

## Inseparable Operations of the Trinity: Outdated Relic or Valuable Tool?

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*The doctrine of inseparable operations has fallen out of favor for many theologians of the Trinity, though it continues to flourish in the trinitarian discourse of many others. Is the axiom to be regarded, per the first camp, as an irrelevant or inconsistent vestige of theology past or, per the second camp, a fruitful device for theology present? By surveying the voice of the fourth-century fathers, critiquing an alternative approach to the Trinity (social trinitarianism), and addressing potential problems regarding the axiom's coherence, I offer a three-stranded evidentiary cord (historical, methodological, and theological) in support of the inseparability principle's ongoing vitality for Christian conversation.*

*Key Words:* Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Church Fathers, Divine Missions, Inseparable Operations, Social Trinitarianism, Trinitarianism

The twentieth-century resurgence of interest in trinitarianism led to the reconsideration, reformulation, or rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity and many of its classical tenets. One casualty of this historical and theological development is the doctrine of inseparable operations.<sup>1</sup> In some circles, the inseparability principle has fallen out of fashion in trinitarian discourse—it is eyed with suspicion, reinterpreted, or repudiated. On the other hand, many theologians are defending, clarifying, and employing the doctrine for their own theological endeavors. Thus, a sort of tug-of-war manifests, prompting me to ask the question, “Is the doctrine of inseparable operations incompatible with, or irrelevant for, contemporary pursuits in Christian theology, or is it a valuable theological tool to be guarded and applied?”

<sup>1</sup> As I explain elsewhere, “The doctrine of inseparable operations affirms that all external works of the triune God are undivided (*opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*). That is, in every divine act in the world (*ad extra*; i.e., ‘toward the outside’), all persons of the Godhead work together as one, by virtue of their one shared nature, will, and power (*ad intra*; i.e., ‘toward the inside,’ or who God is in himself). Thus, when the Trinity acts, there is only one action, not three” (Torey J. S. Teer, “‘As the Father Has Sent Me, Even So I Am Sending You’: The Divine Missions and the Mission of the Church,” *JETS* 63.3 [2020]: 537).

In this article, I argue in favor of the latter option—the inseparability rule possesses fecundity for ongoing theological conversation and construction. I proffer this argument by way of three “strands” of evidence. First, I canvass the fourth-century fathers’ unanimous witness vis-à-vis the unity of the Godhead in nature and in work to validate the historical merit of inseparable operations. Next, I review the twentieth-century revival in trinitarianism that led to social conceptions of the Trinity and then evaluate Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s paradigmatic approach, revealing the weaknesses of her model and preserving classical trinitarianism as the methodologically viable basis for the inseparability principle. Finally, I address two concerns regarding inseparable operations in order to exhibit the axiom’s theological soundness. It is my hope that this article will encourage scholars to confidently and continually utilize the rule as they reflect on the triune God, his works, and his ways.

### The Historicity of Inseparable Operations: The Pro-Nicene Consensus

In recent decades, it has become increasingly popular to argue in favor of a distinction between early Eastern and Western trinitarian theology, suggesting that the East emphasized the three distinct persons within the Godhead, while the West emphasized the unity of the Godhead.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have even rejected the doctrine of inseparable operations on such grounds.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, certain theologians have repudiated the

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 196–97, 210; Adolf Von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. E. B. Speirs and James Millar (London: Williams and Norgate, 1898), 4:84, 113–34; Stanley Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 8–12; Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 10–12; Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 33; Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*, rev. and exp. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2019), xxviii–xxxv. Theodore de Régnon, in his late-nineteenth-century work *Études de théologie positive sur la sainte Trinité*, is often credited as the origin of the East-versus-West paradigm. For more on this subject, see D. Glenn Butner Jr., “For and Against de Régnon: Trinitarianism East and West,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17.4 (October 2015): 399–412.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., LaCugna, *God for Us*, 97–100; Alan Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 135–36;

East-versus-West proposal, instead affirming a shared trinitarian vocabulary between the East and the West—called pro-Nicene theology.<sup>4</sup> In light of such competing historical claims and in favor of the latter position, I briefly survey several fourth-century contributors to inseparable operations, showing that there was indeed a pro-Nicene theological consensus that supported the doctrine.<sup>5</sup>

In the East, Athanasius of Alexandria (290–374) wrote against the Sabellians, who argued for a kind of modalism, and the Arians, who argued that Jesus was a created being. Though he elsewhere addressed the co-eternality of the Holy Spirit,<sup>6</sup> Athanasius's espousal of the inseparability principle typically appeared in his discussion on the co-equality of the Father and the Son: "The divine teaching knows Father and Son, and Wise and Wisdom, and God and Word; while it ever guards Him indivisible and inseparable and indissoluble in all respects."<sup>7</sup>

The Cappadocian fathers also supported the inseparable operations of the Trinity. Basil of Caesarea (329–379), in his treatise demonstrating the divinity of the Holy Spirit, asserted, "In every operation the Spirit is

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Arie Baars, "'Opera Trinitatis Ad Extra Sunt Indivisa' in the Theology of John Calvin," in Calvinus Sacrarum Literarum Interpres: *Papers of the International Congress of Calvin Research*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Gottingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 131–41.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Michele René Barnes, "Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 237–40; Bradley G. Green, *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine: The Theology of Colin Gunton in Light of Augustine* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 169–201; Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 264–83; Keith E. Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 20–21, 51–54; Kyle Claunch, "What God Hath Done Together: Defending the Historic Doctrine of the Inseparable Operations of the Trinity," *JETS* 56.4 (2013): 781–800.

<sup>5</sup> Although I presently survey fourth-century evidence in favor of inseparable operations, language *resembling* or *anticipating* the inseparability principle appears in earlier authors such as Justin Martyr (AD 100–165), *1 Apology* 63 (ANF 1:184); *Dialogue with Trypho* 61 (ANF 1:227–28); Tertullian of Carthage (160–225), *Against Praxeas* 2–3, 8, 19 (ANF 3:598–99, 603, 614–15); Origen of Alexandria (184–253), *On First Principles* 1.2.6, 1.2.12, 1.3.7 (ANF 4:248, 251, 255). All dates listed in this section are approximate.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourse against the Arians* 4.13, 14, 29 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 4:427–38, 444–45).

