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The Trinity in the Reformed Tradition

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1. A specific reformed perspective?

Did the doctrine of the Trinity have any special significance for the early figures in the Reformed tradition – and for their successors? Is it possible to distinguish specific Reformed perspectives regarding the doctrine of the Trinity? Should it be seen as coincidental that several thinkers belonging to the Reformed family so very deliberately developed fully trinitarian theologies during the twentieth century? These are difficult questions to respond to.

It speaks for itself that the early Reformed theologians did not invent the doctrine, but received it from the tradition since the early church – yet did they simply take it over uncritically, without their own adaptations, emphases, and perhaps ignoring aspects about which they were not so enthusiastic? It also speaks for itself that Reformed theologians from the twentieth century and today cannot claim a renewed interest in the doctrine only for themselves, since they obviously share in and depend on what has often been described as an ecumenical rediscovery, a renaissance or a revival of trinitarian faith[1] – yet, is there any relief to be discerned in this ecumenical rediscovery, any confessional characteristics, any preferences and emphases that belong to different confessional communities, and particularly to the Reformed family, or does everyone appropriate the doctrine in exactly the same way, with the same questions and with the same uses?

What makes it even more difficult to answer these questions in the case of the Reformed family is the characteristically Reformed absence of any representative voice, any authoritative office or body, any corpus of teaching or teachers who speak on behalf of the tradition. Where would one find 'the' Reformed perspective? Since the earliest days, the answers to these questions were difficult and contested. Not even

1 See, for example, the informative overviews by Wainwright 1998; Van den Brink 2003; see also Karkkainen.

Calvin could be regarded as speaking for the whole tradition, no single body of confessional documents is accepted by anyone, no authoritative meeting speaks for the family – so, how will one be able to say whether there are specific Reformed perspectives? Whenever one discerns some core perspective, there will immediately be Reformed figures with other voices too, which then raises the question whether the perspective should be broadened to include them too, or whether they should be excluded, as precisely *not* being authentically Reformed.

With regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, these are very pertinent questions, appearing regularly in the discussions – should Reformed Orthodoxy, Schleiermacher, Berkhof, and Moltmann (and many others) – for example – be regarded as exceptions, as un-Reformed regarding their views on the Trinity, or do their views precisely show that any so-called Reformed perspective is too narrow and therefore misleading? The temptations of a circular argument obviously loom large, regarding as Reformed only that which has already been decided on beforehand.

Keeping these difficulties and dangers in mind, it may perhaps be possible to argue that at least *five motifi* appear so regularly in Reformed thought – already in Calvin and again, albeit in diverse and complex ways, in well-known twentieth century Reformed theologians – that they may perhaps be regarded as together representing a specific Reformed perspective.

Perhaps such a case may be made by showing their roots in Calvin's own work and then demonstrating their presence and function in a variety of recent Reformed theological projects. Any attempt to show 'roots in Calvin's own work' is, of course, highly contested. For the last century, different schools of Reformed faith and tradition have appealed to Calvin as their 'roots', often with extremely diverse and even conflicting interpretations of Calvin. South African theology has been a prime example of these conflicts of interpretation, but it is also true of the broader family, and definitely the case within Calvin scholarship. The year of commemoration of his birth in 2009 will again show these controversies. This is also true regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. Did Barth, for example, follow Calvin in his epoch-making return to the doctrine of the Trinity – or precisely not? Is it legitimate to read Calvin through the eyes of Barth and therefore also of the trinitarian renaissance – or precisely not?[2]

2 These debates are today often framed in terms of Richard A. Muller's strong thesis that Calvin should not be 'accommodated' to contemporary viewpoints and needs, but should be studied within his historical context, for example, in his *The Unaccommodated Calvin.*

2. Biblical grammar

In the case of Calvin, a detailed monograph on the doctrine of the Trinity has been published during the last years, which finally makes it possible to make claims backed by painstaking scholarship. It is the comprehensive study by Arie Baars called *Om Gods Verhevenheid en Zijn Nabijheid. De Drie-Eenheid bij Calvijn*.[3]

Perhaps it is fair to say that the first and most fundamental characteristic of Calvin's treatment of the doctrine is found in his particular way of seeing the doctrine as biblical or scriptural. Van den Brink has shown that one of the major criticisms against this doctrine – certainly in the Netherlands, even until and including Berkhof – had for a long time been the feeling that the early Protestant theologians should have been more consistent with their notion of the *sola scriptura*, and that they should have rid themselves also of the legacy of the un-scriptural terminology and content of the doctrine of the Trinity.[4] One could argue that for Calvin exactly the opposite was the case. This doctrine provided

Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition, 2000. This way of framing the issue, however, already shows the problems. It is, of course, necessary for scholarship to understand Calvin as figure of his time, and not to misuse him by making him speak with a contemporary voice. At the same time, if a living tradition is indeed 'a historically extended, socially embodied argument about the goods that constitute that tradition' (in Alasdair MacIntyre's words), and if Calvin indeed provides 'the foundation' or at least some 'roots' for a living Reformed tradition, then it is certainly both legitimate and necessary that contemporary Reformed theology engages with Calvin about its present theological task, and not merely repeats what he said as product of his own historical context.

3 Baars 2004. In a very helpful introduction, he situates Calvin within the contemporary reflection on the Trinity and points to key questions of interpretation. He then minutely follows the development of Calvin's views on the Trinity in the different editions of the *Institutes*, before he focuses on some comparative literature, first Calvin's own commentaries, sermons, and other writings, and then the positions of theologians from the early church who had an influence on Calvin, as well as some of his contemporaries. In an important systematic interpretation, he paints the 'basic structures' of Calvin's views, and then he builds 'bridges' towards contemporary discussions and questions. He claims that this is the first real in-depth study of Calvin's views of the Trinity, and he certainly provides present scholarship with extremely helpful detail and overview. Baars later also wrote a helpful brief discussion of the theme called 'Triniteit' in the equally comprehensive and helpful Selderhuis 2008 (an English translation of which is in preparation).

4 Van den Brink 2003:211.

the only and unavoidable way of thinking and speaking, according to the message of scripture.

