IMITATIO TRINITATIS:
HOW SHOULD WE IMITATE THE TRINITY?

Keith E. Johnson

I. *Introduction*

Immanuel Kant once quipped that the doctrine of the Trinity "has no practical relevance."[1] Kant would be hard-pressed to make this criticism stick today. Contemporary theologians are attempting to relate this foundational Christian doctrine to a wide range of issues. One popular approach to the relevance of the Trinity involves an *imitatio trinitatis* in which Christians are directed to imitate the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in marriage, family, church, politics, and society. Many contemporary proposals for imitating the Trinity follow a similar pattern: specific aspects of the inner life of the triune God (e.g., the equality of the divine persons) are presented as a model for human beings to emulate.

Although Holy Scripture exhorts Christians to imitate the triune God, the approach to imitation commended in Scripture differs substantively from the strategy outlined above. In this article, I will contend that Scripture does not call us to imitate the way the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to one another in their inner life (immanent Trinity) and that construing imitation of the Trinity in this fashion generates a host of problems. Instead, I will argue that Scripture invites us to imitate the way the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to *us* in the economy of salvation—particularly as displayed through the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.

My discussion is divided into four sections. In the first section, I will survey several contemporary proposals commending the immanent Trinity as the focus of human imitation. In the second section, I will explore five methodological problems that arise from attempts to imitate the inner life of the Trinity. In the third section, I will outline an alternative approach focusing on three ways Scripture directs us to imitate the divine persons. In the final section, I will show how imitation is rooted in the redemptive work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Keith E. Johnson (Ph.D., Duke University) serves as the National Director of Theological Education for Cru (Campus Crusade for Christ) and Guest Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary (Orlando).

[1] Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (trans. Mary J. Gregor; New York: Abaris, 1979), 65-67.

II. *Imitating God's Inner Life: Contemporary Examples*

Since the patristic period Christian theologians have drawn an important distinction between God *in himself* and God *for us.*[2] For patristic theologians this distinction was explained in terms of *theologia* and *oikonomia.*[3] In contemporary theology this distinction has been framed in terms of the "immanent Trinity" and the "economic Trinity." The latter denotes God's self-revelation in creation and redemption while the former refers to the intra-trinitarian life of the three divine persons apart from creation and redemption. The proposals outlined below follow the same pattern: specific aspects of the *immanent* life of the triune God are commended as the object of Christian imitation. An emphasis on imitating the immanent life of God is not limited to conservative evangelicals. Proponents of this approach represent a diverse array of ecclesial affiliations and theological perspectives. This diversity will be evident in the examples cited below.[4]

Reflecting on Trinity and church, Colin Gunton suggests that ecclesial structures should reflect the inner relations of the divine persons. According to Gunton, the "being" of the church analogically mirrors the immanent being of the triune God: "The church is what it is by virtue of being called to be a *temporal echo* of the eternal community that God is."[5] The church, therefore, should imitate the "perichoretic interrelation" of the divine persons. No subordination should characterize relations among Christians. To the contrary, structures of equality should exist that reflect "the free personal relations which constitute the deity."[6]

In a book on team-based leadership, George Cladis presents the perichoretic teamwork of the Trinity as a model for church leaders to imitate: "The Father, Son, and Spirit are a kind of *team* that reveals to us seven attributes of Christian fellowship that make for effective church leadership today."[7] Teams that properly imitate the Trinity strive to be covenanting, visionary, collaborative, culture-creating, trusting, empowering, and learning.[8] For example, just as the divine persons work in unity, church leaders should not compete with one another but collaborate in synergistic ways.[9] A (proper) "perichoretic" understanding of

---

[2] Latin, God *in se* and God *pro nobis.*

[3] The Greek term *theologia* was used to denote the mystery of God while *oikonomia* ("economy") was used to describe God's salvific plan. Although the term *oikonomia* plays a relatively minor role in the NT (cf. Eph 1:10; 3:2; Col 1:25), it became a key term in patristic thought.

[4] As you read the examples below, bear in mind that our concern is strictly methodological. No attempt will be made to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of these proposals.

[5] Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 78; italics mine.

[6] Ibid., 80.

[7] George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders* (Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series; New York: Jossey-Bass, 1999), xi; italics original.

[8] Ibid., 3-16.

[9] Ibid., 14.

the Trinity "calls into question the traditional hierarchies of power, control, and domination" that frequently characterize church leadership.[10] Similar claims regarding the Trinity as a model for ecclesial structures can be found in the writings of Catherine LaCugna,[11] John Zizioulas[12] and Miroslav Volf.[13]

Wanting to relate Trinity and mission, David Bjork suggests that the Trinity provides a model for how evangelical missionaries (such as himself) should relate to Catholics in post-Christian France: "My thesis is that a proper understanding of how the one, living and true God has manifested himself as a trinity of persons within a fundamental and absolute unity (as described by the Greek word *perichoresis*) furnishes us with a paradigm which might inform missionary endeavors in post-Christendom lands."[14] For example, just as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together in the economy of salvation, relationships between Catholics and evangelicals should also be marked by active cooperation. Moreover, just as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct yet one, the form of unity that exists between Catholics and evangelicals should preserve the individual identities of both groups. Thus, two distinct forms of witness (Catholic and evangelical) should be recognized as legitimate.

Relating Trinity and society, Leonardo Boff presents the "perfect community" of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as a model for social structures.[15] Boff wants to see an earthly society develop that imitates the "perichoretic" unity and equality of the divine persons: "We seek a society that will be more an image and likeness of the Trinity, that will better reflect on the earth the trinitarian communion of heaven, and that will make it easier for us to know the mystery of communion of the divine three."[16] Boff suggests that the longing for egalitarian forms of society finds its basis in the communion of the divine persons.[17]

----

[10] Ibid., 5.