<sup>7</sup> Athanasius, *Discourse against the Arians* 4.9 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 4:436); see also 4.1, 10 (4:433, 436).

closely conjoined with, and inseparable from, the Father and the Son."<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, responding to charges of tritheism and Sabellianism, Basil maintained, "In the quickening power whereby our nature is transformed from the life of corruption to immortality, the power of the Spirit is comprehended with Father and with Son, and in many other instances.... He is inseparably united."<sup>9</sup>

Basil's younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa (335–396), also embraced the inseparability axiom. In his endeavor to demonstrate the co-divinity of the Son and the Spirit alongside the Father without espousing three distinct gods, Gregory avowed,

But in the case of the Divine nature we do not similarly learn that the Father does anything by Himself in which the Son does not work conjointly, or again that the Son has any special operation apart from the Holy Spirit; but every operation which extends from God to the Creation, and is named according to our variable conceptions of it, has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit. For this reason the name derived from the operation is not divided with regard to the number of those who fulfil it, because the action of each concerning anything is not separate and peculiar, but whatever comes to pass ... comes to pass by the action of the Three, yet what does come to pass is not three things.<sup>10</sup>

Gregory of Nazianzus (330–390), a close friend of Basil and Nyssen, wrote on the unity of the Godhead more with respect to nature than operation.<sup>11</sup> He did, however, affirm the undivided power of the Godhead in the three persons.<sup>12</sup> Another Eastern father, Cyril of Jerusalem (313–386), immediately after acknowledging all three persons of the Godhead,

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<sup>8</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit* 16.37 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 8:23); see also 26.63 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 8:39); *Against Eunomius* 3.2–4 (DelCogliano and Radde-Gallwitz, 187–91).

<sup>9</sup> Basil, *Letter* 189.5 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 8:230). John L. W. James treats Athanasius's and Basil's espousal of inseparable operations at length, concluding, "Athanasius and Basil establish inseparable operation and divine unity by establishing both ontological equality and relational subordination as necessary outcomes of the relations in question. In doing so, they counter their subordinationist opponents without slipping into the opposite heresy of polytheism" ("An Examination of *Homotimia* in St. Basil the Great's *On the Holy Spirit*, and Contemporary Implications," *WTJ* 74.2 [Fall 2012]: 265n51).

<sup>10</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Not Three Gods* (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 5:334); see also *On the Trinity, and of the Godhead of the Holy Spirit* 5–7 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 5:327–33).

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 34.8–9, 15 (NPNP<sup>2</sup> 7:336, 338).

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Nazianzus, *Oration* 31.14 (NPNP<sup>2</sup> 7:322).

articulated the one God's unity of operations: "For though He is called Good, and Just, and Almighty and Sabaoth, He is not on that account diverse and various; but being one and the same, He sends forth countless operations of His Godhead, not exceeding here and deficient there, but being in all things like unto Himself."<sup>13</sup>

In the West, Hilary of Poitiers (315–367), like Nazianzen, focused more on upholding the Godhead's essential unity rather than its operational unity.<sup>14</sup> Although, Hilary sometimes hinted at the unity of operations,<sup>15</sup> and he even explicitly mentioned the unity of power in operation—albeit regarding the Father and the Son alone—in his comments on John 5:19: "If Both have the same power in operation, and both claim the same reverence in worship, I cannot understand what dishonour of inferiority can exist, since Father and Son possess the same power of operation, and equality of honour."<sup>16</sup>

Ambrose of Milan (339–397), too, affirmed the inseparability principle. In his work on the Holy Spirit, he expounded upon the unity of divine nature and action. For example, toward the end of Book 3, he wrote, "And so as the Father and the Son are One, because the Son has all things which the Father has, so too the Spirit is one with the Father and the Son, because He too knows all the things of God.... Therefore, if He works all these things, for one and the same Spirit worketh all, how is He not God Who has all things which God has?"<sup>17</sup>

Ambrose's star pupil, Augustine of Hippo (354–430), is perhaps the most well-known proponent of inseparable operations. In one instance, he quite comprehensively explained,

For the union of Persons in the Trinity is in the Catholic faith set forth and believed, and by a few holy and blessed ones understood, to be so inseparable, that whatever is done by the Trinity must be regarded as being done by the Father, and by the Son, and by the Holy Spirit together; and that nothing is done by the Father which is, not also done by the Son and by the Holy Spirit; and nothing done by the Holy Spirit which is not also done by the Father and by the Son; and nothing done by the Son which is not also done by

<sup>13</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 6.7 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 7:35).

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 5.35, 38; 8.41 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 9a:95–96, 97; 149).

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Hilary, *On the Trinity* 8.13 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 9a:141).

<sup>16</sup> Hilary, *On the Trinity* 9.46 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 9a:171); see also 7.21 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 9a:126–27). Hilary would, of course, include the Holy Spirit in the unity of the Godhead's activities; see 2.1 (9a:51–52).

<sup>17</sup> Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit* 3.19.146 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 10:155); see also 1.1.25 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 10:96–97).

the Father and by the Holy Spirit.<sup>18</sup>

More succinctly, Augustine summarized, "The Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as they are indivisible, so work indivisibly."<sup>19</sup>

Although space does not permit more discussion here, the doctrine of inseparable operations, as articulated by the early fathers (especially Augustine), was fully embraced by many later theologians (e.g., Thomas Aquinas,<sup>20</sup> John Owen,<sup>21</sup> and Herman Bavinck<sup>22</sup>). As Kyle Claunch aptly summarizes, "The doctrine of inseparable operations has been a staple of orthodox trinitarian reflection for many centuries. Therefore, it is not wise to ignore it or dismiss it lightly."<sup>23</sup>

While dialoging between the East-versus-West and pro-Nicene paradigms is still fruitful, what I have presented above should be sufficient to demonstrate that the fourth-century Eastern and Western fathers spoke with one voice concerning the Trinity: the Godhead, though personally differentiated, is inseparable both in nature and in operation.<sup>24</sup> Hence, the

<sup>18</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Letter* 11.2 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 1:47); see also *Sermon* 52 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 6:259–66); *Tractate* 20.3, 13 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 7:132–33, 137).

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity* 1.4.7 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 3:20); see also 1.5.8; 4.21 (3:21; 3:85–86). In arguing against the East-versus-West paradigm, Claunch provides an extensive treatment of Augustine's formulation of inseparable operations and how it coheres with the essential unity of the Godhead ("What God Hath Done Together," 785–91). Tyler R. Wittman also extensively treats Augustine and the doctrine of inseparable operations ("The End of the Incarnation: John Owen, Trinitarian Agency and Christology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15.3 [July 2013]: 287–89).

