

Trinitarian *Telos*: Tracing Some Theological Links from God's Triunity to Christian Eschatology

David Batchelor

Abstract

Drawing on the work of Peter Leithart and Robert Jenson, this article demonstrates that Christian eschatology is inescapably founded on the doctrine of God's triunity. The basis for many of the "systems" used by Christian eschatology is found antecedently within the triunity of God's being. The divine activity within the economy by which creation is being directed towards its glorious climax is trinitarian at every turn, as is the shape of God's ultimate end-goal for creation – permanently differentiated (triune and human) persons united in love within the *Totus Christus*, by which the saints participate in the triune Life.

Introduction

This article traces some connections from theology proper to eschatology—that is, from the doctrine of God's being, and specifically the *triunity* of His¹ being, to the proper account of God's

¹ Sadly English lacks triune pronouns, but only has singular and plural varieties, neither of which is satisfactory in reference to the Trinity. In this article I mostly

intentions and designs for how His creation is finally to relate to Himself. The two primary interlocutors for the ensuing discussion each offer their own perspective on the ways in which trinitarian theology contributes to eschatology:² Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology* considers the Trinity largely from the point of view of our eschatological participation in His life,³ whereas Peter Leithart's *Deep Comedy* considers the Trinity from the point of view of Him being the basis for the eschatological shape of history.⁴

We begin with consideration of the parallels between God's nature and God's creation.

The being of God and the created order

The world that we inhabit exhibits a number of what we might loosely call 'systems', such as logic, category, dimensionality, progression, derivation, intentionality, causality.... Where do these 'systems' come from? The only conceivable options would seem to be (i) God's 'habitat', (ii) God's creativeness, or (iii) God's nature.

The first of these is ruled out, since there is no 'habitat' within which God is confined and must operate (cf. e.g., 1 Ki. 8:27). There is no framework within which God's being subsists, as that framework would be over and above God, controlling and limiting Him, and God would not be the absolutely supreme (personal) being claimed by the Bible.

The second option advances the suggestion that 'systems' such as the aforementioned could simply be created novelties *completely* unlike their Creator, and thus expressing His creativeness. However, it is not possible for any aspect or component of the created order to

use singular pronouns, although on some occasions the plural seems more appropriate.

² That is not to say that either of these authors have our specific questions in mind. Were such a question directly posed to them, they both might well have more to say than has here been gleaned from them.

³ The bulk of Jenson's material that is pertinent to the question under consideration occurs in volume 2 (Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume II: The Works of God* [Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999]).

⁴ Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Comedy: Trinity, Tragedy, and Hope in Western Literature* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2006).

be utterly unlike its Creator.⁵ God called creation ‘good’;⁶ for God to call anything ‘good’ that contains features utterly unlike Himself is surely theologically unthinkable. Would that not entail God rejoicing in that which is absolutely foreign to Himself? One might attempt to dismiss such an objection by arguing that the *wholly dissimilar* created thing is nonetheless still entirely one of His own works, and thus does not entail God rejoicing in something totally independent of Himself. This, however, may be answered by the simple fact that creation plays a role in *revealing* God:⁷ how could creation reveal God if certain of its traits bear no resemblance whatsoever to the God who first conceived of them? Thus the second option must also be dismissed.

We are thus left with the third option—that all such ‘systems’ have their template in God’s own nature. What then *is* God’s nature?⁸ Classical theism affirms that God is simple and has no non-essential aspects to His being. That being so, if He is triune as the Bible indicates, then this is not merely descriptive of a *part* of Him, or a potentially *expendable* way of describing Him, but it actually describes what God *is*, ‘through and through’. Since therefore God is triune to His very ‘core’, one would thus rightly anticipate there to be ‘footprints’ of the Trinity in the story that Christian eschatology tells, and detecting these ‘footprints’ effectively provides an answer to the first part of our enquiry. However, the point being argued here is that every aspect, every feature, every ‘system’ that occurs in our account of Christian eschatology⁹ must have an analogous antecedent in God’s *being*; thus teasing out those ‘systems’ that are analogous to the *triune-ness* of God’s being effectively provides an answer to the second part of our enquiry. The latter question operates at a more basic level, for it asks not just about the characteristics of the story that Christian eschatology tells, but also about the mere possibility of such a thing as ‘story’.

⁵ The term ‘created order’ and other such terms used here refer to creation in its prelapsarian state. This is to simplify the discussion. In fact, I believe the same line of reasoning could be sustained even if creation in its postlapsarian state were in view; however, this would unnecessarily complicate the argument.

