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Millard Erickson and Trinitarian Unity

Since the publication of his first book, *The New Evangelical Theology*, in 1968, Millard J. Erickson has been a consistent voice for American evangelicalism. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen sees him as representing the moderate, and likely the majority, voice in contemporary American evangelicalism.[1] His systematic theology text, *Christian Theology*, has served well and been well received in the evangelical community through several printings and two editions. He has also interacted extensively with postmodernism and postconservatism, seeking to develop an appropriate evangelical response to these two related movements.[2]

His recent work, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Inter-pretation of the Trinity*, represents a significant evangelical contribution to the contemporary discussion of the Trinity. James Leo Garrett, Jr., notes that the mere existence of the text makes a contribution. He writes, "No twentieth century author clearly identifiable as an Evangelical Protestant has written a major monograph on the Trinity. No Baptist theologian during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has written such. . . . Now Millard Erickson, as an Evangelical and a Baptist, has produced such a monograph, and his undertaking is thus inherently noteworthy."[3] In this text, Erickson surveys the history of the doctrine of the Trinity, examines several contemporary responses to the doctrine, presents his own understanding of the doctrine, and finally describes some of the practical implications of his doctrine of the Trinity. Erickson has also supplemented that lengthy

1. Kärkkäinen, *Doctrine of God*, 192.
2. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith*; *Evangelical Left*.
3. Garrett, review of *God in Three Persons,* 78.

work with the simpler text, *Making Sense of the Trinity*. Unfortunately, his work has not garnered significant scholarly interaction.[4]

This chapter will examine Erickson's understanding of divine unity. It will begin by presenting Erickson's social view of the Trinity, noting the stark contrasts it has with the position of Karl Rahner. It will then discuss the two ways in which Erickson sees this social Trinity being united. Finally, it will expose Erickson's position to several critiques.

MILLARD ERICKSON'S UNDERSTANDING OF DIVINE UNITY

In Chapter 2 it was suggested that Rahner's understanding of divine unity provided a maximal picture of that unity. God is one essence, one will, one operation, one consciousness, and one "person" in the modern sense. The Son and Spirit are united to the Father who is their source, and who is the one will at work within them. The word "God" properly refers to the Father alone, who reveals himself to the world through his Son and Holy Spirit. God is one in a very absolute way, but is three only relatively.[5]

Erickson's position falls at the opposite end of the spectrum from that of Rahner. While Rahner makes repeated reference to the singular essence of God, Erickson avoids any reference to a singular essence when presenting his understanding of the trinitarian unity. Erickson replaces Rahner's singular personality and consciousness with an understanding of "three persons, three centers of consciousness."[6] Erickson rejects all talk of the Father as source within the immanent Trinity, instead writing, "Rather than one member of the Trinity being the source of the others' being, and thus superior to them, we would contend that each of the three is eternally derived from each of the others, and all three are eternally equal."[7] Against Rahner's assertion that "God" refers properly only to the Father, Erickson states that it is the Trinity as such which is properly identified as "God." Other uses of "God," as in "the Father is God," are predicables. This means "the Father is God" is equivalent to "the Father

4. For example, Letham, *Holy Trinity* refers repeatedly to Rahner and Pannenberg, and mentions Zizioulas several times. Erickson, however, does not appear in the index. One notable exception is Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 214–34.

5. For these elements in Rahner, see pp. 41–44 above.

6. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 331.

7. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 90.

possesses deity."[8] For Erickson, God is not a singularity with virtual distinctions, but a "true unity, [a] union of those that are more than one."[9] Erickson's understanding of divine unity is radically different from the relative trinitarian position of Rahner.

Erickson puts forth the first of the three understandings of trinitarian unity based upon a social model of the Trinity which this paper will examine. This is a model of the Trinity which has gained considerable popularity in recent years.[10] Jürgen Moltmann, Richard Swinburne, and many others work with a social model, developing it along both biblical and philosophical lines.[11] J. Scott Horrell gives a useful definition of a social model of the Trinity: "In summary, as rooted in the NT, a *social model* of the Trinity is that in which *the one divine Being eternally exists as three distinct centers of consciousness, wholly equal in nature, genuinely personal in relationships, and each mutually indwelling the other*."[12] Obviously, a wide variety of models could fit this definition, as the next three chapters will show. For, while the manner in which God is three is spelled out rather clearly, little is said about how God is one.