[11] "The trinitarian doctrine of God, as the basis for a trinitarian ecclesiology, might not specify the exact forms of structure and community appropriate to the church, but it does provide the critical principle against which we can measure present institutional arrangements. . . . [Institutions should be] structured according to the model of *perichoresis* among persons" (Catherine M. LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991], 402).

[12] "The Church must reflect in her very being the way God exists, i.e., the way of personal communion. . . . The fact that God reveals to us His existence as one of personal communion is decisive in our understanding of the nature of the Church. It implies that when we say the Church is *koinonia*, we mean no other kind of communion but the very personal communion between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It also implies that the Church is *by definition incompatible with individualism*; her fabric is communion and personal relatedness" (John D. Zizioulas, "The Church as Communion," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38 [1994]: 7-8; italics original).

[13] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 191-220.

[14] David Bjork, "Toward a Trinitarian Understanding of Mission in Post-Christendom Lands," *Missiology* 27 (1999): 232.

[15] Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000), 66.

[16] Ibid., xiv.

[17] "We likewise observe in social processes today an immense desire for participation, democratization, and change, aiming at forging a more egalitarian, participatory, pluralistic, and family-spirited

Reflecting on the relationships between men and women in society, Margaret Farley argues that "the very life of the Trinitarian God" should be the "ultimate normative model" for male/female relationships.[18] If we take the Trinity as our model, "equality, mutuality and reciprocity" must serve as "a norm against which every pattern of relationship may be measured" as well as a goal toward which every relationship should move.[19]

Wanting to relate Trinity and politics, Jürgen Moltmann argues that the doctrine of the Trinity (specifically the "perichoretic" unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) provides a pattern for proper political structures.[20] According to Moltmann, divine "perichoresis" is incompatible with every form of "subordination" in God's life. Hence, a political theology that is explicitly Christian will support political structures that imitate the "perichoretic" equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[21]

Imitation of the Trinity in marriage has generated extensive debate among evangelicals. On the one hand, some evangelicals claim that husbands and wives should imitate the authority and submission that characterize the eternal relation of the Father and Son. As Wayne Grudem explains, "Just as God the Father has authority over the Son, though the two are equal in deity, so in a marriage, the husband has authority over the wife, though they are equal in personhood. In this case, the man's role is like that of God the Father, and the woman's role is parallel to that of God the Son. They are equal in importance, but they have different roles."[22] Other evangelicals claim that the equality and mutuality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit constitute a model that all human relations, including marriage, should imitate.[23] As William David Spencer explains, "God exemplifies a unity in diversity that we should emulate between the genders and practice in the global, multicultural, mutual submission and respectful cooperation of all humans."[24]

---

society. This yearning is in tune with a trinitarian understanding of God. Indeed, it finds in Christian faith in God as communion of three divine persons the transcendent utopia of all human strivings for forms that are more participatory, communal, and respecting of diversity" (ibid., xiii).

[18] Margaret A. Farley, "New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution," *TS* 36 (1975): 645.

[19] Ibid., 646.

[20] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 150.

[21] Ibid., 198-200.

[22] Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 459-60.

[23] Generally, evangelical egalitarians have not appealed to the immanent Trinity in support of their views to the same extent as their non-evangelical counterparts.

[24] William David Spencer, "An Evangelical Statement on the Trinity," in *Man, Woman and the Triune God* (special edition journal published for members of the ETS by Christians for Biblical Equality) (2011): 21. Similarly, "The Christian doctrine of God speaks of a triune God who is differentiated as Father, Son, and Spirit, yet is one in being and authority in a bond of love and self-giving. This understanding of God analogically reflects the ideal for all human relationships. It suggests that permanently subordinating a race, socioeconomic group, or sex is not pleasing to God" (Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* [Grand

Also wanting to relate Trinity and marriage, John Sistare explains that husbands and wives are called to "imitate" the "total self-giving love or 'agape' love of the Trinity."[25] Sistare suggests that the practice of contraception is inconsistent with imitation of the Trinity:

> Since contraception is against conception, the natural end of unitive and procreation [*sic*] cannot be met. The total self-giving of one to the other is cut short. Instead we see a selfish act and a denial of the will of the author of Life. The Trinity must always be a part of every conjugal act because it is the Trinity whom the couple imitates in the total self-giving of one to the other. . . . Rather than saying yes to imitating the Trinity and totally giving in a unitive way to one another, the contracepting couple selfishly rejects the love of God and each other.[26]

Finally, in an article titled "How Imitating the Trinity Can Make a Huge Difference in How Your Kids Treat You," Steve Kroening explains that by imitating the divine persons, parents can improve relationships with both their spouse and children.[27] The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit "make it a habit to revere, respect, glorify, and build each other up. They work hard to magnify the other members. And you never hear them speak ill of each other."[28] Parents should imitate the example of the divine persons. If one spouse criticizes the other, children will simply imitate this; however, if children hear one spouse "glorifying" the other (like the divine persons do), children will become more respectful.

III. *Don't Try This at Home: Problems with Imitating the Inner Life of the Trinity*

The examples above employ a similar grammar of imitation. Christians are exhorted to imitate the way the divine persons relate to one another in their inner life.[29] However, when it comes to imitating the Trinity, Scripture points

---

Rapids: Zondervan, 2006], 312). In his more recent work, Giles explicitly denies the appropriateness of treating God's inner life as a model for male/female relationships: "I strongly endorse democratic ideals and social equality, particularly male-female equality, but I do not make the orthodox doctrine of a co-equal Trinity the basis for these ideals, and I do not think others should do this" (Kevin Giles, "The Trinity without Tiers," in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son* [ed. Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House; Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2012], 264).

