (in the “low” sense). In a similar way, the ecclesiology of one who follows this movement is not conditioned at all by it. If *perichoresis* only describes a phenomenon experienced by the Godhead, and if this human participation with the divine describes a relational participation between the redeemed and God, then it is only one’s understanding of the nature of that human participation with God (be it individual or corporate) that would impact one’s ecclesiology. Finally, eschatological realities are only discussed when describing participation in this movement. Because *perichoresis* and participation are unconnected, there need be no expectation that the participation experienced by humanity in the eschaton is related in any way to the perichoretic interpenetration of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Whatever formal definition of participation one holds will be completely uninformed by any notion of *perichoresis* in eschatology in this movement. All in all, this is a very safe movement where the concepts remain unrelated and because of this, their (non)connection does not impact other areas of systematic theology. As we will see below, this (non)connection is similarly safe in all the movements where “strict” *perichoresis* is being utilized.

#### 4.1.2 “Strict” Perichoresis to “High” Participation – Vladimir Lossky

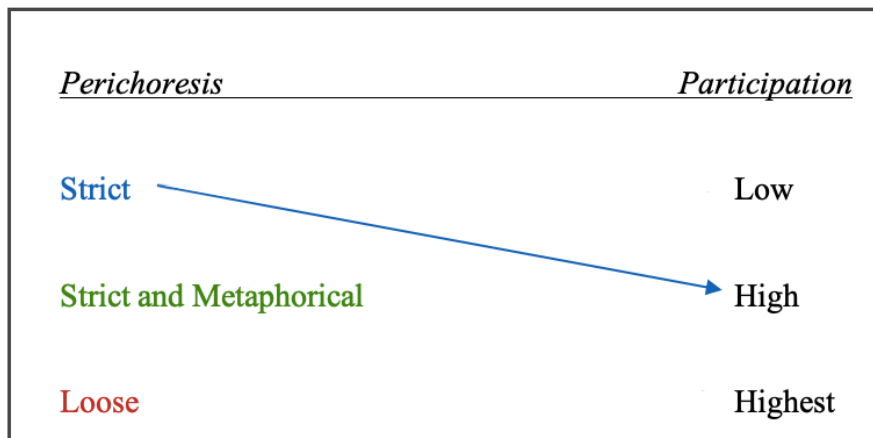


Figure 3

The second option available to theologians who utilize *perichoresis* in only its strictest sense is a position of “high” participation. The logic here is also simple and similarly states that because the theologian excludes humanity from any interaction with God in their understanding of the concept of *perichoresis*, he or she is logically free to describe any form of participation with God, including this “high” option. For an example of this movement, we will turn to the theology of Vladimir Lossky.

Lossky remains very true to the Eastern Orthodox tradition (and most Christian tradition) in remaining “strict” in his usage for *perichoresis*. When he does describe the concept, it is often in the words of John of Damascus himself. Lossky quotes John of Damascus in *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* in describing the unity of the Trinity: “...the Three, having but one nature, have but a single will, a single power, a single operation. To quote St. John Damascene again: ‘The persons are made one not so as to commingle, but so as to cleave to each other, and they have their being in each other (τὴν ἐν ἀλλήλαις περιχώρησιν ἔχουσι) without any coalescence or

commingling.”<sup>14</sup> Because Lossky’s chapter is about the doctrine of the Trinity, and because he is so dependent on John of Damascus throughout this chapter, it does not come as a surprise that he is in the “strict” category of usage for *perichoresis*.<sup>15</sup> Although he does not utilize the concept at great lengths, his understanding of the concept is one that remains completely “strict” in that humanity is ever excluded from the *perichoresis* of the triune persons.

Lossky’s view of participation as the archetype of the “high” (theosis) category can be seen in section 3.2.2 above. Because I have already explored this in more depth, I will not belabor this point here. Instead, I will provide a brief summary of Lossky’s view of participation. For Lossky, the process by which we attain union with God is by

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<sup>14</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 53-54. Lossky is citing John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, I.8 (PG 94.829 and NPNF 2/9b:11).

<sup>15</sup> Although Lossky does not utilize trinitarian “person-*perichoresis*” in any way other than the “strict” category, he does make analogical connections between the “nature-*perichoresis*” in the hypostatic union and deification in several places. In an article for the Greek Orthodox Theological Review, Lossky writes, “The beauty (κάλλος) of the divine nature which the Holy Spirit, bringing about the deification of Christians, shows to the elect in the incarnate Logos, according to St. Cyril, will become a narrow part of the hypostatic union of Christ, brought out in the doctrine of the ‘perichoresis,’ or energetic communication of the divine properties to the humanity of the God-man. This allows us to consider Christ’s transfiguration on Mount Tabor as an anticipation of the eschatological vision ‘face to face’ of the divine incarnate Hypostasis...Now, in the hypostatic union of the God-man, not only the human νοῦς of Christ, but also his soul and body are transfigured by their participation in his Divinity. This ‘perichoresis’ or energetic penetration of the created by the uncreated in Christ, has its analogy in the created persons who become ‘gods by grace’...” Vladimir Lossky, “Problem of the Vision Face to Face and Byzantine Patristic Tradition,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1972): 250-51. In *The Vision of God* he writes of the hypostatic union, “‘perichoresis’ or dynamic co-penetration of what is created and uncreated in Christ finds its analogy in beings who are striving to become ‘gods by grace.’” Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. Asheleigh Moorhouse (London: The Faith Press, 1983), 109. See also Lossky, *Vision*, 50. However, because Lossky is dealing with the nature-*perichoresis* of the hypostatic union in these texts, rather than the person-*perichoresis* of the Trinity, we will not be examining them for the purposes of this study.

the power of the Holy Spirit, through the death and resurrection of Christ, in the context of the Church. He explains that “All the conditions which are necessary that we may attain to union with God are given in the Church.”<sup>16</sup> In a wonderfully complete passage, Lossky writes about the process of agents of deification:

All created nature, spiritual or corporeal, is equally alienated from the uncreated nature of God. However according to the world of St. Peter all are called to become ‘partakers of the divine nature.’ [2 Peter 1:4] Only the Word is the Son by nature, but by the fact of the Incarnation we become ‘sons by participation’ (μέθεξις). To participate in the divinity of the Son, in the community divinity of the Trinity, is to be deified, to be penetrated by divinity—just as the red-hot iron in the fire is penetrated by the heat of the fire—allowing the beauty of the inexpressible nature of the Trinity to shine in us. We are deified by the Holy Spirit who makes us likenesses of the Son, the perfect image of the Father. We become like the Son—‘sons by participation’—by participating in the divine nature, by being united to God in the Holy Spirit. We are deified by the Son in the Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup>

For Lossky, this participation is complete but does not cross the Creator-creation boundaries because of the Eastern Orthodox distinction of essence and energies. An extended discussion of this distinction can be seen in section 3.2.2 above, but I will quote Lossky at length in order to allow him to explain the distinction himself:

What is the nature of the relationship by which we are able to enter into union with the Holy Trinity? If we were able at a given moment to be united to the very essence of God and to participate in it even in the very least degree, we should not at the moment be what we are, we should be God by nature. God would then no longer be Trinity, but ‘μυριοπόστατος’, ‘of myriads of hypostases’; for He would have as many hypostases as there would be persons participating in His essence. God, therefore, is and remains inaccessible to us in His essence. But can we then say that it is with one of the three divine *Persons* that we enter into union? This would be the hypostatic union proper to the Son alone, in whom God becomes man without ceasing to be the second Person of the Trinity. Even though we share the same human nature as Christ and receive in Him the name of sons of God, we do not ourselves become the divine hypostasis of the Son by the fact of the Incarnation. We are unable, therefore, to participate in either the essence or the hypostases of the Holy Trinity. Nevertheless the divine promise cannot be an illusion: we *are* called to

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<sup>16</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 179.

<sup>17</sup> Lossky, *Vision*, 81.

participate in the divine nature. We are therefore compelled to recognize in God an ineffable distinction, other than that between His essence and His persons, according to which He is, under different aspects, both totally inaccessible and at the same time accessible. This distinction is that between the essence of God, or His nature, properly so-called, which is inaccessible, unknowable and incommunicable; and the energies or divine operations, forces proper to and inseparable from God's essence, in which He goes forth from Himself, manifests, communicates, and gives Himself... Thus, according to St. Gregory Palamas, 'to say that the divine nature is communicable not in itself but through its energy, is to remain within the bounds of right devotion'.<sup>18</sup>

So, if the "high" participation of humanity in God is with the true God, but with his communicable energies rather than his incommunicable essence, then the Creator-creation boundaries are preserved and humanity remains distinct from God while still fully participating in true God. Lossky's use of *perichoresis* in the "strict" sense, because it makes no mention of humanity, allows him to make any statements on participation with the divine, including the traditional Eastern Orthodox view of *theosis* which he defends throughout his work.

After this exploration we can conclude that it is perfectly reasonable to move from "strict" *perichoresis* to "high" participation, namely in the Eastern Orthodox tradition of *theosis*. Similar to the previous section, because the "strict" usage of *perichoresis* makes no commitments concerning humanity (as it is completely left out of any discussion of the perichoretic relations), it is perfectly valid to move to a "high" view of participation. Lossky provides us with an excellent example of utilizing *perichoresis* only to describe the unique interpenetration of the persons of the Godhead, and thereby avoids any association of the concept with human participation. In this way, a movement from "strict" *perichoresis* to "high" participation is perfectly acceptable.

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<sup>18</sup> Lossky, *Vision*, 69-70. The final statement is a quotation from Gregory Palamas, *Theophanies*, (PG 150.937D).

Similar to the movement from “strict” *perichoresis* to “low” participation, because the nature of “strict” *perichoresis* does not connect it in any way to a position of human participation with the divine, the (non)connection does not have much of an impact on other areas of systematic theology. Like the first movement, trinitarian theology is untouched by this (non)connection and so *perichoresis* does its theological work only in the area of the interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity. The anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology of one who holds to this movement will all be conditioned only by one’s views of participation with the divine as “high” (*theosis*). The concept of *perichoresis* does not come to bear on any of them, because it is only describing a reality in the Godhead.

#### 4.1.3 “Strict” Perichoresis to “Highest” Participation – Robert Jenson

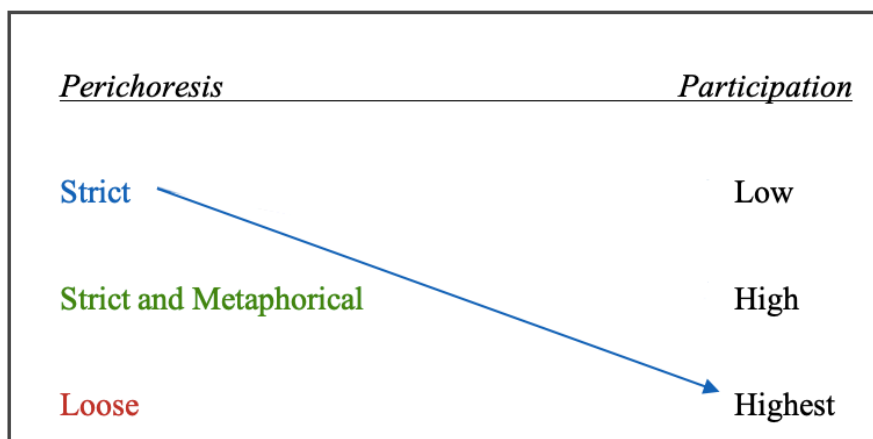


Figure 4

The third and final option available to theologians who utilize *perichoresis* in only its “strict” form is a position of “highest” participation. The logic is equally simple here and states that because the theologian excludes humanity from any interaction with God in their understanding of the concept of *perichoresis*, he or she is logically free to

describe any form of participation between God and humanity, including a “highest” form of participation.

For those theologians that choose to use *perichoresis* in its strictest sense (to refer only to the relations of the Godhead), the widest range of usage is allowed concerning the concept of human participation with the divine. In fact, Robert Jenson, the archetypal example of “highest” participation presented in section 3.2.3 above, is careful throughout his writing to exclusively use *perichoresis* only in the most restricted sense, and he could be used as a great example of the “strict” *perichoresis* category. In order to highlight this versatility of “strict” *perichoresis*, I will show how Robert Jenson separates his use of *perichoresis* from any commitments when it comes to participation. For Jenson, the concept of *perichoresis* is exclusively utilized when describing the divine Godhead and he arrives at his conclusions of human participation with the divine from a very different direction.

Definitionally, the first mention of *perichoresis* in Jenson’s Systematic Theology comes as a brief explanatory term that he equates with “communal life.”<sup>19</sup> In this and every other place where he describes *perichoresis*, Jenson is careful to never include humanity within the bounds of the term. When discussing creation as being an act of communication of God, Jenson states, “...the motive of creation, more precisely located, is a moment in the triune *perichoresis*, in which the *Logos*, the inner-triune Communication, is himself one who communicates.”<sup>20</sup> Even when discussing the Johannine texts that some cite for including humanity in the *perichoresis* of the divine Godhead, Jenson instead states that it is the “community chosen in the triune

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<sup>19</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 214. (As in section 3.2.3 above, Jenson’s *Systematic Theology* noted as Jenson, *ST I* or *ST II*).