In terminology that many others have also often used, the doctrine provides believers with a 'structure' or 'framework'[5] or with 'biblical grammar', with the only way to think Old and New Testament together, and to speak of the *one* God of both Testaments.[6] This does not mean quoting disparate texts in the first place as proof texts, but rather discerning a pattern, a scope, an underlying reality within scripture.[7]

In his very instructive introduction to a collection of key texts from history, *Der lebendige Gott. Texte zur Trinitdtslehre*, Ernstpeter Maurer – not without very good reason – discusses Calvin as the very first contribution, under the theme 'The doctrine of the Trinity: Rule for Biblical Speech about God'.[8] In short, Calvin does not merely take over the doctrine of the Trinity because it is part of the tradition of the church. On the contrary, he is clearly critical of many of the terms that are used, and

5 There have been major scholarly debates about the structure of the *lnstitutes,* including the question whether it should be seen as a consciously trinitarian structure, or not. See, for example, the informative studies by Breukelman 2003; Baars, 2004; Partee 2008). Perhaps it is best to say that the overall structure is probably not trinitarian, although the doctrine of the Trinity is very much present and important (cf Baars 2004:637).

6 Again, this approach is certainly not exclusive to Reformed theologians. There are, for example, many similarities with the kind of argument made by David S. Yeago in his much discussed essay 'The New Testament and the Nicene dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis' 1994.

7 Baars, 'Triniteit,' 279 explains in detail that and how Calvin himself already used scripture in new ways in order to explain the doctrine. He describes Calvin's motive as 'biblical-theological' in nature and comments that Calvin wants to start his thinking from the Bible, but that this does not imply a biblicist rejection of the classical trinitarian terminology. According to Calvin, it is fully legitimate to clarify the message of scripture by means of extra-biblical concepts and dogmatic formulae.

8 Ernstpeter Maurer, 'Die Trinitatslehre: Regel fiir das biblische Reden von Gott,' in Der lebendige Gott. Texte zur Trinitatslehre (Giitersloh: Chr. Kaiser, Giitersloher Verlagshaus 1999), 11–73. Together with Calvin, he also treats Basil of Caesarea and Karl Barth under this theme; in the case of Barth he speaks about God's revelation as the root of the doctrine of the Trinity, 51–73. See also Maurer, 'Grammatik des biblischen Redens von Gott. Grundlinien der Trinitatslehre Karl Barths,' Zeitschrift fur dialektische Theologie 28 (1998), 113–130.

carefully considers, qualifies, critiques, and even rejects some of them. He seems to prefer, for example, the terms Source, Wisdom, and Power.[9]

He is of the opinion that the doctrine provides the only way to understand, think about, and speak about the God of the Bible. In that regard, he again does not simply use all the biblical proof texts that have become standard in the history of the church, but focuses only on such pericopes that show, for example, the unity of the God of the Old and the New Testaments and the divinity of both the Son and the Spirit.

This could perhaps be seen as a *first* characteristic of Reformed trinitarian thought, expressed in more contemporary words; namely, that the doctrine is seen as providing the necessary 'grammar' to speak about the message of the scriptures.

3. Living God

What is this message of the scriptures? It is not without good reason that Maurer calls his study *Der lebendige Gott. Texte zur Trinitätslehre*, or that Michael Welker and Miroslav Volf call the German *Festschrift* for Jurgen Moltmann's eightieth birthday, *Der lebendige Gott als Trinität*, and the accompanying English volume, *God's Life in Trinity*.[10]

The South African Reformed theologian Jaap Durand similarly called his work on the doctrine of God *Die lewende God*, and argued that this conviction had been at the heart of the trinitarian renaissance

9 This is, of course, a typical Reformed intuition, that the tradition in itself, including all the terms, is not in itself authoritative, but subject to critical consideration and rejection, if necessary. It is only because the scriptures make some distinctions that these should be considered necessary and useful. 'I am not sure whether it is expedient to borrow analogies from human affairs to express the nature of this distinction. The ancient fathers sometimes do so, but they at the same time admit, that what they bring forward as analogous is very widely different. And hence it is that I have a great dread of anything like presumption here, less some rash saying may furnish an occasion of calumny to the malicious, or of delusion to the unlearned. It were unbecoming, however, to say nothing of a distinction which we observe that the Scriptures have pointed out. This distinction is, that to the Father is attributed the beginning of action, the fountain and source of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and arrangement in action, while the energy and efficacy of action is assigned to the Spirit,' John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559), in the translation of Beveridge, Book 1/13.18. For discussion, see Baars, Verhevenheid en Nabijheidy 661–669.

10 Michael Welker & Miroslav Volf (eds.), *Der lebendige Gott als Trinitat. Jurgen Moltmann zum 80. Geburtstag* (Giitersloh: Giitersloher Verlagshaus, 2006); Miroslav Volf & Michael Welker (eds.), *God's Lift in Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

in the last half century and longer, but also at the heart of the origins of Reformed theology – before it was, to a large extent, lost, for example, in Reformed scholasticism and orthodoxy and rejected, for example, in the dominant deist and theist religious atmosphere continuing into the early twentieth century.[11]

Broadly speaking, this biblical grammar makes it possible to speak of the God of the scriptures as the living God, involved in history, the God of the covenant and of covenantal faithfulness. Maurer makes the point well by saying that in this perspective, trinitarian faith is the attempt 'to reflect on *(nachzudenken)* the living unity of God'.

> *Christian faith answers the question 'Who is God?' with a history. Because God is living, this history continues to be exciting and to take surprising turns again and again. It comprises many individual histories, since it is concerned with the encounter of God with human beings in very different situations. Nevertheless, the many histories form a unity: God's presence in Jesus Christ shows humanity that God is reliable and keeps faithful to them – even when they alienate from God and rebel against God. The differentiated unity of God, then, is the starting point of the unfolding of the doctrine of the Trinity. 12*

11 See J.J.F. (Jaap) Durand, *Die Lewende God* (1976), as well as his *The Many Faces of God* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2007), in which he tells Calvin's story under the rubric 'Calvin's Reliable God,' 145–156. For the background of these accounts, already see his *Heilsgeskiedenis en die dialektiek van syn en denke: Strukturele verbindingslyne tussen Thomas Aquinas en die teologie sedert die Aujklarung* (ongepubliseerde doktorale verhandeling, Stellenbosch, 1973). For an interesting account, also see William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence. How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), especially the section on 'The Marginalization of the Trinity,' 164–180.

