

The Surprise Ending: An Aspect of the Eschatology and Pneumatology of Robert Jenson

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Introduction

Eschatology runs as a persistent theme throughout Robert Jenson's two volume systematic theology¹. He sets out to describe the last things that Christians can look forward to, the future that God has in store for the redeemed. But as he does so he makes a remarkable claim – that this future will be a surprise, not just for human beings, but also for God. He goes on to specify who will be surprising whom within the life of the Trinity. As we shall see God the Father trusts the Holy Spirit so much that he has mandated him to complete and perfect this fulfilled future in such a way as to surprise him also. He does not require a briefing or an outline plan as to how that will come about, and what it will consist of. The Holy Spirit's unique role is to bring about this unpredictable outcome in an unsupervised manner.

Robert Jenson would identify himself as one of the promoters and advocates of the revival of Trinitarian theology in the 20th century. Herein lies the central paradox of Jenson's unique combination of pneumatology and eschatology, for all classical Trinitarian theologies assume a continuous exchange of love and knowledge between the Triune persons – because the Triune persons are consubstantial they are united in one will. To put it simply, they keep each other informed about all essential matters, especially those relating to human salvation history. How then can the third of the Triune persons be permitted to keep the other two in the dark about how he intends to round off the story of salvation? This is the central issue addressed in this thesis.

Bultmann and the Future

¹ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: Volume 2 The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 311. [Hereafter expressed as *ST*]

Jenson's concern and interest in a describable future began early on in his career as a theologian. It was when he was at seminary in America that he became fascinated with the theology of Rudolf Bultmann, who called God *die Ungesicherheit der Zukunft*, which literally translates as, "The future one who is without history." Bultmann further described faith as "openness to the future." Jenson kept turning this definition over in his mind as he prepared to set off for doctoral studies at Heidelberg. The question that interested him was "Which future?" To this the only possible Bultmannian answer was, "the future of being open to the future." The prospect that this infinite regress opened up was unattractive, and so Jenson set out to address the issue of this contentless eschatology, to as he puts it, "discover a promised future that could be described."² So Robert Jenson's eschatology is based around an attempt to flesh out the promises of the Triune God, to say what can be said of the destiny of the world of creatures according to the future intentions of this God.

What to Expect at the End

In his *Systematics* Jenson specifies some of what can be expected as God rings down the curtain on the human story. The first event of the Second Coming will be Jesus bringing together the Church and Torah observant Judaism in such a way as to overcome the present post resurrection detour, which has permitted the independent existence of these two faith communities. This is Jenson's brilliant solution to the problem of supersessionism. The Church as it exists now is deficient in that it lacks the Jewish membership that was the central recruiting agenda of Jesus' earthly ministry. Torah observant Judaism in its present configuration is deficient in that it lacks the Gentiles whom it was supposed to incorporate in its generous embrace. Conventional Jewish apocalyptic expectation in the time of Jesus was that if the Messiah had come, and had been done to death, then this would set off the eschatological trip

² E mail Robert Jenson to Hugh Bowron 10.06.04

wire that would end human history, and inaugurate the last judgement. But in a stunning improvisational response to the apparent failure of Jesus' mission, God held back the eschatological trip wire in order to permit a further patient and generous time of salvation opportunity.

Furthermore, he permits the two deficient salvation communities of Church and Torah observant Judaism to do their independent and divinely mandated work in this present age. But the opening move of the return of Jesus in glory will be to end the eschatological detour, and to reunite these two regrettably divided faith communities into the one body congruent with his final designs. We shall be hearing more about this completed salvation community in the discussion of the *totus Christus*.

Jenson has some further information to offer about the roll out of Heavenly consequences at the End. All causes and controversies will be decided and settled by the supreme Judge because, "When history is taken into the Kingdom, all its accumulated mutual wrongs must be rectified."³ Death will be abolished.⁴ Human beings will not be able to sin any more, since they will be united to Christ, and will be freed from the entanglements of the *libido dominandi* of this world.⁵

And there will be three controls on the promised future. First, it must include the Trinity.⁶ Second, it will be a polity, since this achieved outcome will be a political achievement described in political metaphors such as the "Kingdom."⁷ Third, its shape and content cannot contradict the Ten Commandments, since they are God's will for the community, and its blessedness is defined by the moral will of the Lord.⁸

³ ST 2: 325.

⁴ ST 2: 330.

⁵ ST 2: 332.

⁶ ST 2: 317.

⁷ ST 2: 318.

⁸ Ibid.

The fate of the cosmos, the destiny of matter, and the style and content of human embodiment as risen, spiritual creatures also receive attention. The universe will continue to be necessary “after the End” as “the stage for the fulfilment of that story” (of God with his people), but with the vital difference that it will no longer be only background scenery for salvation history, but will then have the redeemed as vitally involved in thinking the movements of matter and energy since they will be communal agents in the triune life, given their close identification with the completed, collective Christ. The very stuff of the new creation will have a raised and elevated quality. Here Jenson quotes Isaac Dorner with approval to describe this change, “Matter will have exchanged its darkness, hardness, heaviness, immobility and impenetrableness for clearness, radiance, elasticity and transparency.”⁹ And the appearance of new spiritual bodies of the redeemed will express their special spiritual character; one will be able to read their Kingdom identity as it were by their appearance. Also sexual differentiation will continue.

But the main content of the predictable future concerns the *totus Christus*, a concept Jenson sources from Augustine, in which he proposes that in the completed process of human salvation all Christians will form the Body of Christ as a collective entity, while becoming themselves in the truest sense of Christian identity and individuality, with Christ as their head and organising principle. Jenson builds on and develops this concept to make it his central proposal for the content of the fulfilled future. What awaits the redeemed in the life of the world to come is an intensely Christic communal life in which, as they turn to one another and intend one another, they form the *totus Christus*, becoming the members of that body of which he is the head.¹⁰ In other words they will leave behind the hyper tropic individualism of fallen

⁹ Isaac Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, tr. Alfred cave, J.S. Banks (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1890), 429. Quoted in *ST 2*: 351.

¹⁰ *ST 2*: 339-340.

existence to such an extent that they will become the communal Christ, while at the same time becoming intensely themselves.

And that in turn means that deification will be the destiny of the redeemed. Here prizes are awarded to East and West. Gregory Palamas was right to say that the redeemed will be rendered transparent and translucent by uncreated light.¹¹ Whereas Aquinas got it right contra Palamas that the redeemed will be able to contemplate the vision of God, to see God directly, because their ontological elevation will heal and enhance their minds sufficiently to be able to do this, as deification and beatific vision coincide.¹² We can note also that cosmic temporality will become congruent with the Trinity's temporality in such a way that the redeemed will no longer suffer the alienating effects of past, present and future being divided from each other. No longer will the past be fixed and dead, the future threatening, and the fleeting present uncontrollable.¹³

But it is just at this point that one of the highly unusual features of Jenson's proposal comes into view. He believes that the formation of the *totus Christus* will be the completion of Christ's resurrection – that his resurrection is an event still in process, and that its final outworking will be to some extent a surprise for him. In other words, Christ exists in four successive modalities – as an incognito subtle background influence in the prior history and Scriptures of his people, in the biological form of existence in which he was known in the incarnation, in his present Lordship of the Church as powerful indwelling presence, a theme to be explored in depth in chapter two, and in the Church's final form as *totus Christus* in which Christians as the body of Christ become him in a highly collective modality of existence, while remaining themselves, with Christ as their head and source of identity. What we can notice here is that the fully developed and deployed *totus Christus* is

¹¹ ST 2: 342.

¹² ST 2: 344.

¹³ ST 2: 345-6.

something that will happen to him in the future as much as it will to us. He has changes in store as well. And we are left wondering to what extent Christ was a pre-existent reality in this scheme of things, an issue for later exploration in this thesis.

There has been much debate on this score, an issue that will be addressed below in chapter Three. In brief, Jenson believes that Christ existed as latent potentiality within the narrative pattern of Old Testament salvation history. In particular, he can be located within the servant songs of Isaiah, for as suffering servant he both embodies his people Israel as a representative person, represents them before God as priestly figure, and prefigures the role he will take up from the womb of the Virgin Mary. This of course begs the question whether Christ exists in a purely literary Scriptural mode in this phase of his existence. It also makes clear why protology is a major issue in this thesis.

The pre-existence of Christ is a considerable problem for Jenson because he is so opposed to any protological explanation for the being and doctrine of God, and of the origins of the Triune persons, that he declares that Christ enters the womb of the Virgin Mary from the future, because that is where God dwells. He believes in the doctrine of election, that Christ elected to be with and to deliver sinful humanity from the very beginning, or rather one should say from the future. He makes his electing decision from the future, because that is where he comes from; it is the only dimension he fully dwells, apart from the Church, in which he dwells by anticipation.

The Antinomy of Hope

The theme of developments in the life of God is one we will return to at the end of the introduction. For now we note a paradox and a difficulty that Jenson's proposal labours under. The more he spells out the content of the fulfilled future the more he potentially undermines what is a highly

developed theology of hope. This is what he calls “the antinomy of hope,” for it revolves around the reality that, “Hope ceases when what is hoped for arrives.”¹⁴ The more the future agendas of the Kingdom are realised the more the Kingdom slips through one’s fingers as it moves from dynamic, developing, attracting goals to static, timeless, de-energised and limited reality. It is just at this point that we see why the notion of surprise is an essential and internal necessity of Jenson’s theology. The more the content of the fulfilled future is spelt out the less it comes to seem like the product of the inexhaustible vitality of such an eventful God.

Surprise is also essential because it is part and parcel of his definition of personality, particularly the personality and character of God. The resurrection was a surprising outcome, and its essential meaning and results for the redeemed are as follows: “The decisive difference between a living person and a dead one is that the former can surprise us as the latter cannot...That Jesus lives means that his love, perfected at the cross, is now active to surprise us...he wills our good in a freedom beyond our predicting.”¹⁵

Not only is the art of surprising human beings what Jesus and the Holy Spirit do supremely well, but also it is an essential ingredient of what love is because, “it is the very substance of love to be full of surprises for the loved one. For to love is to fully affirm the freedom of the loved one; it is to be committed to respond to this freedom with good, whatever the loved one does in it. So long as I live I cannot bind in advance what I will do with my freedom; therefore neither can I know in advance what my lover will do for me.”¹⁶ In other words, the antinomy of freedom is resolved in love because what love requires is a kind of perpetual revolution in relational

¹⁴ ST 1: 198.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

developments, a continual forward teleological momentum of unfolding relational consequences.