⁶ Genesis 1.

⁷ E.g., Psalm 19.

⁸ This article uses the terms ‘God’s nature’ and ‘God’s being’ interchangeably.

⁹ E.g., progression, purposiveness, consummation, etc.

The triunely founded 'systems' employed by Christian eschatology

Story, history, movement, non-stasis

The God of the Bible is complete and sufficient in Himself, lacking nothing, having no unactualized potential, nor any room for improvement or maturing. Why then did God undertake any work outside of Himself, why did He embark on any project *ad extra*? Eschatology deals with the *finishing* of God's work, but the fact that He is a *finisher* necessitates Him being a *starter*,¹⁰ which entails 'movement'. What is it in God's being (which cannot be bettered) that this movement, this 'non-stasis' reflects?

For Leithart, the answer is clear: 'it is difficult to see how history can exist at all except as a reflection of the life of the Trinity. A story depends on initial breach, an initial move from the original situation. If there is no movement from the beginning, there is no story, but only stasis.'¹¹ The intra-trinitarian 'movement' of the Father eternally¹² begetting the Son, and their spiration of the Spirit, provides the analogous grounds for the movement entailed in story and history in the created realm. Were God monadic, then the dynamic of history beginning at creation and continuing in narrational sequence would be utterly unlike anything within His ontology.

In addition, a monadic god would also provide no possibility for the main characteristic of story—*climax*. In a world created by a monadic god, 'that initial move [i.e. creation] is an exile, a degeneration, and the best that can be hoped for is a return to the origin.'¹³ Thus for a unitarian god to create would not only be groundless but also pointless—a return to beginnings with no net gain achieved. This brings us to consideration of the trinitarian grounding for the *shape* of the Christian eschatological story.

¹⁰ Douglas H. Knight, *The Eschatological Economy: Time and the Hospitality of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 16.

¹¹ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 87.

¹² I.e. outside of time – time being a created, Trinity-reflecting 'system'.

¹³ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 87.

‘Deep comedy’

There are two basic shapes to stories—comedy and tragedy. These are differentiated with respect to the ending of the story, which is highly relevant to the matter of eschatology, concerned as it is with the dénouement of the true story that history is. Leithart explores this dyad of comedy and tragedy¹⁴ and develops an extension of the former, coining the term ‘deep comedy’ to describe a type of narrational comedy with two distinguishing features: (i) ‘the happy ending is uncontaminated by any fear of future tragedy’, and (ii) ‘the characters do not simply end as well as they began, but progress beyond their beginning... from glory to added glory.’¹⁵ Leithart’s thesis is that deep comedy ‘is a specifically Christian phenomenon rooted in the Christian gospel as the revelation of the triune character of God.’¹⁶

The ‘deep comedy’ evident in the Bible’s account of the entire created cosmos is that this (hi)story ends up more glorious than it began, moving ‘from garden to garden-city,’¹⁷ ‘from Eden to New Jerusalem’:¹⁸ ‘God gives with interest.’¹⁹ The ontological ground for the possibility of a story with such a contour is the immanent Trinity.²⁰ Leithart explains it thus:

There is no degeneration or ‘leakage’ of glory or divinity as the Father begets the Son or, together with the Son, spirates the Spirit... the ‘Second’ is fully equal to and is in fact the glory of the ‘First,’ and therefore for the Bible, the golden age is always out before us not behind us.²¹

The timeless glorious ‘movement within the Trinity is the ontological antecedent for the chronological glorious movement within the

¹⁴ Leithart includes, within the category of tragedy, ‘philosophies that treat finitude, temporality, bodiliness, and limitation as philosophical and practical problems that must be either transcended or grudgingly accepted’ — Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 38.

¹⁵ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, xii.

¹⁶ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 115.

¹⁷ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, xi.

¹⁸ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, xiii.

¹⁹ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, xi.

²⁰ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, xiii.