12 Maurer, *Der lebendige Gott,* 9. Chrisdicher Glaube antwortet auf die Frage 'Wer ist Gott?' mit einer Geschichte. 'Weil Gott lebendig ist, bleibt diese Geschichte spannend und nimmt immer wieder iiberraschende Wendungen. Sie umgreifi: viele einzelne Geschichten, denn es geht um die Begegnung Gottes mit den Menschen in ganz unterschiedlichen Situationen. Und doch bilden die vielen Geschichten eine Einheit: Gottes Gegenwart in Jesus Christus zeigt den Menschen, daβ Gott verlaβlich ist und ihnen treu bleibt-auch wenn sie sich von Gott entfernen und gegen Gott rebellieren. Die differenzierte Einheit Gottes: hier liegt der Ansatzpunkt für die Entfaltung der Trinitatslehre.'

This sounds very similar to the descriptions often given of Barth's views on the Trinity, and it may indeed be that Barth's views form the background of the way Maurer reads the trinitarian tradition, including Calvin.[13]

13 An instructive illustration of such a reading of Barth is, for example, to be found in William Stacy Johnsons discussion of 'The Mystery of the Triune God' in his The Mystery of God. Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 1997), 43–66. 'In contrast to these classical abstractions, Barth conceived God as dynamic and relational in character. In doubtless one of his simplest and yet most breathtaking analytical insights, Barth proclaimed that God is one whose very being (or character) is expressed in act... If it is true that in Jesus Christ knowledge of God is real and possible... then we need to construct a way of conceiving God that makes sense of this conviction... If one accepts a premise that God has been revealed in Jesus Christ, then a constructive, second-order explanatory statement must also be adopted: namely, God's being (which is eternal) must be able to express itself ever anew (in history) in God's act. Or to put it the other way around, God is in God's historic revelation as God is in God's self-being eternally. God reproduces God's being in the world as a history.'
Johnson then argues that it might help to translate this rather abstract language of 'being' into the language of character. According to him, this would mean that Barth is saying that, '(Although it is a mystery and a wonder, the very character of God has been replicated and displayed in the suffering character of this finite human being, Jesus of Nazareth. God is nothing other than gracious in Jesus Christ. Nor is there some different and ungracious divine figure lurking in the shadows. God is as Jesus is; God acts as Jesus acts. "
According to him, this implies that, emphasizing the act' of God, Barth is shifting 'the emphasis away from the so-called 'immanent Trinity' and towards the so-called 'economic Trinity'... Instead of an abstract, reified 'Trinity,' Barth often spoke of God's Dreieinigkeit, which means 'triunity' or 'threefoldness', he says.
'This does not mean there is no 'subject' in the act of revelation. But only through the act of this subject in the economy of salvation can we learn who this subject – God – is. In other words, God is the acting 'subject' of every sentence in the divine story, Only 'in act' can the identity of this Subject be known. 'In act' this particular Subject is always reliable and worth trusting... To put it plainly, 'God is not a transcendent being. From all eternity (God) has determined to turn to humanity' This 'turning' toward humanity is not something statically 'present,' but it is enacted in the dramatic unfolding of a story. It is a story of a God whose own life and character, although an unfathomable mystery, are confessed to have become embodied in the life and death of Jesus Christ... This remarkable story, we must hasten to add, is not yet consummated but is still working itself out toward a distant finale. Through the efficacy of the Spirit, God's story is still being enacted in the power of the risen Christ... We can understand the entire Barthian project as one of thinking through this 'identity' as triune mystery,' he claims (44–47).

The question of who God is can be answered only – according to this perspective – by retelling the story (or history) of the *one* God of the Old and New Testaments as *one* story, with all its complex internal differences, tensions, conflicts, and surprises, and by reflecting on the fidelity and covenantal trustworthiness present right through this one story, and by speaking about God in these terms, and only in these terms, in spite of all the conceptual difficulties this may raise.[14]

From this perspective, therefore, the trinitarian biblical grammar functions as rejection of idle speculation about God, and as critique of what is called idolatry, creating our own images and notions of God, that we then proclaim, worship and serve. On occasion, Calvin could even declare that this is the real usefulness of this doctrine and the main reason still to retain the un-scriptural philosophical terminology of the classical formulations.[15] At stake is the question of *who* God is –

14 According to Calvin, whether a 'god' exists *(quid sit Deus)* is not nearly as important a question as what *kind* of God exists *(qualis sit Deus)*; important is not abstract speculation into God's 'essence,' but sure and faithful knowledge of God's grace, *Institutes* I/2; III/2.

15 It is very instructive that, in the last edition of the Institutes, Calvin begins his discussion of the doctrine of God with a treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity, under the rubric 'The Unity of the Divine Essence in Three Persons.' This differs from the earlier versions, and demonstrates his growing conviction that these terms and forms of thought, relative as they may be as human constructs, are indeed helpful and necessary to speak the biblical grammar (Book 1/13). This section is, however, very interestingly preceded by sections on 'The Principles of Piety Subverted by Fanatics' (in which he argues that, in order to know God, 'we must give diligent heed to the reading and hearing of Scripture,' Book 1/9), on 'The True God opposed to Heathen Gods' (in which he attempts to show that 'in Scripture the Lord represents himself in the same character in which we have already seen that he is delineated in his works,' Book 1/10), on 'The g73
Impiety of Visible Forms of God' (in which he critiques 'the setting up of idols as defection from the True God,' where he makes his well-known argument that 'the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols,' Book I/ll)·, and on 'God Distinguished from Idols for Effective Worship' (in which he warns that God may be robbed of honor and worship may be violated, Book 1/12). In other words, when he comes to the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, the rhetorical use is very much regulative, it serves to identify the true God from religious fanaticism and impious idolatry and worship.
Janet Martin Soskice, in 'Trinity and Feminism,' in The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 135–150, comments, referring to Calvin's 'ferreting out the heretics' by using this doctrine, that 'it cannot be doubted that feminist theology in its reformist branch is often claiming to do precisely that – challenging idolatrous pictures of God,' and she asks

or more precisely, whether God is acknowledged as the living God of the scriptures.[16]