What is being offered here is a theory of human relationships, and of the asymmetric relationship between God and human beings that is perhaps rather one sided. For while relationships in both these dimensions can thrive on challenge, novelty and spontaneity to refresh and stimulate the wellsprings of intimacy, it can also be argued that they require in equal measure stability, continuity, predictability and reliability to engender trust and loyalty. Classical Christian theologies of eternal life have oscillated between the Origenist view of heaven as a kind of advanced research institute of continual discovery, and the Thomist preference for contemplative vision of the being of God. Jenson appears to have come down decisively on the Origenist side of the line in a view of Divine/human relationships that is both dynamic, teleological, and potentially exhausting for its human participants. This take on Divine/human relationships in the time before the *Parousia* privileges novelty and spontaneity over the ordinary and the quotidian. Yet in many ways the normal and the quotidian are the arenas of human experience where the outworking of Divine grace and human salvation mostly happen.

Dramatic Causality

A major component of Jenson's stress on the event of surprise in his eschatology comes from his interest in the theory of dramatic causality. Jenson claims Aristotle as a support for his enlisting of the theory of dramatic causality, which lays down the requirements of a satisfying story. It must draw together the narrative threads into a suspenseful and surprising ending that at the same time leads the reader or theatregoer to conclude that the story couldn't have concluded any other way. In like manner the Holy Spirit will end the human story of salvation and bring the creation to its climax in a way that will surprise everyone, while at the same time leaving them deeply

satisfied that the way in which it happened was inevitable, and true to the characters and the plot line. Yet at no point does he offer any exegetical support from Scripture for such a move.

Did Aristotle actually say this in the *Poetics*? A close reading of the *Poetics* does not reveal any reference to this theory. Chapter nine discusses the elements of probability and necessity in a satisfactory and credible plot. Incidents should be arranged in such a way as to support the unifying themes of the drama.¹⁷ Chapter ten outlines the difference between simple and complex plots, gives preference to complex plots, and defines them as including reversal and recognition. Chapter eleven defines the terms reversal and recognition. Reversal “is a change of fortune in the action of the play to the opposite state of affairs,” and recognition is “a change of fortune from ignorance to knowledge.”¹⁸ That is about as close as the *Poetics* gets to any discussion of dramatic causality.

The other puzzling feature of the reference to Aristotle as a supporting authority is that all the plays which he discussed in that volume were tragedies whose plot lines were well known to their audiences, at least to the elite of Athenian society – there were no surprises for those who watched them. A Greek tragedy is not a whodunit. The audience is not tantalised by the rising tension and mounting curiosity as to how the author will resolve the drama. Its aim is to achieve catharsis through pity and fear that will clarify the incidents of the play, and lead to understanding through emotional expansion.

But it does not matter that Aristotle has little to offer Jenson’s interest in the biggest surprise ending of them all, because this theme proceeds from the

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics: A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature*, Translation by Leon Golden, Commentary by O. B. Hardison, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968), 155.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

internal necessities of his theology, and principally from his objection to the doctrine of God having any metaphysical content. In what is one of his most insistent themes he claims that the theologians of the Patristic era did Christian theology a major disservice by importing Greek metaphysics into the doctrine of God, thus falling prey to the Greek pre-occupation with saving God from the attrition and ravages of time, with the knock on consequence of promoting a God who is metaphysically frozen, lacking in eventfulness and vitality.

As he puts it, "This being of God is not a something, however rarefied or immaterial, but a going-on, a sequentially palpable event, like a kiss or a train wreck."¹⁹ So building on what he perceives to be the Cappadocian schema, the Father is the past or the origins of our salvation, the Son is the present dimension of it, and the Holy Spirit is the future of our salvation in which it will be completed and perfected. Such a God is known and defined by what he does, by the crucial events that flow from his saving activities. To ask the question who is God is to receive the answer, "Whoever rescued Israel from Egypt, and whoever raised Jesus from the dead."²⁰

Chapter one will assess Jenson's claim that God is "an event, a person, a decision, a conversation," and will question whether Gregory of Nyssa can be legitimately claimed as the source of a God who can be described by predicates and not by attributes, who has no metaphysical content in his style of being, and whose mode of existence proceeds from eschatology and not protology. This appears to run counter to the general assessment of Gregory of Nyssa, and rests on the slender foundation of one cited authority.²¹ It begs the question whether this is a fair description of Greek metaphysics. It also

¹⁹ ST 1: 214.

²⁰ ST 1: 44.

²¹ Ekkehard Muhlenberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966).

rides roughshod over the tradition that the three persons in one God are described by relations of origin.

The chapter will also deal with the probability that, while Gregory reckons there to have been a progressive revelation of God as Trinity, he does not assume that this means that there is a sequential replacement of one divine person's activity by another. Since Jenson believes that God has no essence, no metaphysical substance – that he is all eventfulness – then one is left wondering if for him the divine persons do deploy themselves in sequential array? Why do the triune persons act as they do, why do they deploy themselves as they do. The tradition has said that this is why metaphysics is required in the doctrine of God. Jenson would deny that he is modalist in his Trinitarian theology, but the possibility that this is in fact the case will need to be investigated at some depth in chapter one.

There is another problem following on from Jenson's doctrine of God that will require investigation. What exactly is it that the redeemed human creature will participate in? The problem comes from Jenson's refusal to allow any metaphysical content or description of the Christian God. Hans Urs Von Balthasar got to the heart of the matter when he wrote, "The real "last thing" is the triune life of God disclosed in Jesus Christ...And what is this but Being itself? For apart from Being there is "only nothing," while within it there is that mysterious vitality disclosed through Christological revelation, so that everything that comes from absolute Being must bear its seal, with revelation giving us access to the fount of God's life." ²² In other words, if God is all eventfulness and happening but no being, then there is no being for humans to participate in because apart from being there is nothing. What the Bible speaks of as *kabod*/glory and *shekinah*/presence is what metaphysics speaks of as being, and these shimmering depths of being are what surrounds God, and

²² Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama Theological Dramatic Theory 5: The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 57.

it is this quality of being which we enter as we are drawn into the Triune life, which is what heaven consists of. Furthermore, being denotes relations of origin amongst the persons. Chapters two and three will address this issue further.

Chapter two will consider Jenson's ecclesiology and Christology, with a particular focus in the latter section on Jenson's rejection of Divine impassibility, and the follow on difficulties that this creates for his proposals. This thesis will argue in Chapter two that Jenson has done the Patristic writers a disservice in this analysis, particularly Cyril of Alexandria, whose single subject Christology he claims as his own. Had he gone right through in his analysis of the *communicatio idiomatum* he would have come to understand that Cyril believes Christ experienced human emotions divinely, and thus opens the way for a deeper understanding of what a healed and elevated human affectivity will look like in the life of the world to come.

Chapter three will address an Hegelian theme in that Jenson uses his take on subject/object relations to posit that the Father and the Son are an opposed duo in a tension ridden relationship that requires the Holy Spirit to resolve and harmonise their relationship, by interpreting them each to the other, and by freeing them to be what they wish to be for one another. This is quite a contrast to the classical Trinitarian take on the relationship of love, obedience and blessing that is supposed to characterise the Father/Son relationship, and the Holy Spirit as overflowing surplus and abundance of their mutual love. In so doing Jenson appears to have given the Holy Spirit a privileged priority within the Triune *perichoresis*, which also hints at his *proprium* as architect of the End. We can note here how far this is from Augustine's notion of the Spirit's *proprium* as flowing from the Father and the Son.

Chapter three is an assessment of Jenson's pneumatology, what Scott Swain calls, "the freedom of the Spirit, who is the Lord of possibility"²³ How and why is the Holy Spirit the time Lord of the future, who can go about his business of writing the final chapter of the human story in an unedited manner? In his attempts to give the doctrine of the Spirit a greater density than western theology has permitted, has he over-privileged the third person of the Trinity? Why does it matter so much that he will be full of surprises?

But what is of even greater interest to the subject matter of this thesis are the considerable problems Jenson's take on Divine impassibility gets him into around the issue of the possible contents of the future fulfilled world of the Kingdom. If the God who is without analogical interval has vacuumed up human history, how can he shake off the instances of radical evil occurring within it, such as the holocaust, in the future roll out of the new heavens and earth, if these events have lodged themselves within his being? Jenson assures us that sin, suffering, evil and death will be abolished in the future world of the fulfilled Kingdom. It is not clear how this can be accomplished if God has not put some distance between his inner being and events of radical evil within history. To put it another way, when you have opened God up to human history by abandoning the notion of Divine impassibility there are some unfortunate flow on effects on the futurity of God, and within the content of eschatological fulfilment. Chapter four will attempt to wrestle this issue to the ground.

The conclusion of the thesis will address the strangest and most potentially disturbing possibility flowing from the internal necessities of Jenson's pneumatology and eschatology. On the face of it, Jenson appears to think that the End, the fulfilment of the human story in the formation of the collective

²³ Scott R. Swain, *The God of the Gospel: Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2013), 139.

Christ, the *totus Christus*, will also be an event in the life of God, in other words a development in the style and content of the unfolding life of the Trinity. We have noted before that the formation of the *totus Christus* will be the completion of Christ's resurrection – his resurrection is an event still in process, its final outworking will be to some extent a surprise for him. Will it also be the catalyst of change in the life of God?

Jenson is an admirer of some aspects of Hegel's thinking on religion. Chapter three will acquit Jenson of the possible charge that he has incorporated Hegel's notion of God as the World Spirit who evolves within and because of human history. But the conclusion must address the possibility that Jenson's metaphysically drained God will be changed by the style and content of the End.

The conclusion will also consider whether Jenson has delivered a content filled eschatology, a key objective of his proposals. It will make a judgement about the effectiveness and credibility of his pneumatology. Above all it will assess his doctrine of God. Can Jenson's eschatological proposals stand in the light of his conviction that God is without any metaphysical content to his being, that the Trinity is without any immanent inner life, that God is not wholly other but is rather one who is with us completely in the narrative of the gospel? Stephen Holmes sums up Jenson's doctrine of God in these brilliant sentences:

Barth's denial of a *Logos Asarkos*, Rahner's insistence on the identity of the immanent Trinity with the economic Trinity, and Pannenberg's and Moltmann's desire to see God's life as open to the gospel history, all reach their most extreme, and most coherent, expression in Jenson's theology. God is the gospel history; the Jewish man Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity; the eternal generation of the Son is the event of the incarnation. The triune God of history is the history of God. Jenson's greatness – and in my estimation he is one of the greatest theologians working today – is that he sees with astonishing clarity just how thoroughly classical theology will have to be revised if "Rahner's rule" is to be taken seriously, and does not at any point

shrink from the revision, because he believes that to speak faithfully of the gospel, this revision is necessary.²⁴

The conclusion must decide whether such a revision removes from God the capacity to carry out the eschatological proposals that are central to Jenson's *Systematics*.