²¹ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, xiv; cf. 84.

economy of created history.²² It looks not just to the ontological *homoousios* equality between the unbegotten and begotten/spirated triune Persons, but also to the fact that the latter in no way threaten, diminish or eclipse the former. The triune Persons only always affirm, honour and glorify one another.²³ The Father glories in the One He begets; the Son glories in the One who begot Him. The eternal glory-to-glory 'act' of the Father's generation of the Son²⁴ underpins the everlasting glory-to-glory shape of Christian eschatology. As the 'departure' within God's triune being is glorious and in no way degenerative, so also is the 'departure' of eschatology.²⁵

Post-Eschaton glory-to-glory

What of the shape of the cosmic story after the Eschaton itself? Is this a glorious plateau or an onwardly upward movement? Leithart is in no doubt that the shape of the story post-Eschaton continues to be an upward movement, from glory to glory. He notes that the movement of history is from good to better, and that this movement is reflected in, but not restricted to, the transition from the Old Covenant to the New.²⁶ As Leithart infers from 2 Corinthians 3:18, 'Paul expects a continuing expansion of glory, a continuous glorification of the more glorious, the surpassingly glorious, new covenant'.²⁷ And this continuation of glorification continues after the Eschaton.²⁸

²² Leithart reminds us that 'in the eternal life of God there has always been a "supplement," a Second and a Third alongside the First' (Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 83).

²³ '[The] Second [Person] does not murder, efface, veil, or undermine the First. In fact, the Second is never without the First... in perfect perichoretic unity' (Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 83).

²⁴ To demonstrate the non-inevitability of a latter entity being inferior to its predecessor, Leithart cites section 47 of Basil the Great's treatise *On the Holy Spirit*, where Basil argues that the Second Adam was clearly not inferior to the First Adam (Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, xv; cf. 22; Romans 5:12-21).

²⁵ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 86-7.

²⁶ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 22-3. Leithart here shows the superiority, at every point, of the New Covenant over the Old.

²⁷ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 23.

²⁸ 'History will "end" with humans still facing infinite horizons yet to achieve—which is to say, it will not end. There will be a judgment and a resurrection, but

This can be confirmed by considering the finitude of the resurrected saints. The Eschaton undeniably represents a decisive moment in the saints' glorification, but if thereafter there is nothing but a plateau of glory for them, then this must form a limit to the glories that they can ever experience. It is a *limit* since the saints, as finite creatures, cannot experience *absolute* fullness of glory which would be infinite, but only according to their finite capacity. However, the one dimension in which the resurrected saints are *not* finite is in the duration of their lives. Thus, if as the millennia of the new heavens and new earth go past the saints' experience of glory increases, then there is no limit to the fullness of the glories they experience and yet their experience will always be finite. Their fullness of glory *tends towards* infinite measure (without ever reaching the point of infinity) as their lives tend towards infinite duration (without ever reaching the point of infinity).

Apropos of this post-Eschaton growth in glory, Leithart points out the delightful apparent paradox that the glorified saints will experience full satisfaction of their desires, 'and yet look ahead to an infinite degree of greater satisfaction still to attain. We can hope for both satisfaction and the infinitely extended possibility of enhanced satisfaction, but this is without any hint of "dissatisfaction"'. He describes this as 'doubly comic: all wants are met, yet there is ever again infinite satisfaction still to be had'. Indeed Leithart here subsequently argues that 'Christian desire is... triply comic, since there are desirable goods that come only by giving... Fulfilment of desire is in these cases comically enhanced by the opportunity to extend and enhance fulfilment of desire in others.' God's inexhaustible riches are ever to be mined by the fully satisfied redeemed. This is counterintuitive: it infringes the supposition that *desire* can only originate from a *lack*. Yet the fallaciousness of this supposition is attested by the theological fact that 'God desires the returning love of His creatures not because there is anything lacking in Him but because He desires to share the fullness of His triune life. So also, men and women may desire out of a fullness of being and life

that will be the first moment of a new phase of human development and emphatically *not* an entry into a static existence' (Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 16-7, author's italics).

rather than lack'.²⁹

Death and resurrection

It has been observed that the shape of history in the main (and frequently in the details) resembles that of a tick-shape—'good to bad to better than ever.'³⁰ We have just located the final phase of this profile in the trinity of God. Is there any sense in which the central phase of the 'tick-shape' is also analogous in some way to God's being? Leithart attempts to find a basis for 'death' in the reciprocal self-sacrifice of the Persons of the Trinity towards one another, emboldened to do so by the manifestation, within the created realm, of 'deathlike-ness' apart from the Fall.³¹ This move is probably appropriate if stated carefully enough to avoid misunderstanding. A Christian eschatology needs to include the tick-shape's characteristic 'dip' though, as well its final upward crescendo, to give proper acknowledgment to the current prevalence of pain and injustice.³²

Metaphor, meaning and intentionality

Hitherto we have considered the Trinity as grounding the possibility of story and of 'deep comedy', both of which are 'systems' required by an account of Christian eschatology. However, there are other triunely founded 'systems' that are also worth brief consideration.