The contemporary use of the social model is often traced back to Leonard Hodgson, who suggested that the unity of the Triune God could not be understood as mathematical simplicity.[13] Instead, the proper way to understand God's unity is as an "organic unity," or an "internally constitutive unity."[14] Hodgson attempts to explain this unity as "the unity of a being whose unity consists in nothing else than the unifying activity which unifies the component elements."[15]

8. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 265–66.

9. Ibid., 231.

10. Schwöbel, "Introduction," in *Persons, Divine and Human*, 12; Horrell, "Biblical Model," 404.

11. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 149–77; Swinburne, *Christian God*, 180–89; Gresham, "Social Model," 326–27.

12. Horrell, "Biblical Model," 408, emphasis original.

13. Gresham, "Social Model," 326; Bracken, "Holy Trinity, I," 166. Of course, Hodgson had sources. He mentions Webb, *God and Personality* in Hodgson, *Towards a Christian Philosophy*, 150. See also Welch, *In This Name*, 133–38; Hodgson, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 90–96.

14. Hodgson, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 90, 108.

15. Ibid., 94.

To exemplify this type of unity, he points to the psychological theories of John Laird.[16] Human selves are known in the three interrelated activities of thinking, feeling, and willing. These activities are distinct from each other, yet they are inseparably alloyed together, for they are "elements in a more or less unified whole, and in spite of the fact that they are only observably existent when active, there is a continuity as well as a unity in each interpermeating group, that unity and continuity which is to be found in the individual life of each human being."[17] He points out that there is no fourth unifying principle or reality, but that the three are, rather mysteriously, the self. Hodgson uses this as a model of divine unity, a unity based on interpenetration and mysterious self-constitution.[18]

This unity of the Trinity cannot be reduced to a unity of an individual, however. It is instead a social unity. Time and again, Hodgson refers to "the social life of the Blessed Trinity" and "the social life of the divine Trinity."[19] It is a life in which both unity and diversity are real, and which forms a model for human society. Love serves to unite the "social whole" together into one life without effacing variety.[20] Hodgson is clear that the diversity in God cannot be understood as inequality, even in terms of cause or source. He writes, "I now wish to add that in this unity there is no room for any trace of subordinationism, and that the thought of the Father as the Source or Fount of Godhead is a relic of pre-Christian theology which has not fully assimilated the Christian revelation."[21]

As will become evident, Erickson's understanding of the Trinity parallels Hodgson's at several points. This summary statement is exemplary:

> The Trinity is a communion of three persons, three centers of consciousness, who exist and always have existed in union with one another and in dependence on one another. . . . They share their lives, having such a close relationship that each is conscious of what the other is conscious of. . . . There is therefore a mutual submission of each to each of the others and a mutual glorifying of one another. There is complete equality of the three. . . . At the same

16. Laird, *Problems of the Self*.
17. Ibid., 86.
18. Ibid., 87–90.
19. For example, Hodgson, *Essays in Christian Philosophy*, 43, 103, 108, 109, 156.
20. Ibid., 133.
21. Hodgson, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 102.

> time, this unity and equality do not require identity of function. There are certain roles that distinctively belong primarily to one, although all participate in the function of each.[22]

Erickson believes "the Trinity must be understood as fundamentally a society. The Godhead is a complex of persons."[23]

Erickson begins his own construction of a doctrine of the Trinity with a lengthy survey of the Scriptures.[24] While he deals with both the Old and New Testaments, he is particularly attentive to the depiction of the Trinity in the Gospel and Epistles of John. He reaches several conclusions from this part of his study. John clearly views the Son as deity (John 20:28). This is done without equating him with God. Instead, both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are represented as distinct from the Father. Erickson writes, "There are indications in the Gospel of interaction among the members of the Trinity. This is especially the case of the relationship between the Father and the Son. A definite distinction is present between the two, indicated both by the narratives involving dialogue between Father and Son and the discussions of the nature of that relationship."[25] Despite this diversity, there is a closeness seen in the loving interaction of the three (John 14:9–21), in addition to outright statements of unity (John 10:30). This unity is further reflected in the coordinated work of the three (John 7:16, 18; 16:13–15) and in the fact that one's relationship to the Father is determined by his relationship to the Son (John 5:17–21, 8:19, 14:23).[26]