²⁴ Stephen R Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: the Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic 2012), 24.

Chapter 1

What Kind of a God?

God is an event, a person, a decision, a conversation

For Robert Jenson there is no prior actuality in God – God never was in the past – and it is not possible to consider or discuss the being of God, since God is eventfulness – we can only know him by what he does. As Scott Swain memorably puts it, “God is as God does in the triune story of salvation.”¹

So to consider God as Trinity is to consider the three poles of time, each of which is occupied by a Triune person. “The Father is the ‘whence’ of God's life; the Spirit is the ‘whither’ of God's life; and we may even say that the Son is that life's specious present.”² The Father establishes the personality of God. As the originating one he fires forward the arrow of that teleological stream of events in which God makes himself known to the world of creatures, and which in fact is the very stuff of who and what God is. Since the Son lives only in love and obedience to the Father, and to seek and serve the best interests of the world of creatures, he provides the existential space in which the Father's ego can deploy, and find itself. The Son's “individuality is his freedom from his merely private self.”³ The incarnation is “Jesus' intrusion into the outward flight of the Father's consciousness.”⁴

We can note here Jenson's determination to speak only of God as he reveals himself in the evangelical events of salvation history. He relentlessly and thoroughly fulfils Rahner's rule in such a way that only the economic Trinity counts. The immanent Trinity, if it exists at all, is completely conformed to those decisive events revealed in Scripture by which the human race will be saved by the triumph of the love revealed in Jesus. Nothing else about God matters, and we need not concern ourselves with pointless speculation about the kind of being that stands behind these events. Any talk of processions and missions in the

¹Swain, *The God of the Gospel*, 137.

²ST 1: 218-219.

³ST 1: 219.

⁴ST 1: 220.

traditional sense is ruled out⁵ because this belongs to the incorrect and unhelpful theological world view that developed out of the infiltration of Greek Metaphysics into the doctrine of God.

The Son is known by, and exists within, the flow of events that extend from his gestation in the womb of Mary, to his death as the hanged man on Golgotha. We can only speak of his pre-existence, a topic to be considered at greater length later in this thesis, in a tentative and tenuous way as a latent potentiality within the Old Testament's salvation history. We can wonder in what sense he took his place at the right hand of God after the resurrection, because in the Jensonian view of things Jesus rose into the Church, where he is present in a very powerful mode of indwelling. It is this ecclesial mode of his existence that will be our primary focus in the next chapter, but for now we can note that we speak of Christ as the now of our salvation in the sense that this is where we find him, locate him and experience him. The futurity of God, its forward flight through time, is available to us in this present modality of Christ's existence. The Church is his body in a quite vivid and robust sense.

The Spirit is the completer and perfecter of this forward momentum of teleological events. He is also the goal of this arrow flight of saving events originally fired forward by the Father. There is no other future to be anticipated, feared or longed for – he is the futurity of God. And this is why the Spirit has a certain degree of priority amongst the Triune persons, because, “The Spirit is God coming to us from the last future; he is God coming from and as the Kingdom.”⁶

This leaves us asking what the content of that future will be. We have detailed some of these beneficial end time consequences for the human race in the introduction. We have noted also that the Spirit, having raised Jesus from the dead, will complete this process of Christic development by bringing the *totus Christus* to pass. This will be in a sense the completion of the Kingdom. We can notice here a theme that will be our primary concern towards the conclusion of the chapter – that what is being described here is the effects on

⁵Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel*. (Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers 2002), 125. In fact Jenson allows use of the terms Processions and Missions in preference to western technical terms for Trinitarian relations providing that they are left “beneficially vague,” and do not imply the existence of an immanent Trinity existing in free association from an economic Trinity.

⁶ST 1: 219.

the redeemed rather than the one who generates them – that we are informed about the affective, existential and ontological goods and gains of the saved, but little is said about the bestower of these gifts. We are left wondering what or who in this fulfilled future makes all this happen, and what process of interaction between Saviour and saved brings this about.

However this location of the Triune persons on the three poles of time does help to unpack the surprise dimension of the Spirit's ultimate finale. For if the being of God is a flow of events that must hang together in a coherent narrative then this story of salvation, like any satisfying narrative, must have its own freedom to develop as the characters determine the plot in a dialogical rhythm with the main protagonist – God. One of the strengths of Jenson's proposals is the way in which each human “no” to God is outflanked, outwitted and overturned by a surprising riposte from God, in which his continuing “yes” reframes and repositions the developing narrative. God's originality and tactical finesse can work the human “no” into the story in such a way that it becomes part of the tapestry of the completed future. If God is a story, then this rattling good yarn must have a curiosity inducing and suspense fulfilling ending.

Robert Jenson has described God as an event, a person, a decision and a conversation. What does he mean by that? In these four descriptors he lays out his revisionary metaphysics of God's being. Consider these quotes on the subjects of God's eventfulness:

the one God is an *event*; history occurs not only in him but as his being...The fundamental statement of God's being is therefore: God is what happens between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit...God is the event of the world's transformation by Jesus' love, the same love to which the world owes its existence...What happens to the world with Jesus has three identities that are the origin of time, the goal of time, and what within time is what time is about.⁷

God has no essence or substance, he is what happens to the world, particularly through Jesus.

⁷ST 1: 221-222.

We can note though the privileging of certain events, and the leaving out of others, which might be thought to be surprising omissions. The escape of the children of Israel from Egypt, and the raising of Jesus from the dead are the two determining events from which Jenson reads off his doctrine of God. Yet it is odd that the incident of the burning bush, and the incidents that cluster around the giving of the law on Mount Sinai in a direct encounter between God and Moses, are overlooked. Though God keeps his inner being reserved from direct observation in these primary disclosure events, they have the effect of irresistibly pressing the issue of who and what kind of a God Moses is dealing with, where he came from, and what kind of a covenant partner Israel has entered into a relationship of promise with. It is even more puzzling that these incidents are overlooked when one considers his warm approval of R. Kendall Soulen's *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity: Distinguishing the Voices*, a book which focuses on a theme dear to his heart, the proper naming of God, and which gives high profile to these disclosure events. These two incidents of course, if included in his *Systematic Theology*, could have awkwardly raised the issue of the being of God, and were omitted perhaps for that reason.

For that matter it is odd that the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, and the inner Trinitarian discourse in the High Priestly prayer in John 17 aren't front and centre in his prioritising of Scriptural events from which we can read off the identity of God. Furthermore Jenson states that he agrees with the Orthodox that Pentecost is a peer event with the resurrection, and not just a roll out consequence of it as much of western theology would have it.⁸ Again, this is another event that receives a lot of attention from Kendall Soulen in his discussion of the proper names of God.⁹ So one is left wondering why he didn't include the Baptism in the Jordan, the Transfiguration and Pentecost in the line-up of decisive events that happened to the world, and that are on a par, some would think, with the escape across the sea of reeds and the resurrection?

To state that God is a person could be encouraging to those who are of a Neo-Chalcedonian frame of mind in their doctrine of God, but Jenson has something else in mind in using this descriptor. To the question "how can an event be a person," he replies

⁸ST 1: 146.

⁹ R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity: Distinguishing the Voices, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 185-189, 251-255.

that this means that there is a continuity in the stream of events that is God, they have “a mutual dramatic coherence,” they hang together in such a way as to indicate that there is a personality that links them up.¹⁰ This is particularly the case in the dialogical rhythm, the back and forward exchange between God and humankind in the events of Scripture. God is faithful to himself in the way he acts.

To say that God is a decision flows on from the other two descriptors – the events and their continuity character reveal a set of decisions. To declare him a conversation is to point to his communicating character as Word and Logos who maintains a conversation with those he engages within the stream of history. Address and response are essential both between the Triune persons, and with those whose future is unfolding, and who might become different from what they presently are on the basis of this address and response exchange. If the end is to be a surprise then this will be in part because of where these unfolding conversations may take it to.

Is Gregory of Nyssa a theological ally?

Robert Jenson claims a warrant for this rather original and remarkable take on God’s being from Gregory of Nyssa. He thinks that Gregory described God as a predicate – a doing, acting, making it happen kind of Divine being, rather than being a God of attributes. In this way he would be quite distinct from the majority of his Patristic contemporaries for whom God’s attributes of timelessness, impassibility, and so forth, secure God from the possibilities of becoming vulnerable to the attrition of time. They, as it were, put God in the refrigerator of a frozen, static, immobility that is the inevitable concomitant of allowing Greek metaphysics into one’s doctrine of God. But Gregory’s doctrine of God was different and unique because his view of infinity was different.

Here we can call to mind his doctrine of *epectasis*, the development of an idea originally drawn from Origen that the soul continually advances in knowledge of God in a never ending journey into the inexhaustibility of bliss. Origen had seen heaven as being like membership of an advanced research institute in which the mysteries of the universe and

¹⁰ST 1: 222.

all the conundrums of the search for human understanding would be explored and resolved, and then further developed. Gregory took this notion further, and brings it to bear on his doctrine of God. Rowan Williams gets to the heart of the matter when he writes:

If the Christian life is a journey into God, it is a journey into infinity – not an abstract ‘absoluteness’ but an infinity of what Gregory simply calls ‘goodness,’ an infinite resource of mercy, help and delight. And because of its limitless nature, this journey is always marked by *desire*, by hope and longing, never coming to possess or control its object. This is perhaps Gregory’s most vivid way of expressing the Christian conviction of God’s transcendent freedom and objectivity: faith is *always*, not only in this life, a longing and trust directed away from itself towards an object to which it will never be adequate, which it will never comprehend. God is what we have not yet understood, the sign of a strange and unpredictable future.¹¹

Jenson claims support for his notion of God as “a going on” from Gregory of Nyssa on the basis of one book.¹² This writer cannot read theological German, and is not aware of an English translation of this book, but in a sense this does not matter because what is important here is that Jenson thinks Gregory supports what he wants to write about God. But before moving on from our consideration of Gregory of Nyssa there is one topic that deserves investigation – is he as free from Greek metaphysical thinking about God as Jenson thinks he is?