Leithart highlights the fact that trinitarian theology provides the grounds for the possibility of metaphor and typology: the Son can

²⁹ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 56-7.

³⁰ David P. Field, 'Not the Least Lash Lost', 35-7 (2007)

<<http://davidpfield.com/other/AAPC2-3lecture.pdf>> [last accessed 1 December 2008].

³¹ Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 89. Leithart here also adduces creational evidence of death apart from the Fall, in the botanical domain, and in Adam's "'deathlike" sleep, only to awaken to a greater, more glorious, more wonderful life' with his wife.

³² As Leithart explains: 'the gospel narratives, because they include the ineradicable moments of betrayal, torture, injustice, and cross, prevent the Christian understanding of history from becoming trivially comic or sentimental' (Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 24).

represent the Father, and yet *is not* the Father, hence we have the possibility of one thing representing a non-identical thing.³³ This aspect of God's triunity thus forms the basis for such 'systems' as metaphor, analogy and typology;³⁴ it even grounds the mere possibility of *grounding* something.

However, is it possible to extend Leithart's idea to affirm that it is not only *metaphor* that the Trinity grounds, but also the whole concept of *meaning* or *semantics* and even *intentionality* and *purposefulness*? The concepts of "meaning" and of 'purposefulness' are quintessential to Christian eschatology: eschatology may be summarized as stating that the present has *meaning* for the church because of God's *intentions* that He will fulfil at the Eschaton. Therefore the potential for an inference that there is only the possibility of 'meaning' and 'intention' because God is triune would be of major importance for eschatology. Let us explore this by imagining God as a monad. What would (the being of) that god *mean*? Nothing really, it would seem. Even the question itself seems vacuous: a monadic god is just 'there', devoid of meaning. Consider now though God as He actually is, triune. Ask the same question again: What does (the being of) that God *mean*? This time we *can* begin to answer the question, and such an answer might commence thus: '(the being of) God means that the unbegotten Father eternally begets His *homousios* Son...' God the Father begets the Son according to His nature and will. It is not an accidental 'act'. It is inevitable, and yet also deliberate, purposeful and meaningful. We have thus located in the triune being of God the foundation for *meaning* and *intentionality*, both of which are prerequisite 'systems' of Christian eschatology.

³³ 'In the Trinity, we find the root of the "is/is not" character of metaphor. This Father is not the Son and yet if you have seen the Father you have seen the Son. ... Scripture indicates that one thing can stand for, represent, or symbolize other things... a "righteous man is like a tree" [cf. Psalm 1]. The Son is the express image of the Father, and yet is not the Father. This perichoretic "is/is not" (a man is/is not a tree) structure is inherent in God and is the very nature of metaphor' (Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 88).

³⁴ 'The typological similarities between events... depend on the perichoretic rhythms of the Trinity. The flood is like the exodus is like the crossing of the Jordan is like the return from exile is like Jesus' baptism is like Christian baptism' (Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 89).

Having examined the triune foundations required for eschatology, we now consider the Trinity's role in the story that Christian eschatology tells. Before looking at the trinitarian shape of God's ultimate gospel purposes,³⁵ we will first reflect on the trinitarian shape of the *means* by which He achieves His end-goal. In doing so we will consider the triune missions in the economy of creation, acknowledging that the divine missions *ad extra* parallel the divine processions *ad intra*.

The missions of the Son and the Spirit

'[T]hrough the Son and Spirit, his two hands, the Father both prevents the creation from slipping back into the nothingness from which it came and restores its teleology, its movement to perfection.'³⁶ Without these divine missions, there would be no eschatology. However, the missions of the Son and the Spirit do not just *enable* the future eschatological era; they usher it in. The work for which the Father sent the Son into the world, and for which the Father and the incarnate, risen and ascended Son sent the Spirit into the world, establishes the eschatological era both in the sense of preparing for it and in the sense of actually beginning it. Christian Eschatology is not exclusively to do with matters future: it has aspects both of 'already' and of 'not yet'. A full account of eschatology must include the 'already' aspect.

The first Advent, considered in general

This *inaugurated* aspect of Christian eschatology, which we have in view in this section, is trinitarian at every turn. It recounts the incarnation of the eternal Son as the long promised and foreshadowed Messiah, His earthly life, baptism, temptation, public ministry, teaching, miracles, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension, in all of which He does His Father's will (John 4:34; 5:19;

³⁵ I use the plural ('gospel purposes') to convey not any *disunity* in God's ultimate purpose, but rather the *rich multifacetedness* of his ultimate purpose.