[25] John Sistare, "The Trinity," http://www.cfpeople.org/SeminarianWritings/Sem013.html (accessed January 26, 2012).

[26] Ibid.

[27] Steve Kroening, "How Imitating the Trinity Can Make a Huge Difference in How Your Kids Treat You," http://www.wisdomsedge.com/wejoom/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=119&Itemid=28 (accessed January 26, 2012).

[28] Ibid.

[29] One might object that by focusing exclusively on the role of the immanent Trinity, my survey misrepresents the positions of the theologians cited above. For example, it might be argued that a complementarian view of male/female relations is firmly rooted in exegetical considerations that have nothing to do with the doctrine of the Trinity, and that by focusing narrowly on imitation of

us in a different direction. Before we explore this alternative approach, we will briefly consider five methodological problems that encumber attempts to imitate God's inner life.

First, the imitate-the-immanent-Trinity approach tends to be highly selective. Many of these proposals present a single abstract concept like "equality" as the object of imitation. For example, we are frequently told that hierarchical social, political, and ecclesial structures are incompatible with the "equality" of the divine persons. If we were truly imitating the Trinity, we would develop non-hierarchical structures. Functionally, the doctrine of the Trinity is reduced to a single key concept (in this case, "equality") and this concept is commended as the object of imitation. What justifies this selectivity? Why imitate "equality" and not some other aspect of God's inner life—like "triunity"? For example, why not argue that we should imitate the "threeness" of God by developing ecclesial structures with three "equal" yet "distinct" branches of authority: an executive branch (corresponding to the Father), a legislative branch (corresponding to the Word), and a judicial branch (corresponding to the Spirit, who is described in John's Gospel as "Counselor")? What determines which aspects of God's inner architecture should be imitated and which can be ignored?

Second, the imitate-the-immanent-Trinity approach fails to take into account the implications of the Creator/creature distinction. Substantial differences exist between divine relations and human relations that disallow *direct* imitation of God's inner life. *Perichoresis* represents an excellent case in point. Historically, this Greek term has been used to describe the way in which Scripture portrays the mutual indwelling of the divine persons in the context of a unity of essence (cf. John 14:10). Despite contemporary references to imitating the "dance" of the Trinity, it is difficult to imagine precisely how human beings imitate divine *perichoresis*. What would it look like for human beings to indwell one another such that their subjectivies overlap? Divine relations differ from human relations in another important way as well. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are *constituted as persons* by their relations in such a way that they cannot exist apart from these relations. The same cannot be said of relations among human beings. Unlike the divine persons, we exist apart from our relations with others.[30] If my mother dies, I do not cease to exist. Moreover, as Kathryn Tanner

---

the immanent Trinity I obscure this important point. I readily acknowledge that the theologians cited above may possess compelling reasons for their proposals unrelated to trinitarian doctrine. My purpose is not to render judgment on the strengths and weaknesses of these proposals. My concern is methodological, i.e., with the legitimacy of presenting God's inner life as the focus of human imitation. These two issues should not be confused. Returning to one of the examples above, one might, on biblical grounds, affirm a complementarian view of male/female relations while denying the legitimacy of appealing to the immanent Trinity in support of this position (this is my own view). Alternatively, one might affirm an egalitarian view of male/female relationships while denying the legitimacy of appealing to the immanent Trinity in support of this view (e.g., Kevin Giles's stance; see n. 24 above).

[30] See Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Current Issues in Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 224-25.

explains, the divine persons "remain irreducibly distinct from one another in ways that human beings cannot imitate."[31] Although I am a son in relation to my father, I also have the capacity to become a father myself. This is not the case with the divine persons. Father and Son are irreducibly distinct in such a way that the Son can never become the Father or vice versa.

In response someone might say, "Forget about God's inner life. We should imitate the way the divine persons relate to one another in the economy of salvation." Although it represents a step in the right direction, this move does not solve every problem. The Creator/creature distinction applies to the economy of salvation as well: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together in ways that differ significantly from the way human beings cooperate. One fundamental element of historic trinitarian orthodoxy is the notion that the divine persons act *inseparably* in the economy of salvation.[32] Undivided operation means that all three persons are involved in *every* act of creation, providence, and redemption.[33] It also means that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share one will and execute one power. Undivided operation is a direct implication and economic expression of intra-trinitarian unity (i.e., monotheism).[34] It is difficult to imagine how humans would *directly* imitate the unified work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[35] Translated into human terms, it means that two humans could never act apart from one another.

Third, a number of proposals commending the immanent Trinity as the focus of human imitation depend upon a "social" model of the Trinity that stands in tension with the trinitarian theology confessed by the church fathers (e.g., Augustine and the Cappadocians) in the ancient ecumenical creeds (e.g.,

---

[31] Ibid., 226.

[32] This is expressed in the Latin axiom *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* ("the external works of the Trinity are undivided").

[33] For example, while it was only the Son who became incarnate, the incarnation was the joint work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[34] Undivided action should *not* be confused with "modalism," which denies the hypostatic distinction of the divine persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit remain irreducibly distinct in their unity of operation. Moreover, inseparable operation only represents one aspect of trinitarian agency. A proper understanding of trinitarian agency involves two aspects. On the one hand, the working of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is inseparably the work of the three *ad extra*. On the other hand, in this single act, the divine persons work according to their relative properties *ad intra*. The Father acts with the other divine persons according to his mode of being "from no one" (unbegotten). The Son acts with the other divine persons according to his mode of being "from the Father" (generation). The Spirit acts with the other divine persons according to his mode of being "from the Father and the Son" (procession). Combining these two elements, we might say that the divine persons act inseparably through the intra-trinitarian taxis: from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. For more on the agency of the divine persons, see Keith E. Johnson, "Trinitarian Agency and the Eternal Subordination of the Son: An Augustinian Perspective," *Them* 36 (2011): 7-25.