John Behr describes Gregory’s intellectual formation thus. “Gregory did not have the advantage of an education at a prestigious university, or even of foreign travel, but was educated largely by his two eldest siblings (Peter, later Bishop of Sebaste, Basil the Great). Gregory probably studied under Basil between 335 and 357-58 when he taught rhetoric at Caesarea.”¹³ This writer finds it hard to believe that he would not have been thoroughly inculcated with Greek philosophical thinking, and given a deep immersion in Greek

¹¹Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 57-58.

¹²Ekkerhard Muhlenberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa: Gregors Kritik am Gottesbegriff der Klassischen Metaphysik*, (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966).

¹³ John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology, Volume 2, The Nicene faith, Part 2*, (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004) 409.

metaphysics. It would therefore have been hard for them to think about the world and what lay behind it in any other terms.

Of course, for the Cappadocian Fathers Scripture is the primary datum they would have worked from in developing their Trinitarian doctrine of God. But Lewis Ayres has written persuasively on the way pro-Nicene theologians made magpie like borrowings from their intellectual milieu to engage with Scripture:

Engagement here is a complex and piecemeal affair between Christian, inherited Jewish, and Greek and Roman philosophical traditions. By “piecemeal” I mean that particular philosophical doctrines, separated from others taken to be intrinsically related to them in their original contexts are used to elucidate particular themes or terminologies or passages from Scripture. For example both Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine adapt themes from Plotinus: neither, however, makes any extensive use of the complex discussions concerning the complex interrelationships between the three primary *hypostases* that so fascinated the latter. Rather, discussions that Plotinus would have assumed to be pertinent to only the One or Nous are drawn on and melded together to discuss the Christian Trinity. Both similarly draw on aspects of Stoic terminology...: both feel free to condemn other aspects of Stoic tradition that are antithetical to their purpose...This piecemeal engagement is deeply shaped by a complex notion of the scriptural text as the primary resource for the Christian imagination, as a text that may be explicated through the use of whatever lies to hand and that may be persuasively adapted.¹⁴

Recent scholarship about Gregory posits that his primary focus as a theologian is to establish an epistemology by which we can know God. This epistemology is very much grounded in his neo-Platonic intellectual background, and it assumes that ontology is the appropriate way to think about God. To quote two sources:

Since God is infinite, the cognitive journey opened up by faith is also without limit; it is epistemology rooted in ontology.¹⁵

...through his deployment of power terminology, Gregory also offers an ontological and epistemological foundation for human knowledge of God that he

¹⁴Lewis Ayres, *Nicea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 391-392.

¹⁵Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge and Divine Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 25.

thinks fundamental to pro-Nicene theology and which sets the stage for any analogical description of the Godhead.¹⁶

And as Gregory proceeds he shows his Greek philosophical bias more and more:

The language of invisibility also implies elevation beyond the intelligible, for in becoming invisible himself, Moses is becoming like God. This motif, namely, that only like knows like reaches far back into Greek philosophical tradition. If Moses is to know God, Moses must become like God.¹⁷

What Gregory is doing is laying the foundations of the classic Christian mystical tradition, with its three stages of the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive. First the mind is purged of unhelpful and misleading notions of God, then light is shed on the mysteries of God, the deep truths of the gospel, and then the lights are turned out, discursive reasoning fails, as the soul journeys on proceeding by naked faith alone into union with God, the goal of the Christian life. It almost goes without saying that this is a tale of neo-Platonic ascent. Indeed, Scripture is read typologically along these lines. The burning bush is a type of the mind being purged of false notions of God, the long and winding road that Abraham pursues is a journey of pure faith without knowledge, the ascent of Moses to the top of Mt Sinai is a type of the soul's eventual union with God. The road map towards eventual union with God is one of continuity, then of abrupt discontinuity, as the insights and rational understanding of God granted in the illuminative phase fade out and are of no further use as the soul proceeds over the precipice into darkness, where only faith as naked trust counts and is useful, and indeed is its own kind of antennae and sensibility. Knowledge is overcome in faith.

The Christian mystical tradition depends upon certain Scriptural texts such as the *Song of Songs*, but it is also saturated with neo-Platonic assumptions. Gregory as one of the influential founders of this tradition is not uniquely different from his Patristic contemporaries in being immune from this powerful and ubiquitous intellectual current of his time. His is not the lazy God whom Robert Jenson fears, but is a dynamic God who

¹⁶Lewis Ayres, "On Not Three People" in *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, Ed. Sarah Coakley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 16.

¹⁷Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, 49-50.

can do and be all that Scripture says of him, while being assembled in part from metaphysical sources.

Before leaving this topic let us briefly rehearse certain points that have been put to Jenson on this score. One cannot posit a pure Bible and a corrupt Greek metaphysics. From the intertestamental period on, substantial importation of Greek thought forms takes place into biblical literature, and into the New Testament itself. If they were culled out then Johanne literature, the Pauline, and some of the post-Pauline epistles, would be different, and somewhat impoverished. Greek metaphysical thought is not a monolithic reality, and Hellenic thought on say, the topic of impassibility, is a diverse and multi-faceted reality. And Jenson's *Systematics* is not without its own philosophical assumptions, especially his enthusiasm for Hegel, a topic that will be considered in a later chapter.

Martin Laird also raises an interesting point about the book Jenson puts so much weight on in his enthusiasm for Gregory of Nyssa. Muhlenberg asserts that Gregory thought that the soul cannot achieve union with God, because this would be to suppose that God can be contained within the grasp of human comprehension. But this misses the point that Gregory believes that the last lap of the journey into union with God is achieved through faith, in which attempts to grasp God cognitively and conceptually have been renounced, and thus the incomprehensibility of God is preserved in what amounts to a union beyond knowledge.¹⁸ Ironically Robert Jenson has become enthusiastic about the doctrine of *theosis* in recent times,¹⁹ a doctrine of union with God that originates in the Patristic era, and which again is heavily impregnated with neo-Platonic background assumptions. But this of course raises the issue of exactly what or who the believer achieves union with. Here is Gregory's take on who one is united to:

none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding subsist, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists.²⁰

¹⁸Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, 101-102.

¹⁹Carl E. Braaten, Robert W. Jenson, "The Finnish Breakthrough on Luther Research," in *Union with Christ: the New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), vii.

²⁰Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.24

In other words God is a transcendent essence – here we have the language of substance relating to the doctrine of God that Jenson is so keen to renounce, since God is what happens to the world through Jesus Christ. And one is left wondering if God has any substantiality to unite oneself to since he is apparently only eventfulness.

In a recent lecture entitled *Karl Barth on the Being of God* Robert Jenson admits to being embarrassed to find that in *CD II/1* Barth discusses the being of God under the categories of essence, using the language of standard substance metaphysics. How could this be when he then goes on to characterize God as “event, first-person person and decision,”²¹ a way of thinking about the being of God that encouraged Jenson into his particular take on this theme? The rest of the lecture is something of a torturous struggle to accept that Barth can allow both ontological and action/eventfulness categories of God to exist side by side without difficulty or embarrassment. About as much as he can concede is that substance language in this instance is about God being “our object, an *other* which is simply and unavoidably there for us and which therefore we can actually *know*.” This combination of ontological language about God’s being, together with a dynamic understanding of his mode of being, is typical also of Gregory of Nyssa, but it is a combination which Jenson cannot permit for his doctrine of God. Which leaves us wondering whether his will o’ the wisp God has any substance by which the believer can connect with him?

Why the Immanent Trinity matters

We have noted that Jenson is opposed to substance language about God's being because this proposes a picture of God as a timeless, changeless substance who exists in an eternal present without the dynamic existence in time that he thinks is true to the biblical God. He only allows use of the term *ousia* to refer to the divine action of being – it acquires valid theological content only if used after identifying the three Triune identities. To use such a term before listing the descriptions of their dynamic particularity would be to empty the term of any theological content.²²

²¹Robert Jenson, “On the Being of God,” in *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, ed. Bruce L McCormack and Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Grand Rapids Michigan/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2013), 44.

²²Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, 21-25, 162-168.

What then does he think goes on at the heart of the Triune being? The issue comes down to a matter of internal relationships: "...the one and eternal Godhead, which each of the persons 'has,' is itself constituted by the relations between these persons, so that Father, Son, and Spirit play different roles in their joint realization of deity, and just so each possess the one and self-same deity."²³ In other words there is a kind of phantom junction box that co-ordinates the three Triune identities as they deploy in their respective poles of time, and as they relate to one another. But this is as far as he is prepared to go in saying what the stuff of God consists of.

We have commented already on Jenson's objection to the intrusion of Greek metaphysics into the doctrine of God as a re-paganising of the gospel. But his real point of concern does not lie only, or even primarily, with what happened in the Patristic and/or Medieval era. It is easy to forget that Jenson sees his primary vocation as being that of a theologian of culture, who is desperately concerned at the plight of the Church in the west, which he perceives to be seduced and subverted by its surrounding culture. As we shall see in the next chapter this is in large measure why he proposes such an industrial strength doctrine of the Church. It requires a dense theological texture at its centre and robust ecclesial boundaries so that it can see off the encroachments of the surrounding toxic culture. It is the present state of emergency for the Church in the west that is the urgent driver of his rejection of what he perceives to be the infiltration of pagan philosophy in former and formative times. Christopher Wells sums up Jenson's motivation in this regard very well when he writes:

What readers of Jenson ought to see is perhaps quite obvious: he has always understood himself as a theologian of culture – indeed Jeremiah-like, often *against* culture – driven above all to confront the nihilism of the present with the radicality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Understanding this prevents us from viewing Jenson's revisionist metaphysics as, say, a self-aggrandizing “new” theological agenda, conceived and only recognizable in the world of academia. Rather, like Barth, Jenson's program is theological *intervention*, intended above all to call cultural Christianity to account, to bring accommodationist versions of the Christian religion to their knees, and so preach the good news. If the “cash value” of Jesus' resurrection is new life in baptism, argues Jenson, then the church needs in her proclamation and in her *being* to wrest as many as she can from the clutches of sin

²³Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, 120.

and death, which in modernity is synonymous with the emptiness of neopagan transgression and antinomianism...Read in this context of late-twentieth century Protestant theology, Jenson's analysis against "Aquinas" is understandable. It is intended to be a highly charged polemic against cultural religion on the one hand and *haute* intellectual versions of mainstream Christianity on the other. That is, Jenson rejects what he perceives to be the intrusion of pagan culture and philosophy into the theology of the Church.²⁴

At this point we must consider the possibility that Jenson has Sabellian tendencies in his Trinitarian doctrine. When those with a smattering of theological understanding first have Jenson's so called Cappadocian take on the Trinity as the Father being the past of our salvation, the Son as being its present, and the Holy Spirit as being its future they often respond with a query as to whether this is modalism, at least that is the response this writer has usually encountered in such circumstances. But in fact Jenson must be acquitted of this charge, because by allocating each of the Triune persons to a particular pole of time he has certainly given each of them their unique *proprium*. They are not merely masks of the one God deployed in functional form as required in the drama of salvation. They are uniquely and fully themselves, as you would expect from a theologian who is keen to stress that they are not located within one *ousia*.