³⁶ Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Toward A Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 117.

6:38; 14:10; 17:4) by the Spirit (Matthew 1:18, 20; 4:1; 12:28; Luke 4:14, 18; 10:21; John 6:63; Romans 8:11; Ephesians 1:20-21). Jesus' first advent functions both as our needful revelation of the Father to us (John 14:7-9),³⁷ and also as our route to the Father (John 14:2-6),³⁸ corresponding to His coming from the Father and His return to the Father respectively 1:1-2, 9 11; 3:2; 6:33, 38, 41-42; 8:42; 13:3; 14:12).³⁹ To this we can add that Jesus pointed to His own Person as the eschatological reality towards which all humanity is heading, whether for salvation or punishment (Matt. 25:31-46);⁴⁰ He is one to whom judgment has been delegated by the Father (John 5:22) and he is the king whom the Father has installed (Psalm 2; Acts 4:26; 13:32-3). 'Jesus is the ultimate case study of our Trinitarian eschatology.'⁴¹

The Atonement

The eschatological 'solution' to the 'problem' of human sin is inescapably trinitarian. There could be no salvation if the One punished vicariously had not also perfectly obeyed. How could He obey *perfectly* if He were 'just another' descendant of Adam? Only as an irruption of uncreated God from outside of the human race (and yet as one fully consubstantial with the human race) could He obey *perfectly*; but whom could this Person-who-is-God *obey* without there being God the Father *to* obey? There is no salvation without perfect obedience, and no perfect obedience without the Trinity.

Christ's Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a definitive eschatological moment; he is the firstfruits of the resurrection-life that all God's people will one day enjoy. There is a human who already has an

³⁷ Leithart refers to the Incarnation as 'a glimpse into the "home life" of the Father and Son' (*Deep Comedy*, 83).

³⁸ John 14:2-6.

³⁹ Cf. Leithart, *Deep Comedy*, 82.

⁴⁰ Cf. Kelly M. Kopic, 'Trajectories of a Trinitarian Eschatology', in Paul Louis Metzger, ed., *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2005): 189-202, at 197.

⁴¹ Kopic, 'Trajectories', 196.

eschatological bodily existence. And according to the logic of Romans 8:11, what the Father has given this One human—resurrection life—He will also give to the saints by His Spirit that lives in them now.⁴² The redeemed have been raised with Christ (Rom. 6:4-5, 8; Eph. 2:6; Col. 2:12; 3:1); His realized resurrection secures their future resurrection (1 Cor. 15).⁴³ We may not yet know resurrection existence experientially, but the One with whom we derivatively have been raised already does.⁴⁴ What has happened to Him, from within the Trinity, working in the economy, will certainly happen to His people too.

The sending of the Spirit

For the believer, Christ's eschatological relevance is not simply *past* (His resurrection and ascension) and *future* (the Parousia) but *present* as well; Kelly Kopic reminds us of 'the eschatological doctrine of the continuing work of the Mediator.'⁴⁵ It is by His Spirit, promised by the Father and sent by the Son at Pentecost,⁴⁶ and ever working in the

⁴² As Jenson puts it, 'believers' resurrection follows necessarily from the eschatologically lively Spirit's habitation in the church' (*The Works of God*, 329).

⁴³ Kopic, *Trajectories*, 198.

⁴⁴ That the saints are *raised with Christ* would seem to be a rather shorter route in establishing a trinitarian basis for the resurrection embodiment of the saints than the obscure route that Jenson attempts. Jenson's trinitarian basis for the eschatological embodiment of the redeemed is based on their 'full congruence with the eternal *perichoresis* of the triune life'. He begins by exploring some of the functions of human embodiment and enumerates four such functions. He then attempts to trace these features of personal embodiment to roots in the divine *perichoresis* hence giving the eschatological embodiment of the redeemed a trinitarian footing (Jenson, *The Works of God*, 346-7). Within this framework, however, Jenson's chain of logic is almost impenetrable; he may well be correct in his analysis, but his explanation gives the reader (or *this* reader, at least) too little to grasp hold of in order to follow it.

⁴⁵ Kopic, 'Trajectories', 196.