This also explains why there had been a remarkable lack of interest in the classical discussions of the immanent Trinity in these Reformed circles, already since Calvin. The emphasis is obviously on the activities of the one, living God – undivided, although to be distinguished;[17] rich, complex, full of surprises, yet always faithful to the promises and according to character;[18] full of grace, goodness, and mercy, although with many faces and forms.[19] The classical terminology is difficult, confusing, and not necessarily the best to be used, according to Calvin.[20] Even his appreciation for Orthodox theologians does not lead him into extensive discussions of the immanent Trinity,[21] which is also true of

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'Might the doctrine of the Trinity then, in our own time and with our own theological questions, serve the same useful regulative

16 On the knowledge of God in this version of the Reformed tradition, see for example Cornells van der Kooi, As in a Mirror. John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God (Leiden: Brill, 2005); also James B. Krohn, Knowing the Triune God. Trinity and Certitude in the Theology of John Calvin (Stellenbosch: Unpublished doctoral dissertation, 2002).

17 This again causes heated debates among Reformed theologians, with some who want to emphasize the unity of the divine actions more, some who stress the difference between the acts of the one God.

18 See, for example, Peter Opitz, Calvins theologische Hermeneutik (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1994), especially 'Die trinitarische Verankerung des Wortes Gottes als doctrina,' 154–180.

19 Durand, Lewende God, speaks of 'paradigms of radical grace' to indicate that the grace of God is manifested in many different ways; for an instructive depiction of the many faces of God's grace according to Calvin, see also Brian A. Gerrish, Grace and Gratitude (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002).

20 Baars can therefore conclude that, although 'the doctrine of the Trinity forms the positive heart of Calvin's doctrine of God,' he 'does not systematically discuss themes like: the Essence and the attributes of God,' Verhevenheid en Nabijheid 703. For the detail, see 381–464.

21 For an extensive discussion of Calvins relationship to Gregory of Nazianzus, see Baars, Verhevenheid en Nabijheid, 466–480. The influential Scottish Reformed theologian Thomas F. Torrance argued that Calvins doctrine of the Trinity shows remarkable parallels with the concept of Gregory and that he was influenced by him. In several publications and reports for ecumenical meetings and dialogues, Torrance developed one of the important trajectories of a Reformed view of the doctrine in deep appreciation for the Orthodox tradition; see for example his The Trinitarian Faith (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1988), and his The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1996); as well as the 1991 Agreed Statement on the Holy Trinity between the Orthodox Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, in which he played a major role. Torrance sees

his appreciation of Augustine.[22] He deliberately does not use the classical biblical quotations to explain the generation of the Son and the Spirit.[23] He seldom mentions the *filioque* and only in passing, and the

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Calvins most important contribution to the doctrine in his concept of manifold interpenetrating personal relations or subsistences within the one indivisible Godhead. Still, Baars is of the opinion that Calvin has at the most undergone some indirect influence of Gregory, and finds Torrance's interpretation of Calvin 'somewhat controversial' (j'nogal aanvechtbaar'), 660.

22 Again, Calvin's relation to Augustine regarding the doctrine of the Trinity is controversial and disputed. According to Baars's detailed investigation, Verhevenheid en Nabijheid, 480–540, Calvin rejects Augustine's allegorical exegesis and his speculative approach to the trinitarian doctrine, he differs from Augustine's understanding of'Person' as an inner-trinitarian relationship, he rejects Augustine's search for traces of the Trinity, and he avoids speaking of the Trinity in his sermons, unlike Augustine. Most significantly, perhaps, is the fact that Augustine strongly stresses the unity of God, while Calvin puts more emphasis on the individuality of the Father, on the Son, and on the Spirit. This last aspect has been especially controversial regarding the positions of both Calvin and Augustine.

In this regard, the English Reformed theologian Colin Gunton has been particularly productive, also developing one of the important trajectories of a Reformed view of the doctrine in several studies, including, for example, his The Promise of Trinitarian Theology (Edinburgh: T &T Clark, 1991), The One, the Three and the Many. God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), The Triune Creator (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), and The Christian Faith. An Introduction to Christian Doctrine (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). It is no surprise that the Festschrift which he edited for his own supervisor, Robert Jenson, was called Trinity, Time, and Church (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), nor that the Festschrift dedicated to him by his own students, edited by Paul Louis Metzger, was called Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2005). In this last collection, a chapter from Gunton's *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), was included, called 'The Relevance of the "Eternal" Trinity'.

Gunton was particularly critical of Augustine and his impact on Western theology, and sought to recover also for the Reformed tradition a renewed interest in the importance of the immanent Trinity and of reflection on the attributes of God, among others by showing a preference for the Cappadocians, especially Basil of Caesarea, with a strong emphasis on a relational view of God and the divine being as essentially shared communion of the three persons, although in his case very consciously based on the economy of salvation, in Reformed fashion.

23 Calvin seldom uses the traditional terminology that the Father is unbegotten, that the Son is generated by the Father and that the Spirit proceeds from the Father (and the Son). Instead, he prefers to speak of

controversy clearly does not play an important role in his thought.[24] He is not interested in the search for any *vestigia trinitatis* that would help to make rational sense of the triune figure of thought. He is not concerned with theoretical discussions of unity and plurality.[25]

This may be a *second* characteristic of Reformed trinitarian thought; namely, that its interest lies elsewhere than the inner-trinitarian discussions of the early church, that the biblical grammar leads (them) to a different kind of trinitarian language; namely, confessing the actions of the *living* God.

4. Trinitarian spread

For this perspective – reflecting on the rich biblical account of the work of the one living God – it becomes typical to speak about most Christian convictions (some would perhaps say 'doctrines')[26] in a rich and complex, trinitarian way.