Nor are they so separated in their Triune identities (his term of choice for them) as to be a trithiest God. We can recall that Jenson attributes a dramatic coherence of events that links up and pulls together the teleological stream of events and decisions that is God into an integrated Divine personality. There is a continuity and stability here that are the hallmarks of the one God in three identities at the centre of the Christian religion.

We can note though that the Christ spoken of in this way may have Arian tendencies. If he is not the *logos asarkos*, if his pre-existence can only be considered in the most tentative and attenuated way, if he only exists in four modalities – in a subtle underlying presence in the history and Scriptures of his people, in biological form in New Testament times, in ecclesial form in present times, and as *totus Christus* in the fulfilled future – then he may be less than the Christ defined by Nicea and Chalcedon.

²⁴Christopher Wells, "Aquinas and Jenson on Thinking about the Trinity." *Anglican Theological Review* (March 2012): 356-357.

Who is the God who comes among us?

This indifference to the past of God's being, this denial of his prior actuality, creates difficulties about the kind of God the believer hopes to encounter in the end process of salvation. Like Philipp Melanchthon, a founder of Jenson's theological tradition, he tends to focus on the *beneficia* of God's works on behalf of the believer, rather than on speculation about the God who causes them to happen, and who stands behind them. There is a fascinating parallel here with the Anglican priest poet George Herbert, who tends to use words drawn for the world of human affectivity as synonyms for God in his poems. Consider his poem *The Call*:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:

Such a Way, as gives us breath:

Such a Truth, as ends all strife:

And such a Life, as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:

Such a Light, as shows a feast:

Such a Feast, as mends in length:

Such a Strength, as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:

Such a Joy, as none can move:

Such a Love, as none can part:

Such a Heart, as joyes in love.

It is what God does to people, the effects he creates, the affective states he generates in people that is of interest here, rather than the God who produced them. The notion of loving God for his own sake, or that the source of true human happiness, pleasure, fulfilment, contentment comes from creaturely participation in his being is not considered. Yet the issue of God's quiddity, his most essential mode of existence, is unavoidable here.

The question of what God is, and how God is are inescapably connected to his salvific effects.

Divine revelation, or the story of God revealed in the Scriptures, leaves us asking, who is the God who comes among us as he is? And that in turn means we have to ask where does this God come from? To read the Bible as the book of the acts of God is to be left asking the question – Who is the one who acts thus? So the past of God is an unavoidable issue. Indeed, the gospels themselves are mightily interested in the question of where this life that has appeared among us comes from, hence the way in which the themes of gynaecology and genealogy are deployed right from the start.

The conclusion that the orthodox theologically reflecting community has come to as it has pondered the data of Divine origins as revealed in the incarnation is that the God on display among us is a God who is wholly achieved and self-sufficient, that the Triune persons have a substantial presence, and that an essential part of the missions of the Son and the Spirit is to reveal their origins. In this way they present their credentials as trustworthy bringers of salvation so that its recipients can know who they are dealing with, and can come to know that they are in relationship with a reliable God. In a way it is odd that Philipp Melanchthon, and the theological tradition flowing on from him to include Robert Jenson, are so disinclined to encourage theological interest in and speculation about the inner life of God, since this addresses a fundamental anxiety in Protestant Reformation theology – the possibility of a God behind God, a dark God who does not wish the human race well, despite his apparently benign acts in salvation history. Such a nightmare God came into clear focus in the writings of the 20th century son of a Swiss Reformed Pastor, Carl Jung, with his God who is beyond morality, the maker of weal and woe as he pleases, who acts without reference to the best interests of the human race. Such a God has even been deployed in the service of Christian theodicy to try and explain some of the more troubling incidents of 20th century history.²⁵

This is why a God who is all story and eventfulness, who has no apparent substance behind his will o' the wisp occurrence in human affairs, will not do. God's past matters,

²⁵Jim Garrison, *The Darkness of God: Theology after Hiroshima*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans), 1983.

his prior actuality is a significant factor in the quality mark of his trustworthiness and reliability in his dealings with the world of human creatures. And it is why Trinitarian theology that is deeply interested in the inner life of God is not a luxury or an optional extra. The more one comes to know something of the inner life of the Triune persons, the style and the content of their life together, the less one has cause to fear the possibility of a rogue God. The search for a gracious God has its fruitful conclusion in a theology firmly focused on the immanent Trinity.

A God in flux?

There is a further troubling issue to do with a God who is all future and no past. It comes into clear relief in some quotes from an article entitled *Challenging the Modalism of the West: Jenson on the Trinity* by Timo Tavast, a theological offering which Jenson has warmly endorsed as showing a deep understanding of his theology:

Using the perspective of the entire biblical narrative, Jenson expresses this same idea, arguing that the central events of the Old and New Testament, especially the Exodus and the Resurrection, did not happen only for human beings but for the Triune God Godself²⁶...The Spirit is able to bring new aspects to God's reality, and these new, contingent historical matters are now inseparable parts of the Triune God's deepest nature²⁷...In the theological model advanced by Jenson, true freedom is neither freedom from being influenced nor the timeless permanence of the status of origin. Instead, the freedom of God – which also distinguishes the Trinity from creatures – is God's true openness to the future and to new possibilities realised by the Holy Spirit through the resurrection of the living Jesus, who died for us as an obedient servant of the Father...In this freedom, the Trinity is free to be what God would not necessarily have been.²⁸

Here in clear relief is the issue with which the conclusion of this thesis must wrestle. Few would quarrel with the notion that the end of the human story will be a surprise for those to whom it will happen. Those present at the eschaton, and the far greater number who will then experience the last judgement, possibly a sojourn in purgatory, and then the apportioning of each to their eschatological due, will no doubt experience many a surprise. But Jenson proposes rather more than this – that the freedom that attends the

²⁶Timo Tavast, "Challenging the Modalism of the West: Jenson on the Trinity," *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (Fall 2010): 358.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 361

²⁸*Ibid.*, 362

Holy Spirit's style of operations, and indeed that informs its very nature itself, is so radical that it will affect and alter God himself. The future is wide open in its possibilities, and that applies also to God. He is not conditioned and controlled by the past, but rather the developing interactions between God and humankind set the agenda for the eventual final form of God himself. This is not quite what the Christian world has expected up until now:

My dear people, we are already the children of God but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed; all we know is, that when it is revealed we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is.²⁹

The redeemed have expected to be in for changes at the hand of God, but have assumed that they will be conformed to the image of a solid state God, one with continuity, constancy and stability as his hall marks of nature and identity. That he may be a God in flux is the possibility that must be investigated in full as this thesis proceeds.

²⁹1 John 3: 2 Jerusalem Bible

Chapter 2

Ecclesiology and Christology

We have noted before the robust ecclesiology in Jenson's *Systematics*. In part it is a response to what he perceives to be the emergency situation that the Church faces in western culture. He wants a Church with clear boundaries and a thick theological description so that it can see off the seductive allure of a surrounding culture that seeks to reshape the Church according to its nihilist and self-indulgent agendas. However, as we shall map out in this chapter, it is Jenson's doctrine of God that is the primary driver of an ecclesiology that leaves even Catholics wondering at its dense texture.

The Three Key Issues

In this chapter we will resist the temptation to be drawn into an extended discussion of Jenson's ecclesiology. Instead we will focus on three issues. Does Jenson believe in the heavenly session – that Christ ascended into heaven to take his place at the right hand of the Father, from where he reigns as Lord of the Church? This will involve a consideration of Jenson's theology of the Ascension.

To what extent does Jenson's belief that Christ's bodily location in the Church act as a preliminary formation point of the *totus Christus*? Jenson believes that Christ exists in four successive modalities of being, an underlying literary pattern of pre-incarnate existence in the pages of the Old Testament, his biological existence as Jesus of Nazareth, his present existence as closely identified with the Body of Christ the Church, and his ultimate and fully deployed existence as the totality of all redeemed believers of which he will be the head. To what extent is Christ as second identity of the Trinity distinct and apart from the church, both in its present existence, and in its eschatological fulfilment? This issue is important because the *totus Christus* represents a substantial portion of what Jenson perceives to be the content of the end. To what extent then does the Church *in via* constitute a major ingredient of the surprise ending to the story of salvation?

Thirdly, there will be a consideration of Jenson's use of the *communicatio idiomatum* within his ecclesiology and Christology. This in turn will lead on to an investigation of his enthusiasm for Cyrillian single subject Christology, and how he has modified it to incorporate his rejection of Divine impassibility. We will focus on an incident in the earthly life of Jesus, the temptation in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the possibility that Jesus might have given way under this extreme existential pressure. This raises the issue of a God who might change, who may be developing in dialogue with the human story, and who might be a different God as the surprising ending comes about.

Roman Catholic Reservations

However, before leaving Jenson's ecclesiology to one side as a major topic we can usefully note some Roman Catholic observations and reservations about it. Susan K. Wood thinks that Jenson so completely identifies the risen body Jesus with the Church that he comes close to arguing that the Church is an extension of the Incarnation.¹ She goes on to note that at Vatican 2 *Lumen Gentium* prudentially put some space between the risen Christ and the church by describing the church as the sacrament of salvation, a modality of Christ's presence which both reveals and conceals him. While the church is like the incarnate word it is not synonymous with him, and that is important because too close an identification between them ignores the reality that the church is in a state of becoming as it moves by grace towards the eschaton which has yet to arrive.²

She notes also the way in which Jenson anchors the origins of the Church as one of God's gifts in creation. It comes first before the gospel, for it was always God's intention to locate his being within the community.³ Francis Watson explains what Jenson is about here with great clarity. "The church's origin lies in the Father's act of electing Jesus and his community, the *totus Christus*. (In the earlier unfolding of the doctrine of the trinity, Jesus was presented in relative abstraction from the community; but, as we shall now see, the relationship between Jesus and the community is so close that the doctrine of the church

¹Colin Gunton, ed, *Trinity, Time, and the Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert W. Jenson* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans 2000), 182.