[35] Of course, we must not fall into the opposite error by insisting that no analogy exists between the unity of the divine persons and the church. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus prays that his followers would be one "just as" he and his Father are one (John 17: 11, 21, 22). This text will be discussed further below.

Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed). "Social" trinitarians typically apply a post-Enlightenment definition of person as conscious willing subject to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, they conceive of the divine persons as three centers of consciousness and will. This is not the way Augustine or the Cappadocians (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus) thought about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[36] It is outside the scope of our present discussion to offer a critique of "social" trinitarianism. Moreover, the proposal I will outline below is *not* dependent on a "psychological" model of the Trinity over and against a "social" model. For our purposes it is sufficient simply to note that social trinitarianism underwrites much of the contemporary imitate-the-immanent-Trinity approach.

This brings us to a fourth problem with imitating the immanent Trinity—namely, the problem of "projection." Karen Kilby suggests that this problem can be seen in the work of some contemporary social trinitarians who treat the perichoretic unity of the divine persons as a tool for combating individualism, patriarchy, and oppressive political structures.[37] According to Kilby, appeals to "perichoresis" among social trinitarians frequently involve three steps. First, *perichoresis* is identified as that which constitutes the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Next, *perichoresis* is defined by projecting some aspect of human relatedness into God's immanent life. Finally, *perichoresis* is commended as an exciting resource Christians have to share with the world. "Projection, then, is particularly problematic in at least some social theories of the Trinity because what is projected onto God is immediately reflected back onto the world, and this reverse projection is said to be what is in fact *important* about the doctrine."[38]

Finally, the imitate-the-immanent-Trinity approach does not take into account the reality of life in a fallen world. We do not live in the world of Gen 1 and 2. We live on the other side of Gen 3. Practically speaking, this means that we imitate God under the condition of sin. Since no sin marks the immanent life of God, how do we know what it looks like to imitate God under the condition of sin? Answer: look at how the divine persons relate to *fallen* human beings. In the economy of salvation, we see God's love displayed *in the context of human rebellion and suffering*. When we forgive those who sin against us, we are not directly imitating the relations among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *in se* (as no "forgiveness" marks these relationships); instead, we are imitating the forgiveness the divine persons extend to fallen human beings. With this perspective in mind, we are now ready to consider an alternative approach.

---

[36] See Keith E. Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), ch. 2 and appendix 1.

[37] Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *NBf* 81 (2000): 432-45.

[38] Ibid., 442; italics original.

IV. *A More Excellent Way: Imitating God's Relations with Human Beings*

If we are not called to imitate the inner relations of the divine persons, how then should we imitate the Trinity? In the discussion that follows, I will explore three overlapping ways Scripture directs us to imitate the Trinity. As we will see below, all three modes of imitation are found in a single text: Eph 4:32–5:2. This passage represents one of the clearest biblical texts in which Christians are exhorted to imitate the triune God.[39]

First, Scripture invites us to emulate the *character* of the divine persons. Fundamental to the trinitarian faith of the church is a distinction between common and personal properties. Common properties are shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; examples include holiness, aseity, eternity, simplicity, sovereignty, love, justice, will, and mercy. Personal properties are proper to one of the divine persons in such a way that they constitute the basis for distinguishing one divine person from another. Historically, Christian theologians have recognized three personal properties: "paternity" (Father), "filiation" (Son), and "procession" (Holy Spirit). In the context of the distinction between common and personal properties, Christians are called to imitate *some* of the properties that are common to the divine persons. The reason we say "some" is because not all of God's attributes can be imitated by human beings. Theologians use the term "communicable attributes" to identify divine attributes that humans have the capacity to imitate (albeit analogically). Examples of communicable attributes include spirituality, knowledge, wisdom, trustworthiness, goodness, love, mercy, jealousy, holiness, righteousness, and justice.[40] Our imitation of these communicable attributes should be seen in the context of our status as image-bearers who are called to reflect God (Gen 1:26-27).

Numerous examples of this first mode of imitation can be found in Scripture. For example, after exhorting his readers to live holy lives, Peter cites Lev 19:2, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Pet 1:16; cf. Lev 11:44). The implication is that God's people are to reflect his holiness in their lives. The Apostle John exhorts his readers to imitate the love of God, affirming that "God is love" (1 John 4:7-16). A number of the character qualities Paul encourages his readers to cultivate reflect the character of God.[41] We see this mode of imitation commended in Eph 4:32 when Paul exhorts his readers to be kind and compassionate. Peter

---

[39] "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 4:32–5:2). This and all biblical citations are taken from the ESV.

[40] Examples of incommunicable attributes would include aseity, immutability, eternality, omnipresence, and simplicity. For a helpful discussion of communicable and incommunicable attributes, see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 156-225.

[41] Gordon Fee points out, for example, that in describing love as "patient" and "kind" in 1 Cor 13:4, Paul "begins with this twofold description of God, who through Christ has shown himself forbearing and kind toward those who deserve divine judgment" (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 637).

O'Brien explains that the kindness and compassion Paul exhorts his readers to cultivate reflect the character of God.[42] Although no explicit exhortations to imitate the Holy Spirit can be found in Scripture, we imitate the Holy Spirit anytime we emulate *any* of the communicable attributes identified above. This is because communicable attributes are shared by all the divine persons.