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Thomas Aquinas, *St. John*, vol. 6 of *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels* (Oxford: James Park, 1874), commentary on John 5:19–20 (pp. 180–86).

<sup>21</sup> E.g., John Owen, *Pneumatologia*, vol. 3 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Gould (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 93–94, 198.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 215.

<sup>23</sup> Claunch, "What God Hath Done Together," 799. Adonis Vidu comes to the same conclusion: "The ancient pedigree of the *opera ad extra* rule ... is undeniable" ("Trinitarian Inseparable Operations and the Incarnation," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4.1 [May 2016]: 106). See also Michel René Barnes, "One Nature, One Power: Consensus Doctrine in Pro-Nicene Polemic," in *Theologica et Philosophica, Critica et Philologica, Historica*, *Studia Patristica* 29 (Louvain: Peeters, 1997), 205–23.

<sup>24</sup> As Johnson writes, "Against the East-West paradigm, it is important to recognize that Augustine and [the] Cappadocians share in common all the core

doctrine of inseparable operations possesses rich historical merit and, as such, can serve well for contemporary theological construction.<sup>25</sup> Such historicity, however, is but one strand of evidence supporting the fecundity of the inseparability rule.<sup>26</sup> In the next section, I consider another strand: the doctrine's methodological viability.

### The Methodological Viability of Inseparable Operations: The Classical Trinitarian Framework

Though the doctrine of inseparable operations is ultimately derived from the biblical data, it is wrapped up with several theological categories that are indispensable to a classical (or Latin) trinitarian framework (e.g., unity of nature, distinction of persons, processions, missions). Further, as Fred Sanders correctly notes, "The task of the doctrine of the Trinity is to describe the connection between God [*in se*, or 'in himself'] and the economy of salvation."<sup>27</sup> In this section, therefore, I examine whether the more recent model for discourse concerning the Trinity, social trinitarianism,<sup>28</sup> offers a viable alternative for understanding intratrinitarian and

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elements of pro-Nicene theology ... (common power, common operations, common nature)" (*Rethinking the Trinity*, 54). Johnson goes on to say, "A case in point is inseparable operation. Augustine and the Cappadocians have virtually identical accounts of the inseparable operation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (54n18).

<sup>25</sup> The pro-Nicene consensus on the Trinity in general and inseparable operations in particular well suits ongoing efforts at "retrieval theology," or, broadly speaking, "resourcing contemporary systematic constructive theology by engaging historical theology" (Gavin Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals: Why We Need Our Past to Have a Future* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019], 45).

<sup>26</sup> This section has focused on the historical grounds for the doctrine of inseparable operations. For a detailed discussion of the doctrine's theological and biblical grounds, see Gregg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit, Theology for the People of God* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 277–81. My section here should supplement Allison and Köstenberger's sparse treatment (pp. 281–82) of the historicity of the inseparability principle.

<sup>27</sup> Fred Sanders, "The Trinity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. Kathryn Tanner, John Webster, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 35.

<sup>28</sup> Broadly speaking, social trinitarianism is any model that attributes to the Godhead three distinct centers of consciousness, intellect, and will. According to Karen Kilby, "Most basically, social theorists propose that Christians should not imagine God on the model of some individual person or thing which has three sides, aspects, dimensions or modes of being; God is instead to be thought of as

God-world relations. If the historic model of the Trinity—with which the doctrine of inseparable operations is intimately connected—does not stand the test of time, then it may be necessary to dispense with the attendant axiom as an irrelevant theological relic. But, as I explain, the social model evidences certain weaknesses that inhibit it from displacing the classical model as the preferred approach to trinitarian discourse. Hence, preserving the classical approach shows the inseparability principle to possess methodological viability and, thus, fruitfulness for ongoing theological endeavors.

As scholars widely recognize, the twentieth-century revival in trinitarianism began with Karl Barth's discussion on the Trinity in his *Church Dogmatics*. Such revival then progressed with the writings of Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Robert Jenson, John Zizioulas, Catherine LaCugna, and others.<sup>29</sup> Rahner, who insisted on "the importance of the economy of salvation for Trinitarian reflection," and Zizioulas, who brought the "concepts of personhood and relationality to centre stage," are of particular importance regarding the shift of trinitarian discourse toward relationality.<sup>30</sup> In Stanley Grenz's estimation, Rahner is in ranks with Barth vis-à-vis the revival and recasting of trinitarian discourse because of "his articulation and consistent use of a methodological principle that informed the subsequent flow of trinitarian theology."<sup>31</sup> Rahner saw historic discussions on the doctrine of the Trinity as detached from salvation history,<sup>32</sup> so his guiding principle—known as "Rahner's

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a collective, a group, or a society, bound together by the mutual love, accord, and self-giving of its members." Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000): 433. Theologians who posit a so-called "relational" view of the Trinity may or may not affirm these characterizations. Consequently, in this section, I restrict my evaluation to a purely "social" understanding of the Trinity. For an example of a "relational" model, see Thomas H. McCall, "Relational Trinity: Creedal Perspective," in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. Jason S. Sexton, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 113–37.

<sup>29</sup> Though a robust treatment of the twentieth-century developments in trinitarianism is beyond the scope of this article, Grenz (*Rediscovering the Triune God*) provides a comprehensive survey of such developments, covering the key figures and their supporters, innovators, and critics.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 9.

<sup>31</sup> Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> For his part, Rahner conceived of the economic Trinity (i.e., God's action in the world) as "a history of relations between Father and Son, in the unity of the Spirit, that takes places within the created order" (Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, 10).

Rule”—was that “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.”<sup>33</sup>

While Rahner “retained the classical belief that God’s eternal being is ultimately independent of historical events,”<sup>34</sup> later theologians (i.e., Moltmann, Pannenberg, and Jenson) would draw out “the more thoroughgoing implication of Rahner’s Rule, namely, the idea that God finds his identity in the interplay of the three members of the Trinity within the temporal events of the economy of salvation.”<sup>35</sup> That being said, LaCugna’s contribution to modern trinitarian discourse—that is, her social view of the Trinity—merits especial consideration, for she functions as a sort of nexus of twentieth-century trinitarian development. As Grenz details,

A more thorough account of the trajectory in which she stands might suggest that LaCugna combines impulses from Zizioulas [i.e., “being as communion”] with Barth’s focus on the pseudonymity significance of the divine self-disclosure in Christ, Rahner’s linking of the immanent Trinity with the economic Trinity—which she revises and reformulates as *theologia* and *oikonomia*—and the interest in viewing the divine life through the history of the trinitarian persons evident in Pannenberg, Moltmann, and Jenson.<sup>36</sup>

LaCugna modified “Rahner’s Rule” by suggesting that the only way to access *theologia* (“the mystery of God”) is through *oikonomia* (“the mystery of salvation”).<sup>37</sup> She did, however, appreciate and utilize Rahner’s methodology, conceding,

Rahner’s theology nonetheless furnishes the basic methodological principle: Christian theology must always speak about God on the basis of God’s self-communication in Christ and in the Spirit.... God comes to us through Jesus Christ in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, which suggests that God exists in differentiated personhood.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel, Milestones in Catholic Theology (1967; repr., New York: Crossroad, 1997), 22. LaCugna, one of Rahner’s successors, clarifies “Rahner’s Rule”: “The identity of ‘economic’ and ‘immanent’ Trinity means that God truly and completely gives God’s self to the creature without remainder, and what is given in the economy of salvation *is* God as such” (Introduction to *The Trinity*, by Rahner, xiv; emphasis original).