<sup>20</sup> Jenson, *ST II*.19.



perichoresis.”<sup>21</sup> The concept of *perichoresis* remains here, as it does everywhere else in Jenson’s work, as a descriptor for the relations within the Trinity only. The community is not participating in the triune *perichoresis* but was chosen by the divine participants of that *perichoresis*. Jenson again defines *perichoresis* as a concept reserved only for the Trinity, that “their intricately ‘interweaving dance,’ their mutually active commonality as persons distinctly identified precisely and only by their relations with one another, and just so with utter reliability.”<sup>22</sup> He goes on to explain that humanity cannot be included in an understanding of *perichoresis* because human community “lacks any structure like the definite three of the divine *perichoresis*[.]”<sup>23</sup> When Jenson speaks of *perichoresis*, here and in other places,<sup>24</sup> he only does so in the “strict” sense, where the term is reserved only when describing the Trinity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Jenson, *ST* II.177.

<sup>22</sup> Robert W. Jenson, "Gratia Non Tollit Naturam Sed Perficit," *Pro Ecclesia* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 51.

<sup>23</sup> Jenson, "Gratia Non Tollit Naturam Sed Perficit," 51.

<sup>24</sup> Jenson notes that any world made by God would have to be “some counterpart of the divine perichoresis, merely in its character as mutual movement.” Jenson, *ST* II.129 and Jenson’s musical language reaches its peak when describing the *perichoresis* of the Godhead. He writes, “The phrase ‘the one God’ directs us finally to the sheer perichoresis of Father, Son, and Spirit, and that is to their communal music...God is a great fugue.” Jenson, *ST* I.236.

<sup>25</sup> However, the closest Jenson comes to a “strict and metaphorical” account of *perichoresis* is when he states, “We may from this viewpoint summarize previous teaching: the world is what Father, Son, and Spirit command in order to ordain a community that can include others with themselves. This, we may suppose, would be true of any world the real God would create. Moreover, any world could exist only as a referent of the triune conversation, and any world would therefore be as flexible to that conversation as is the actual one. That is, any world would be some counterpart of the divine perichoresis, merely in its character as mutual movement.” Jenson, *ST* II.129. However, because he is describing the world not as experiencing *perichoresis* (which would be “loose”) nor as being an image of *perichoresis* (which would be “strict and metaphorical”), but only as being a product of the *perichoresis* and its counterpart, Jenson can remain in the “strict” category of usage for *perichoresis*.

Jenson provides us with a glimpse into the movement from *perichoresis* to participation in chapter fourteen of his first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, which is titled simply, “Our Place in God.” In this context, he explains, *perichoresis* is “‘righteousness’ in that it is a perfect harmony in which each of the divine persons fully accepts what he is for the others.”<sup>26</sup> In the next paragraph, he offers a glimpse into human participation with the divine, but with the concept of righteousness, not *perichoresis*. He writes, “Our inclusion in the triune discourse is an initiation into the triune harmony, into God’s righteousness.”<sup>27</sup> Although he made a direct connection between righteousness and *perichoresis* in the previous paragraph, Jenson is intentional to avoid any use of the terminology of *perichoresis* when describing human activity. Later, when discussing the beauty of the being of God, Jenson comments, “The harmony of Father, Son, and Spirit, the triune perichoresis, transcends its character as goodness because it has no purpose beyond itself, being itself God. And the harmony of a discourse thus taken for itself and for the sake of itself, as its beauty, its aesthetic entity.”<sup>28</sup> Here, Jenson’s exclusivity regarding the terminology of *perichoresis* as only pertaining to the Godhead is evident. The triune *perichoresis* is itself God and has no purpose beyond itself, it does not include humanity as a perichoretic participant. The usage is “strict” and exclusive, not giving any indication towards being either a “strict and metaphorical” or “loose” interpretation of *perichoresis*.

Because Jenson restricts his understanding of *perichoresis* to only the persons of the Trinity, and not to include humanity, he is free to make any claims about human

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<sup>26</sup> Jenson, *ST* I.230.

<sup>27</sup> Jenson, *ST* I.230-31.

<sup>28</sup> Jenson, *ST* I.235.

participation in the divine that he would like. As we have explored in section 3.2.3 above, Jenson is a prime example of the “highest” category of participation. I will not reexamine everything here again but will provide a brief summary of Jenson’s thoughts on participation to show how his use of *perichoresis* in no way inhibits the statements he is able to make when it comes to participation.

Through the development of Jenson’s thought, especially from his understanding of Trinity, ecclesiology, and eschatology, Jenson affirms that the *telos* of humanity is in a complete, metaphysical unity with God. This unity is complete and final, not requiring any sustaining work from the Spirit.<sup>29</sup> Jenson arrives at this complete unity by first identifying the Trinity as being constituted in dramatic coherence and known by the name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His trinitarian theology is quite dependent upon the doctrine of *perichoresis* for it describes that which constitutes the divine Godhead. From here, Jenson moves to an understanding of ecclesiology wherein the Church is the body of Christ, not metaphysically or figuratively, but literally. From here it is easy to see how Jenson’s eschatology includes a view of the *telos* of the Church as being the *totus Christus* in every respect. Humanity is taken up into the infinite conversation that is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and experiences a oneness with God that is complete and mutual. We can see from the way Jenson structures his theology, that while he could utilize the doctrine of *perichoresis* in order to include humanity in the divine *perichoresis* as the ultimate participation, he instead approaches participation from a different starting point, while still ending with his “highest” view of participation between God and humanity.

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<sup>29</sup> Jenson, *ST* II.339.

Finally, after examining this example of moving from “strict” *perichoresis* to “highest” participation, let us turn our attention towards a brief summary of the validity of this movement. Just as in the other movements from “strict” *perichoresis* which, by definition, make no commitments concerning humanity (as it is completely left out of any discussion of the divine perichoretic relations), it is logically valid to move to any form of participation, including this “highest” category. Jensen provides us with a prime example of utilizing *perichoresis* only to describe the unique interpenetration of the persons of the Godhead, and thereby avoiding any association of the term with human participation. Although he could approach his understanding of human participation with the divine by means of utilizing *perichoresis*, Jensen is careful to keep that term reserved only for relations among the persons of the Godhead. Jensen is well within logical reason to speak of *perichoresis* in such a “strict” way and then also discuss human participation with the divine in the “highest” way.

Similar to the movement from “strict” *perichoresis* to “low” participation and from “strict” *perichoresis* to “high” participation, this movement also has minimal impact on other areas of systematic theology. Certainly the two concepts themselves have much to say about the Trinity, humanity, salvation, the church, and the last things, but the movement between the two (because they are not logically connected) does not impact those areas at all. Like the first two movements, trinitarian theology is untouched by this (non)connection and so *perichoresis* does its theological work only in the area of the interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity. It may be that humanity experiences a kind of participation with God that is very open in the “roominess” of God, but all of those statements are contained within one’s view of human participation with the divine. *Perichoresis*, in this movement, does not inform the way that humanity experiences this participation in the eschaton, so the movement itself does not provide

us with any impact on trinitarian theology. For Jenson, the *perichoresis* of the Godhead is a different phenomenon altogether than what humanity experiences. These phenomena may be similar, but they are always kept strictly separate (one for the experience of God, the other for the experience of humanity), so however one describes the “loose” human participation with God, it cannot be said to be perichoretic. Similarly, the anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology of one who holds to this movement will all be conditioned only by one’s views of participation with the divine. The concept of *perichoresis* does not come to bear on any of them, because it is only describing a reality in the Godhead. In conclusion, even though the individual concepts themselves have great impact on other areas of systematic theology, it is clear that the movements allowed by “strict” *perichoresis* to any category of usage for “participation” offer the least amount of residual impact on doctrines outside of themselves. This minimal impact is a positive byproduct of utilizing *perichoresis* only in the “strict” sense.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> While this may be true, I also understand that a pragmatic outcome of least impact is certainly not a good reason in itself to choose to use *perichoresis* in the “strict” sense. I am merely expressing one potentially positive byproduct of this choice.

#### 4.2 Participation Categories Available to “Strict and Metaphorical” *Perichoresis*

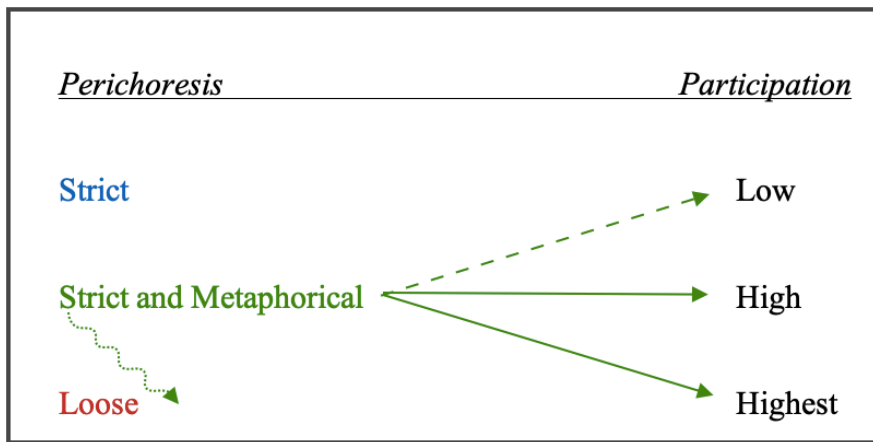


Figure 5

Members of the category of “strict and metaphorical” usage for *perichoresis* are potentially more limited in the categories of participation allowed to them than the “strict” users. This slight limitation is due to the danger that often (though not always) accompanies the way these scholars use metaphors. The logical movement from “strict and metaphorical” use of *perichoresis* to participation can be visualized by figure 5 above.

In order to understand the danger of slipping from “strict and metaphorical” to “loose” (represented by the descending step-like line in the bottom left of figure 5), I will begin by providing a brief discussion on metaphor before moving on to evaluate the three options for “strict and metaphorical” users of *perichoresis*.

##### 4.2.1 Metaphors: A Brief Excursus

Metaphors or comparisons by analogy as such can be extremely helpful and need not limit one’s options when it comes to making claims about human participation. A metaphor by definition implies a connection between two concepts, while denying

that the two are identical. When the Psalmist wrote that God was his rock, fortress, shield, and the horn of salvation,<sup>31</sup> he was not describing the physical properties of God or claiming that God could be either contained in or exactly identified with those material objects. Likewise, he was not attempting to instantiate any specific claims about rocks, fortresses, shields, or horns. Instead, those words are used to describe similarities between the concept of God—a concept that is difficult to understand—and concepts related to certain material objects—concepts with which the audience has familiarity. Similarly, scholars who fit into the “strict and metaphorical” category are not explicitly making any claims about the human relations they are using as a metaphor but are instead only making explanatory claims about the divine relations.

A metaphor is a rhetorical tool by which one word or concept is used figuratively in order to describe an aspect or aspects of a seemingly disparate word or concept. There are two parts to every metaphor, the primary subject and the secondary subject.<sup>32</sup> The primary subject is that which is being discussed; the thing which ought to be taken literally. The secondary subject is that which is being compared to the primary subject and is that which ought to be taken figuratively. So, when David speaks of God as a rock, God is the primary subject, and rock is the secondary subject. God is the subject we are discussing, that which we are taking literally and wanting to learn more about, while rock is the subject that has properties comparable to that of God, namely strength (or durability, or immovability, etc.), and is to be taken figuratively. It is important to keep the directionality of a metaphor consistent, in that we are trying to

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<sup>31</sup> See Psalm 18.

<sup>32</sup> David Hills, “Metaphor” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Stanford University, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/metaphor/>.

learn about the primary subject (a difficult concept such as God) by examining the secondary subject (a more easily understandable subject such as a rock), and not the other way around. By saying God is a rock, we are not trying to understand more about a rock, but more about God. The language is thus used in a rather open-ended way in order to draw the listener into a greater understanding of a difficult concept by comparison with a concept more easily accessible. In this way, a true metaphor of *perichoresis* that compares divine perichoretic relations with human relations (either in marriage, the church, or otherwise) does not necessarily make any claims about the connection between the human and divine relations; the claims are being made instead about either the divine relations or the human relations themselves (depending on which is the primary and which is the secondary subject in the metaphor).