Second, Scripture exhorts us to emulate the *conduct* of the divine persons in the economy of salvation.[43] As image-bearers, human beings were created to imitate God's divine rule by serving as vice-regents exercising dominion over his creative work: "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (Gen 1:28; cf. Ps 8:6).[44] Humans are also called to imitate God by observing Sabbath rest. In the Decalogue, God exhorts his people to "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exod 20:8). The following reason is given for Sabbath-observance (established by the Hebrew particle כִּי): "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exod 20:11). Furthermore, humans are to imitate God, whose every word "proves true" (Prov 30:5; cf. 2 Sam 7:28; Ps 12:6), by speaking truthfully to their neighbors (Lev 19:11; cf. Exod 20:16).

Turning to the NT, Jesus exhorts his followers to imitate the conduct of their Father in heaven by showing kindness to their enemies: "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt 5:44-45). After instructing his readers to "love one another" (1 John 4:7), John reminds them how God (the Father) displayed his love by "send[ing] his only Son into the world, so that [they] might live through him" (1 John 4:9) and exhorts them to imitate the Father's example: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11).

Several negative examples can be found in the Gospels in which individuals are rebuked for failing to imitate the conduct of the triune God. A striking instance can be found in Luke 15. In response to criticism from the Pharisees for having fellowship with "sinners," Jesus told three parables: a story about a man with one hundred sheep who rejoiced when one of his lost sheep was found (15:3-7), a story about a woman with ten coins who rejoiced when her

---

[42] "According to the Old Testament, *kindness* is a quality which God himself demonstrates concretely, to all men and women as his creatures, but especially to his covenant people. . . . 'Compassion' is regularly used in the New Testament of God or Christ to speak of their unbounded mercy to sinners (Matt 9:36; 14:14; 18:27; Luke 1:78; 7:13; 10:33; 15:20)" (Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesian*s [Pillar NT Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 351).

[43] Although many of the examples cited below focus on the Father, these should not be seen as excluding the Son and Holy Spirit in light of the unity of the divine persons.

[44] Adam and Eve, however, failed in this mandate. It was fulfilled by the second Adam, Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15; Rom 5:12-21; Heb 2:5-9).

lost coin was found (15:8-10), and a story about a father with two sons who rejoiced when his lost son returned (15:11-32). The third story involves an odd twist. The elder brother refuses to join in the celebration over the return of his younger brother (15:25-32). His father explains that it is fitting to celebrate, "for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found" (15:32). The parallels are not difficult to catch. The prodigal-loving father in the story reflects God the Father while the elder brother reflects the Pharisees. There is no exhortation to "be like the father." Instead, this parable functions negatively, explaining why the Pharisees fail to imitate the Father—namely, because they share the spirit of the elder brother. Implicit in this story is the fact that they should imitate the joy of the Father.[45] Another negative example can be seen in Jesus' story about the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:21-35). Implicit in this story is the reality that Jesus' followers should reflect the conduct of the Father by imitating the forgiveness they have experienced.

Exhortation to imitate the conduct of the divine persons can be seen clearly in Ephesians: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as [καθὼς καί] God in Christ forgave you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love" (Eph 4:32–5:2a; cf. Col 3:12-14). We have already observed that the character qualities Paul encourages in v. 32 (i.e., kindness, compassion) reflect God's character. Here we want to observe how Paul exhorts his readers to imitate, in their relations with one another, the forgiveness they have experienced from God the Father in Christ.[46] As Peter O'Brien explains, καθὼς καί (4:32) "has both comparative and causal force (cf. 5:2, 25, 29): what God has done 'in Christ' for believers, which has been so fully set forth in chapters 1–3, provides both the paradigm of and grounds for their behavior."[47] The command to forgive is followed by an exhortation to "be imitators of God," which implies that one way Paul wants them to imitate God is by extending forgiveness to others. The description of believers as "dearly loved children" (5:1)—a reference to their adoption into God's family—constitutes the basis on which the exhortation to imitate God is made: "Since they have richly experienced that love, they should be imitators of him and reproduce that family likeness."[48] It is helpful to observe the way the grammar of imitation functions in this second mode. In all the examples above, the model for imitation is not the way the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to *one another* but the way the divine persons relate *to human beings* in creation, providence, and redemption.[49]

---

[45] "Joy/rejoicing" is one of the key themes in this chapter (Luke 15:5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 24, 32).

[46] In all but a handful of texts, the Greek noun θεός refers to God the Father. See Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of* Theos *in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). Here it quite clearly refers to the Father.

[47] O'Brien, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 352.

[48] Ibid.

[49] One might object to this point on the grounds that the relationship of the Son to the Father (particularly the Son's obedience to the Father) represents a point of imitation. Actions of the second person of the Trinity *in his human nature* represent a special case that will be addressed below.

A final way we imitate the Trinity is by imitating the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. Although this category may initially appear to overlap with the previous one, an important difference exists: whereas in the previous category we imitate the actions of the Son *qua* Son (along with the Father and Holy Spirit), in the third category we are imitating the eternal Son *in his human nature.* It is this third mode of imitation that receives the greatest attention in the NT.[50] The link between imitation of Christ and imitation of the Trinity is clearly established in Eph 5:1-2: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as [καθὼς καί] Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." After exhorting his readers to imitate God by living a life of love, Paul points them to the concrete example of Christ who "loved us" and "gave himself for us" on the cross.[51] Commenting on the link between the imitation of God and Christ in this passage, O'Brien explains, "By living a life of love the readers will imitate God; yet that life of love is modeled on Christ's love so signally demonstrated in the cross. Hence the imitation of God is ultimately the imitation of Christ."[52] Along similar lines, John Calvin explains, "Children ought to be like their father. Paul reminds us that we are children of God, and so we ought to be like him as much as possible. . . . Christ is the model of how we can do this."[53]

Imitation of Christ's love represents an important theme in the Johannine corpus. In John 15:12, Jesus exhorts his disciples to imitate his love ("This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you")[54] and then points them to the greatest expression of love, anticipating the cross: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Similarly, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16). Two claims are made in this verse: the cross teaches us the true nature of love (i.e., laying down our lives for others), and we should imitate Christ's example by laying down our lives for others. As Stephen Smalley explains, "The verb ὀφείλομεν, 'we ought,' suggests the intensity of the constraint laid upon every believer to follow the pattern of self-surrender set by Jesus in his life and death."[55]

---

[50] O'Brien, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 352.