<sup>34</sup> Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 148.

<sup>37</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 4, 13.

<sup>38</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 13.

Since her conception of God is tied up with God’s self-revelation in redemptive history, LaCugna avers, “The fundamental issue in trinitarian theology is not the inner workings of the ‘immanent’ Trinity, but *the question of how the trinitarian pattern of salvation history is to be correlated with the eternal being of God.*”<sup>39</sup> Thus, for LaCugna, “*theologia* and *oikonomia* ... are inseparable.”<sup>40</sup>

Ultimately, LaCugna resists reflecting on the nature of God apart from salvation history—specifically, the incarnation. She stresses,

We can only make true statements about God—particularly when the assertions are about the triune nature of God—only on the basis of the economy, corroborated by God’s self-revelation in Christ and the Spirit. *Theological* statements are possible not because we have some independent insight into God, or can speak from the standpoint of God, but because God has freely revealed and communicated God’s *self*, God’s personal existence, God’s infinite mystery.<sup>41</sup>

On this basis, LaCugna criticizes classical conceptions of the Trinity, arguing that the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity results from a gap between *oikonomia* and *theologia*.<sup>42</sup> In her view, “the existence of such an intradivine realm is precisely what cannot be established on the basis of the economy, despite the fact that it has functioned within speculative theology ever since the late fourth century.”<sup>43</sup>

In proffering such critiques, LaCugna reveals one of her undergirding presuppositions: “Theories about what God is apart from God’s self-communication in salvation history remain unverifiable and ultimately untheological, since *theologia* is given only through *oikonomia*.”<sup>44</sup> By situating *theologia* upon *oikonomia*, LaCugna conceives of God solely in terms of his constitutive relationship with creation,<sup>45</sup> as if all that God is he is toward creatures in time:

Trinitarian theology is par excellence a theology of relationship: God to us, we to God, we to each other. The doctrine of the Trinity

<sup>39</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 4 (emphasis original).

<sup>40</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 4. For example, she argues that “the being of Jesus is inseparable from his person and his history” (6). While this point is true of Jesus of Nazareth, it is not, however, true of God the Son.

<sup>41</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 3 (emphasis original).

<sup>42</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 223.

<sup>43</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 223.

<sup>44</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 231.

<sup>45</sup> As opposed to conceiving of God in terms of his aseity, eternal subsisting relations, and the like.

affirms that the “essence” of God is relational, other-ward, that God exists as diverse persons united in a communion of freedom, love, and knowledge. The insistence on the correspondence between *theologia* and *oikonomia* means that the focus of the doctrine of the Trinity is the communion between God and ourselves.<sup>46</sup>

To her credit, LaCugna places a heavy emphasis on the relationship between theology proper and soteriology, as one of her primary objectives is to demonstrate the practicality of the doctrine of the Trinity in everyday Christian experience.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, she centers her trinitarianism on the Christ event, a move that should appeal to social and classical trinitarians alike. In doing so, however, LaCugna commits several missteps.

First, while God’s triune nature is only explicitly revealed in the New Testament, LaCugna’s focus on God’s self-communication in Christ and the Spirit effectively ignores God’s progressive revelation throughout the Old Testament. For someone whose proposal champions salvation history as the basis of accessing God’s nature, neglecting a significant portion of that history undercuts—to a large degree—the credibility of her argument. Besides, that God progressively discloses himself to creatures in time does not mean that humankind can ever fully apprehend him. Consequently, we cannot know all that there is to know about God merely by looking at “the face of Jesus Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit,”<sup>48</sup> even though all that God is obtains in the persons and works of Christ and the Spirit.<sup>49</sup>

Second, that God’s triune nature is only revealed through the economy of salvation does not eliminate the possibility of making theological statements about God *in se*, especially when Scripture itself—in both the Old and New Testaments—makes theological statements about God’s nature independent of time (e.g., Isa 40:28; Col 1:15–19).<sup>50</sup> It is precisely because

<sup>46</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 244.

<sup>47</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, foreword, 1, 4, 13; “Re-Conceiving the Trinity as the Mystery of Salvation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38.1 (February 1985): 1–2, 14.

<sup>48</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 305.

<sup>49</sup> I.e., singular—though personally differentiated—divine nature; singular divine power-will-intellect that operates in personally differentiated modes.

<sup>50</sup> Also significant is that many New Testament passages quote Old Testament passages when discussing the nature of God, particularly the divinity of the Son (e.g., Acts 2:25–36; Heb 1:1–13), thereby hinting at some degree of disclosure of God’s triune nature in the Old Testament, even if such disclosure may have been fuzzy. Furthermore, the early church fathers (e.g., Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*) frequently visited the writings of the prophets when

Scripture makes theological statements about the nature of God—including that of the three persons of the Godhead—that classical conceptions of trinitarianism arose in the first place. The early church fathers, as well as theologians throughout history, endeavored to account for Scripture’s multifaceted witness concerning God’s nature.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, we cannot simply ignore or reject centuries of reflection on God’s essence just because God more clearly revealed his triune nature at the incarnation and beyond.