What is surprising, however, is that the normal directionality of metaphors is in using a more easily understandable secondary subject as the figurative metaphor for a more difficult primary subject about which the speaker is trying to describe. However, with most scholars in my “strict and metaphorical” category, they take the opposite approach; the more difficult subject—the perichoretic union of the Godhead—is used in order to try and shed light on a simpler subject—the union of a man and woman in marriage, for example. To cite an example from section 2.2.1 above, Apostola states, “one could draw on the concept of the *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling) of the persons of the Holy Trinity as a way of understanding the true nature of the church and ultimately human society itself.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Gunton states, “a doctrine of human perichoresis affirms [...] that persons mutually constitute each other, make each other what they are. That is why Christian theology affirms that in marriage the man and the

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<sup>33</sup> Apostola, "Mutual Accountability," 301.



woman become one flesh.”<sup>34</sup> This directionality would be similar to a hypothetical instance of the Psalmist trying to understand a fortress by considering God. If the purpose of a metaphor is to shed light on a difficult subject by comparing it to a more understandable subject, then it is confusing to see how the lofty and mysterious subject of the mutual interpenetration of the persons of the Godhead would be useful in order to more fully understand human relations. However, despite either directionality in a pure metaphor of *perichoresis*, the writer is not necessarily making any claims about the connection or identification between the primary subject and the secondary subject. Instead, by definition, they are making comparisons between aspects or traits of the two subjects.

It is for this reason that the “strict and metaphorical” category is distinguished from my “loose” category. A scholar who explains *perichoresis* as an interpenetration that is only truly experienced by the Godhead is using the term, in its purest sense, to make claims only about the Godhead. The metaphor in this example would only be used to try to explain the concept of divine *perichoresis* without making claims about whether or not humanity was included in this divine *perichoresis*.

However, there is a danger in using metaphor in this way because of the temptation to read more into the metaphor than it allows. It is one thing to say, for example, “the perichoretic union of the persons of the Godhead is complete and whole, allowing for unity without confusion of persons; marriage is similar in that it ought to include a similarly intimate union where the two become one, allowing for unity without confusion of persons.” It is another thing entirely to then say that “human married persons experience perichoretic unity.” This, then, is the danger. Unless one

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<sup>34</sup> Gunton, *One, Three, Many*, 169.

hedges their metaphors carefully throughout their usage, it is easy to slip into language that allows for confusion and inconsistency.

As an additional aspect to my exploration of these logical movements, I will provide an evaluation of each example scholar’s use of *perichoretic* metaphors and how effectively (or ineffectively) they qualify their metaphors for use in this category, and whether or not they ought to be considered instead for the “loose” category of usage for *perichoresis*.

4.2.2 “Strict and Metaphorical” Perichoresis to “Low” Participation – Patricia Wilson-Kastner

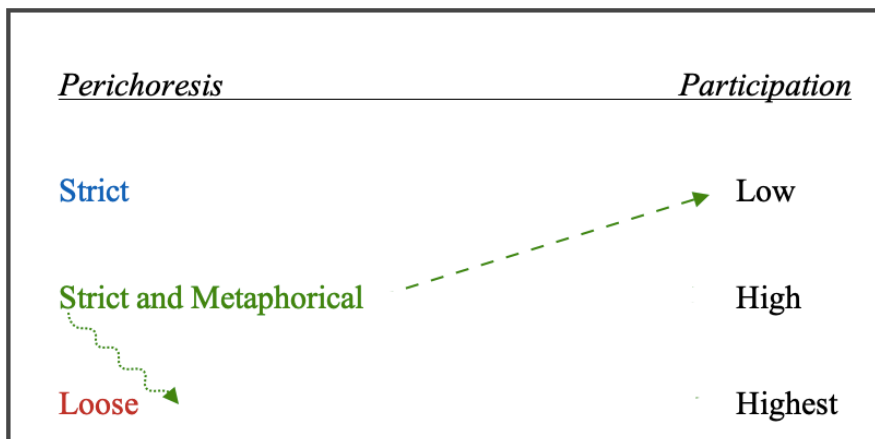


Figure 6

The first movement we must examine for theologians who utilize *perichoresis* in its “strict and metaphorical” form is to a position of “low” participation. The logic here states that because the theologian excludes humanity from any interaction with God in their formal understanding of the concept of *perichoresis*, he or she is free to describe a “low” form of participation with God. However, as was pointed out in section 2.2.2 above, the danger of slippage from “strict and metaphorical” *perichoresis* into the

“loose” category due to the use of metaphorical language can make it difficult for theologians to stay true to a “low” participation.

Patricia Wilson-Kastner offers a prime example of the “strict and metaphorical” category of usage for the concept of *perichoresis*. Although she defines the term explicitly using language taken from John of Damascus, she follows others in attempting to mine the concept for metaphorical value. For Wilson-Kastner, the value of the concept of *perichoresis* is in that it provides the prime example of equality among diversity, an idea she follows for the case of feminism. Wilson-Kastner begins by using the original ideas of John of Damascus to define *perichoresis* as “the notion that each of the persons of the Trinity ‘not only subsists in the common divine substance; they also exist in their relation to the other Persons.’”<sup>35</sup> In this way she sets up her definition as potentially fitting in the “strict” category. However, she immediately moves on to describe the utilitarian value of the concept of *perichoresis* for the feminist cause. She states, “Because feminism identifies interrelatedness and mutuality—equal, respectful, and nurturing relationships—as the basis of the world as it really is and as it ought to be, we can find no better understanding and image of the divine than that of the perfect and open relationships of love.”<sup>36</sup> She goes on to explain that “as a metaphor, it is imperfect and ultimately breaks down if pushed too far. But for a feminist, the divine trinitarian dance<sup>37</sup> is a far more appealing, inclusive, and revealing sign of the divine than the two

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<sup>35</sup> Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ*, 126. Here, Wilson-Kastner is quoting Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 174-75.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ*, 127.

<sup>37</sup> In a previous paragraph on the same page, Wilson-Kastner follows Robert Kress in incorrectly identifying the etymology of *perichoresis* as “to dance around” and uses the terminology of dancing to refer to *perichoresis* throughout this section. See section 2.1 above and Kress, “The Church as Communion,” 140; and his retraction of this in Kress, *The Church: Communion, Sacrament, Communication*, 17-18.

seated white males and a dove, or a divine unity, male or female in image.”<sup>38</sup> Here we can see that she identifies the limits of her metaphor and understands that it ought not be taken too far. Humanity cannot fully participate in the same *perichoresis* as the persons of the Trinity, for that level of complete interpenetration is reserved only for divine persons. However, as the slippery slope of the “strict and metaphorical” category often leads, her metaphor does push too close to the “loose” category when she states, “In the universe the divine *perichoresis* summons everyone to join it in trinitarian eternal harmony.”<sup>39</sup> By making a statement which claims that everyone is invited to join in the trinitarian *perichoresis*, Wilson-Kastner is extremely close to committing herself to the concept that humanity has the capacity to participate in the perichoretic unity of Father, Son, and Spirit. If this were the case, then she would be a sure case for falling into the “loose” category.<sup>40</sup> However, because of her statements about the limits of her metaphor, her language allows her to remain conceptually in the “strict and metaphorical” category instead.

Now that we have identified Wilson-Kastner as a member of the “strict and metaphorical” category, let us turn to her position on human participation with the divine. Although Wilson-Kastner does not focus much attention on her own theology of human participation, she does explore the concepts of partaking of the divine nature and the doctrine of grace in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Bonaventure, and

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<sup>38</sup> Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ*, 127.

<sup>39</sup> Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ*, 127.

<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere, Wilson-Kastner defines *perichoresis* as “a unity and interconnection of equals.” Ruth C. Duck and Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Praising God: The Trinity in Christian Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 122. If this were her only definition of the concept, then a “loose” rendering would be much more appropriate. However, because of her elucidation in *Faith, Feminism, & The Christ*, she belongs rightly in the “strict and metaphorical” category.

Luther (among others). Although she remains mostly separate from the discussions in that she does not provide much of her own theology in them, she makes a few key statements in other works that allude to her appropriate position in the “low” participation (communion) category. When discussing the importance of preaching the theology of grace, Wilson-Kastner comments on the eschatological goal of creation, stating, “Speaking theologically, the end, the *telos* for which God created the world, is to exist in communion with God.”<sup>41</sup> Later in the same article she comments on how humanity ought to be delighted with the opportunity to have “communion with God.”<sup>42</sup> This communion, for Wilson-Kastner, is certainly influenced by the varied doctrines of participation as found in Gregory, Augustine, and Luther, but when describing her own understanding of the concept she chooses terminology that explicitly separates her from any idea of *theosis* (in the Eastern Orthodox sense). She certainly could have employed the language of deification as found in Gregory, but her low-level language of “communion” keeps her away from the “high” category of human participation with the divine.

In her article exploring God’s infinity in the thought of Gregory and Edwards, Wilson-Kastner offers us a glimpse into her own views while commentating on the positions of these two scholars. She writes of the goal of creation as being in “infinitely closer union with God.”<sup>43</sup> Later she expresses how finite humans can participate in the

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<sup>41</sup> Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "Preaching the Theology of Grace," *Saint Luke's Journal of Theology* 29, no. 4 (1986): 288.

<sup>42</sup> Wilson-Kastner, "Preaching the Theology of Grace," 288.

<sup>43</sup> Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "God's Infinity and His Relationship to Creation in the Theologies of Gregory of Nyssa and Jonathan Edwards," *Foundations* 21, no. 4 (1978): 319. This is similar to the image of an asymptote that Crisp mentions, see section 3.2.1.2 above.

infinite God, stating, “God’s infinity is a perfect act of communion between Father, Son, and Spirit, and creation is a finite image of God’s infinity in its unending progress of the partaking of his life.”<sup>44</sup> In these examples we can also see how Wilson-Kastner has the potential to utilize “high” or “highest” language to describe participation, but she intentionally remains “low” in her understanding of human participation with the divine. Keeping her language to discussing “communion” and “closer union,” Wilson-Kastner remains solidly within the bounds of the “low” participation category.

Now that we have examined this example of the movement from “strict and metaphorical” *perichoresis* to “low” participation, let us turn to an analysis of the merits of this movement. Given the correct metaphorical boundaries, it is perfectly logical to move from a truly “strict” view of *perichoresis* to a “low” participation. The trouble comes with the slippage that metaphors often contain. For Wilson-Kastner, the acknowledgement of the limits of her metaphor allow her to remain logically capable of moving to “low” participation, but only barely. The slippage that she allows with her language accounts for some ambiguity in her meaning, and this lack of clarity could be avoided. This possible slippage is indicated in figure 6 above by the dotted line leading from “strict and metaphorical” to “loose” *perichoresis*. Because this slippage could account for an illogical move to “low” participation, the movement from “strict and metaphorical” *perichoresis* to “low” participation is indicated with a dashed line in figure 6.

Let us finally turn to an exploration of the impact that this movement has on other areas of systematic theology. First, the movement from “strict and metaphorical” *perichoresis* to “low” participation has the potential to be as simple as that experienced

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<sup>44</sup> Wilson-Kastner, "God's Infinity," 319.

by the first movement from “strict” *perichoresis* to “low” participation. The only issues arise with the potential “slippage” that comes from metaphorical language which could potentially bring the position into the “loose” category for *perichoresis*. In Wilson-Kastner’s example, the slippery language following her metaphor is, “In the universe the divine *perichoresis* summons everyone to join it in trinitarian eternal harmony.”<sup>45</sup> If everyone is called to join in perichoretic, trinitarian harmony (and if a call from a perfect God leads to a possible outcome where the call can be truly answered), then this certainly could have implications in multiple arenas. Firstly, this statement and statements like it could impact the ontological openness of the Trinity in a way that could potentially break down the Creator-creation distinction. Complete, mutual interpenetration of God with humanity would also impact anthropology, in that humanity would have the capacity for such an identification with God. Additionally, any account of soteriology and eschatology would need to include this sort of metaphysical union between God and humanity, whether the union was instantaneous or gradual. And finally, an account of ecclesiology would potentially be impacted because of the way that this call is to be answered by “everyone.” All in all, the slippery language that comes from metaphors has the potential to lead to many effects throughout our systematic theologies.

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<sup>45</sup> Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ*, 127.

4.2.3 “Strict and Metaphorical” Perichoresis to “High” Participation – Theoretical

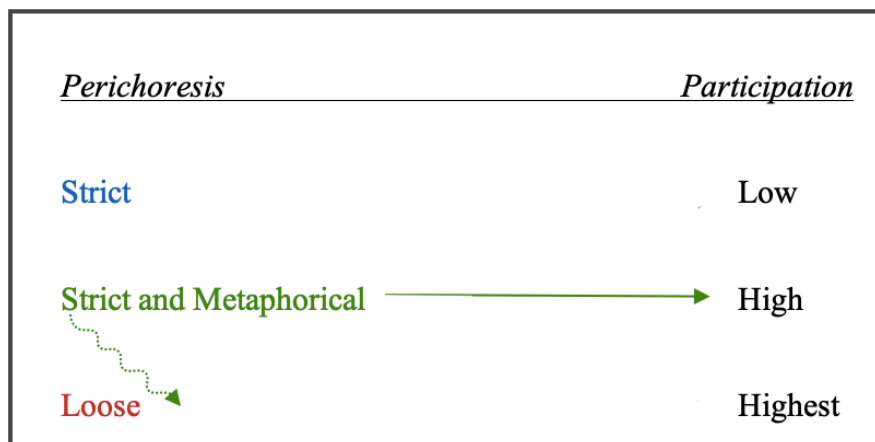


Figure 7

The second movement we will examine for theologians who utilize *perichoresis* in its “strict and metaphorical” form is a position of “high” participation. The logic here states that because the theologian excludes humanity from any interaction with God in their understanding of the concept of *perichoresis* as such, he or she is free to describe a “high” form of participation with God. As was pointed out before, there is still a danger of slippage from “strict and metaphorical” *perichoresis* into the “loose” category due to the use of metaphorical language. This slippage is less problematic in this movement because of the level of participation that is anticipated for humanity to experience with the Godhead.