²*Ibid.*, 182-183.

³*Ibid.*, 180; see also *ST* 2: 168.

might itself have been developed within the doctrine of God. If God is not God without Jesus, it is for that very reason that God is not God without the church."⁴ Wood thinks that this is more than even the Roman Catholic Church claims for itself.

Wood mentions too the way in which Jenson comes close to positioning the Church within the other three persons of the Trinity as a kind of fourth primary point within the biblical narrative.⁵ Though she does not mention it, this of course flows from Jenson's enthusiasm for Jonathan Edwards. Since we will have to come back to this remarkable claim in our discussion of the *totus Christus* it is worth quoting Edwards on this point: "There was, (as) it were, an eternal society or family in the Godhead, in the Trinity of persons. It seems to be God's design to admit the church into the divine family as his son's wife. Heaven and earth were created that the Son of God might be complete in a spouse."⁶ Here we see the way in which Christology and ecclesiology come together in a potent mix in the developing relationship of the Triune persons as the End discloses itself. We are also left pondering as a dilemma for later exploration the extent to which the second person of the Trinity and the fully deployed *totus Christus* can be and will be distinguished from one another.

Jenson on the Ascension

So to proceed to the first question, to what extent does Robert Jenson believe that Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father? At several points in his *Systematic Theology* he says that he does⁷, but we can note how nuanced he is in this declaration. The Ascension functions for him as the terminating point in the plot lines of events that the gospels report about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.⁸ To ask where Jesus came from in his resurrection appearances is to receive the answer that he came from the fulfilled future of the kingdom, from heaven if you like. Is heaven then the place and space where God dwells, waiting for the Church to come to him across the

⁴Francis Watson, "'America's Theologian': an appreciation of Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*, with some remarks about the bible," 211. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002): 211.

⁵Wood, *Trinity, Time, and the Church*, 180.

⁶Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies*, 741, quoted in *ST* 2: 19.

⁷*ST* 2: 123. *ST* 1: 201.

⁸*ST* 1: 197.

horizon of its eschatological destiny, from where he is drawing and attracting it to its fulfilment within the Triune economy? Yes and no appears to be the answer, and the more a curious reader digs into his *Systematics* the more complex and interesting the question becomes.

God is described as the *Eschatos*⁹, an apt title for the one who we are told comes from the future. Yet we are told very little about the life of the God of the future as he lives his life of fulfilled bliss in his preferred time zone. In this Jenson is consistent, for he has ruled out speculation about the inner life of God as an unproductive and inappropriate exercise. The kind of speculation he is against is about that of processions within the immanent life of the Trinity, such as Augustine and Aquinas typically engage in. Jenson is a theologian of the economy and of the missions of the Trinity. He is thoroughly Lutheran in believing that human beings have no business trying to pry into God's private life. Furthermore, the relentlessly forward momentum of the teleological stream of events that Jenson calls God is too fast a moving target, is too much a fleeting phantom, to be able to get a fix on. The image of sitting at the right hand of God suggests rest and repose in calm magisterial gravitas. Jenson must pay lip service to this received image from Scripture and Tradition, but it implies the kind of static, immobilised God that he has been at pains to remove from his doctrine of God. About as far as he is prepared to go, in another publication, in which he is discussing the communion of attributes, is to concede that, "'Jesus sits at the right hand' of God predicates universal rule."¹⁰

Jenson is prepared to concede that Jesus exists in several different styles. Yet these other styles are in a way beside the point because of Jenson's famous declaration that Jesus has risen into the Church, that embodiment equals availability, that Jesus has embodied himself and made himself available in the Church and its sacraments, and that heaven is where God is. Jesus "needs no other body to be a risen man, body and soul. There is and needs to be no other place than the church for him to be embodied, nor in that other place any other entity to be the 'real' body of Christ. Heaven is where God takes space in his

⁹ST 2: 167.

¹⁰Eric W Gritsch and Robert W Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement And Its Confessional Writings* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia 1982), 95.

creation to be present to the whole of it; he does that in the Church."¹¹ Thus heaven is collapsed into the life of the Church.

We can notice immediately a follow on consequence in terms of a theology of the Ascension. Traditionally Jesus as Lord of the Church has been assumed to be carrying out his leadership role from the right hand of the Father in heaven. Yet in Jenson's assessment of this role Jesus leads the Church from within it where he is "ruling in the hearts of his believers from the church's table, font and pulpit."¹² Here one is left wondering whether Jenson means this in a provisional or complete sense. He goes on to say that Jesus "can find his Ego in a community of earthly creatures and have that community as his body. Nor is the one human personality Jesus thereby separated or divided,"¹³ so the head is well and truly connected to the body, and the Ascended Christ appears to have descended into his community, which has thereby acquired a dense ecclesial texture as the place of Divine indwelling. This raises questions as to the extent that he takes the Church's sinfulness seriously.

There is an irony and ambiguity here. On the one hand the church has been valorised, both by locating Christ's availability within it as his risen body, and by privileging the ecclesiological biblical model of body of Christ above all others, despite the fact that it is only mentioned four times in the New Testament.¹⁴ Yet on the other hand his account of the founding of the church is resolutely eschatological in such a way as to point to its provisional nature. "God institutes the church by *not* letting Jesus' Resurrection be itself the End, by appointing 'the delay of the Parousia.'"¹⁵ Similarly "The church is nothing other than an appropriate if beforehand unpredictable side step in the fulfilment of the Lord's promise to Israel. The church is, just as Loisy insinuated, an eschatological detour of Christ's coming; ...Thus the church is neither a realization of the new age nor an item of the old age. She is precisely an event *within the event* of the new age's advent."¹⁶ As an interim community, which is deficient in not having the broad mass of Jewish

¹¹ST 1: 206. see also ST 1: 201.

¹²ST 2: 123.

¹³Ibid., 254.

¹⁴Ephesians 1: 22-23; 5: 23; Colossians 1: 18, 24.

¹⁵ST 2: 170.

¹⁶ST 2: 171.

membership that were the primary mission target of Jesus of Nazareth, that is living between the ages, one is left wondering whether it deserves the valorisation that Jenson has bestowed upon it?

There are also pneumatological and eschatological complications here. Apparently, seizing the eschatological arrestor hook to stop the post resurrection end to human history was the work of the Spirit. Doing this, and founding the church are two sides of the same coin. "Pentecost is the Spirit's particular personal initiative to delay the Parousia: when the Spirit descends eschatologically yet without raising all the dead and ending the age, the time of the church is opened."¹⁷ Yet what the Spirit has created is a community so deeply imbued with the bodily presence of the second person of the Trinity that it raises questions as to whether He is indeed dwelling with the Father in the heavenly realms, and crucially whether He can therefore come again at his second coming to his followers and the creation. Can the one who is so firmly located below in the here and now of the developing life of the *totus Christus* be also the one who will return in glory? That role indeed appears to have been usurped by the Spirit, as "The Spirit is God coming to us from the last future; he is God coming from and as the Kingdom."¹⁸ Jenson spells this out in more detail in another place in this way:

It is in that the Spirit is God as the power of God's *own* and our future and, that is to say, the Power of a future that also for God is not bound by the predictabilities, that the Spirit is a distinct identity of and in God. The Spirit is God as his and our future rushing upon him and us; he is the eschatological reality of God, the Power as which God is the active Goal of all things, as which God is for himself and for us those 'things not seen' that with us call for faith and with him are his infinity.¹⁹

Later in this work it will be necessary to unpack this convoluted quotation, which is at the heart of this particular thesis topic, but for now we can note that apparently the one who will usher in the last days is the third Triune identity, who appears to have exclusive rights on the last act of salvation history. While it is true that Jenson assumes that the Spirit will find himself in the fully realised *totus Christus*, it is the Spirit nonetheless who initiates the End as the completer and perfecter of salvation. The *totus Christus* would

¹⁷ST 2: 179.

¹⁸ST 1: 219.

¹⁹ST 1: 160.

seem to be in somewhat passive mode as the consummation occurs. Some may feel at this point that key aspects of the doctrine of the Spirit have been short changed, that certain dimensions of classical pneumatology have been neglected, that what we have here is a theologian of the identity of God, and not the nature of God.

Key to understanding Robert Jenson's theology of the Ascension is what he understands heaven to be, and its implications for the future. On the one hand, "Heaven, we saw, is the place of the future as this is anticipated by God. To our present concern, what is in heaven is therefore Jesus *as* the head of that communal body that itself will only be whole at the End."²⁰ It is "finally defined within apocalyptic metaphysics, where it is the created future's presence - *as* future! - with God."²¹ On the other hand, "heaven is the origin of the call of God's coming Kingdom, insofar as that call is a created force beckoning within the creation. The creation is liberated to its End and Fulfilment by God the Spirit; heaven is the telos of this dynamism insofar as it is a teleology within creation itself."²²

What this appears to mean is that heaven is the presence of the future from which God's generative salvation initiatives come, such as the implanting of Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and the descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost to halt the imminent Parousia and thereby create the Church as a pre-eschatological communal structure. Heaven is also the anticipated future which God possesses by anticipation. However, this is not a fixed future fully determined in all its details because, as we shall be discovering later on in this work, the future is open in its possibilities, both for the creation and for God. One could say it is a future of anticipated possibilities and scenarios.

Heaven is where Jesus sits at the right hand of God in a putative and nominal sense. Lip service is paid to the location of the head of the Church in the ascended heavenly realm. The fact of the matter, however, is that Christ is where he decides to be, and he has chosen to be in the Church so as to be available in the present dimension of humankind's salvation prospects. This is where he must be since any post-Ptolemaic understanding of the universe could not conclude that heaven is a spatial location, in which God dwells

²⁰ST 2: 251.

²¹ST 2: 121.

²²ST 2: 121.

separate from the creation. The metaphor of Ascension enthronement will be fulfilled at the End when “The space between the Father and Christ at his right hand accompanies the embodiment of the *totus Christus*.”²³ The Ascension in the fuller and traditional understanding will only occur when all things are fulfilled and complete. It too is a future event.