Third, as a consequence of her emphasis on soteriology (or *oikonomia*, “the mystery of salvation”), LaCugna’s proposal is heavily anthropocentric. She avers, “God is *personal*, and . . . therefore the proper subject matter of the doctrine of the Trinity is the encounter between divine and human persons in the economy of redemption.”<sup>52</sup> In LaCugna’s view, because God has revealed himself (*theologia*) through the economy of salvation (*oikonomia*) as a God in relationship with human creatures, his essence is, as quoted above, that of “diverse persons united in a communion of freedom, love, and knowledge.”<sup>53</sup> It is inappropriate, however, to equate what God is toward humankind in redemptive history (*pro nobis*) with what he is in himself (*in se*). God, including his nature, is independent of creation and history. On the other hand, God’s acts in time are contingent; God is who he is, but out of love, he created and redeemed. Thus, while God’s work in creation is consistent with his nature, we cannot simply dispense with distinguishing between God’s inward and outward acts, and we cannot forget that God’s inner life is the basis for his outer works, while his works—to greater and lesser degrees—express and point back to his essence. The mystery of God (*theologia*) forever exceeds that which God reveals in time and space, but that reality does not mean we should forsake “faith seeking understanding”—in this case, reasoning toward who God

supplying evidence of, for example, the three divine persons within the Godhead, the full divinity of the Son and the Spirit, and the unity of God’s action in creation.

<sup>51</sup> Not to mention, via the economy of the created order, humankind possesses critical faculties—reflective, to a degree, of God’s own mind—that allow us to make reasoned deductions—in accord with Scripture—concerning the nature of God outside of time. Indeed, the theologian’s task is, and has always been, to cohere thoughtful reflection with Scripture’s voice regarding God, his works, and his ways. As Stephen J. Wellum rightly notes, “Theology does not merely repeat Scripture; it seeks to ‘understand’ what Scripture says in terms of application, logical implications, metaphysical entailments, and so on” (“Retrieval, Christology, and *Sola Scriptura*,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 23.2 [Summer 2019]: 36).

<sup>52</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 305 (emphasis original); see also p. 231.

<sup>53</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 244.

is in himself. As Joseph Bracken aptly notes in his review of LaCugna's work, "This distinction [between God's *being* and God's *doing*] guarantees that the reality of God will not be absorbed into the reality of human history even when the latter is presented as the progressive self-revelation of the triune God."<sup>54</sup>

Funneling all contemplation about God's nature (*theologia*) through the lens of redemptive history (*oikonomia*) limits theological reflection to only that which can be apprehended through such a vector. Hence, LaCugna's proposal should be understood as a potential, though limited, vector that can offer certain insights into God-world relations and the practical implications of the Trinity in everyday Christian life. So, whereas LaCugna contends that "Trinitarian theology is the language of relationality *par excellence*,"<sup>55</sup> I argue that her construal of relationality, though a soteriological manner of pursuing trinitarian theology, is fraught with certain difficulties.<sup>56</sup>

In the end, LaCugna's social conception of the Trinity lacks persuasive power, thus preventing social trinitarianism from undermining or displacing classical trinitarianism. The classical model, therefore, remains the preferred framework for ongoing theological conversation and construction.<sup>57</sup> To summarize the classical model briefly, the Father is unbegotten

<sup>54</sup> Joseph A. Bracken, review of *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, by Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *Theological Studies* 53.3 (September 1992): 559. Relatedly, Letham writes, "The danger is that of importing modern concepts of personhood into our thinking on the Trinity. Once again, this is a mistake. We need to approach the matter from the other end. Personhood is to be understood (insofar as we can ever understand it) in terms of the way God is three. He is an eternal communion of three *hypostases* in undivided union. He creates human persons" (*The Holy Trinity*, 557, citing Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996], 160).

<sup>55</sup> LaCugna, "Re-Conceiving the Trinity," 13 (emphasis original); see also *God for Us*, foreword, 1, 244.

<sup>56</sup> LaCugna herself recognizes this reality: "The trinitarian model of God-in-relation, while not the equivalent of God's being, is nonetheless the appropriate framework for explicating the Christian's experience of salvation by God through Jesus in the Spirit" ("Re-Conceiving the Trinity," 14). However, her rejection of the distinction between God's inward and outward acts and her hesitance to discuss the nature of God apart from redemptive history should be avoided.

<sup>57</sup> I recognize that proffering negative arguments (i.e., rebutting contrary proposals) without presenting positive arguments (i.e., supporting my own proposal) does not automatically demonstrate the validity of my preferred position. However, taking classical trinitarianism as the long-abiding tenant, my critique of the social model of the Trinity, the theological newcomer, should be sufficient to show that the historic approach cannot be so easily evicted.

or unoriginate (paternity). The Son is eternally generated by the Father (filiation, or eternal generation). The Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from, or is eternally spirated (or breathed) by, the Father and the Son (procession, or passive spiration). Thus, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist as eternal subsisting relations.<sup>58</sup> As Gregg Allison and Andreas Köstenberger clarify, "It is not as though the relations *exist between* the three Persons (we may think of our relationship with our spouse or with one of our friends); rather, the Persons *are* the relations."<sup>59</sup> The subsisting relations reveal the irreversible intratrinitarian *taxis* (or order; Father → Son → Holy Spirit). Further, the *taxis* characterizes not only God's inner life (or inward acts) but also how God acts in the world. All inseparable activity of the triune God is accomplished *from* the Father, *through* the Son, and *by* the Spirit (Father → Son → Holy Spirit →→ creation).<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> For greater discussion on intratrinitarian relations, see Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 255–58; Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 78–102 (esp. 99–102); Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 409–11. For a graphical depiction of the double procession of the Holy Spirit, as well as a defense of the Latin *filioque* addition to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, see Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 237, 258–64. I defend the biblical basis for the double procession of the Holy Spirit in Teer, "As the Father Has Sent Me, Even So I Am Sending You," 541 (esp. 541n21). Finally, for a recent treatment and defense of the *filioque* (from the perspective of the divine missions), see Adonis Vidu, "Filioque and the Order of the Divine Missions," in *Third Person of the Trinity*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders, Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 21–35.

<sup>59</sup> Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 256 (emphasis original). Cf. Torrance, who more extensively explains,

The relations between the divine Persons are not just modes of existence but hypostatic interrelations which belong intrinsically to what Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are coinherently in themselves and in their mutual objective relations with and for one another. These relations subsisting between them are just as substantial as what they are unchangeably in themselves and by themselves. Thus the Father is the Father precisely in his indivisible ontic relation to the Son and Spirit precisely in their indivisible ontic relations to the Father and to One Another. That is to say, the relations between the divine Persons belong to what they are as Persons—they are constitutive onto-relations (Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 157).

<sup>60</sup> The arrow (→) represents movement within the life of God (i.e., *ad intra*), while the double arrow (→→) represents the action of God toward the created order (i.e., *ad extra*). This rendering also appears in Teer, "The Divine Missions and the Mission of the Church," 538.