Unfortunately, I have not been able to identify any theologian who makes this move from “strict and metaphorical” *perichoresis* to “high” participation. This “high” participation is most often expressed by Eastern Orthodox theologians, and so I was hopeful that I would be able to identify a clear example of this movement in the thought some prominent Orthodox theologian. Unfortunately (or fortunately), I was unable to find any such theologian, either from the East or West, promoting a “high” view of participation and also an explicit definition of *perichoresis* that was used in the “strict



and metaphorical” sense. For this reason, this is the only one of my nine movements that is currently, to my knowledge, purely theoretical. However, it is still possible to analyze the validity of such a movement, even if it is only theoretical.

A theologian who wishes to utilize *perichoresis* in a “strict and metaphorical” sense is technically logically allowed to make a movement to any of the three categories of participation. However, if said theologian is not careful in the boundaries of his or her metaphor, then it is a slippery slope which leads to an understanding of *perichoresis* that actually falls into the “loose” category. However, because the theologian moves to a “high” (*theosis*) view of participation with the divine, this slippery slope does not pose any problem. Whether a theologian remains “strict” in their purest understanding of *perichoresis* (like in section 4.1.2 above) or if they slip into a “loose” understanding of *perichoresis* (like in section 4.3.2 below), they are equally valid in making claims about participation that fall into this “high” category. The level of participation with the divine that humanity experiences in a “high” view of participation is one that can make room for a “loose” understanding of *perichoresis*, especially if there exists a distinction between the essence and energies of God. With this in mind, a movement from “strict and metaphorical” *perichoresis* to “high” participation is logically valid.

It is difficult to assess the impact of a theoretical theological movement, but I will simply state here that the impacts which affect all “strict and metaphorical” users of *perichoresis* (including those who move to a “low” or “highest” view of human participation with the divine) have the potential to impact this movement as well. In the areas of Trinity, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, this movement may have ripple effects based on the quality of the metaphor and its boundaries.

4.2.4 “Strict and Metaphorical” Perichoresis to “Highest” Participation – Leonardo Boff

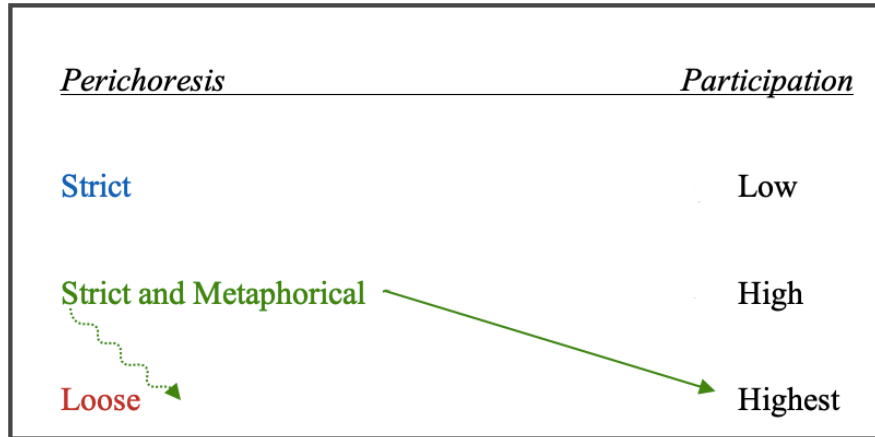


Figure 8

The final movement to examine for theologians who utilize *perichoresis* in its “strict and metaphorical” form is a position of “highest” participation. The logic here states that because the theologian excludes humanity from any interaction with God in their understanding of the concept of *perichoresis* as such, he or she is free to describe a “highest” form of participation with God. As was pointed out before, while there is still a danger of slippage from “strict and metaphorical” *perichoresis* into the “loose” category due to the use of metaphorical language, this slippage is even less problematic in this movement because of the level of participation that is anticipated for humanity to experience with the Godhead. In fact, the slippage could be used to the advantage of the scholar who wants to make an explicit connection between *perichoresis* and a “highest” level of human participation with the divine.

Leonardo Boff is one of the leaders of the liberation theology movement of the twentieth century and his seminal work, *Trinity and Society*, provides a look into his understanding of trinitarian relations. However, Boff is also quite difficult to categorize with both his view on *perichoresis* and his view on participation because of his mixture

of metaphor and the way he uses referents in his language (e.g. sometimes referring to *perichoresis* and union or communion interchangeably, other times distinguishing between them). Despite this, and after attempting to be view his theology as a whole, his position can be understood as moving from “strict and metaphorical” *perichoresis* to “highest” participation. Let us begin by examining his view of *perichoresis*.

Like many other scholars in either the “strict” or “strict and metaphorical” categories, Leonardo Boff explains that *perichoresis* was a word used to express what Jesus describes in John 10, 14, and 17 (Jesus and the Father are one, Jesus is in the Father, the Father is in Jesus). He points out that this term stresses “the eternal co-existence of the divine Persons and their respectiveness, that is, the relatedness they bear to one another.”<sup>46</sup> By providing a brief definition of *circumincessio* and *circuminsessio*, he also pulls out the active and passive ideas contained within the one term, *perichoresis*, writing, “Its first meaning is that of one thing being contained in another, dwelling in, being in another—a situation of fact, a static state...Its second meaning is active and signifies the interpenetration or interweaving of one Person with the others and in the others.”<sup>47</sup> He brings all of this together in order to define *perichoresis* as being “dynamic and reciprocal, a true indwelling” and argues that the *perichoresis* of the Son and Father as demonstrated by Jesus’ ministry is evidence for this kind of relation.<sup>48</sup> In this way, Boff uses the term *perichoresis* in its purest sense to refer only truly to the relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 135.

<sup>47</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 135-36.

<sup>48</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 138.

<sup>49</sup> In fact, in his glossary at the end of *Trinity and Society*, Boff leaves humanity completely out of his definition of *perichoresis*, which reads, “Greek term meaning literally that one Person contains the other two (static sense) or that each Person

However, like many other social trinitarians, Boff also sees the doctrine of the Trinity as a useful foundation on which to base human social relations. As such, he takes many aspects of trinitarian theology, not least of all *perichoresis*, and describes how they are relevant for human society (hence the title of the book). This relevance comes about most clearly when examining the church as an image of the Trinity:

The trinitarian vision produces a vision of a church that is more communion than hierarchy, more service than power, more circular than pyramidal, more loving embrace than bending the knee before authority.

Such a perichoretic model of the church would submit all ecclesial functions (episcopate, presbyterate, lay ministries, and so on) to the imperative of communion and participation by all in everything that concerns the good of all.<sup>50</sup>

Here we can see how he is using *perichoresis* as a model on which to define and build the church. It is not only in answering the call of Christ to be a community that the church fulfills its function, but it is precisely in reflecting, as a metaphor, the perichoretic nature of the triune God that the church truly bears witness to God. This comes most clearly to Boff in the context of liberation. He points to *perichoresis* in the Trinity as the model that motivates the church to liberation, writing, “From the perichoresis-communion of the three divine Persons derive impulses to liberation... The church is more the sacrament of trinitarian communion the more it reduces inequalities between Christians and between the various ministries in it, and the more it understands and practices unity as co-existence in diversity.”<sup>51</sup>

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interpenetrates the others, and so reciprocally (active sense). The derived adjective “perichoretic” deines the type of communion obtaining between the divine Persons.” Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 241.

<sup>50</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 154.

<sup>51</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 236-37. Emphasis original.

The final example of Boff's qualification for being in the "strict and metaphorical" category of usage for *perichoresis* actually comes at the very beginning of this book. In the first chapter, when Boff is setting up his whole argument, he describes the concept of divine *perichoresis* as being the ultimate metaphor for human community:

For those who have faith, the trinitarian communion between the divine Three, the union between them in love and vital interpenetration, can serve as a source of inspiration, as a utopian goal that generates models of successively diminishing differences. This is one of the reasons why I am taking the concept of perichoresis as the structural axis of these thoughts. It speaks to the oppressed in their quest and struggle for integral liberation. The community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit becomes the prototype of the human community dreamed of by those who wish to improve society and build it in such a way as to make it into the image and likeness of the Trinity.<sup>52</sup>

Boff follows this statement up with a short discussion on words and analogy, stating, "Faced with the ineffable Mystery, theology suffers from the acknowledged inadequacy of our human concepts and expressions. Applied to the Trinity, our terminology can have only analogical and indicative meaning; our words hide more than they reveal, however much of what is revealed corresponds to the reality of the divinity."<sup>53</sup> By qualifying his metaphor and expressing an admittance of the limits of his language, Boff attempts to remove himself from any formal slippage into the "loose" category of usage. We can see from all this, and especially by his use of *perichoresis* as the driving force which pushes the church to liberate the oppressed, that Boff clearly fits into the "strict and metaphorical" category of usage for *perichoresis*.

Despite this picture of Boff as one who remains uniform in his position of *perichoresis* as "strict and metaphorical," he provides us with a great example of the

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<sup>52</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 6-7.

<sup>53</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 7.

slippery slope that often accompanies this category of usage. The clearest example of this slippage comes about in the heart of his argument about the communion of the Trinity as the basis for liberation on earth:

St Paul and St John summon us to include all people and history in the perichoretic unity of the Trinity... [John 17:21]. This trinitarian unity is integrating and inclusive; its end is the full glorification of all creation in the triune God... This integration in the Trinity has to make its appearance in history, as ruptures in community are healed... In a way we can say that the Trinity still has a future to the extent that creation, which belongs to it, is still not fully taken up and integrated into the communion of the three divine Persons. Only when this has happened will the three Persons be one single, complete communion.<sup>54</sup>

This quotation exemplifies the slippery slope that leads from “strict and metaphorical” usage to “loose” usage, and why this slippery slope is a short step to “highest” participation. Boff first interprets John 17 as an invitation for humanity to participate in the *perichoresis* of the Trinity. Here already we see a blurring of the line between the formal definition of *perichoresis* as being “strict” but also motioning towards humanity. His definition still barely remains “strict” because it is the “perichoretic unity of the Trinity” that humanity is summoned to be included in; it is not the perichoretic unity of the Trinity and humanity. This is a minor but important difference. Even here, the *perichoresis* is that of the Trinity, and humanity is invited to participate in something that is not theirs. However, Boff does not stop there and instead goes on to elucidate his meaning by describing the goal of creation as being “integrated into the communion of the three divine Persons.” An integration is more than a participation, and as such, Boff slides directly into the “highest” form of participation.

The one extended quotation above is not the only point of slippage for Boff as a member of the “strict and metaphorical” category of usage for *perichoresis*. He also

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<sup>54</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 148.

shows evidence of this slippage in chapter one directly after he first defines *perichoresis* under his initially “strict” terminology. After giving a “strict” definition of *perichoresis* that makes no mention of humanity, Boff writes of the Trinity, “This union-communion-perichoresis opens outwards: invites human beings and the whole universe to insert themselves in the divine life: ‘May they be one in us...that they may be one as we are one’ (*hen*: John 17-21-2).”<sup>55</sup> He already has the seeds of his slippage to “loose” *perichoresis* evidenced in this opening up of trinitarian unity to humanity. Again, it is the *perichoresis* of the Trinity, not humanity, that creation is invited into. This invitation comes from an outward movement of the trinitarian persons in seeking to bring all of creation into the mutual love between them.

One can see, from these quotations, how Boff’s theology of *perichoresis* logically leads to a “highest” category of understanding for participation of humanity with the divine. By slipping into the realm of “loose” *perichoresis*, Boff includes humanity in the divine *perichoresis* and unites Creator with creation in the eschaton in ways that go beyond any “low” or even “high” views of participation. Boff expresses this eschatological expectation in several stages. First, he notes the roles of each person of the Trinity in the culmination of creation as being united with the divine life, writing, “The Trinity in creation seeks to insert creation in the Trinity...The whole mystery of creation will meet the mystery of the Father; all created beings will be confronted with their eternal prototype in the Son; the communion and union that binds all together will be seen as an expression of the Holy Spirit. Creation will be united forever to the mystery of life, love and communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”<sup>56</sup> However, this

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<sup>55</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 6.