Whether one speaks about the knowledge of God, about creation, about being, about time, about human beings, about salvation, about sin

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the Father as Source, the Son as Wisdom, and the Spirit as Power, see Baars *Verhevenheid en Nabijheid*, 637–678.

24 Ibid, 308–330, 666–669, 693–694.

25 For a critical discussion of modernity in this regard, and its impact on contemporary trinitarian thought, see Gunton *The One, the Three and the Many. God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

26 It is of course a controversial issue within Reformed theology whether it is helpful to speak of doctrines in the plural, as if it is possible to summarise the content of the Christian faith in a plurality of formulations; see, for example, Barth's discussion in *Church Dogmatics* 1/1-, 304–309; also Hendrikus Berkhof's *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 32–33. It is sometimes said – in line with the trinitarian grammar of trust in the one living God – that there is in fact only one doctrine, and it is often pointed out that doctrina for Calvin was synonymous to the preaching of the living Word; see Opitz, *Calvins theologische Hermeneutik*, 154–180; for a detailed doctoral study of the many different uses of doctrina in Calvin, see Victor E. d' Assonville, *Der Begriff 'doctrina' bei Johannes Calvin – eine theologische Analyse* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2001). For a careful and instructive comparison between Luther and Calvin in this regard, precisely concerning the question how the Reformation saw the relationship between the intrinsic unity of the canonical truth of salvation and the extrinsic plurality of Scriptural dogmata,' see Hendrik W. Rossouw, *Klaarheid en Interpretasie* (Amsterdam: Jacob van Campen, 1963), especially 190–201, but in the larger context of 166–270; as well as his essay on 'Doksologie, ortodoksie en ekumene,' in Jan T. Bakker et al. (eds.), *Septuagésimo Anno. Theologische Opstellen aangeboden aan Prof. Dr. G. C. Berkouiver* (Kok: Kämpen, 1973), 203–212.

and suffering, about election, about the church, about baptism, about the Lord's Supper, about eschatology, about the Christian life, about discipleship and ethics, about calling, about hermeneutics, about love, yes, about Jesus Christ, about his cross, his resurrection and his threefold office, as well as about the Spirit, about worship and liturgy, about piety and spirituality, about prayer – a trinitarian account always seems to help to speak in more differentiated ways about the rich and complex, dynamic and surprising ways of the biblical account. Contemporary examples of all of these abound in theological literature.

Perhaps this should be regarded as the most far-reaching impact and lasting contribution for the trinitarian revival of Karl Barth's well-known move to begin the *Church Dogmatics* with the doctrine of the Trinity?[27] One major practical consequence has been that Reformed treatments of the last few decades of all these themes, and many more, have typically often followed a 'trinitarian spread' (in Dutch, a *trinitarische spreiding*, in the famous expression of Noordmans,[28] but with the same

27 The opinions, of course, differ about the question whether in Barths own work this move remained too formal, built on a somewhat abstract notion of revelation, rather than on the rich content of the scriptures themselves. Some argue that it was too philosophical and theoretical, especially in the prolegomena itself, while others point to the further volumes of the Church Dogmatics to argue that Barth indeed followed the biblical grammar and spoke in rich and complex biblical detail about many doctrines, including of course the extensive sections of theological exegesis in small print.

28 In his exposition of Sundays 7–22 of the Heidelberg Catechism (called *Het Koninkrijk der Hemelen*, and available in reprint in his *Verzamelde Werken* 2, Kämpen: Kok, 1979:433–551), Oepke Noordmans uses the expression 'trinitarische spreiding' when discussing Sunday 7 (on the threefold division of the creed). In a very interesting way, he explains the notion by saying that believers often ask what Jesus would do, but that it is also necessary to ask what following the Father would mean and what the Holy Spirit would do. Only when asking these three questions together may a more adequate response be forthcoming.
In his very creative 'guideline for religious speeches,' in the form of a trinitarian discussion of the credo, called *Herschepping*, (original 1934, available in reprint in *Verzamelde Werken* 2, Kämpen: Kok, 1979, 214–322), he wrote about the doctrine of the Trinity under the heading 'There is plurality in God.' Here he argues that although God is one, there was a Word with God, and that Word came into the world – as a result of which the unity of God is broken. According to the gospel, God can even act in ever different ways. When speaking is not enough, God comes to us; when coming is not enough, He comforts us. In this way God reveals himself as Father, Son, and Spirit throughout the Bible. In fact, anyone who opens the Bible according to Noordmans sees its threefold structure: the Old Testament, the gospels, and Acts with the

spirit also to be found in Van Ruler).[29] Whatever the question, it seems that the biblical grammar calls for a threefold response.

The essay by Welker dedicated to Moltmann could perhaps serve as a representative illustration, also because it is – according to its own subtitle – an attempt to develop a doctrine of the Trinity with biblical orientation.[30] He takes his point of departure in contemporary experiences of disaster, suffering and evil, and asks how it is possible to speak of God and life in the face of these realities. In his own words, only a complex trinitarian response based on the dynamic biblical account could show the way.

Therefore, he first discusses God as Creator by showing the ambivalence and ultimate lack of comfort of any 'natural' creation theology (appealing mainly to Calvin); he then deals with the self-revelation of the saving God in the crucified and resurrected Christ (in critical dialogue with Moltmann himself); and he finally introduces the care for and salvation of creation in the power of the Holy Spirit (engaging with natural scientists, such as John Polkinghorne). The crucial point is that it is only through this complex trinitarian way of the scriptures that faith can speak about these experiences of disaster, since any partial answer would remain inadequate and misleading.

In this way, Welker demonstrates a *third* characteristic of Reformed trinitarian thought, often appealing directly to Calvin himself; namely, the importance of a *trinitarian spread* in speaking the language of faith.[31]

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letters. This plurality of God – or 'openness of God' as Noordmans has it – determines the wealth and abundance of Christian preaching and should be tangible in every sermon (223).