Though the Trinity is revealed in salvation history, the divine missions—of the Son and the Spirit—proceed from the eternal relations of origin; therefore, God’s *being* must be understood as the metaphysical grounding for God’s *doing*. In a similar manner, the Trinity’s inseparable activity in creation proceeds from the Trinity’s indivisible essence. In other words, the essential unity of the Godhead must be understood as the metaphysical grounding for operational unity of the Godhead.<sup>61</sup> Divine personally differentiated unity is the proper starting place for trinitarian theology and for all derivative theologies. Hence, trinitarian proposals suggesting otherwise cannot depose the classical approach. The doctrine of inseparable operations, as it is naturally entangled with this approach, therefore remains a viable basis for contemporary theological formulation. Such methodological viability furnishes a second strand of evidence that supports the continuing fecundity of the inseparability principle. In the next section, I consider the final strand: the doctrine’s theological coherence.

### The Theological Coherence of Inseparable Operations: Inseparable Operations and Classical Trinitarian Categories

In order to demonstrate the theological soundness of inseparable operations and, thus, the axiom’s fruitfulness for contemporary theology, I must address two concerns: (1) The unity of the Godhead—in nature and in work—seems to undermine personal distinctions among the three persons in creation and redemption.<sup>62</sup> (2) Since the historic Christian tradition generally favors a Christocentric understanding of Scripture and theology, how can such an emphasis square with the inseparability principle? In other words, too much emphasis on one divine person (i.e., the Son)

<sup>61</sup> To say it another way, “It is the one identical essence which is the ontological ground of the doctrine of inseparable operations” (Claunch, “What God Hath Done Together,” 797).

<sup>62</sup> This question is not arbitrary. Spence, in his discussion concerning John Owen’s argument (in *Pneumatologia*, 67) that the Holy Spirit is a distinct divine person due to his “peculiar subsistence” in the Godhead, asks, “But does not an unqualified doctrine of the indivisibility of God’s external activity . . . preclude such an argument? How can an undivided activity demonstrate distinct persons?” (*Incarnation and Inspiration*, 129–30). LaCugna articulates a similar critique: “Once it is assumed that the Trinity is present in every instance where Scripture refers to God, and once the axiom *opera ad extra* is in place, no longer, it seems, is there any need for the plurality of divine persons *in the economy*. At least it is no longer possible to single out any one person in relation to a particular activity” (*God for Us*, 99; emphasis original).

seems to undercut the one indivisible work of the triune God and diminish the personalizing properties of the other divine persons. I explore this latter concern with respect to the Holy Spirit in particular due to the co-extensive nature of the divine missions (i.e., incarnation [Son] and indwelling [Spirit]).<sup>63</sup>

The solution to these apparent difficulties comes by cohering—or simultaneously affirming—the doctrine of inseparable operations and the related doctrine of distinct personal appropriations. This coherence comes into play with respect to one of the most common objections to inseparable operations: only the Son became incarnate, or the incarnation is a peculiar work of the Son, not a common operation of the Three. Kyle Claunch, Tyler Wittman, and Adonis Vidu all argue convincingly against this objection by demonstrating the congruity between inseparable operations and distinct personal appropriations, focusing primarily on John Owen’s articulation of the two doctrines in accord with the Augustinian tradition.<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, I do not recapitulate their arguments; instead, I briefly summarize their conclusions and then utilize their solutions in service of my present research concern.

According to Wittman, “Owen explicitly argues [that] the Son alone became incarnate by appealing to the order of subsistence.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Owen himself says, “But as to the manner of subsistence [in the divine essence], there is distinction, relation, and order between and among [the divine persons]; and hence there is no divine work but is distinctly assigned unto each person, and eminently unto one.”<sup>66</sup> Relatedly, though concerning the language of “principle” and “subject,” Claunch avers,

Neither Augustine nor Owen makes this distinction explicit, but

<sup>63</sup> I explore how a Christocentric emphasis corresponds with the person of God the Father in Torey J. S. Teer, “Inseparable Operations, Trinitarian Missions and the Necessity of a Christological Pneumatology,” *JTS* 72.1 (April 2021).

<sup>64</sup> Claunch, “What God Hath Done Together”; Wittman, “The End of the Incarnation”; Vidu, “Inseparable Operations and the Incarnation.” Wittman says it best: “Far from innovating or weakening the received grammar of trinitarian theology, Owen is in basic continuity with the Augustinian tradition as it came through Aquinas and was articulated by Reformed Orthodoxy” (“The End of the Incarnation,” 298).

<sup>65</sup> Wittman, “The End of the Incarnation,” 297. Said another way, “[Owen] affirms the traditional use of appropriations to ascribe particular works distinctly to the Father, Son and Spirit. Such distinctions arise because each person acts in accordance with the order of their subsistence” (293).

<sup>66</sup> Owen, *Pneumatologia*, 93. Later, Owen explains, “The only singular immediate *act* of the person of the Son on the human nature was the assumption of it into *subsistence* with himself” (160; emphasis original).



they utilize it in their discourse. It is the distinction between the *principle* of divine action and the *subject* of divine action. The principle of all divine action is the one undivided essence [*principium*, or “source or origin”]. The subject of divine action is either Father, Son, or Holy Spirit... For Owen, the Son is the unique *subject* of the assumption of the human nature. It is by the observance of this distinction between the *principle* of divine action—the one divine essence—and the subject of divine action—one of the divine persons—that the coherence of the doctrines of inseparable operations and distinct personal appropriations is maintained.<sup>67</sup>

It is exactly the harmonization of inseparable operations and appropriations that confirms the theological integrity of the inseparability principle. I return to this point momentarily, but first I must take up the language of *terminus* in relation to the order of subsistence within the Godhead (i.e., the eternal processions) and the (temporal) missions of the Son and the Spirit.