<sup>56</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 230.

unity could still potentially be placed in my “low” participation (communion) category if Boff left his explanation here. It is a unity which, if this passage is taken by itself, only describes communion and union. However, he goes on to explain this unity a bit more fully by explaining that men and women “will be united to the divine Three in love and tenderness so as to be united in tenderness and love to all created beings. The universe in the triune God will be the body of the Trinity, showing forth, in the limited form of creation, the full possibility of the communion of the divine Three.”<sup>57</sup> Here again, we see Boff inching his way to an eschatology that involves humanity being completely united (absorbed?) in the Trinity. This statement even sounds vaguely reminiscent of Robert Jenson, our archetype of the “highest” participation category, in seeing creation as the body of the Trinity.<sup>58</sup> The final validation that Boff belongs in the “highest” participation category comes when he describes the *telos* of all creation: “The universe exists in order to manifest the abundance of divine communion. The final meaning of all that is created is to allow the divine Persons to communicate themselves. So in the eschatological fullness, the universe—in the mode proper to each creature,<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 231.

<sup>58</sup> Although Robert Jenson’s vision is distinguished from Boff’s in that Jenson sees the church as the actual body of Christ, rather than seeing all of creation as the body of the Trinity, as Boff does here.

<sup>59</sup> This single clause, “in the mode proper to each creature” is what causes Boff to be so difficult to categorize. He fails to explain what this proper mode might be or to what extent the insertion into the communion of the Trinity would be corporate or individual, spiritual or metaphysical, partial or complete. After reading all of the relevant works by Leonardo Boff I have not been able to find any further elucidation on his position in this concept. It is for this reason that Boff is placed in this “highest” participation category. However, if he dives deeper into explaining his views on human participation in the eschaton in future works, I would be delighted to add to my understanding of his theology and adjust his thoughts into the appropriate category. To see more of Boff’s views on the topics of *perichoresis* or participation, see Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 175-83; Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time*, trans. Patrick Hughes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 187; Leonardo Boff, *Church:*



culminating in man and woman in the likeness of Jesus of Nazareth and Mary—will be inserted into the very communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Then the Trinity will be all in all.”<sup>60</sup> This last statement, that all creation will be inserted into the communion of the Trinity, describes almost definitionally the “highest” position for participation. With the Trinity as “all in all” in the way that Boff is describing, humanity becomes intermingled in the communion of love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in a way that goes beyond current human capacity (i.e. human beings cannot mutually interpenetrate one another or any other thing).

Now that we have explored the logic of this movement and an example exemplifying its place in the thought of modern theologians, let us turn to a brief analysis as to the validity of such a movement. From a logical standpoint, Boff and others who might fall into these categories, are permitted to move from either “strict and metaphorical” *perichoresis* or “loose” *perichoresis* to the “highest” category of usage for participation. Whether the theologian’s concept of *perichoresis* remains “strict and metaphorical”—formally excluding humanity from divine *perichoresis*—or it slips into the “loose” understanding of *perichoresis*—where humanity experiences perichoretic unity with the Trinity—he or she is logically permitted to move to a “highest” category of understanding of participation. If the usage of *perichoresis* remains properly “strict and metaphorical” then it makes no claims about humanity, and so the theologian is free to choose from any category of participation, including the “highest” category. Additionally, if the usage of *perichoresis* slips into the “loose” category, then because

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*Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, trans. John W. Kiercksmeier (London: SCM Press, 1985), 144-53.

<sup>60</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 237.

humanity is being included in the perichoretic unity of the Trinity, then the “highest” category of participation is actually the most valid (see section 4.3.3 below).

This clearly has impacts on many other doctrines in systematic theology. A movement like this from “strict and metaphorical” *perichoresis* to “highest” participation shows that the Trinity ought to be the model and goal of human relations. We ought to model our relations after the example of the Trinity, and we ought to position our lives so that we can enter into complete union with God, that the whole universe can “be inserted into the very communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” as Boff states.<sup>61</sup> Anthropologically, soteriologically, and eschatologically, this means that the purpose of humanity is this insertion into the divine. In ecclesiology, we ought to look to relations of the persons of the Trinity to see how we ought to relate to one another in the Church. This movement, especially when done in a way that slips from one category into another, causes a chain reaction in many other doctrines.

Additionally, whether or not the move is logically valid does not endorse it as clean theology. The slippage from “strict and metaphorical” to “loose” *perichoresis* is precisely the lack of clarity that inspired this project in the first place. Inconsistency in usage of a single concept in the course of a single work is not the precision that should be expected in theology. Instead, theologians ought to strive for consistency and lucidity in all areas of their theological systems. With this in mind, the “strict and metaphorical” category of usage for *perichoresis* should be avoided. Instead, scholars can consider using alternate concepts when if desiring to make metaphors of divine concepts for use in humanity; alternate concepts for *perichoresis* that might be acceptable for metaphors could include union, communion, intimacy, relationship, unity, or fellowship, to name

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<sup>61</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 237.

but a few. These terms describe elements of the inter-trinitarian relations without going as far as *perichoresis*. Based on the slippage that is so easy when using *perichoresis* as a metaphor, it is best instead to choose whether or not one wishes the term to remain in the “strict” category or accept the position of the “loose” category. However, as we will see in the next section, the possibilities for those who choose to use *perichoresis* in this “loose” category are more limited when it comes to providing logical options for participation.

#### 4.3 Participation Categories Available to “Loose” *Perichoresis*

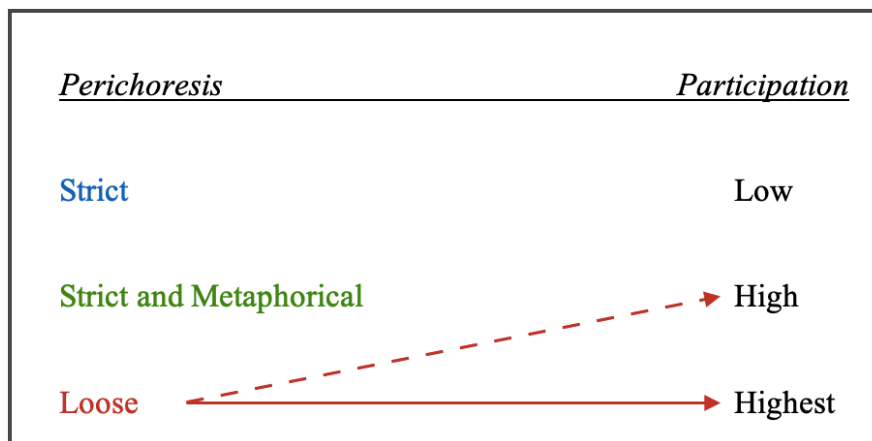


Figure 9

“Loose” *perichoresis* provides the most limited range of usage for *participation* in my system. Because of the extent to which humanity participates in the divine in their understanding of *perichoresis*, scholars must either stick to a “high” or “highest” view of participation or be inconsistent in the way they view participation. Scholars in this category use *perichoresis* to include humanity as participants in the interpenetrating relations of the Godhead, and so they are already making statements about human participation in the divine. A scholar who uses *perichoresis* in the “loose” way as I have described it is most logically required to discuss participation in the “highest”

(identification) way, unless he or she creates some extreme boundaries and enters into a “high” (theosis) understanding of participation. For this reason, the movement from “loose” *perichoresis* to “high” participation is listed with a dotted line in the figure above. Scholars in the “loose” *perichoresis* category are inconsistent if they attempt to posit a “low” (communion) view of participation, which is why there is no arrow connecting “loose” *perichoresis* to “low” participation in figure 9.

#### 4.3.1 “Loose” Perichoresis to “Low” Participation – John Jefferson Davis

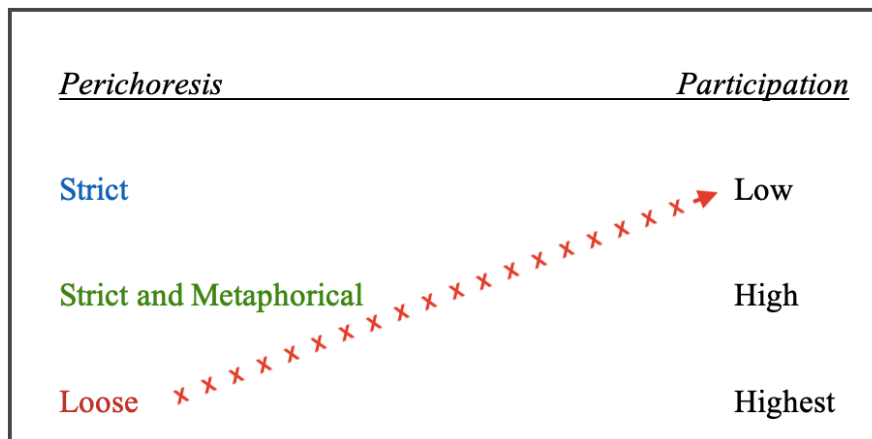


Figure 10

The jump from “loose” *perichoresis* to “low” participation is the least logically allowable of all nine possibilities being examined in this chapter and is the primary reason that this project was initially undertaken.<sup>62</sup> Over the past half-century, with the resurgence of scholars examining trinitarian theology and mining the early church fathers for answers, the concept of *perichoresis* has rushed to the forefront of many

<sup>62</sup> Whereas the overview figures (figure 9 above and figure 13 below) do not even include a line connecting “loose” *perichoresis* with “low” participation, for the purpose of this section, this (non)movement is represented as a crossed-out line in figure 10.

discussions. With many scholars employing the term in so many different ways as to merit a project like this that has to categorize them. However, because using the term has become something of a fad in recent decades, it has been used sometimes in careless ways and scholars' new use sometimes forces them to go beyond the limits that they say they are willing to go in other areas of their systematic theologies. It is logically invalid for one to move from a truly "loose" form of *perichoresis* to an idea of participation that fits into my "low" category. One cannot have complete perichoretic unity between humanity and God *and* maintain that human participation with the divine is very limited. In this section we will examine one scholar who attempts to do just this, and then examine whether his statements cohere or not.

John Jefferson Davis is one of our prime examples of "loose" *perichoresis* in section 2.2.3 above. Because I have already examined his position in more depth I will summarize his argument here. Davis begins with an extremely open-ended definition of *perichoresis* as "a 'heart-to-heart' or 'heart-in-heart' connection between two or more persons characterized by reciprocal empathy."<sup>63</sup> This definition can therefore apply to anyone who falls under the category of "person." He moves on to argue from John 14 that the "in" experienced by Jesus with the Father and the believer with Christ is the same.<sup>64</sup> He finally moves to John 17:21 where he argues from the assumption that the "even as" implies exact equality, rather than mere similarity, of experience. He caps off his argument by examine Pauline texts and claiming that humanity can experience perichoretic unity with the Godhead which is "a radically new metaphysical and

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<sup>63</sup> Davis, "What Is 'Perichoresis'," 147.

<sup>64</sup> "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (John 14:20)

ontological reality.”<sup>65</sup> Finally, in this same article, Davis makes one statement which alludes to a position on human participation in the divine when explains that “Jesus’ high priestly prayer (Jn 17) pointed to the eschatological perfecting of the believer’s perichoretic communion with God and the people of God.”<sup>66</sup> With all of this in mind, it is clear to see why Davis is our archetypal example of the “loose” usage of *perichoresis*. By including humanity in the mutual interpenetration of persons found in the Godhead, Davis’ use of *perichoresis* is about as “loose” as possible.

From this form of *perichoresis* one would assume that Davis holds a “high” or “highest” view of human participation with the divine. Such statements as “new metaphysical and ontological reality” when describing a new perichoretic relationship that humanity experiences with God ought to require him to follow through on those claims in his understanding of human participation. However, as we will see, Davis is very consistent in his explicit discussions on participation that humanity’s communion with God is only with His *activities*, not His *being*.<sup>67</sup> First, when describing the participation of humanity with the divine in ministry, he states explains that ministers “should be aware of the fact that he or she is actually acting *in partnership* with the Holy Spirit and is *participating* in the action and ministry of the three persons of the

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<sup>65</sup> Davis, "What Is 'Perichoresis'," 149.

<sup>66</sup> Davis, "What Is 'Perichoresis'," 148.

<sup>67</sup> This language of participating in the activities rather than the essence of God is somewhat reminiscent of the Eastern Orthodox energies/essence distinction. However, because of the unique differences of the Eastern Orthodox energies/essence distinction, and because he does not make any distinction of activities and being in the perichoretic relations of the Godhead, Davis’ view does not properly fit into the “high” view of participation either.

Trinity as *they* act in partnership for the purpose of building up the whole Body.”<sup>68</sup> Similarly he writes, “Paul’s sense of working in partnership with Christ and the Spirit and with his fellow believers arises naturally out of his sense of the reality of his union with Christ and solidarity with the Body of Christ...”<sup>69</sup> Here, Davis argues that humanity can participate in the action and ministry of the persons of the Trinity, but not in their metaphysical ontology. Again, when defining the Trinity in his argument for ministerial significance, he writes, “*Christian ministry is done in the presence of the Triune God and in partnership with the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—with the Triune God being recognized as the Primary, Active Agent in every ministerial act.*”<sup>70</sup> And finally, he states, “...human partnership *with* the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a reflection of the partnership in ministry *of* the Triune God and a participation in it.”<sup>71</sup> We see here again the fact that humanity is only participating in the acts of God, working alongside Him as secondary agents in ministry. From his ministerial arguments, we will move on to more systematic arguments made by Davis that concern participation.