29 In similar creative and imaginative fashion, Arnold Albert van Ruler also developed a remarkably trinitarian theology, over many years and in complex ways; see for example his posthumously published essay 'De noodzakelijkheid van een trinitarische théologie,' in his volume of essays *Verwachting en voltooiing – een bundel theologische opstellen en voordrachten* (Nijkerk:Callenbach, 1978), 9–28; a trinitarian approach discussed in great detail in the doctoral dissertation by Christo Lombard, Adama, Thora en Dogma (Aardse lewe, Skrif en Dogma) by Van Ruler (Bellville: University of the Western Cape, unpublished dissertation, 1996). Between the work of Noordmans and Van Ruler there are important different emphases to discern, although they both represent influential voices within twentieth century Reformed thought on the doctrine of the Trinity.

30 Welker, 'Der erhaltende, rettende und erhebende Gott. Zu einer biblisch orientierten Trinitätslehre,' in Welker & Volf, *Der lebendige Gott*, 34–52.

31 A similar and instructive example would have been the essay by John Webster on 'The Dignity of Creatures,' in the *Festschrift for George Newlands, The God of Love and Human Dignity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark,

5. Pastoral purpose

In his instructive overview of the contemporary renaissance of the doctrine of the Trinity, Gijsbert van den Brink describes as the first characteristic *(grondtrek)* of this renaissance the way in which trinitarian thought has again been seen as central to soteriology, to the biblical message of salvation. He calls this trend the '*Heimhohlung* van de triniteitsleer in de soteriologie' (the relocation of the doctrine of the Trinity to its original home, namely, soteriology).[32]

This description is most certainly true of the role of the doctrine in Calvin's own thought and work. Commentators, of course, use many different words to describe this thrust, not always soteriology. Some speak of his pastoral approach, some of piety or even spirituality. Many underline the rhetorical nature of his work, by which they want to stress that he always had specific audiences in mind, particular listeners or readers, with their specific issues, questions, needs and convictions – and he wanted to address them, to comfort, and to challenge them.

Charles Partee bases his recent study on *The Theology of John Calvin* on the conviction that the overall structure of the *Institutes* is determined by his exposition of God who is *for* us (books I and II) and God who is *with* us (book III, on the faithful person and book IV, on the faithful community). In fact, Partee follows the same structure for his own book as well:

2007), ed. Paul Middleton, 19–34. Although not Reformed, Webster is a very authoritative voice on Barth, interpreted within the Reformed tradition, and his approach in this essay most clearly shows the same characteristics. He argues that a theology of human dignity will be well-ordered when it is organized around the magnalia Dei, the great deeds of God; namely, 'the long-familiar three-moment' pattern of creation-reconciliation- perfection … Though not without its limitations … this arrangement can provide space for conceptual analysis without abandoning the historical character of the divine economy'.
From this perspective, he then gives a three-fold answer to the question concerning the dignity of creatures. 'Human dignity has its basis in the loving act of God the creator who summons creatures into being and bestows life upon them, ordering their nature and determining their destiny by calling them to enact their being in fellowship with himself; God the reconciler defeats creatures' trespass upon their own dignity, restoring them to fellowship with himself and re-establishing their dignity; God the perfecter completes the dignity of creatures, gathering them into the fellowship of the saints and empowering them actively to testify to God's perfection of human dignity.' The characteristic trinitarian spread cannot be clearer.

32 Van den Brink, 'Hedendaagse Renaissance' 218–221.

> *The mystery that holds together the confession of God for Us and God with Us is the conviction of God in Us, or, more accurately, We in God … This union with Christ who is one with God is the central and irreducible mystery of Christian faith and life. God is for us in Jesus Christ, and God is with us in Jesus Christ.* [33]

Although Partee uses this focus on the mystery to argue for a christological rather than a trinitarian structure to the *Institutes*, he once again underlines the soteriological, pastoral, or pious thrust of Calvin's theology very convincingly.

The title of Baars's *magnum opus* also captures Calvin's pastoral thrust very well, but in his case explicitly with regard to Calvin's treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity; namely, *Concerning God's Highness and Nearness: Calvin on the Trinity*. It is about God being both 'exalted' and 'very near' at the same time, and both forms of knowledge of the living God are full of comfort and grace. This living God of the Bible is both able *and* trustworthy, both holy and transcendent, *and* both near and gracious.

Here, Michael Welker's comment is representative of a further, *fourth* characteristic Reformed trait in recent trinitarian discussions. It is not about idle speculation, about any form of *Glasperlenspiel*. Rather, the doctrine of the Trinity should help us to both understand and keep the long-suffering patience of faith in the midst of experiences of shattering senselessness and futility.[34]

The doctrine of the trinity, speaking the biblical language of the living God who is for, with and in us, is a *pastoral* message, helping faith to remain patient amid the many experiences of destructive and meaningless suffering and violence.[35]

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33 Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 40–41. He discusses four popular suggestions concerning the structure of the Institutes between 1536 and 1560; namely, Warfield's idea of the Apostles' Creed, Dowey's suggestion of the twofold knowledge of God, the trinitarian suggestion (represented by Philip Butin), and his own proposal of the union with Christ. Whether Calvin actually had any single dividing principle in mind is a secondary question. Partee certainly portrays the pastoral natural of Calvin's work in a moving way.

34 Welker, 'Der erhaltende, rettende und erhebende Gott. Zu einer biblisch orientierten Trinitätslehre,' in Welker & Volf, *Der lebendige Gott*, 36. 'Die Trinitätslehre soll vielmehr helfen, den langen Atem des Glaubens zu verstehen und zu bewahren inmitten der Erfahrungen zerstörerischer Sinnlosigkeit und 'Zweckwidrigkeit' in dieser Welt.'

35 One could argue that the deepest motivation behind Barth's radical contribution to the trinitarian renaissance was also pastoral or

6. Practical pattern

'Ever since God exhibited Godself to us as a *Father,* we must be convicted of extreme ingratitude if we do not in turn exhibit ourselves as God's children. Ever since *Christ* purified us by the laver of his blood, and communicated this purification by baptism, it would ill become us to be defiled with new pollution. Ever since Christ ingrafted us into his body, we, who are his members, should anxiously beware of contracting any stain or taint. Ever since Christ who is our head ascended to heaven, it is befitting in us to withdraw our affections from the earth, and with our whole soul aspire to heaven. Ever since the *Holy Spirit* dedicated us as temples to the Lord, we should make it our endeavour to show forth the glory of God, and guard against being profaned by the defilement of sin.'