Allison and Köstenberger offer a helpful analysis of these subjects: “If we conceptualize (1) the trinitarian processions as the inner life and eternal relations of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and (2) the trinitarian missions as the external activity and temporal works of the triune God, then we can consider (3) the trinitarian missions to be the trinitarian processions turned outside and in time.”<sup>68</sup> In addition, the authors more concretely explain,

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<sup>67</sup> Claunch, “What God Hath Done Together,” 797–98. Concerning Owen’s use of *terminus* language (in *Christologia*, vol. 1 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Gould [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965], 225), Wittman writes, “Owen’s phrase ‘term of assumption’ immediately recalls Aquinas’s language (*terminum assumptionis*) and is a clear affirmation of the *terminus operationis* principle: certain triune works *ad extra* terminate on one person. The Son’s assumption of the human nature is the *terminus*, or end, of the undivided trinitarian act of the incarnation” (“The End of the Incarnation,” 298). See also p. 295, where Wittman, vis-à-vis Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*, 3a.3.4), states that “this distinction between the divine nature as *principium* and the divine person as *terminus* enables Aquinas to uphold both the unity of the divine nature and the distinction of the divine persons in the incarnation.” Vidu essentially follows Wittman’s conclusions (Vidu, “Inseparable Operations and the Incarnation,” 118–19). However, Vidu offers a valuable clarification pertaining to the present discussion: “I am suggesting that the language of appropriation and of terminus are ... interchangeable. An action is appropriated to one divine person if that action terminates in that person. Conversely, an action which is appropriated to a person (in view of an affinity between that person’s *propria* and the created effect) is also said to terminate in that person” (115n18).

<sup>68</sup> Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 275–76.

The temporal missions of the Son and the Spirit express and are reflective of their eternal processions: There is an appropriateness to the incarnation and salvation as the particular mission of the Son as eternally generated by the Father. And there is an appropriateness to the outpouring and indwelling as the particular mission of the Holy Spirit as eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.<sup>69</sup>

In connecting the appropriations of various operations to one of the divine persons with the eternal relations of the Three, Allison and Köstenberger introduce the language of “termination” into their argument: “The notion of termination is that a work that is appropriated to one of the three Persons terminates in that Person in the sense of the goal or end of that work.”<sup>70</sup> In doing so, they rely almost entirely on Vidu’s extensive treatment of *terminus*.<sup>71</sup> In Vidu’s own words,

The terminus is the divine person at the far end of a divine agential chain... In this sense of the notion, it is the Holy Spirit that seems to invariably serve as the terminus of divine actions, since he is the perfecting cause, in addition to the originating (or efficient) cause (Father) and “moulding” (or formal) cause (Son). As perfecting cause, the Spirit applies the agency of the three persons, and is thus in a sense, most proximal to its terminus.<sup>72</sup>

Writing on pneumatology, Allison and Köstenberger then advance their argument to an especial discussion of the three particular divine works that terminate in—or are appropriated to—the Holy Spirit: speaking (related to revelation); creating, recreating, and perfecting (related to creation and redemption); and filling with the presence of the triune God.<sup>73</sup> I return to these “peculiar” works of the Spirit shortly in relation to the second concern raised above.

Holding inseparable operations and distinct personal appropriations in congruity, the treatment above has served to demonstrate that a particular act appropriated to one person of the Godhead is “simultaneously the unique act of the one person and the common act of all three.”<sup>74</sup> Consequently, the two above-mentioned concerns regarding the inseparability

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<sup>69</sup> Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 276–77; see also 282–83.

<sup>70</sup> Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 282–83.

<sup>71</sup> Allison and Köstenberger (*The Holy Spirit*, 283) cite Vidu (“Inseparable Operations and the Incarnation,” 115n18).

<sup>72</sup> Vidu, “Inseparable Operations and the Incarnation,” 115.

<sup>73</sup> Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 284.

<sup>74</sup> Claunch, “What God Hath Done Together,” 797 (original emphasis removed).

principle are unsustainable. First, the unity of the Godhead—in nature and in work—does not undermine the distinctiveness of each person within the Godhead because “the distinct hypostatic identity of the three persons in the Godhead ... entails the observable distinction between the actions of the three persons in the economy of salvation.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, the language of, and distinction between, (eternal) processions and (temporal) missions is helpful indeed. As Matthew Levering writes, “The processions enable us to distinguish the persons without eviscerating the divine unity, while the missions add ‘a specific relationship to the creature’ without conflating the economy of salvation with the intratrinitarian life.”<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Claunch, “What God Hath Done Together,” 790n39. Here, Claunch is summarizing Augustine’s view on the relationship of the persons *ad intra* versus their actions *ad extra*, which he concludes is the same position appropriated by John Owen and, ultimately, the position that best aligns with historic orthodoxy. More comprehensively (and more relevant to my present argument), Claunch details,

For Augustine, the distinct actions of divine persons in the world *reveal* the eternal intra-Trinitarian order of subsistence of the three divine persons.... Each action performed distinctively by each divine person is appropriate only to that person as a revelation of the eternal and irreversible *taxis* present in the Godhead.... When one divine person acts in the economy of salvation (e.g. the Son assuming a human nature), he acts by the one power of the one divine substance, shared equally by the three persons, making the act of the one person an act of all three. The act is appropriated to one person as distinct from the other two *ad extra* because there is a fixed order of subsistence *ad intra*, which God reveals by his actions in the world (“What God Hath Done Together,” 791; emphasis original).

<sup>76</sup> Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit: Love and Gift in the Trinity and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 169, quoting Bruce D. Marshall, “The Unity of the Triune God: Reviving an Ancient Question,” *The Thomist* 74 (2010): 8. This point also rebuffs LaCugna’s (mis)understanding of the relationship between *theologia* and *oikonomia*. Relatedly, Vidu instructs,

While the common actions of the Trinity are “appropriated” to this or that divine person, the missions are proper and not so appropriated. A mission, Aquinas shows, is nothing but a relationship to a created term added to a procession. As Neil Ormerod puts it, “The inner relatedness of the divine persons becomes the basis whereby a contingent created reality or temporal effect can become a term for the procession.” ... The created effects are what they are precisely because of the inner-relatedness of the Trinity, and thereby because of the unique personal identity of each of the persons.... There is a very real sense, then, in

Second, a Christological emphasis vis-à-vis Scripture and theology does not conflict with inseparable operations because the one indivisible work of the triune God (creation-redemption-consummation) centers upon the Son, especially as seen in the divine missions.<sup>77</sup> While there are two temporal missions, the mission of the Son (reflective of his eternal generation by the Father) and the mission of the Spirit (reflective of his eternal spiration by the Father and the Son), due to the inseparable operations of the Trinity, the two missions are coextensive with each other and, thus, inextricably linked.<sup>78</sup> Here, Allison and Köstenberger’s discussion of the divine works that terminate in the Holy Spirit comes into play. Concerning the Spirit’s role in recreating (i.e., the application of salvation), “all of the benefits of Jesus Christ come to Christians and the church through the Holy Spirit, who unites us to Christ and his saving work.”<sup>79</sup>

which the effects truly reveal the distinctiveness of the persons (“Inseparable Operations and the Incarnation,” 123; quotation from Neil Ormerod, “The Metaphysics of Holiness: Created Participation in the Divine Nature,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 79.1 [2014]: 68–82).