When Davis elucidates on his doctrine of the Trinity, he states, “Teleologically, bringing persons into ever-deepening communion with God the Father, through Jesus Christ the Son, in the communion of the Holy Spirit, is recognized as the ultimate

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<sup>68</sup> John Jefferson Davis, "Practising Ministry in the Presence of God and in Partnership with God: The Ontology of Ministry and Pastoral Identity: A Trinitarian-Ecclesial Model," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 36, no. 2 (2012): 125.

<sup>69</sup> Davis, "Practising Ministry," 126.

<sup>70</sup> Davis, "Practising Ministry," 127. Emphasis original.

<sup>71</sup> Davis, "Practising Ministry," 127. Emphasis original.

purpose and goal of all church ministry...<sup>72</sup> Here, the operative word that Davis utilizes is “communion.” The picture of human participation painted by Davis here is not one of mutual interpenetration with the persons of the Trinity, equal to that which the persons of the Godhead experience. Instead, it is a picture of communion, of being with, of participating in the work that God is doing, not in His being. This level of participation (communion) is described further when Davis explains union with Christ. He states, “Just as union with a prostitute involves body-to-body contact between a man and the prostitute, so union with Christ involves a real spirit-to-spirit contact between Christ and the believer.”<sup>73</sup> This metaphor, taken from 1 Cor 6:16-17, certainly describes an intimacy of union, but not one which could be termed perichoretic. “Real spirit-to-spirit contact” as written by him as just that: contact. Union, communion, intimacy, all of this terminology points to a “low” understanding of participation, one where humanity is participating with God, but through a union with Christ which resembles contact, not complete metaphysical interpenetration. Davis sides with E.P. Sanders when he quotes him, saying, “We seem to lack a concept of ‘reality’—a real possession of the Spirit—which lies between naïve cosmological speculation and belief in magical transference on the one hand and a revised self-understanding on the other.”<sup>74</sup> Davis wants to avoid my “highest” category of participation or any kind of “magical transference” as an extreme version of human participation in the divine.

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<sup>72</sup> Davis, "Practising Ministry," 127.

<sup>73</sup> Davis, "Practising Ministry," 129.

<sup>74</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977), 522. cited in Davis, "Practising Ministry," 130.



Davis goes on to develop an extended analogy of union with Christ as like a Skype conversation with his daughter:

Our Skype icons are instruments of our extended Selves. My icon is 'in' her laptop screen and her icon is 'in' mine. The connection is a real one because the internet connection is real and the Skype icon and software are real...Two molecular objects—such as two bowling balls—cannot be 'in' the same space, but various forms of digital information can be 'in' the same computer hard drive, or in the same wireless internet broadcast space at the same time...To complete this implied analogy between the digital and the spiritual worlds, we can say that in union with Christ, Christ and the believer are a 'coupled system'; the Holy Spirit is the real, continuous, 'high-speed, broadband "internet" connection' between heaven and earth, between Christ and the believer. 'If anyone is joined to the Lord, he is one spirit with him' (1 Cor. 6:17). We are more deeply and really connected to Christ by the Holy Spirit than we are connected electronically on Facebook to our Facebook 'friends'. Indeed, what a 'Friend' we really have in Jesus! ...The Holy Spirit extends my empirical/molecular self into the presence of the risen Christ; we are seated with him (by extension) in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). The Spirit extends the presence of the risen Christ into my space/soul: we are truly connected in a 'digital'/spiritual connection and embrace.<sup>75</sup>

There is a lot to unpack here in terms of Davis' view of participation, so we will try to go through his analogy one piece at a time. First, he describes the extensions of his physical presence (what he calls his "icon") as being present in his daughter's computer and vice versa. This is what he understands as mutually indwelling, or *perichoresis*. However, the difficulty of this metaphor is that it is extremely limited. For one thing, the extended selves of which he speaks do not actually occupy the same space. At most, his icon can be seen as next to his daughter's (in the Skype window), but the two do not actually occupy the same space. Additionally, the "in" that he is describing is not between two icons, but between one icon and a laptop (a medium for viewing digital information). If we were to truly take this metaphor to the physical and spiritual realms, it is more similar to comparing a spirit being "in" a body, not "in" another spirit. And

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<sup>75</sup> Davis, "Practising Ministry," 130-31.

finally, his claim that “digital information can be ‘in’ the same hard drive” does not prove that digital information can occupy the same space and therefore mutually indwell one another any more than two people being “in” a football stadium affirms the claim that they are mutually indwelling one another. However, if we grant his claim about digital extensions of ourselves and it’s use as being a metaphor for union with Christ, we can see that Davis’ claims about participation are in fact “low” (communion). If our union with Christ is merely an elevated version of our union with Facebook friends, then true metaphysical absorption or identification is not an option for Davis. Nor is a “high” level of communion that might be described as *theosis*. Instead, this participation with the divine is simply communion with the Son by the power of the Spirit. With this in mind we can safely place Davis in the “loose” category of usage for *perichoresis* and also the “low” (communion) category of usage for participation.

Now that we have examined this example, let us turn to whether or not the logic is sound. First, we have established that in this category, “loose” *perichoresis* involves humanity relating to God *in the same way* that the persons of God relate to one another. To define *perichoresis* in a “loose” sense and include humanity as being involved in the *perichoresis* of the Godhead requires humanity to be completely united to God. This complete interpenetration between God and man would need to be mutual and omnidirectional if it were to be truly perichoretic. In order for a theologian to move from that completely mutual relationship of interpenetration and dependence between God and man (“loose” *perichoresis*), and then to make a statement about the *telos* of humanity as being anything less than complete union with God’s being in perfectly, God-like union with the essence of God, is logically invalid. A true understanding of “loose” *perichoresis* is one where humanity relates to God *as God relates to God*, in ways that are beyond the allowable limits of “low” participation.

There are several important implications that come about because of this movement. Firstly, because of the discrepancy between the stated concept of *perichoresis* as “loose” and the disparate view of a “low” participation, there is certainly a level of confusion. Within the doctrine of the Trinity, the view of *perichoresis* maintains that the perichoretic unity between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not exclusive to those divine persons. Instead, humanity is welcomed into these relations and able to experience a level of interpenetration that is not expected in other categories of *perichoresis*. However, the confusion arises when trying to map this level of perichoretic unity with the concept that the salvation of the redeemed ends in a participation that looks more like association with or working alongside God. These seem to be opposites in the way that the doctrines are worked out in different arenas (close *perichoresis* in the doctrine of the Trinity, but only low communion in an understanding of eschatology). These implications leave a systematic theology that is inconsistent and unclear.

Scholars who attempt to hold cohesive systematic theologies cannot hold both of these concepts in this way, and they should instead choose to make a change in one of their two viewpoints. One option would be for the scholars to change the way they utilize the concept of *perichoresis* and limit the involvement that humanity has in the inner workings of God. The other option that remains would be for them to admit that their picture of human participation with the divine must be more than they might be willing to admit. Including humanity in the perichoretic relations of the Godhead requires, by definition, that the level of participation that humanity has with God is perichoretic and must be explained in either the “high” (*theosis*) or “highest” (identification) categories. The clarity and consistency that comes from adapting aspects

of our systematic theology is necessary in order to account for the whole of our understanding of God and God’s relation to us.

#### 4.3.2 “Loose” Perichoresis to “High” Participation – Catherine Mowry LaCugna

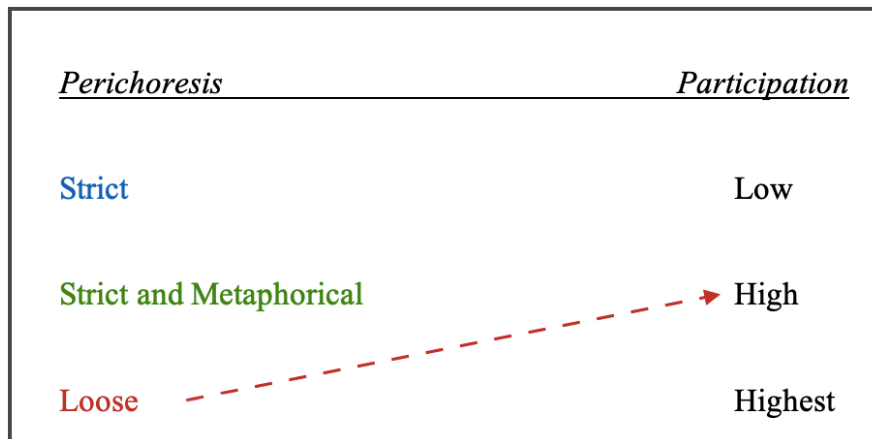


Figure 11

Unlike the movement from “loose” *perichoresis* to “low” participation, here lies a potentially acceptable logical move that can be valid given appropriate boundaries marked by the theologian. As we will see in the next section, the most logical movement from “loose” *perichoresis* is towards “highest” participation because of the completeness of interpenetration that is necessary for a proper understanding of true *perichoresis* in the Godhead. However, some theologians attempt to move from a very open and “loose” understanding of *perichoresis* to a more Eastern Orthodox understanding of participation, namely *theosis*. The argument would move from an “loose” view of *perichoresis*—one where humanity is able to actively participate in *perichoretic* relations, either with the Godhead or among other believers—but the theologian would be careful to demarcate areas (for lack of a better term) of God wherein humanity cannot participate. The reason that this movement is represented by a dotted line in figure 11 above is because of the incredibly difficult theological

gymnastics that one must accomplish in order for this to work. One such theologian who is able to perform this feat—albeit very narrowly—is Catherine Mowry LaCugna. Despite coming from a Catholic background, LaCugna agrees in many respects with some Eastern Orthodox (and social trinitarian) views of Vladimir Lossky, particularly when understanding the *telos* of humanity as divinization. We will see below how she fits into both the “loose” category of *perichoresis* and the “high” category of participation.

One way in which we can see LaCugna’s “loose” understanding of *perichoresis* is in her divergence from Wilson-Kastner.<sup>76</sup> LaCugna argues that Wilson-Kastner’s feminist theology improperly locates a vision of egalitarian human community into the immanent Trinity, and thus falls into the pitfall of double-projection.<sup>77</sup> If this is where the vision of human community lies, argues LaCugna, then “it seems that feminism, as much as patriarchy, projects its vision of what it wishes would happen in the human sphere, on to God, or onto a transeconomic, transexperiential realm of intradivine relations.”<sup>78</sup> LaCugna’s solution to this problem is to instead identify a model located in the economy of redemption and that uses *perichoresis* as its basis:

The starting point in the economy of redemption, in contrast to the intradivine starting point, locates *perichōrēsis* not in God’s inner life but in the mystery of the one communion of all persons, divine as well as human. From this standpoint ‘the divine dance’ is indeed an apt image of persons in communion: not for an intradivine communion but for divine life as all creatures partake and literally exist in it. Not through its own merit but through God’s election from all eternity (Eph. 1:3-14), humanity has been made a partner in the divine dance. Everything comes from God, and everything returns to God, through Christ in

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<sup>76</sup> There are other ways to point out LaCugna’s fittingness for this category, especially the flippant way she uses *perichoresis* even when describing the relationship of interconnected theological themes. See LaCugna, *God for Us*, 363.

<sup>77</sup> This pitfall is pointed out by Karen Kilby as seen above in section 2.2.2.1 fn 69.

<sup>78</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 274.

the Spirit. This *exitus* and *reditus* is the choreography of the divine dance which takes place from all eternity and is manifest at every moment in creation. There are not two sets of communion—one among the divine persons, the other among human persons, with the latter supposed to replicate the former. The one *perichōrēsis*, the one mystery of communion includes God and humanity as beloved partners in the dance. This is what Jesus prayed for in the high-priestly prayer in John’s gospel (John 17:20-21).<sup>79</sup>

This bold statement clearly puts LaCugna in my “loose” category because of the way in which she includes humanity in the one *perichoresis* that is experienced by God. She does not fit into the “strict and metaphorical” category because there is no analogy being taken here (from the divine *perichoresis* to some human *perichoresis*). Instead, there is only one *perichoresis* and it includes both God and all created beings.