These words stand almost at the beginning of Calvin's well-known exposition of the Christian life. He is explaining why believers should 'dedicate and devote themselves to righteousness' – deliberately using a 'trinitarian spread'. This is very common in his work, not only to use a trinitarian pattern when he explains something, but in fact to use such a trinitarian pattern when he is discussing the Christian life, sanctification, holiness, and the believers' calling.[36]

Clearly, the trinitarian grammar that the living God of the covenant is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has practical implications, according to Calvin. The knowledge that this God is for us, in us and with us should have practical consequences – but how? As crucially important as this insight indeed is, it may be necessary to distinguish carefully in this regard, in order to appreciate the typical Reformed appropriation of this fundamental conviction.

Calvin himself does not draw practical conclusions based on the inner life of the immanent Trinity. His arguments are not built on notions of relationality, identity, and difference, or the social nature of the divine life. His hesitance or reluctance to be drawn into those discussions results in a seeming lack of knowledge regarding the immanent

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soteriological in nature, in that he wanted to safeguard the truth or the trustworthiness of the gospel, providing assurance of faith; see, for example, from the many studies the two brief accounts by Alan Torrance, 'The Trinity,' in The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ed. John Webster, 72–91; and George Hunsinger, 'Mysterium Trinitatis: Barth's Conception of Eternity' in *For the Sake of the World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 2004), ed. George Hunsinger, 165–190.

36 For these words, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), in the translation of Beveridge, slightly adapted, Book III/6.3. This is typical of many discussions in his work.

Trinity, which makes it very difficult to draw direct conclusions, for example, with a view to ecclesiology, ethics, or anthropology – at least in the way that has become popular in many recent trinitarian projects. Some theologians in the Reformed family are clearly attracted to these figures of thought, and therefore develop their own relational or social ecclesiologies, sometimes even with explicit critique of Calvin's reluctance in this regard, but perhaps it is fair to say that this is not characteristic of mainstream Reformed theology.[37]

The more typical way would be to follow Calvin's logic, and to develop practical implications of the trinitarian spread, according to the conviction that believers belong to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, and are claimed, called, and renewed by the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. In this way, many innovative, influential, and inspiring proposals have been forthcoming from Reformed theologians during the last decades – for the nature of our practical knowledge of God; for faith, piety, and spirituality; for worship and liturgy; for ecclesiology; for the ecumenical nature of the church; for the mission of the church; for a life of baptism and the Lord's Supper; for the Christian life and ethics. Again, Reformed publications on

37 Many of the Reformed voices in the trinitarian renaissance seem concerned that there was too little interest in Calvin in the so-called immanent Trinity. Many contradictory interpretations are therefore given to the place of God's *aseitas* or God's hiddenness, sometimes appealing to Calvin, sometimes clearly critical of his perceived lack of interest. The term Verhevenheid (highness) in Baars's title is a deliberate attempt to argue that this was indeed important for Calvin. Baars says that God is 'more' than we know, although not 'different.' Again, many voices are critical because they feel that more attention to the relational or social nature of the immanent Trinity could show constructive avenues; for example, to develop ecclesiology, ethics, and even anthropology. Moltmann provides a well-known example, often discussed; but so also Cornelius Plantinga Jr., 'Social Trinity and Tritheism,' in Plantinga & Feenstra (eds.), *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 21–47. For a discussion of Calvin, Barth and Bruce McCormack and their views on God's hiddenness, see for example Paul Helm, *John Calvin and the Hiddenness of God* and *Engaging the Doctrine of God. Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2008), ed. Bruce L. McCormack, 67–82. Comparing Calvin to Augustine in this regard, John Webster, for example, calls Calvin's comments 'more terse' (about a theological conception of aseity), 'more muted' (about the immanent dimension), 'characteristically reticent' (about the trinitarian dimensions), 'less concerned' – in short, 'what Calvin offers is an account of the aseity of God from the economic perspective,' in his 'Life in and of Himself: Reflections on God's Aseity,' in McCormack (ed.), *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, especially 121–123. Perhaps that is the most one can claim with some accuracy.

these themes are many and popular. Perhaps three illustrations of this Reformed thought pattern could suffice – respectively on the church, on mission, and on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

In his widely read doctoral dissertation *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship*, Butin first offers an account of what he calls 'The Trinity: Calvin's theological paradigm for God's economic relationship with humanity'. The emphasis is clearly on the economy of salvation, on a trinitarian relationship with human beings. In the second part, he develops this trinitarian paradigm as the 'basis, pattern, and dynamic' for the divine-human relationship. 'Basis' refers to the revelation of God as triune, 'pattern' refers to redemption as the trinitarian way in which this God mediates, restores and redeems human beings, and 'dynamic' refers to the human response called forth by this trinitarian action towards humanity. In a final part, 'The Trinity and the visibility of grace'. he considers practical implications for church, baptism and the eucharist.[38]

In a series of works and over many years during the twentieth century, Lesslie Newbigin made this characteristic Reformed trinitarian spread fruitful for missiological thought and action. Already, in *The Household of God*, he had suggested a trinitarian ecumenical ecclesiology, by correlating the biblical images of the 'congregation of the faithful', the 'body of Christ', and the 'community of the Holy Spirit' broadly with Protestant, Catholic, and Pentecostal traditions. The argument was the – characteristically Reformed – attempt to demonstrate that the wholeness of the church described in the scriptures requires adequate emphasis on all three of these ecclesial patterns.[39] In his influential

38 Philip W Butin, *Revelation, Redemption and Response. Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford, 1995); also his popular introductory study *The Trinity* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001). According to Baars, Butin is another example of someone who moves too far away from Calvin himself, into the direction of a social Trinity.