[51] As in Eph 4:32, καθὼς καί in 5:2 has both comparative and causal force: the self-giving love of Christ is both the ground and standard for Christian conduct. See O'Brien, *Letter to the Ephesians,* 354.

[52] Ibid., 354. Similarly, "The idea of the imitation of God in 5:1 is defined both by what precedes (God's activity of forgiveness) and by what follows (his love, the essential characteristic of his activity in Christ). In fact, the imitation of God turns out to be the imitation of Christ, as in the motivating clause it is the latter's love and self-giving that are the ground and the norm for the behavior required of believers" (Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* [WBC 42; Dallas: Word, 1990], 311).

[53] John Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians,* in *Galatians, Ephesians* (Reformation Commentary on Scripture, NT 10; ed. Gerald Bray; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 365.

[54] Jesus does not say "love me as I love the Father" but rather "love me as I have loved you." Of course, the love that Jesus expresses toward his disciples certainly reflects the love the Father has for the Son (John 15:9).

[55] Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (WBC 51; rev. ed.; Waco: Word, 2007), 185. Imitation of Christ is an important theme in 1 John. This imitation is not "superficial exercise" but "carries with it

We are also called to imitate the servant-leadership of Christ. Rather than imitating the authoritarian rule of the Gentiles (or a supposedly "non-hierarchical" Trinity), Jesus instructs his disciples to emulate *his* leadership: "It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt 20:26-28; par. Mark 10:43-45). After washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus offers the following explanation: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15).[56] The Apostle Paul exhorts his readers to imitate the humble self-sacrificing service of Jesus Christ—displayed most clearly on the cross (Phil 2:5-8).[57] Hence, the pattern for Christian humility is not some kind of intra-trinitarian *kenosis* (contra Hans Urs von Balthasar) but the *economic* self-emptying of the Son in the cross.

In Eph 5, Paul encourages husbands and wives to imitate the relationship of Christ and the church.[58] As the church submits to Christ, Christian wives should submit to their husbands (Eph 5:24). As Christ loved the church by giving himself up for her, Christian husbands should also display self-sacrificial love toward their wives (Eph 5:25). Importantly, Paul does *not* exhort husbands and wives to imitate the inner relations of the Son and the Father.[59] The point

---

a deep sense of obedient participation in Christ, whose resources make this 'imitation' possible" (ibid., 195).

[56] The example commended is not foot-washing per se but humble service. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 455-68.

[57] Contra the "kerygmatic" reading of Phil 2:5-11 (e.g., Käsemann, Martin, et al.), an "ethical" reading of this text makes the most sense. As O'Brien explains, "Accordingly, the Christ-hymn presents Jesus as the ultimate model for Christian behaviour and action, the supreme example of the humble, self-sacrificing, self-giving service that Paul has been urging the Philippians to practice in their relations one toward another (vv. 1-4)" (Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 205). For a helpful discussion of the ethical and kerygmatic interpretations of Phil 2, see ibid., 253-62.

[58] This is not the place to wade into the debate over the contemporary application of this text to Christian marriage. My point here is *methodological*: the Christ/church relation represents the focal point of imitation.

[59] Some would argue that 1 Cor 11:3 ("But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God") represents an exception to this pattern. This text is sometimes cited as providing biblical warrant for the view that we are to imitate the way the Son *qua* Son eternally relates to the Father; however, if we recognize that Paul is speaking in v. 3 about the incarnate Christ in his mediatorial role, it still fits the pattern outlined above. Without entering too far into the contemporary debate over the meaning of "head" (κεφαλή), I will clarify that there are two primary ways the expression "God is the head of Christ" has been read in the history of the church: (1) in reference to the subjection of the Son to the Father in the incarnation (κεφαλή understood in the sense of "authority") and (2) in reference to the eternal generation of the Son by the Father (κεφαλή understood in the sense of "source"). For example, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Thomas Aquinas acknowledges the legitimacy of both readings (although he prefers an incarnational reading): "The third comparison he makes

of imitation is the relationship of Christ *to the church*. This reflects the consistent pattern we have observed elsewhere, namely, that imitation is directed at how the divine persons relate to human beings in the economy of salvation.[60]

Furthermore, Christians are instructed to embrace hardship following Jesus' example (Matt 10:24-25; John 15:18-20; 1 Thess 1:6-7; Heb 13:12-13). Imitating the suffering of Christ is a key theme in 1 Peter. After exhorting Christian servants to honor the authority of their earthly masters—even when they experience unjust treatment for doing what is right—Peter points them to the example of Christ: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Pet 2:21). Not only is suffering part and parcel of the calling of every Christian, but when they suffer for what is right, they also follow in the footsteps of Christ. Peter underscores Christ's response to unjust treatment: "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet 2:22-23). One might wonder, "If I am being treated unjustly, how does it help me to know that someone responded better than I?" Peter seems to anticipate this question. Drawing on the language (and theology) of Isa 53, he reminds his readers that Christ's suffering was not merely exemplary but also *redemptive* in that it liberated them from the power of sin, making a different response possible: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned

---

is of God to the Lord, when he says: The head of Christ is God. Here it should be noted that this name, 'Christ,' signifies the person mentioned by reason of His human nature: and so this name, 'God,' does not refer only to the person of the Father but the whole Trinity, from which as from the more perfect all goods in the humanity of Christ are derived and to which the humanity of Christ is subjected. It can be understood in another way, so that this name, 'Christ,' stands for that person by reason of his divine nature; then this name, 'God,' stands only for the person of the Father, Who is called the head of the Son not by reason of a greater perfection or by reason of any supposition, but only according to origin and conformity of nature; as it says in Ps 2 (v. 7): 'The Lord said to me: you are my Son; today I have begotten you'" (Thomas Aquinas, *On the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (trans. Fabian Larcher), http://www.josephkenny.joyeurs.com/CDtexts/SS1Cor. htm (accessed August 8, 2012).