Now that we have established that LaCugna fits nicely into the “loose” category of usage for *perichoresis* why does she fit into the “high” view of participation, rather than the “highest” view? On a first reading, LaCugna provides ample reason to potentially add her to the “highest” view because of the extreme lengths she goes to describe the complete union that humanity can experience with God. In a section examining God’s self-communication, LaCugna makes a strong point which lies at the heart of her whole argument in *God For Us*:

...there is a practical reason to resist equating ‘immanent Trinity’ with ‘inner life of God’. The life of God is not something that belongs to God alone. *Trinitarian life is also our life*. As soon as we free ourselves from thinking that there are two levels to the Trinity, one *ad intra*, the other *ad extra*, then we see that there is *one* life of the triune God, a life in which we graciously have been included as partners. Followers of Christ are made sharers in the very life of God, partakers of divinity as they are transformed and perfected by the Spirit of God. The ‘motive’ of God’s self-communication is union with the creature through *theōsis*. God’s economy of salvation is the economy of divinization and glorification. To conceive trinitarian life as something belonging *only* to God, or belonging to God apart from the creature, is to miss the point entirely. To analyze the ‘immanent Trinity’ as a purely intradivine reality also misses the point. The doctrine of the Trinity is not ultimately a teaching about “God” but a teaching about *God’s life with us and our life with each other*. It is the life of

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<sup>79</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 274.

communion and indwelling, God in us, we in God, and all of us in each other. This is the *'perichōrēsis'*, the mutual interdependence that Jesus speaks of in [John 17:20-21].<sup>80</sup>

It may seem from the extended quotation above that she would be an apt candidate for blurring any creator-creation distinction and opening herself up to the pitfalls of absorption or true identification associated with the “highest” category of usage for human participation with the divine. However, LaCugna is careful to make a few key distinctions in her usage of *perichoresis* that allow her to stay in the “high” category of participation.

First, LaCugna makes a clear statement affirming the Creator-creation distinction when she qualifies her discussion on *perichoresis* by stating “The divine community of persons relates equally and mutually within itself, to itself, and secondarily to the creature. The creature is not in any way essential to God’s life in communion.”<sup>81</sup> This qualification maps well onto the unidirectionality found in the energies/essence distinction made by Lossky and other Eastern Orthodox theologians. LaCugna is also careful to deny any loss of humanity in the process of *theosis*. She states, “Divine and human remain what they are; they are not combined into a *tertium quid*, but because of Jesus Christ they now literally ‘exist’ entirely with reference to each other.”<sup>82</sup> All of the bonding and uniting that occurs between divinized humans and the Godhead occurs by the power of the Spirit and through the person of Jesus Christ. Nowhere does LaCugna describe the human being as being made one with the *essence* of the Godhead, but she does so rather with the second person of the Trinity. She

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<sup>80</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 228. Emphasis original.

<sup>81</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 275.

<sup>82</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 296.

explains that “the Spirit divinizes persons, incorporating us into the very life of God by uniting us with Jesus Christ...the Spirit does not change the human nature into a divine nature, but if substance is seen to derive from personhood, then the Spirit brings about an ontological union of God and the creature.”<sup>83</sup> To wrap up this section on the communion of persons by the power of the Spirit, LaCugna makes this strong statement: “The *telos* of human nature is to be conformed to the person of Christ who *hypostatically* unites human and divine natures. *Theōsis* takes place in the economy, in the communion of persons with each other and with all of creation. The Holy Spirit incorporates us into the very life of God, into the mystery of *perichōrēsis*, the ‘to and fro’ of being itself which exists in personhood.”<sup>84</sup>

The second—and more important—distinction that LaCugna makes is in the way she defines and distinguishes the economic and immanent Trinity, essence and energies, *ousia* and *hypostasis*. LaCugna follows de Régnon in arguing that the Latin West after Augustine lost too much of God’s relationality by defining God first and foremost as a substance with an essence, and secondarily as persons in relation.<sup>85</sup> For

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<sup>83</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 297. In footnote 145 on that page, LaCugna appeals to Karl Rahner and states, “Rahner himself followed the Eastern theology of divinization, and coined the category of ‘quasi-formal’ causality to indicate that God’s grace is neither extrinsic to the creature (efficient causality) nor is the creature’s substance changed into something else (formal causality) but the creature is ‘made God’ according to the order of grace. Cf. *The Trinity*, 34-38.”

<sup>84</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 297-98.

<sup>85</sup> Theodore de Régnon argued that Latin trinitarianism, after Augustine, begins philosophically with the one God and then moves to explore how that one God is three persons; whereas Greek trinitarianism maintained a starting point of the primacy of the Father, then moves to the persons of the Son and the Spirit. Theodore de Régnon, *Études De Théologie Positive Sur La Sainte Trinité*, 4 vols. (Paris: Victor Retaux, 1892-1898). There is certainly debate over the validity of this argument, but suffice it to say in this context that LaCugna agrees with de Régnon’s basic premise.



LaCugna, the relationality defines the essence of God. After the impassioned statements quoted at length at footnote 80 above, she states the following:

The principle that emerges from this discussion is that an immanent trinitarian theology cannot be a description of God's essence if that essence is thought of apart from Christ and the Spirit. It is a basic principle of Christian theology, both Latin and Greek, that God's essence is permanently inaccessible and unknowable; the Orthodox would add, 'imparticipable'. This is not to say that we do not know God. If God is truly *self*-communicating, then we do know the essence (personal existence) of God: we know God as God truly is, in the mediation of God's self-revelation in Christ and the Spirit...to speak about God in immanent trinitarian terms is nothing more than to speak about God's life with us in the economy of Christ and the Spirit.<sup>86</sup>

The very fact that LaCugna corners off an aspect of the being of God that is 'imparticipable' removes her from the "highest" category of participation (albeit quite narrowly).

Now that we have identified that someone has attempted to move from "loose" *perichoresis* to "high" participation, let us examine whether or not it is tenable.

Although LaCugna is in a unique position to make this jump, it is quite a tenuous position that calls for some sort of redefinition of *perichoresis*. As seen in section 2.1.2 above, the traditional definition for *perichoresis* when referring to trinitarian relations is one of complete metaphysical interpenetration, wherein each person is said to be dynamically indwelling each other person and passively indwelled in by each other person of the Trinity. This sort of union can only include humanity if *perichoresis* involves only the energies of God (in an Eastern Orthodox sense) and not God's essence. So, while it may be difficult to thread this needle, it is logically acceptable to move from "loose" *perichoresis* to "high" participation.

However, this movement from "loose" *perichoresis* to "high" participation does have implications for other areas of theology. Because the concept of *perichoresis* is

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<sup>86</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 228-29.

one that includes humanity, but humanity is not being said to participate with the essence of God, there have to be some sharp distinctions between essence and energies in the Godhead. Additionally, it may be difficult to hold to a “loose” *perichoresis* in this sense and still maintain that the essence of God is constituted by the personhood of God. A relational ontology for the Trinity would be very difficult to uphold if one is trying to maintain that humanity only participates in the persons, not the essence, of God. If personhood constitutes essence, then the relational *perichoresis* that humanity experiences with God would be with that which is constituting God’s essence, and the distinction could be lost. In the other areas of theology which I am exploring for impact (anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology), the implications follow a similar pattern. The *telos* of humanity and the church is to participate with God’s energies in a way that unites us to God more closely than those who hold to “low” participation, yet with more reservations than those who hold a “highest” level of participation. While the *perichoretic* union with God is certainly intimate, it is (somehow) only with God’s energies, keeping the essence of God’s being holy and separate from creation. With all of this in mind, we move to our ninth and final movement from *perichoresis* to human participation with the divine.

### 4.3.3 “Loose” Perichoresis to “Highest” Participation – Jürgen Moltmann

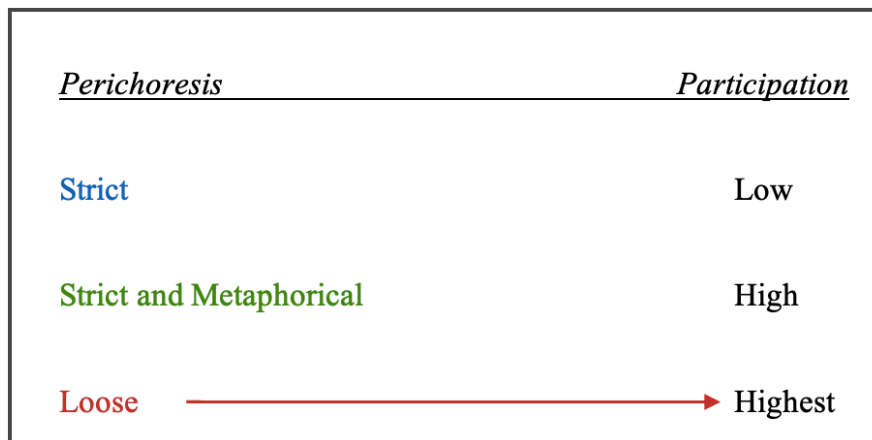


Figure 12

The final movement we must examine for theologians who utilize *perichoresis* in its “loose” form is a position of “highest” participation. The logic here states that because the theologian includes humanity in the *perichoresis* of God, he or she is free to move easily (and somewhat obviously) to a “highest” form of participation with God. This is the most logical move allowed and most honest conclusion for those who wish to use *perichoresis* in the “loose” sense.

Jürgen Moltmann provides us with a glimpse into the possibilities of this movement from “loose” *perichoresis* to “highest” participation. We will begin by exploring his use of the concept of *perichoresis* and why he fits in this “loose” category. When Moltmann uses the term *perichoresis* he includes humanity and all of creation in his definition.

Moltmann begins his exploration of *perichoresis* by defining it as John of Damascus did. He writes, “When the three persons exist in the power of their relationships with one another, for each other and in each other, then they themselves shape their own unique unity, namely, as a tri-unity. John of Damascus grasped this unity with his doctrine of the eternal *perichoresis* as the unique union of the three

persons. That is to say, the divine community is shaped by the mutual relationships of the divine persons themselves.”<sup>87</sup> He also explains that John of Damascus used the term in the doctrine of the Trinity in order to “capture the mutual indwelling of the equal divine persons.”<sup>88</sup> Moltmann goes on to expound the concept further, stating, “there is on the level of the trinitarian perichoresis no priority of the Father, but total equality of the divine persons. You cannot even number them as number one, two, or three.”<sup>89</sup> By explaining the concept in this way, we see how Moltmann views the concept of *perichoresis* as one that does not provide any unbalance, but that each person participating in the perichoretic union is completely equal. He expands on this even more by stating, “By virtue of their perichoresis the divine persons exist so intimately with one another, for one another, and in one another that they constitute a single, unique, and complete unity by themselves.”<sup>90</sup> Here Moltmann elevates the concept of *perichoresis* to such an extremely high place, where the unity experienced by the participants is complete and mutual. So far, this definition of *perichoresis* matches what we would expect for all users of the term.

Moltmann enters into the “loose” category for *perichoresis* when he describes the openness of this perichoretic community. For Moltmann, this unity is not special in

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<sup>87</sup> Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, *Humanity in God* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983), 98. This book includes chapters by Jürgen and his wife, Elisabeth, but my quotations throughout are exclusively from chapters written by Jürgen Moltmann.

<sup>88</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, “Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology,” chapter 6 in *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2000), 114.

<sup>89</sup> Moltmann, “Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word,” 114.

<sup>90</sup> Moltmann, “Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word,” 117.

the case of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but instead it is the unity into which the whole of creation is invited:

Because the salvation of the creatures exists in their being included in the eternal life of the triune God and in participating in it, we understand the unity of the triune God as an open, inviting, uniting, and integrating community... This community with God is no external unity. It occurs when the Son of God, Jesus, takes men and women into his intimate relationship with his Father (whom he called 'Abba'), making them into children of God, who then also call God 'Abba' (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). The Spirit takes the creatures into her community with the Son and the Father.<sup>91</sup>

Moltmann is making claims that the *perichoresis* of the Godhead is open and available to all of creation that is redeemed by Christ. By including humanity (and the rest of creation) into his understanding of *perichoresis*, Moltmann is most suited for my "loose" category of usage for the concept. He goes on to explicitly connect these statements with *perichoresis*:

The community of God is also a mutual indwelling and thus a perichoretic unity: 'Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them' (1 John 4:16). Mutual indwelling and perichoresis are also the life secrets of the whole new creation, because in the end God will be 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28) and everything will be in God. The perichoretic unity of the triune God should therefore be understood as a social, inviting, integrating, unifying, and thus world-open community. The perichoretic unity of the divine persons is so wide open that the whole world can find room and rest and eternal life within it.<sup>92</sup>

Moltmann's view of *perichoresis* is as "loose" as one could get, including not just the redeemed of humanity but all of creation. By making these claims he is removing any exclusivity in the relations of the Godhead and thus removing himself from any notion of being in the "strict" category. Because he is not making any kind of analogy or metaphor with this statement about the openness<sup>93</sup> of the perichoretic unity,

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<sup>91</sup> Moltmann, "Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word," 117.

<sup>92</sup> Moltmann, "Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word," 117.