⁴⁶ Andy Johnson observes in Luke 24:49 the strongly trinitarian language from the lips of the visibly human Son—of Him pledging to send the Holy Spirit whom the Father had promised. Johnson notes the *homoousios* and mutual dependence between the three triune Persons that this indicates ('Ripples of the Resurrection in the Triune Life of God: Reading Luke 24 with Eschatological and Trinitarian Eyes', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24 (2002): 87-110, at 107.

pre-Eschaton present, that the church is being prepared for her Husband. The Spirit—‘the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it’ (Eph. 1:14)—‘is thus the very personal presence of Christ with and within us during our present between-the-times existence.’⁴⁷

Trinitarian unity of purpose

It is necessary to conclude this discussion of the eschatological activity of the Trinity in the economy with brief comment on ‘the unity of divine movement in history’.⁴⁸ Most of this article considers some aspect of the *three-ness* or *plurality* of the Trinity, but the *unity* of the triune Persons should not be passed over. Gregory of Nyssa’s avowal of the Trinity’s absolute harmony in all of His works, along with Augustine’s insistence on the inseparability of all of the Trinity’s works *ad extra* provide the necessary input here.⁴⁹ Indeed, one could also add Hilary of Poitiers’s insight that the Son and Spirit receive Their will from the Father by Their respective generation and procession (and not ‘after the event’).⁵⁰ In all that God purposes and hence does, the triune Persons follow an absolute identical agenda.

Having discussed the ineluctable trinitarian-ness of the eschatological works of God and His unity of purpose in those works, we now move on to examination of the trinitarian contours of the purpose itself.

The triune creative-redemptive *telos*

What is the great *telos*—the great purpose—for which God conceived of the mere existence of anything else apart from Himself? According to Maximus the Confessor, ‘God, full beyond all fullness, brought creatures in being... so that they might participate in Him in proportion to their capacity and He Himself might rejoice in His works... through seeing them joyful and ever filled to overflowing

⁴⁷ Gordon Fee, quoted in Kapic, ‘Trajectories’, 199; cf. 197.

⁴⁸ Kapic, ‘Trajectories’, 191.

⁴⁹ Kapic, ‘Trajectories’, 192.

⁵⁰ Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, IX.74.

with His inexhaustible gifts.⁵¹ This is a great statement of God's ultimate intention, and here we explore the following question: with what content must a biblical trinitarian fill out such a summary of Christian eschatology/teleology? We begin with the concept of *union*.

Union of love between permanently differentiated persons

For Jonathan Edwards, the notion of "union" is an essential aspect of both the intra-trinitarian life of God, and, derivatively, of God's dealings with His creation; it is the goal of His work of redemption and was also instrumental in His route to achieving that goal.⁵² Edwards viewed the ever-increasing closeness of the union between God and redeemed creatures as ever approaching the closeness between the Father and the Son.⁵³ However, the fact of the comparison between the Persons of the Trinity means that this union never becomes an absorption or assimilation into God, but ever maintains the differentiation between the parties of the eschatological union, just as there is eternal differentiation in the triune being of God.⁵⁴ God's act of uniting a people to Himself 'has the double form of distinguishing and reconciling, separating and bringing together.'⁵⁵ The post-Eschaton continuing glory of the saints thus includes them becoming ever closer to God⁵⁶ and yet ever differentiated from God;

⁵¹ Quoted in Amy Plantinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 127.

⁵² Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All*, 120.

⁵³ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 19.

⁵⁴ This acts as a control to the concept of deification. Deification cannot ever in eternity future entail the saints being in undifferentiated union with God, as long as the Persons of the Trinity remain differentiated which of course they are by nature and thus ever will be.

⁵⁵ Knight, *The Eschatological Economy*, 61.

⁵⁶ This union is counterintuitively all the closer because of the Fall and subsequent Redemption: 'If man had never fallen, God would have remained man's friend; he would... have had the favour of all the persons of the Trinity. But now Christ becoming our surety and Saviour, and having taken on him our nature, occasions... a nearer relation than otherwise would have been.... The sin and misery of man, by this contrivance, are made an occasion of his being more happy, not only than he was before the fall, but than he would have been, if he never had fallen' (Edwards, quoted in Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All*, 138).

their union with God takes the form of covenantal cleaving, not merging.

The unity *amongst* the redeemed is similarly founded on the unity of the Trinity. For Cyprian, the redeemed community are ‘a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.’⁵⁷ The same characteristic of eschatological unity being a *differentiated* unity therefore also applies here: God’s act of making His people one (John 17:11, 20-23) does not melt away their differentiation from each other.