[60] The priestly prayer in John 17 (specifically Jesus' request that his followers may be one "just as" he and his Father are one; vv. 11, 21, 22) should not be seen as an exception to this pattern. No exhortation can be found in this passage to imitate God's inner life. Moreover, the visible unity for which Christ prays is not brought about by individual churches becoming, in their ecclesial structures, platonic reflections of the intra-trinitarian unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Rather, ecclesial unity is constituted by a relation with and participation in the salvific work of the triune God (i.e., the sending of the Son and giving of the Holy Spirit). For more on this theme, see John Behr, "The Trinitarian Being of the Church," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 48 (2004): 67-88. Finally, the precise nature of the parallel in John 17 is not spelled out. It is one thing to affirm, in a general sense, that the unity of the church somehow *analogically* reflects the unity of the divine persons. It is quite another to specify the precise ontological content of that divine unity and then draw a straight line from a speculative conception of this "unity" to specific ecclesial structures (as some contemporary theologians are in the habit of doing).

to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet 2:24-25).[61] Our discussion of the suffering of Christ reminds us why it is most fitting that the incarnate Son represents the focus of human imitation. Despite fashionable theological trends in speaking about "divine" suffering (e.g., Jürgen Moltmann),[62] it makes no sense to speak about imitating the "suffering" of the Father or Holy Spirit.[63] We imitate the suffering of the eternal Son *in his human nature*.[64]

Finally, throughout his time on earth, Jesus modeled a life of obedience to the will of the Father.[65] I have come, says Jesus, "not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38). Similarly, Phil 2:8 emphasizes the fact that Jesus was "obedient to the point of death." Jesus draws a direct parallel between his earthly obedience to the Father and our obedience to him: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 15:10).[66] In response someone might say, "Here you are admitting that we should imitate how the Son relates to the Father. How does this fit with your earlier claim that we are not called to imitate the way the divine persons relate to one another?" My answer is that Scripture does not call us to imitate the way the eternal Son *qua* Son relates to the Father in the divine life prior to (or apart from) the incarnation but rather the way the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, relates to the Father in his state of humiliation.[67]

---

[61] The idea of participating in Christ's sufferings represents an important theme in Paul's letters as well (Col 1:24; Phil 3:10).

[62] See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 21-60.

[63] For a helpful discussion of the question of divine suffering, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

[64] Through union with Christ, we also participate in Christ's sufferings (Col 1:24; Phil 3:8-11).

[65] "Obedience" also represents a fundamental category for understanding Christ's redemptive work. See John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 19-24.

[66] Some theologians claim that the Son *qua* Son is, in some sense, eternally "obedient" to the Father and that the eternal obedience of the Son constitutes the ultimate example for humans to imitate. Even if one were to acknowledge some sense in which we may legitimately speak about an eternal "obedience" of the Son to the Father (as do Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Boris Bobrinskoy, et al.), we only know what true obedience looks like as it is demonstrated by the incarnate Son. In other words, the clearest example of "obedience" is that of the Son to the Father *in his state of humiliation.* A helpful collection of essays exploring arguments for and against the legitimacy of affirming that the Son, *qua* Son, eternally submits to the Father can be found in Jowers and House, eds., *New Evangelical Subordinationism?*

[67] Of course, Christians are not called to imitate every aspect of Christ's life. For example, just because Jesus was a carpenter does not mean his followers should be wood-workers. Moreover, just because Jesus was single does not mean his followers must remain single. Furthermore, just because Jesus lived a life of poverty does not mean his followers should live a life of poverty. This is where certain ecclesiastical traditions have distorted NT teaching. As John Yoder rightly explains, the NT offers no "general concept of living like Jesus" (John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], 134). For example, in commending celibacy (1 Cor 7), "it never occurs to [Paul] to appeal to Jesus' example" (ibid). Imitation of Christ in the NT is fundamentally orientated toward the self-sacrificing service of Jesus—especially as it is revealed in the cross.

V. *Connecting the Music and the Dance: Imitation Rooted in the Redemptive Work of the Trinity*

Some readers may be concerned that talk of "Jesus as our example" will inevitably lead to moralism. Although this concern is quite legitimate, it is important to recognize that all three modes of imitation outlined above are rooted in the redemptive work of the triune God (i.e., the electing love of the Father; the life, death, resurrection, and enthronement of the Son; and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit). We see this clearly in Ephesians. Paul exhorts his readers to forgive as (καθὼς καί) God in Christ forgave them (Eph 4:32) and to walk in love as (καθὼς καί) Christ loved them (Eph 5:2). As I explained earlier, καθὼς καί is not merely comparative; it also has causal force. We forgive *because* we have been forgiven; we walk in love *because* Christ loved us. That this imitation is rooted in the redemptive work of the triune God becomes even clearer in the broader context of Ephesians. In the first half of the letter, Paul describes the redeeming work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[68] Then, at the end of ch. 3 he prays that the Father would strengthen his readers with power through the Holy Spirit so that Christ might dwell in their hearts and that, "being rooted and grounded in love," they might "have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that [they] may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:17-19). Thus, the imitation Paul encourages at the end of ch. 4 arises out of a rich experience of the love of God in Christ, mediated by the Holy Spirit.[69]