In addition to the biblical evidence for a social Trinity, Erickson roots his position in the fact that God is the metaphysical ultimate, writing, "There is one eternal, uncreated reality: God. . . . God is spirit, not matter."[27] Citing Carl F. H. Henry, he associates spirit with mind, drawing the conclusion that "the fundamental characteristic of this universe is personal."[28] Persons are what matter in reality. He concludes, "If, then, the most significant members of the creation are persons in relationship, then

22. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 331.

23. Ibid., 221.

24. Ibid., 157–210; cf. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 17–42.

25. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 210.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 219.

28. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 219–20; Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 5:105.

reality is primarily social."[29] It is therefore best to understand the creator of reality, God, as a social being.

Erickson believes that the "Trinity is three persons so closely bound together that they are actually one."[30] By person, Erickson does not mean a Rahnerian relation of opposition, but a self-aware subject, a center of consciousness, and more.[31] As suggested above, person functions in Erickson's metaphysic as the primary ontological reality, in many ways replacing the traditional concept of substance as the seat of a being's attributes.[32] After writing that the unique role of persons is the key to his metaphysic, he considers human persons:

> This means that we should think of ourselves not so much as substances with attributes, but as subjects who display certain characteristics. . . . In a sense, we are not even subjects with attributes attached, but the whole set of qualities which go to make up what we are, including both past and future qualities and all of our thoughts, actions, experiences, and relationships. . . . What must be stressed is that each of us is a person, a subject; and everything we are, have been, and will be, is part of that person.[33]

As he has based this metaphysic on the role of divine persons in creation, it would be a mistake to isolate this understanding of "person" to the human context.

Erickson boldly emphasizes the threeness of God. He writes, "The conception we have been employing in this construction tends to emphasize the uniqueness and distinctness of the three persons more than do some theologies."[34] He approvingly cites Pannenberg, who speaks of the self-distinction amongst the members of the Trinity, and refers to each as a center of action.[35] Like Pannenberg, Erickson believes that in the Trinity "there is a distinctness of consciousness capable of originating thoughts and relationships among the members of the Trinity. The way in which

29. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 221; Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 57.

30. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 221.

31. Cf. pp. 43–44, 47–48 above with Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 61.

32. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 2.13.3 (*ANF* 1:374); Athanasius, *De decretis* 22 (*NPNF*2 4:164–65); and Augustine, *De Trinitate* 2.2.4 (*NPNF*1 3:39) all espouse this traditional position.

33. Erickson, *Word Became Flesh*, 525–26, 529.

34. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 226.

35. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:319; Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 227, 232.

each refers to the other, and interacts with the other, suggests a greater multiplicity of identity than has sometimes been thought of in trinitarian theology."[36]

Despite his emphasis on the three in God, Erickson works to avoid tritheism. He writes, "We therefore propose thinking of the Trinity as a society, a complex of persons, who, however, are one being."[37] One being here does not mean the singular metaphysical substance it means in Tertullian, Anselm, or Rahner.[38] Erickson is clear that the divine nature the three in God share is a generic nature "of which they are the only instances."[39] In fact, Erickson seems to abandon a substance/attribute model for God altogether, instead placing the attributes "in" the persons.[40]

Erickson does not refer to the Trinity as "one being" because of a singular divine substance. Instead, Erickson sees two primary means by which the members of the Trinity are "one being": love and interdependence. Because the cause of the universe is ultimately personal, Erickson says "the most powerful binding force in the universe is love."[41] The God of the Bible is described as love, and while this does not exhaustively identify his being, it is a "very basic characterization of God."[42] The love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for one another is both a basic attribute of each and a mutual exchange which unites them as Trinity. Erickson writes, "Love is such a powerful dimension of God's nature that it binds three persons so closely that they are actually one."[43]

Erickson anticipates the objection that love is an inadequate means of uniting the Triune God. He notes that this objection is based on human experience, in which love is necessarily limited by the physical separation of bodies, the existential separation of diverse experiences, and the spiri-

36. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 227.

37. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 58.

38. Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean* 2, 7, 22 (*ANF* 3:598, 602, 618); Anselm, *Monologion* prologue, 16, 17, 25 (5, 28–30, 41–42); Rahner, *Trinity*, 75.

39. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 225, 266.

40. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 231; Erickson, *Word Became Flesh*, 528–30. Like many who attempt to move away from that metaphysic, however, Erickson occasionally assumes it, as when he denies that God changes in "essence, status, or quality." See Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, 542.

41. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 221.

42. Ibid.

43. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 58.

tual separation of selfishness.[44] God, however, does not suffer from these problems, but instead experiences a perfectly shared life. Because they lack corporeality, diverse experiences, and selfishness, the Father, Son, and Spirit eternally experience perfect communion and the perfect identity of experiences.[45] Erickson believes that in the Trinity, "Each of these three persons then has close access, direct access, to the consciousness of the others. As one thinks or experiences, the others are also directly aware of this. They think the other's thoughts, feel the other's feelings."[46] The perfectly shared divine life occurs amongst three who have the same "goals, intentions, values, and objectives," and who are secure in their communion because they know it is eternal and unbreakable.[47]

It is this concept of shared life which Erickson identifies with the ancient terms *perichoresis* and *circumincessio*. John of Damascus used *perichoresis* to describe the mutual interpenetration of the members of the Trinity, and the term has been appropriated by recent theologians such as Moltmann and Leonardo Boff.[48] Erickson takes the term to mean "that each of the three persons shares the lives of the others, that each lives in the others."[49] This sharing of life includes cooperation in every action, whether or not one member seems to be particularly active in that action. Creation, for example, while attributed primarily to the Father, is also the work of the Son and Spirit.[50] Through love based on a total sharing of life, the three persons in God are bound together in a unity like, but infinitely stronger than, the unity of a husband and wife, or the unity amongst believers.[51]

44. Ibid., 59–60; Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 222.

45. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 223–24. During the Incarnation, the second person of the Trinity did possess a limited body, but Erickson sees this as a temporary and minor obstacle to the point at hand.

46. Ibid., 225.

47. Ibid., 226.

48. John of Damascus, *Fidei Orthodoxa* 1.8, 1.14 (*NPNF*2 9:11, 17; *PG* 94:829, 860); Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 57; Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 150; Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 86; Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 137.

49. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 229.

50. Ibid., 235; Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 64.

51. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 227. Erickson states that there is "some univocal element" among these examples of unity.

The other element of Erickson's understanding of divine unity is the interdependence of the three in God. He repeatedly asserts that the three in God cannot exist, let alone be God, without one another, and writes about their "mutual production."[52] He writes of the three, "None has the power of life within himself alone. Each can only exist as part of the Triune God."[53] The life of God is a life in which "the life of each flows through the others, and in which each is dependent on the others for life, and for what he is."[54] The Father, Son, and Spirit are one because their existence is tied to their closeness.

Erickson presents several analogies to demonstrate this interdependence. One is that of Siamese twins, in which the organs of one member sustain the life of both.[55] Another is that of a married couple with such a strong relationship that they, as a couple, have an identity which is more important to them than their identity as individuals, and in fact influences their individual behavior.[56] Erickson's most well developed analogy is that of the heart, lungs, and brain of the last man alive. These organs are interdependent; without any of them, the other two die. They are human organs as long as they are alive, for they make up the only human alive, and therefore the totality of human nature, rather than simply one "human" among many. But only together, assuming the rest of a human body needed for life, do they compose that human. Erickson concludes the illustration, writing, "Each is human, so long as in union with the other two, but together the three, the organism, is a human, a human being. Note that I said the three is, rather than the three are, for together they constitute a new entity, a single being, which is more than the sum of the parts."[57] Like these three organs, the three persons in the Godhead depend upon one another for their existence.