The eschatological permanence of human personhood is the means by which the differentiation between God and the saints, and amongst the saints, is maintained. Any eschatological account akin to *nirvana*’s ‘abolition of personality’ is thus ruled out, since ‘the church hopes for fulfilment by inclusion in a *perichoresis* of irreducible personalities.’⁵⁸ The irreducible personhood of the glorified saints is founded on the irreducible personhood within the Trinity.⁵⁹ Negatively then, any eschatological prospect of the dissolution of personhood into a ‘mush’ is eliminated. Positively though, the union between persons that are ever mutually *other* allows for the enduring possibility of *love*. Two beings that have melted into one entity cannot love each other, as there would no longer be an ‘each other’.

Love persists beyond the Eschaton as the doctrine of the Trinity indicates, and as 1 Corinthians 13:8 confirms. Jenson puts it thus: “‘Love’ is the New Testament’s and the church’s single word for the future the gospel holds out, whether for this age or for the End. It could not be otherwise. The Spirit is the agent of love in the triune life’.⁶⁰ Jenson’s claim that love is the ‘single word’ to sum up eschatology (what about ‘Jesus?’), seems questionable. Nevertheless he rightly states the centrality and eschatological endurance of love.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Jürgen Moltmann, ‘God in the World—the World in God: Perichoresis in Trinity and Eschatology’, in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser, eds, *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 377.

⁵⁸ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 317.

⁵⁹ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 354.

⁶⁰ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 319.

Totus Christus, by which the saints are included in the triune Life

Hitherto we have spoken in general terms of the nature of union between God and His people, and amongst the people of God. We now move on to discuss the particular form that these two aspects of eschatological union conjointly take, and what that results in for the redeemed.

The specific form that the eschatological union between God, saint and saint takes is the *totus Christus*. For Jenson, this is a cardinal concept. 'That to which [the Father] directs all things is the *totus Christus*.'⁶¹ 'Believers will enter the triune life only as members of the *totus Christus*'.⁶² Here we have the eschatological location of the union between Creator and redeemed creation: it is Christ and His church, Head and body, Husband and wife. The seed from which the *totus Christus* stems is the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity. Without this hypostatic union of the divine nature of the Son of God to a human nature, there could be no possibility of the kind of union between God and humans that Christian eschatology envisions. (Indeed, supralapsarianism affirms that humanity was created in order to be a suitable creaturely nature for the eternal Son to unite to Himself hypostatically.) The *totus Christus* is the goal and logical outworking of Christ's incarnation. It is the locus of the covenantal binding of God to His elect.

The *totus Christus* is not narrowly christological but is an expansively trinitarian corpus, formed of Christ united to 'those whom the Father ordained for him and whom the Spirit has brought to him.'⁶³ Furthermore, according to Jenson, 'the gospel promises inclusion in the triune community by virtue of union with Christ and just so in a perfected human community.'⁶⁴ John's Gospel confirms that the mutual indwelling between Jesus' disciples (including both Jesus' contemporaries and later believers) and Jesus Himself does indeed correspond to the mutual indwelling within the triune Persons (John 14:10-11, 20; 15:4-5, 7, 10; 17:20-23, 26). Thus for the believer, the

⁶¹ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 173.

⁶² Jenson, *The Works of God*, 317.

⁶³ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 339.

⁶⁴ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 311.

result of belonging to this body is nothing less than inclusion in the triune life of God—participation in the intercourse between the Persons of the Trinity. It is this participation in the triune Life that makes the eschatological existence of the saints *infinitely* glorious: ‘The Eschaton is infinite created life, made infinite in that it is the life of creatures seen by the Father as one story with the story of the Son and enlivened by the Spirit who is the Telos of that story.’⁶⁵ This means that when the Father considers the Son, He considers both His divine nature and His human nature, the full-orbed conception of the latter being the *totus Christus*, in which the saints are included—surely a mind-boggling notion!

Now and then

The inclusion in the triune life discussed here is something that has already begun, (since the saints are described as already being the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16; 12:13, 27) and yet is clearly not fully experienced by them. Bodiliness matters, as we have seen, and the Head of the *totus Christus* is currently bodily separated from the rest of the *totus Christus*. ‘The church now possesses her Lord sacramentally only, that is, actually and truly but still in faith and not by “sight.”’⁶⁶ Nonetheless, even during the current age the ‘presence’ of the church with her Head is real, such that ‘[b]elievers’ existing communion in the Trinity is the painful intrusion there of a plurality of still decidedly self-centred persons.’⁶⁷ Thus the present bodily separation within the *totus Christus* is ‘painful’ for both the created and uncreated sides of the union.