<sup>77</sup> Indeed, as Michael J. Svelg notes, “Orthodoxy continually points us to the person and work of Christ in his first and second coming as the central theme of the Bible, theology, Christian life, and all reality. [Furthermore,] Orthodoxy reminds us of the overarching biblical narrative of creation, redemption, and ultimate restoration effected by the harmonious work of the triune God: *from* the Father, *through* the Son, and *by* the Holy Spirit” (*RetroChristianity: Reclaiming the Forgotten Faith* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 93; emphasis original). See pp. 87–105 for a more in-depth survey of the historical Christocentricity of the Christian faith. See also Glenn R. Kreider and Michael J. Svelg, *A Practical Primer on Theological Method: Table Manners for Discussing God, His Works, and His Ways* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 76–81.

<sup>78</sup> Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 275; Christopher R. J. Holmes, *The Holy Spirit*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 21; Stephen R. Holmes, “Trinitarian Action and Inseparable Operations: Some Historical and Dogmatic Reflections,” in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 71–74.

<sup>79</sup> Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 290. Consistent with this point, the authors affirm

the Holy Spirit’s eternal relation of procession from the Father and the Son, expressed correspondingly in the mission of the Spirit (beginning with his outpouring on Pentecost) and characterized by temporal fulfillment (of the Father’s will *centered on the gospel of the Son*). On this latter

Of course, the proclamation and consummation of the Son's work—that is, the gospel—is the very will of the Father (John 5:19; 6:38).

Furthermore, a Christological emphasis, in accord with the inseparability principle, does not detract from the distinct hypostatic identity of the other divine persons because all divine action takes place according to the *taxis* (Father → Son → Holy Spirit →→ creation). In particular, such an emphasis does not diminish the person and work of the Holy Spirit because the one work of the Godhead terminates and finds its completion in the Spirit. Simplistically speaking, the Father sends the Son, Christ himself accomplishes redemption, and the Holy Spirit applies the benefits of redemption to the body of Christ, the church, thus making it/them the temple of the Spirit.<sup>80</sup> As the perfecting cause of all divine works, the Holy Spirit has an essential—not diminished or insignificant—role in those works (see John 16:13–15).<sup>81</sup> In alignment with Allison and Köstenberger's treatment of the divine works that terminate in the Spirit, it is indeed through the continual agency of the Holy Spirit that “the triune God dwells in his people.”<sup>82</sup> Hence, theology featuring the inseparability principle and the classical Christocentric emphasis immediately and continually acknowledges the Spirit's ongoing life-giving work in the world

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point, Owen offered, “The Holy Ghost doth immediately work and effect whatever was to be done in reference unto the person of the Son or the sons of men, for the perfecting and accomplishment of the Father's counsel and the Son's work, in an especial application of both unto their especial effects and ends” (277n8; emphasis added; quotation from Owen, *Pneumatologia*, 159).

<sup>80</sup> Stephen Holmes summarizes this point by borrowing from “Basil's ordering”: “The single work of salvation was initiated by the Father, carried forth by the mission—and the passion—of the Son, and is being brought to perfection by the mission of the Spirit. In saying this, however, we have to remain committed to the notion that this is one single activity, an inseparable operation” (“Trinitarian Action and Inseparable Operations,” 74). For an example of “Basil's ordering” (or *taxis*), see Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 1.3 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 8:3). For more on the Spirit as the perfecter of all divine works, see Torey J. S. Teer, “The Perfecter of All Divine Acts: Inseparable Operations, the Holy Spirit, and the Providence of God,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 178.707 (July–September 2020).

<sup>81</sup> Indeed, recalling Claunch's discussion of Augustine, Owen, and principle-subject language, while the undivided essence of the Godhead is the principle of all divine works, the Holy Spirit is the unique subject of all the works appropriated to him.

<sup>82</sup> Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 292; cf. Michael S. Horton, *Rediscovering the Holy Spirit: God's Perfecting Presence in Creation, Redemption, and Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 28; Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Smith (New York: Crossroad/Herder & Herder, 2015), 2:101.

and—especially—in the life of the church.

In summary, the doctrine of inseparable operations is theologically coherent and, as such, defensible against actual and potential concerns to the contrary. The axiom, in accord with the classical approach to trinitarianism, does not muddle the personal distinctions among the three divine persons in their united work. The indivisible activity of the Godhead is personally differentiated just as the indivisible essence of the Godhead is personally differentiated (recall eternal subsisting relations). Further, a Christ-centered understanding of Scripture and theology, in keeping with the historic Christian tradition, accords with the inseparability principle because every undivided act of the Trinity, recalling Gregory of Nyssa, “has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son [the one upon whom all divine activity *centers*], and is perfected in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>83</sup> So stands the third and final strand of evidence demonstrating the value of inseparable operations for ongoing theological endeavors.

### Conclusion

Upon final evaluation, is the doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity (*opera trinitis ad extra indivisa sunt*) an outdated relic irrelevant for contemporary pursuits in Christian theology? Far from it! The inseparability rule is a fecund theological tool that accords with classical trinitarian categories and emphases. Showing the doctrine to be so was the goal of this essay.

By first surveying the pro-Nicene theological consensus concerning inseparable operations and then critiquing LaCugna's social model of the Trinity, I validated the historical precedence of the axiom and preserved classical trinitarianism as the preferred framework for understanding intratrinitarian and God-world relations. And by utilizing contemporary arguments in support of inseparable operations, I confirmed that the axiom harmonizes with distinct personal appropriations and a Christocentric understanding of Scripture and theology. Hence, the inseparability principle possesses historical merit, methodological viability, and theological soundness.

This three-stranded evidentiary cord thus supports the ongoing fecundity of inseparable operations for theological construction. Consequently, it has relevance and explanatory power for making sense of a whole host of modern issues, such as the full divinity of both the Son and the Spirit, the Son and the Spirit's participation in all divine activity (especially creation), the incarnation of the Son alone, the agency of both the Son and the Spirit in the life of Christ, Jesus's cry of dereliction on the cross, the

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<sup>83</sup> Gregory, *Not Three Gods* (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 5:334).

inhabitation of the Father and the Son in the Spirit's indwelling of believers, and the Spirit's activity in world religions. Though the tug-of-war over the viability of inseparable operations may continue, I hope this article has added to the persuasive power needed to tip the balance in favor of classical trinitarian categories.