39 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1953). It is interesting that already a few years earlier another influential Reformed theologian made a similar argument in North America. In 1946, H. Richard Niebuhr published an essay called 'The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church' in *Theology Today* (1946), in which he claimed that '[t]he doctrine (of the Trinity) also has great importance for an ecumenical theology as a formulation of the whole Church's faith in God in distinction from the partial faiths and partial formulations of parts of the Church and of individuals in the Church'. He described Christianity as 'an association, loosely held together, of three Unitarian religions,' namely a 'Unitarianism of the Creator', a 'Unitarianism of

small monograph called *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission*, he made a deliberate attempt to redirect the ecumenical movement toward a more comprehensive trinitarian ecclesiology.[40] His *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* is directly and systematically based on a typical trinitarian spread, describing 'mission' as 'proclaiming the kingdom of the Father', 'sharing the Life of the Son' and 'bearing the witness of the Spirit'.[41] On the basis of these ideas, he later engaged very critically with new developments in the ecumenical movement, and argued that the doctrine of the Trinity is 'public truth' and should be part of public debate in contemporary societies.[42]

Jesus Christ', and a 'Unitarianism for which the Spirit is the one and only God ... (perhaps) the most prevalent of all. All Christian spiritualism tends in this direction'. He then pointed out 'The Inadequacies of the Three Unitarianisms' and argued for 'the Trinitarianism of the whole Church'. Reprinted in H Richard Niebuhr. Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), ed. William Stacy Johnson, 50–62.

40 Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission* (Richmond: John Knox, 1964). These were also the years during which trinitarian faith, especially influenced by Karl Barth, had a major impact on the ecumenical movement and on missiological reflection and work through the concept of the *missio Dei*. This later became contested terrain, but there can be little doubt about the lasting role of this characteristically Reformed trinitarian thought in this regard. David Bosch describes this history with careful detail and sensitive insight in his *Transforming Mission. Paradigms Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 389–393. 'Throughout, the Barthian influence was crucial ... Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology ... As far as missionary thinking was concerned, this linking with the doctrine of the Trinity constituted an important innovation ... Mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate. Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people.'

41 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995).

42 See for example his critical response to Konrad Raiser, 'Ecumenical Amnesia' in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* No X. 18/1 (Jan. 1994), 2–5; also his 'The Trinity as Public Truth,' in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 1–8. The deepest ground for his critique was to be found in his impression that in contemporary ecumenical thought, trinitarian language seems to have become a mere indication for plurality, for a vague notion of difference, without any basis in the Christ-event, in other words, that it has lost its grounding in the economy of salvation, so characteristic of the Reformed tradition, For an account of the

In his influential work called *What Happens in Holy Communion?*, Michael Welker deals very closely with the detail of the biblical account of the Last Supper, but divided into three parts that broadly correspond with the trinitarian spread ('thanking God', 'celebrating in the presence of Jesus Christ', 'joyful glorification of the Triune God'). In addition to this overall structure of the whole discussion, the final chapter is specifically called 'In the Name of God, the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit,' and reflects on 'the presence and activity of the Triune God in the supper as source of spiritual renewal'.[43]

Together, these three approaches illustrate a *fifth* and final characteristic of Reformed trinitarian thought. In accordance with Calvin's point of departure in the *Institutes*, knowledge of God and knowledge of self are intimately related; the one does not exist without the other. This implies that trinitarian biblical language about the one Living God who is for us, with us and in us will have *practical* consequences, for who we are and what we are called to be.

It is therefore typical of such an approach that two positions are rejected, simultaneously. On the one hand, the conviction represented by Kant and even in the Reformed family by Schleiermacher, that the doctrine of the Trinity does not have any practical use, is denied. On the other hand, the conviction so popular as part of the renaissance of the doctrine that it is possible to draw ecclesiological and ethical conclusions from the immanent Trinity is regarded with some reserve, since this may so easily turn into circular argument and even forms of ideological language, where divine sanction is given to ideas people already harboured before they recognized them again in God.[44]

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debate, see also Geoffrey Wainwright, Lesslie Newbigin. *A Theological Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 129–134.

43 Michael Welker, *What happens in Holy Communion?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000).

44 See the valuable warning by Van den Brink, who points out that one may easily use the doctrine of the Trinity to support some favourite cause of one's own, instead of allowing the doctrine to have a critical function towards one's own (political, social etc.) intuitions. Theologians should be careful not to utilise the doctrine of the Trinity in ideological ways; Hedendaagse Renaissance, 237. For a thoughtful proposal on how to 'relate the doctrine of the Trinity to the Christian moral life,' see the contributions by the Reformed theologian Robert Vosloo, 'Identity, Otherness and the Triune God 7 Journal of Theology for Southern Africa Vol 119 (July 2004), 69, 89, in which he considers possibilities of 'model,' 'imagination,' and 'participation,' pleading for 'enriching the participatory imagination,' especially drawing on the notion of perichoresis; also 'The gift of participation: on the Triune God and the Christian moral life,' *Scriptura* Vol 79/1 (2002), 93–105, considering

7. The key place of the doctrine in the Reformed tradition – coincidental?

So, is the key place of the doctrine of the Trinity in the work of so many Reformed theologians of the last decades coincidental, or not? Broadly speaking, they are all part of the much larger renaissance – in which, however, the Reformed Karl Barth played a pivotal role. Was it coincidental that Barth developed those insights, so early in his career, at a time in which he delved deeply into Calvin and the Reformed confessional heritage?

When one looks more closely, however, it does seem that the enthusiasm with which many of these Reformed theologians appeal to the trinitarian faith, and particularly the most characteristic ways in which they do this, do seem to correlate with basic intuitions in the early Reformers, including Calvin, particularly that trinitarian language offers a way to tell the story of the scriptures, to know God as the living God, acting as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, graciously loving, saving, and comforting us *and* calling, claiming, and renewing us, in rich and complex ways – always in the plural (Noordmans).

notions such as analogy, imitation, and again imagination and participation. Appealing to Bonhoeffer and Welker, he concludes with the self-critical reminder – fully in the spirit of the Reformed motifs described here – that 'a description of the Christian life through the Spirit is subject to dissolution in a hazy mysticism that dislocates the Christian moral life from the economy of salvation. Or, put differently: our participation in God is a participation in Christ and through the Spirit' 101.