Erickson is aware that claims of dependence within the Godhead have traditionally taken the form of an asymmetrical dependence of the Son and the Spirit on the Father as their source or cause. He describes this as the "Greek" position, and examines its formulation by Rahner and

52. Ibid., 233, 235, 264; Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 62.
53. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 264.
54. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 61.
55. Ibid., 63; Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 233–34.
56. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 269–70.
57. Ibid., 269; also Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 62–63.

LaCugna.[58] While Erickson acknowledges that such positions claim biblical support, he believes that they are "based on identifying too closely the economic Trinity (the Trinity as manifested to us in history) with the immanent Trinity (God as he really is in himself). Rather than one member of the Trinity being the source of the others' being, and thus superior to them, we would contend that each of the three is eternally derived from each of the others, and all three are eternally equal."[59] Erickson believes it is an exegetical leap, and therefore a mistake, to read a few statements about the economic work of the Trinity back into eternity.[60]

In addition, Erickson presents the work of B. B. Warfield to show that the New Testament does not clearly subordinate the Son to the Father. Warfield notes that Paul prefers to refer to the first and second members of the Trinity as God and Lord rather than Father and Son, and that the triadic formulae of the New Testament show no particular pattern of authority. Nor is Father/Son language indicative of subordination or derivation; according to Warfield, in the Semitic context, the emphasis was on equality.[61] Concerning the question of why the person of the Trinity became incarnate who did, Erickson looks to Warfield's assertion of a covenant arrangement in God concerning the responsibilities of each divine person in the economy.[62] The New Testament does not definitively assert any sort of eternal subordination within the Godhead, nor can such a subordination be read from the functional subordination seen in the economy.[63]

There is therefore some epistemic distance between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. The relations within the Trinity which

58. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 291–99. That Erickson chooses these as his representatives of the "Greek" view is odd, though they do see the Father as source of divinity. Case, review of *God in Three Persons,* 236. John Zizioulas, an Orthodox metropolitan, might be a more logical representative of the Greek view.

59. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 90. See also Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 309.

60. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 86. While Erickson cites only John 14:28 here specifically, he mentions begetting and proceeding as concepts that should not be read back into eternity. It is ironic that Welch believes that reading economic statements into eternity is the mistake all social trinitarians make. See Welch, *In This Name*, 262.

61. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 301–302; Warfield, "Biblical Trinity," 50–52.

62. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 303; Warfield, "Biblical Trinity," 53–54.

63. For a similar argument, see Bilezikian, "Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping," 57–68. For an opposing view, see Kovach and Schemm, "Eternal Subordination," 461–76.

make its persons interdependent should be conceived of as symmetrical, and no immanent distinctions should be presumed to exist within the Godhead.[64] Erickson writes, "I would propose that there are no references to the Father begetting the Son or the Father (and the Son) sending the Spirit that cannot be understood in terms of the temporal role assumed by the second and third persons of the Trinity, respectively. They do not indicate any intrinsic relationship among the three."[65]

This means that the titles "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" are purely economic; the roles played by the three persons in redemption could have been exchanged. While Erickson does freely use the terms to identify the three, especially in his systematic theology, he does not indicate that these titles are in themselves eternal.[66] Instead, when one reads Erickson's constructive Christology, one reads about the incarnation of "the Second Person of the Trinity," the incarnation of "God."[67] There are few, if any, references to the incarnation of "God the Son" or "the eternal Word." There is nothing about the "Second Person of the Trinity" which suits him to the incarnation, and it appears Erickson identifies him by that title because it is the option which serves to pick out the divine person incarnate as Jesus which makes the least distinction amongst the members of the Trinity. As Erickson's summary statement indicates, "There is complete equality of the three."[68]

Erickson sees the Trinity as a society of three eternally divine, perfectly equal, fully personal centers of consciousness. As a divine society, the Trinity is united by a love of infinite power, which binds the three into one. This perfect love is based on the perfect sharing of lives amongst the three persons. This sharing of life includes an intrinsic symmetrical interdependence of the members. They depend upon one another for their life and deity. As such, they are one. The next section will critique this understanding of unity.

64. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 309–10; Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 86.

65. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 309.

66. For example, Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 362–63.

67. For example, Erickson, *Word Became Flesh*, 544, 549, 552, 553, 625, 546.

68. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 331.