Imagine yourself in a large house in which those who are deaf and those who can hear live together.[70] In one of the rooms, you see a young man sitting in a chair listening to music on his iPod. Rhythmically, he is tapping his foot, snapping his fingers, and swaying to the beat of the song. His entire body moves in response to what his ears are hearing. It is obvious he is enjoying himself. A few minutes later, a deaf person opens the door and enters the room. He carefully watches the person listening to the music and thinks to himself, "That seems like fun. I think I'll try that too." So he sits down next to the man with the iPod and begins to imitate him. Awkwardly and haltingly at first, he tries to snap his fingers, tap his toes, and move like the person next to him. After

---

[68] For more on the trinitarian nature of salvation in Ephesians, see Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 73-85.

[69] We see a similar dynamic in the passages we examined earlier from 1 Peter and 1 John. Peter not only invites his readers to emulate Christ's example in the midst of suffering (1 Pet 2:21-23) but he also reminds them how Christ's redemptive work enables them to respond in a Christ-like way (1 Pet 2:24-25). Similarly, the author of 1 John connects the obligation to imitate God by loving one another to his readers' experience of God's love (1 John 4:10-11) and regeneration (1 John 4:7).

[70] This illustration was first suggested to me by Larry Kirk, pastor of Christ Community Church in Daytona Beach, Fla.

a little practice, he slowly begins to sway in time with the first man, mirroring his actions. Although he eventually gets better at keeping time, he concludes that it is not as much fun as it initially seemed; indeed, it takes an enormous amount of effort to mimic the dance. Imagine that a third person enters the room and watches this scene. What does he see? Two people apparently doing the same thing. Is there a difference? Absolutely! The first person hears the music and his actions are a natural response to the rhythm and melody; the second man is merely imitating outward actions. This picture illustrates an important parallel with imitation. The "dance" represents a life of love for God and others while the "music" represents the gospel. Sometimes we are like the person in the story who is trying to imitate the dance steps without hearing the music of the gospel. God's heart, however, is not simply to get us to dance but to enable us, by his Spirit, to hear the music of the gospel. Dancing (in this case, imitation of Christ) reflexively follows. Imitation, therefore, is empowered by a rich experience of the music of the gospel. This is precisely what Paul prays for in Eph 3:14-19.

The doctrine of sanctification helps us keep the divine and human aspects of "imitation" in proper perspective. Although regeneration is *monergistic*, progressive sanctification is *synergistic*.[71] Scripture presents both the triune God and believers as agents in the process of progressive sanctification (e.g., Phil 2:12-13). The language of "imitation" tends to emphasize the human dimension in the sanctification process; however, there are a number of passages employing imitation language that emphasize the divine side. Romans 8:29 represents a clear case in point: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son (συμμόρφους τῆς εἰκόνος τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ), in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." Paul describes the outcome of the sanctification process in terms of conformity to the image of Christ. Paul uses the same Greek adjective (σύμμορφος) in Phil 3:21 to describe the result of Christ's transforming work at his second coming.[72] Although Paul's use of "image" (εἰκών) may initially appear redundant with "conformed" (σύμμορφος), Douglas Moo points out that the addition of this

---

[71] "Many people confuse regeneration and sanctification. Regeneration is exclusively God's work, and it is an act of His free grace in which He implants a new principle of spiritual life in the soul. It is performed by supernatural power and is complete in an instant. On the other hand sanctification is a process through which the remains of sin in the outward life are gradually removed. . . . It is a joint work of God and man" (Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951], 172). Similarly, "Regeneration [is] a momentary monergistic act of quickening the spiritually dead. As such, it [is] God's work alone. Sanctification, however, is in one sense synergistic—it is an ongoing cooperative process in which regenerate persons, alive to God and freed from sin's dominion (Rom. 6:11, 14-18), are required to exert themselves in sustained obedience" (J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* [Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1993], 170).

[72] Moo argues that this parallel (along with 1 Cor 15:49) is crucial for interpreting this conforming action as eschatological. See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 535.

term accomplishes two purposes: it underscores the reality that "Christians are 'fitted into' the 'pattern of existence' that Christ has established and modeled," and it invites a "negative comparison" with Adam, who marred the image of God in the fall.[73] In this context, God intends "to imprint on all those who belong to Christ the 'image' of the 'second Adam.'"[74]

VI. *Conclusion*

"Be imitators of God," writes the Apostle Paul. Many contemporary theologians assume that we are to fulfill this biblical directive by imitating the inner relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in marriage, family, church, and society. I have argued that Scripture does not call us to imitate the way the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate *to one another* in their inner life. Rather, Scripture calls us to reflect the Trinity in three ways: (1) by imitating the character (communicable attributes) of the triune God, (2) by imitating aspects of the conduct of the triune God in the economy of salvation, and (3) by imitating the humble, self-sacrificing life of the incarnate Christ. In short, we are to imitate the way the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate *to us* in the economy of salvation—particularly as displayed through the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. Thus, imitation of the Trinity (*imitatio trinitatis*) ultimately takes the form of the imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) and is empowered by the redemptive work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

---

[73] Ibid., 534. Created in the image of God, humans were made to reflect God's character and imitate his rule. When they rebelled against God, the image was marred. The good news of the gospel, however, is that through the second Adam—Jesus Christ—the image is being renewed and will one day be perfected.

[74] Ibid.