Yet the here and now dimension is inescapably there in any consideration of heaven because, as we noted three paragraphs before, it is “the call of God's coming Kingdom,” it “is a created force beckoning within the creation,” it “is the telos of this dynamism in so far as it is a teleology within creation itself.” In this sense it is the force that drives the future from within the present, rather than a fully realised atemporal supernatural reality drawing creation on to an inevitable conclusion, which is the conclusion that Jenson wants to avoid. It is the galvanising internal accelerator of the flow of events that occur within time, rather than the haven of rest and peace of resolved personal histories. It is the motivator and animator of the forward momentum towards the future, the time dimension that really counts, and the only place where God can truly be said to be, apart from his robust presence in the Church.

In the opinion of this appreciative reader of Jenson the ambiguity and ambivalence of his attitude to Christ's heavenly session is finally resolved in one decisive quote that says it all. “Any picture of God ruling the hearts of his believers from the Church's table, font and pulpit, and ruling the rest of creation from some place else called heaven, it is here claimed, radically inappropriate.”²⁴ Thus we may now turn to the place of the earthly *totus Christus* as a major ingredient of the surprising ending to the story of salvation.

Separating the Second Triune Identity and the *totus Christus*

A problem with the two volume *Systematics* is that Jenson is often trying to say so much in so compressed a space that his taut aphorisms and highly condensed paragraphs can be difficult to unpack, offering as they do an ambiguity of interpretation. In the matter of the

²³ST 2: 348.

²⁴ST 2: 123.

totus Christus Jenson is much clearer when in more relaxed mode in his article *Christ as Culture 1: Christ as Polity*. Here he both states what he means by the term, and outlines a tension that must now be explored:

Christ is eschatologically and so ecclesially what Augustine called the *totus Christus*: he is himself simply *as himself* and he is himself as one with his disciples, with the members of his body; and only as he is both is he indeed himself. His person, in so far like ours, is constituted by his vocation and its carrying-out; but his mission was precisely to give himself wholly to others – consider only, 'This is my body given for you.'...the structure we have just described is the structure of Christ's personal life only, of the life that could and did empty itself by death into a community of disciples without thereby vanishing into the community. Christ is and remains the second identity of the community as one only; yet he and the community he brings with him into the life of the Trinity are again one and the same 'whole Christ.' Christ has a body that is itself a community of bodies; while I have only one thing that sits at the computer as I write. Nevertheless, the relation between Christ and the church is the prototype of my relation to my body, so that analogies can be drawn: just as I am my body yet can stand over against my body to discipline it or harm it or suffer it or enjoy it, so Christ is the church yet stands over against the church to discipline and shape and suffer and enjoy it.²⁵

The distinction between Christ as second identity of the Trinity and Christ as *totus Christus* is well put, but has he put sufficient space between the two to prevent Christ in his second modality simply dissolving into the community? The question is important for this work because it determines whether Christ will simply be a collective entity in the life of the world to come, or whether he will be sufficiently separate to welcome the church as bride into the Triune economy.

Jenson inserts three ontological buffers to maintain the degree of separation. Christ's robust risen presence in the Church is through the medium of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Thus he is in its midst, sustaining it, inspiring it and feeding it with his risen life, while at the same time not being completely identified with it in every detail. So it is that he can assert, and agree with, the doctrine of Eucharistic sacrifice. "The risen Christ now offers himself and his church, the *totus Christus*, to the Father. This offering

²⁵Robert Jenson, "Christ as Culture 1: Christ as Polity," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (November 2003): 325.

anticipates his eschatological self-offering, when he will bring the church and all creation to the Father that God may be “all in all.”²⁶

He also distinguishes between the two by making use of the Scriptural metaphor of bride for the Church. “In the New Testament, the church and risen Christ are one but can also be distinguished from each other; thus, for example, the church is the risen Christ's bride (Ephesians 5: 31-31) so that Christ and the church are joined as a couple. We may not so identify the risen Christ with the church as to be unable to refer distinctly to the one and then the other.”²⁷ It is prudential for Jenson to have worked the bride ecclesial image into his script since those theologians who prefer a thick theological description for the Church often use “body” and “bride” in tandem as their preferred descriptors, while Jenson has let “body” do pretty much all the heavy lifting in his ecclesiology.

The third buffer is an eschatological one, referring in particular to the internal life of the *totus Christus* in the fulfilled future, and its asymmetric relationship to the Triune persons. “The diachronically constituted community cannot be raised without its past members. Nor are we to become identical with one another, or melt into one monadic superperson, even one named *totus Christus*. The redeemed life will be congruent with and moved by the divine life, and this is the mutual life of irreducible personal identities.”²⁸ So the redeemed are to be sharply distinguished one from another, and Christ from them. Furthermore, “God can indeed, if he chooses, accommodate other persons in his life without distorting that life. God, to state it as boldly as possible, is *roomy*. Indeed, if we were to list divine attributes, roominess would have to come next after jealousy. He can, if he chooses, distinguish himself from others not by excluding them but by including them.”²⁹ Here we can recall Jenson's enthusiastic quoting of Jonathan Edwards earlier in this chapter in which he wrote of Jesus bringing his bride with him to share in the life of the Trinity, thus bringing Jenson's second and third ontological buffer into play simultaneously. We can also recall Susan Wood's distinct unease at this move with its

²⁶ST 2: 253.

²⁷Ibid., 213.

²⁸Ibid., 354.

²⁹ST 1: 226.

implications that the church as *totus Christus* has thereby achieved almost fourth person status within the Trinity.

Ian McFarland is also not convinced that Jenson has provided a sufficient degree of separation between the risen Christ and the church. He thinks that Jenson has pressed the body of Christ imagery so hard as “to suggest that the church exhausts Christ's objectivity,” that he has thereby risked compromising “Christ's freedom over against the community,” and that despite Jenson's enthusiasm for *communio ecclesiology* he has missed the point that, “However intimate their union is conceived, the head and members of the ecclesial body are not parts of a single organism, but a communion of persons whose enduring, bodily distinctiveness is a defining feature of Christian belief.”³⁰ For McFarland the balance between the dimensions of union and distinction can be found by going back to Scripture, and by taking a long, hard look at a key passage from Ephesians:

speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Eph. 4: 14-16; cf. Col. 2: 19)³¹

By making a clear distinction between Christ as the head of the body the church, and Christians as members of that body, Ephesians makes it clear that Christ is the source and goal of the Church's growth as the members grow into him. It gives him a degree of objectivity over against the church, and makes clear that as head he enjoys absolute priority over it, while at the same time preventing any notion of the body existing in ontological separation from the head:

The identity of the ecclesial body is not simply an amalgam of the various individual identities of its members, but is rather determined by the head as the source and goal of the body's' growth. There is thus no possibility that the engrafting of new members will change this body's identity; it is rather the members whose identities are transformed in the process of growing into the head (Romans 8: 29; 2 Corinthians 3: 18). At the same time, however, the fact that this

³⁰Ian A. McFarland, “The Body of Christ: Rethinking a Classic Ecclesiological Model,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (July 2005): 239, 240.

³¹*Ibid.*, 238.

body does grow means that Jesus, though the source of the body's identity, does not exhaust it.³²

These are telling points that leave this reader concluding that it would have been helpful if Jenson had done more in the *Systematics* to create a clear distinction between head and body in the church, and to have put further ontological buffers between Christ and the *totus Christus*.

Communicatio Idiomatum

I turn now to a consideration of Jenson's use of the *communicatio idiomatum*, of Cyrillian single subject Christology, and their follow on consequences for the notion of Divine impassibility, and the possibility that Jenson believes in a God who changes as he interacts with the developing twists and turns of salvation history.

The *communicatio idiomatum* was a theological resource developed by Patristic theologians to explain how Christ could simultaneously exist in his incarnate status on earth while at the same time governing the universe. Cyril of Alexandria developed it further to explain how Christ had a highly unified identity as a single subject within his divine and human natures.³³ To put it simply, for Cyril the Logos is a divine nature clothed with a human nature, rather than being a dual identity existing within separate compartments of divinity and humanity, the error which he supposed Nestorius to have committed. Jenson sums up the Cyrillian take on the *communicatio idiomatum* with admirable clarity:

each nature of Christ is active in communication with the other, each contributing what is proper to it *and* in its own way what is proper to the other...the one Christ lives his life as God and as a man, divinely and humanly, and his doings and sufferings cannot be sorted out into two differing sets of doings and sufferings.³⁴

³²Ibid., 239.

³³Andrew Mellas comments, "Cyril himself did not employ the phrase *communicatio idiomatum* 'communication of idioms' but often alluded to the concept by narrating the mysterious exchange of properties between the divine and human natures of Christ in his exegetical works. The idea emerged as early as Origen but is not fully articulated until the sixth century and beyond." "The Passions of His Flesh," *Phronema*, Vol. 29(1), 2014, 83 footnote 8.

³⁴Robert Jenson, "Christ in the Trinity: Communicatio Idiomatum," in *The Person of Christ*, ed. Stephen R. Holmes and Murray A. Rae (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), 66, 67.

This theological resource was deployed for a different purpose within the context of reformation debates between Lutherans and Calvinists about Eucharistic presence. Calvinists assumed that the Ascended Christ could only be in one place, in heaven at the right hand of God the Father, and so could not be present on many altars. The *extra Calvinisticum* was used to think through the way in which worshippers participated in Christ in the Eucharist. Instead of Christ coming to them in the consecrated bread and wine the Holy Spirit lifts them up to the heavenly places to the heavenly banquet whereby they partake of a mystical union with Christ. Lutherans, by contrast, had and have a robust doctrine of the real presence, and believe Christ can be simultaneously present on many altars because the *communicatio idiomatum* makes this possible.

Robert Jenson has developed this resource further by way of the theology of Johannes Brenz and his 16th century Swabian contemporaries to explain how Christ can be present in different styles, in different ways and in different places at the same time:

Since the creation is for God but one place immediately over against the place that he is, his simultaneous presence to the whole creation is unproblematic. And his exercise of the presence will not be modulated by location within the creation, since for God there *are* no plural locations, but only by ontological context: he is in one way present in his Word, he is otherwise present at all points in created space, he is otherwise present in the hearts of believers, and so on.³⁵

Of course Jenson could have used this resource to explain how Christ can be simultaneously reigning over the church from heaven at the right hand of God while at the same time being powerfully present within it, but for the reasons just explained above he does not require this assistance. Instead the Swabian take on the *communicatio idiomatum* is used to explain how Christ is present simultaneously in his risen bodily availability throughout the church throughout the world in a variety of modes, but most particularly in the Eucharist and in the sacramental life of the church.