The End in sight though is the mutual joy of the Creator and the redeemed creatures: ‘God created the world for his Son, that he might prepare a spouse or bride for him to bestow his love upon; so that the mutual joys between this bride and bridegroom are the end of

⁶⁵ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 319. Jenson’s assertion here of the Spirit as the Gospel’s *telos* would seem misplaced; his overall point is well made though. David Field puts it more simply: ‘[a]s members of *totus Christus* [believers] are the objects of the loving regard of the Father for the Son’ (Field, ‘Not the Least Lash Lost’, 40.

⁶⁶ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 334.

⁶⁷ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 323.

creation.⁶⁸ Or again, 'divine glory and creaturely happiness may together be looked upon as God's one ultimate end in creating the world.'⁶⁹ What else can this reciprocal joy be founded on other than the triune Persons' delighting in and glorying of one another—a cascade of mutual loving and honouring, in which the saints are eschatologically caught up.

The transformation of the saints' knowledge of God

Jenson poses the following question: 'what are we to make of the indeed biblical... promise that while we now know God by faith, and so by hearing, we shall then see him "face to face"?'⁷⁰ He answers his own question with reference to the activity of 'hearing' within the Trinity: the Son 'hears the Father's Word only as he *is* that Word, so that his hearing has the immediate presence that in created time we call sight. And insofar as the blessed share his relation to the Father, their hearing too will be an immediate and fulfilled apprehension.'⁷¹ As long as the language of 'immediacy' is not pressed too hard,⁷² this is a worthwhile and helpful observation. Our current sightless knowledge by hearing and by faith will become a greater, fuller, and richer knowledge comparable to our current experience of visually attained knowledge.⁷³ For this Jenson adduces the trinitarian grounds that the Father's natural Son (by whom we become the Father's adopted sons) is simultaneously the Father's *Word*, and thus our appropriation of God's Word is no longer merely by auditory reception but surpassingly by actual union with the Word who is a Person.

⁶⁸ Edwards, quoted in Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All*, 130.

⁶⁹ Edwards, quoted in Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All*, 131.

⁷⁰ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 345. Jenson here cites 1 Corinthians 13:12.

⁷¹ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 339.

⁷² In 1 Corinthians 13:12, the sight-knowledge of both 'now' and 'then' is mediated, though totally transformed from the poorly mediated ('in a mirror dimly') to the brilliantly mediated ('face to face').

⁷³ That is not to say that aural communication will no longer have a role; there is no obvious theological reason to think that the verbal/auditory/textual reception of knowledge is for the immature and not also for the mature (including the eschatologically mature).

Conclusion

The major points covered in this article are as follows:

(i) The theological grounding for the mere possibility of a 'deep-comedy', glory-to-glory shaped Christian eschatology is trinitarian.

(ii) The means by which God's eschatological purposes are achieved are the intra-trinitarian missions in the economy—the Father's sending of the Son and their sending of the Spirit.

(iii) God's final intention—the mutually delighting relationship between Creator and redeemed creation in the form of the *totus Christus*—is trinitarian, both in *basis* (by corresponding to the differentiated, personal, loving tri-union of God) and in *experience* (by consisting in the saints' ever richer fellowship with God's triune life).

A non-trinitarian 'theology' (or philosophy) would be unable to sustain the eschatological content of any of these three points.

In closing, let us briefly consider how these applications of the doctrine of the Trinity might be deployed in order to correct false Christian hopes.

There is a popular but defective understanding 'of "heaven" as the place where nothing happens anymore, because there are no mutual differences and so no mutual challenges.'⁷⁴ However, that the Christian hope is not a somehow blissful stasis of disintegrated, non-bodily persons assimilated into 'God' is soundly debunked at every point by application of the doctrine of the Trinity. There is no stasis but a glory-to-glory dynamism. Nor is there any collapse of personhood. Indeed, the glorified saints must even be a *bodily* persons, following their Head and eschatological Trailblazer—the risen Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, commissioned by the Father in the Spirit to be incarnated as one of them, slain in place of them, and resurrected ahead of them.

Conversely, at the other end of the spectrum, there is no place for an eschatology that asserts an extreme individualism of personhood, where 'we get to "heaven" and each just do our own thing there.'

⁷⁴ Jenson, *The Works of God*, 360.

Rather there is a loving fellowship of saints, the alignment of whose desires reflects the eternal community of their triune Creator and Re-creator God, each redeemed person paradoxically maintaining their own distinctives even as they become ever more like their one Elder Brother and Husband-King, Jesus.

DAVID BATCHELOR
Eastbourne