<sup>93</sup> Elsewhere, Moltmann adds to this description of openness, stating, "This divine life is revealed through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and if it is revealed, it is also *opened up for us and the whole of creation*. Revelation is an invitation... The

he does not fit in the “strict and metaphorical” category either. Instead, this open and inviting model of *perichoresis* fits very well in this “loose” category.<sup>94</sup>

From his understanding of *perichoresis* in the “loose” category, it is easy to see how Moltmann receives criticism for his views as being panentheistic.<sup>95</sup> Although I cannot do justice to Moltmann’s intricate eschatology in this small space, I will highlight the ways in which he qualifies for the “highest” category of usage for participation. Moltmann views the *telos* of creation as being completely and mutually

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community of the disciples and friends of Jesus among one another should *conform to the unique unity of the Father and the Son*. They should *live with one another and even in one another*, just as the Father lives in the Son and the Son lives in the father. Their community not only should reflect the community of the Father and the Son, but could also *participate in the divine community* of the Son and the Father. This presupposes that the community of the Triune God is *so wide open* that as humanity and nature are united in love, the entire creation will find space and time in God. The unity of the Triune God is open and inviting for the unification of the entire creation not only with it but also in it.” Moltmann-Wendel and Moltmann, *Humanity in God*, 88. (emphasis mine).

<sup>94</sup> In an article for *Inservimus*, Chet Harvey describes Moltmann’s view of *perichoresis* as what he calls, “ontological perichoresis.” He cites Kevin Vanhoozer’s critique of Moltmann’s use of *perichoresis* as one which has “stretched the concept of perichoresis to describe not only the *ad intra* life of the Father, Son, and Spirit but the life of the Trinity *ad extra* as well.” Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, 153; cited in Chet Harvey, “Perichoretic Application in the Theologies of Colin Gunton and Jürgen Moltmann,” *Inservimus* 1, no. 1 (2015). Harvey deals almost exclusively with Vanhoozer’s critiques of both Moltmann and Colin Gunton in their use of *perichoresis*. For an additional critique of Moltmann’s use of *perichoresis*, consider Thomas H. McCall, “Moltmann’s Perichoresis: Either Too Much or Not Enough,” chapter 5 in *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010); and William Hasker, “Moltmann and Zizioulas: Perichoresis and Communion,” *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199681518.001.0001/acprof-9780199681518-chapter-14>.

<sup>95</sup> John Cooper calls Moltmann’s view “perichoretic panentheism.” John Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 252.

indwelled by God. He shows this in *Humanity and God*, stating, “The lordship of Christ encompasses both the ‘living and the dead,’ and it culminates in the Parousia, where Christ quickens the dead and destroys death itself. The ultimate goal of the lordship of Christ is to prepare the way for the kingdom of glory, to prepare for God’s indwelling in the new creation; and thus, God will be ‘all in all.’”<sup>96</sup> God’s indwelling in the new creation, this eschatological panentheism, gets developed further in his short work on the doctrine of hope, *In the End — the Beginning*, stating, “So in contemplating God, human beings do not become gods themselves. But they are ‘deified’ inasmuch as they participate directly and without tormenting differences in God’s primality and livingness, his truth and beauty. In their contemplation of God they receive as finite beings a *relative eternity*, by virtue of their unhindered participation in the divine eternity. It is a *participatory eternity*, into which human life is absorbed, and yet in God remains human.”<sup>97</sup> Here Moltmann seems to want to provide evidence of his understanding of the Creator-creation distinction by stating that humanity’s eternity is “relative” and “remains human.” However, he does this poorly because of his description of this participation as being “unhindered” and an eternity into which humanity is “absorbed.” These statements coupled with his understanding of “loose” *perichoresis* do not do much to maintain a participation that humanity enjoys which is in any way qualitatively different than that which God experiences. This panentheistic (and decidedly not pantheistic) view of the future is expressed further when Moltmann states:

In the consummation, everything in its unique character (and therefore without losing itself) will dwell within the Deity beyond – not just the soul but the whole

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<sup>96</sup> Moltmann-Wendel and Moltmann, *Humanity in God*, 83.

<sup>97</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End - the Beginning: The Life of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 157.

person, not just individuals but the whole community, not just human beings but all created beings in heaven and on earth. In the end God gathers everything into himself.

But this picture is one-sided. Just as in contemplation *everything is in God*, so *God*, for his part, *is present in all things*, and interpenetrates their finitude with his infinity. For this Paul takes the image: ‘God will be all in all’ (1 Cor. 15.28). That is the vision of God’s kingdom in his glory. The divine and the earthly are not intermingled, the divine is not pantheistically absorbed into all things, but the divine and the earthly interpenetrate each other mutually: unmingled and undivided. That is the vision of God’s *indwelling* in this world.<sup>98</sup>

An intermingling of this magnitude may avoid claims of pantheism but this view of the *telos* of creation as being completely “intermingled” with the divine in a panentheistic God-world relationship is one view which fits well into my “highest” category of participation.

As seen in this example, it is certainly conceivable that one could move from “loose” *perichoresis* to “highest” participation. In fact, this is the most acceptable movement allowed from a view of “loose” *perichoresis*. The level of participation that is expected of humanity given the definition of “loose” *perichoresis* necessitates this conclusion of “highest” participation. If one includes humanity in the most intimate, mutual, and exhaustive union of the divine Godhead, then the level of participation that humanity experiences with God is definitionally of the “highest” level. Although there are very few theologians who would be willing to admit such an elevated level of participation when discussing the *telos* of humanity, those who wish to use *perichoresis* in this “loose” way may want to ask themselves if they are willing to go this far.

The implications here are fairly straightforward. In the doctrine of the Trinity we see an openness to include humanity in the relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Anthropologically we can see that humanity was created with the capacity for

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<sup>98</sup> Moltmann, *In the End - the Beginning*, 157-58. Emphasis original.



such a perichoretic union with the divine, and we see it as a future aspect of soteriology that we would enjoy such a participation. Ecclesiologically, if our brothers and sisters in Christ are future perichoretic participants with the Godhead, then our relationship with them ought to be one that mirrors our future perichoretic union together. Finally, this union is lived out in the perfection of the redeemed in the *telos* of humanity as we participate completely in identification with the Godhead. From start to finish this movement is logically consistent, even if it leads to some troubling conclusions about the nature of God and humanity.

#### 4.4 Overview and Summary

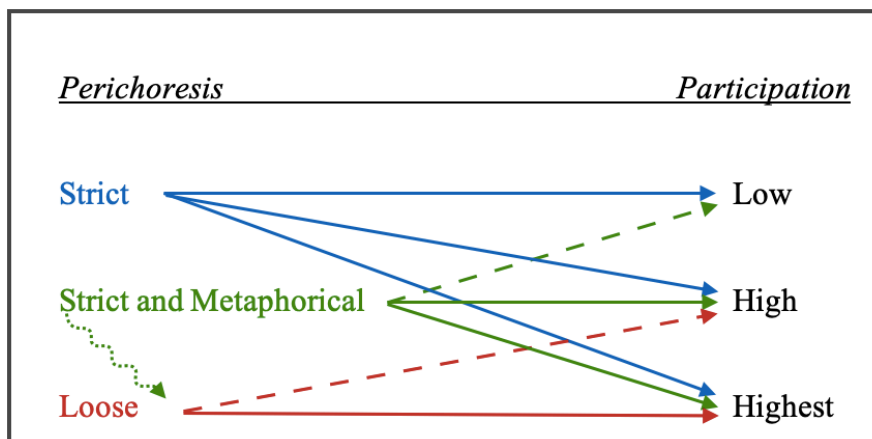


Figure 13

After examining all nine possibilities for movements from categories of usage of *perichoresis* to participation, let us review the logical validity of these movements (see figure 13 above). If a theologian is diligent to use *perichoresis* in a “strict” way to describe the unique relations of the persons of the Godhead exclusively, then he or she is logically valid in expressing human participation in any way he or she sees fit. Because no mention of humanity is made in an understanding of *perichoresis*, these theologians are free to make their way to any doctrine of human participation with the

divine through other theological avenues. For someone who defines *perichoresis* in a “strict and metaphorical” way, then all three categories of usage for participation are technically available. However, due to the slippery slope that many show when using metaphors poorly, the “low” category of participation is a potentially difficult one to maintain if the language slips into “loose” *perichoresis*. And finally, for those who wish to use a “loose” definition of *perichoresis*, the only strong movement is towards “highest” participation. A “low” understanding of participation is not logically tenable, and the “high” category is only available if the theologian is willing to carefully distinguish between which aspects of the Godhead are *perichoretically* available for humanity’s participation.

## CONCLUSION

*Perichoresis* and human participation with the divine have been linked in the last century due to the new ways in which theologians use the concept of *perichoresis*. Trinitarian theology has seen a resurgence in the last 200 years and is a topic widely explored in modern theology, having arrived at its current state through the influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, the movement of social trinitarianism, and others. The concepts of *perichoresis* and participation are valuable to explore because of the ways in which they intersect with one another and the impact they have on other areas of systematic theology.

The concept of *perichoresis* has a rich history ranging back to christological uses in Gregory of Nazianzus and Maximus the Confessor, on to its trinitarian adaptation by John of Damascus. Today, scholars use the term to mean many different things, but these can be broken into three categories. The “strict” users remain faithful to the historical use and restrict the concept to refer exclusively to the relations of the persons of the Godhead. The “strict and metaphorical” users keep the same formal definition but are comfortable with using metaphors either to understand the concept, or to understand human relations (either with God or with others). As shown, this has the potential to be a slippery slope leading to the third category of users, called the “loose” users of *perichoresis*. These “loose” users of the term allow for human inclusion in this kind of unifying relationship, either with God or with other humans (most often in the church or family). A definition of *perichoresis* that could be helpful in moving forward is: *perichoresis is the unique, mutual, and complete interpenetration of the persons of*

*the Trinity which is the perfect unity of the divine essence and which does not erode, in any way, the real distinction of personhood in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

The concept of human participation with the divine has a similarly rich history, with special attention seen in the Eastern Orthodox concept of *theosis*. Modern theologians can be categorized into three groups of thought. Those in the “low” participation category see human participation with the divine as a relational alignment and identification with God, often through Christ. This kind of participation can also be called, “communion” or “christosis.”<sup>1</sup> Many Eastern Orthodox theologians would be in the “high” participation category, as it aligns most closely with the doctrine of *theosis* or divinization. The key to understanding this kind of participation lies in a distinction of God’s essence and energies, wherein the believer can participate in the energies of God, whilst keeping God’s essence holy and separate. The last category of understanding for human participation with the divine is the “highest” view. In this view, theologians see a complete metaphysical identification of the believer with God, one in which the substance of the believer shares mutually with the substance of the divine. Although there are certainly reasons why theologians defend each of these three categories, a helpful definition for Protestants in the “low” category (such as myself) could be stated as follows: human participation in the divine *is the gradual, ongoing process in the redeemed in which they participate relationally in the divine life through union with Jesus Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.*

Finally, the logical limits and allowances of one’s category of usage for *perichoresis* necessitates movement to only certain categories of understanding human participation in the divine. Those who use *perichoresis* only in the “strict” category are

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<sup>1</sup> Following the language of Blackwell, *Christosis*.

most free to describe their understanding of human participation with the divine in any way they see fit. Because “strict” *perichoresis* does not include humanity, statements about humanity’s participation with God are not governed by it. Those in the “strict and metaphorical” category of usage for *perichoresis* are potentially less open to describe human participation with God as they see fit. The only danger is in the slippery slope that can occur in their language when metaphors become too loose and subject-defining. In those instances, it might be difficult for a “strict and metaphorical” user to retain value in their metaphor while adequately qualifying it to posit “low” participation. Finally, the “loose” category of usage for *perichoresis* is the most problematic for openness to categories of participation. When one asserts a “loose” view of *perichoresis*—in which humanity is included in the intimate *perichoresis* of the divine persons—then one is necessarily making a statement about the kind of human participation in the divine that is occurring. It is logically invalid to assert a “loose” *perichoresis* and then state that humanity’s participation in the divine is merely relational or communal. Because of the metaphysical nature of *perichoresis*, a metaphysical participation with God is required under those circumstances.

Theological clarity is a virtue in all areas of our systematic thought. Through this thesis I have argued for clarity in the case of *perichoresis* and participation. Moving back to a “strict” view of *perichoresis* is beneficial because of the faithfulness to the history of the term, as well as the exclusivity which it retains for the mystery of the relations of the Godhead. By excluding humanity from this mysterious inner-working of God, the theologian is able to make any statements they would like concerning the relation of humanity to God (or humans with other humans). Additionally, by honing the term *perichoresis* and sharpening its use in a more specific concentration, the value

of the term increases, and there is less of an opportunity for misunderstanding between scholars.

*Perichoresis* is a beautiful, mysterious concept that ought to lead us to worship the vast and intimate God who experiences such deep interpenetration of persons. Let us worship this God who is three-in-one as beautifully stated in the Quicumque Vult:

And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father is uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father infinite, the Son infinite, the Holy Spirit infinite. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal. And also there are not three uncreated, nor three infinities, but one uncreated, and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Spirit Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties, but one Almighty.

So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord. And yet not three Lords, but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord, so we are forbidden by the Catholic religion to say, "There are three Gods, or three Lords."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Schaff, *The Greek and Latin Creeds*, II, 66-70. I have intentionally cited only part of the Quicumque Vult because of its relevance to this thesis, and am aware of skipping portions which touch on other aspects of theology as well as the extensive anathema portion of the creed.

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