Both Jenson and the Swabians claim to have radical Cyrillian Christology on their side. What then does Cyril of Alexandria's Christology consist of? *Kenosis* is a major focus of Cyril's Christology. The Son enters the human condition fully at its lowest point of

³⁵ST 1: 204.

abasement. To heal the human condition he must assume its most hurting aspects. Philippians 2: 5-10 maps out the contours of Christ's descent into human lostness. But this is *kenosis* in the patristic sense as *Krypsis*, concealment of the Divine attributes rather than the divesting of them. The close ontological union of divine and human in this unique being gives him the capacity to experience human distress without surrendering his divine invulnerability to it. He experiences this in his human nature, registers it in his divine nature, which in turn contains and lessens the vitiating attrition of pain and suffering.

Nor is sin able to enter him at any point. In fulfilment of Romans 8: 3 the Son is sent "in a form like that of our own sinful nature," in such a way that "he has passed judgement against sin within that very human nature." (NEB) He does this by means of the *communicatio idiomatum*, another central concern of Cyril's.

For Cyril one of the major reasons for his commitment to a highly unified view of Christ's incarnate medium of existence is because this enables human beings to be drawn into union with God – that Christ's *henosis* leads to human *theosis*. The purpose of the incarnation is the ontological restoration and rescue of the human race.³⁶ Cyril puts it this way, "For Christ is, as it were, a kind of common frontier of the supreme divinity and humanity (being both in the same one, and as it were holding together in himself things so greatly separated), and as God by nature he is joined to God the Father, and again, as truly a man, is joined to men."³⁷ Because Christ draws together in himself divinity and humanity he is able to be the unique generation and locus point for human participation in the divine life.

We can note also that this is the enabling motif of his high doctrine of Eucharistic presence. As the baptised receive the body and blood of Christ the seeds of immortality are planted within them – they are reconnected to that vivifying source of Divine life that the human race lost contact with at the Fall. So although the redeemed will still experience biological death their *divinization* is both a work in progress and their ultimate destination.

³⁶John McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 184, 195, 225-6.

³⁷Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, www.ccel.org/pearse/morefathers/files/cyril Book 10: 14-15.

In a compare and contrast exercise between Cyril and Jenson we can note that Cyril's doctrine of Eucharistic presence was virile, of "the medicine of immortality" variety,³⁸ but was not associated with such a close-knit sense of identification with Christ's post Ascension presence in the Church. As Keating points out, the consequences of the Ascension have a different trajectory for Cyril: "The ascension and enthronement for Cyril, then: (1) brings the divine plan of salvation to its completion in Christ the first fruits; (2) reveals the end intended for the whole human race; and (3) inaugurates a renewed human life on earth through the gift of the Spirit."³⁹

Cyril's focus was on the more here and now issues to do with the way in which Christ was ontologically assembled and present in the days of his life on earth. Four issues were at the forefront of his Christology: the need to settle on an agreed and adequate terminology with which to discuss and define the issues in dispute; the "what" of the Incarnation, that the eternal word of God is the one single subject in all the psychic and intellectual life of the incarnate Lord; the "why" of the Incarnation as a dynamic transaction stimulated by God's redemptive mercy to become the source of the universalised divinization of the believer by grace; and the "how" of the Christological union, the manner of the relationship between the divine and the human in Christ.⁴⁰ In a sense Jenson can take all this for granted, and build on these foundations for his own startling purposes.

Robert Jenson's Christology rests on Cyrillian foundations; he appropriates many of Cyril's hard won gains in the Nestorian controversy. It is a single subject Christology. But there are certain areas of its follow on conclusions that would cause Cyril concern, particularly as they relate to the issue of Divine impassibility. Although Nestorius accused Cyril of being *theopaschite* in his Christology because of his highly paradoxical language about the way in which Christ suffered, he was in fact what we would call a soft impassibilist. He believed that the Divine logos suffered in the manner of the flesh, in his human nature. "For Cyril, both qualified divine impassibility and qualified divine passibility were necessary for a sound theology of incarnation. The affirmation of

³⁸Daniel Keating, *Divinization in Cyril: The Appropriation of Divine Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 163-165.

³⁹Ibid., 159.

⁴⁰McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, 188, 194, 195.

impassibility was a way of protecting the truth that the one who became incarnate was truly God. Admitting a qualified passibility secured the point that God truly submitted himself to the conditions of the incarnation."⁴¹ For Cyril this is at the very centre of his Christological concerns because it provides a way of making sense of Philippians 2: 5-11, with his concomitant conviction that *kenosis* is the most important topic in Christology.

Robert Jenson has a nuanced definition of divine impassibility. Jenson proposes that the patristic writers used the term *apatheia* to make clear the Bible's central notion of God's unwavering faithfulness. While God is affected by changes in knowledge, will and emotions, he remains constant in his personal identity, character and nature. However, God's identity is shaped by temporal events. Human beings can interact with God in such a way as to generate emotional responses within him, and there is a considerable element of surprise in the way salvation history will play itself out, even to God.

Jenson thinks that western Christianity has imported unhelpful elements of Hellenistic philosophy into its doctrine of God in such a way that God has been thought to be stoically free from emotional disturbances as a result of his interactions with the world of human creatures. So seriously does Jenson take the biblical narratives of struggle, and the strength of divine emotions in response to the events of salvation history, that he takes literally the despair of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – at this crucial point God feels despair because it is a possibility that he may experience defeat. It is worth quoting Jenson on this point:

What if Jesus had capitulated in the desert or in the garden? We want to say this could not have happened, since by the dogma of Nicea Jesus is of one being with the Father, and God cannot despair. But that again is to violate these stories of struggle and overcoming. The church must indeed read the stories of the temptation and the garden by the dogma, but if their narrative character is honoured what they then tell is that deity might at those moments have broken-whatever metaphysical sense we are to make of this. The heart of the matter is that Jesus' Resurrection appears in the New Testament not as an obvious consequence of his deity but as the Father's amazing triumph.⁴²

⁴¹Paul Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 150, 161.

⁴²ST 1: 48.

Cyril by contrast bookends the garden scene in such a way as to highlight the invulnerability and robust self-assurance of the Nicene God-man. In his *Commentary on Luke* he portrays Jesus deliberately leaving the house where he had been instructing the disciples and going to the garden, where Judas would have known he was staying, in order to make himself easy to locate and arrest.⁴³ And then in his *Commentary on John* he has Jesus deliberately identify himself and make himself known to the temple police to make it easy for them to arrest him because they could not recognise him through their own natural powers.⁴⁴

But Jenson has no patience with this approach:

Here is a place at which the main theological tradition has simply capitulated, betraying the stories because it has been unable to fit them into its inadequately evangelized metaphysics. Thus even John of Damascus and the Neo-Chalcedonian tradition he summarized could do no better with the prayer in the garden than to interpret it as – not to put too fine a point on it – pedagogical play acting. To portray Christ in his last night on earth in terms of such Stoic self-control and omniscient anticipation and control of events is to undermine any realistic account of Christ's *kenosis*.⁴⁵

But is this fair to Cyril's account of Christ's interior psychological states? Here he is commenting on John 12: 27, "Now is my soul troubled." Cyril writes "For the thought of death that has slipped in attempts to agitate Jesus, while the power of the divinity at once masters the emotion that has been aroused and immediately transforms that which has been conquered by fear into an incomparable courage."⁴⁶ So the Word has power to transmute vulnerable human emotion into something else. And the point of experiencing human distress in this way is to bring this modality of human experience into the process of salvation.

For Jenson God has such a rich affective life that his emotions can be blinding forces, the passions that Patristic theology was so keen to distance God from. So God's love discloses itself often in the modality of divine jealousy, in an insistent demand for exclusive

⁴³Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke, Sermons 1* (www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/cyril) 6.

⁴⁴Cyril, *Commentary on John*, 44.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 48, footnote 47.

⁴⁶Cyril, *Commentary on John*, 8. 703d.

fidelity. Yet despite all this such a God is self-determining, wholly reliable, and will ultimately reach his objectives without being frustrated by his passions. In what he proposes here Jenson has gone far beyond Cyril's paradoxical Christology. For as John Byung-Tek Song states Cyril is in accordance with the patristic tradition in viewing "God's emotions as acts of his free grace that served as pedagogical tools to recall a wayward humanity". They are, "voluntary, foreknown, purposeful, and non-overwhelming."⁴⁷

Cyril had recognised the crucial point that "the predication of suffering to the divine nature alone would render the assumption of humanity superfluous, whereas the opposite extreme, the attribution of suffering to the human nature alone would jeopardize divine involvement. Nestorius as we know, embraced the second option, while many modern defenders of divine suffering tend to settle for the first one."⁴⁸ Jenson, it could be argued, has surrendered the transcendence of God by an over-literal reading of the despair of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The Healing of Human Affectivity

Moreover, there is a further dimension to Cyril's Christology that makes Jenson's reading of the Gethsemane scene unnecessary, and that illustrates why, for this author at least, Divine impassibility is a crucial cornerstone of Neo-Chalcedonian orthodoxy. For Cyril Christ's invulnerability to human passions is not just a defence against being reduced by human frailty to less than Divine status and potentiality. Christ has entered the human condition and has taken on human affectivity so as to fully experience it, and thus to heal it from within. Christ as it were experiences human emotions Divinely so as to open up the dimension of human affectivity to its full potential, so that it may enter into its proper and God intended functioning. Human affectivity as we now know it is a disordered and etiolated reality. One of the purposes of the incarnation is to re-order it, and to restore it to what it was supposed to be when God first invented the palate of emotional tones and responses that make up a key dimension of human experience. Thus the acute existential distress that Christ experiences in the Garden of Gethsemane is not a crisis moment of

⁴⁷John Byung-Tek Song, "An Assessment of Robert Jenson's Hermeneutics," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1 (January 2013), 96, 95.

⁴⁸Gavrilyuk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, 172-175.

potentially falling away from his mission agenda at the 11th hour, but is rather the healing from within of extremes of negative and destructive human emotions. Human disobedience is healed from within.

This is why single subject Christology and the *communicatio idiomatum* matter at the deepest level in Cyril's theology. As Andrew Mellas puts it:

St Cyril of Alexandria held that it was Christ's appropriation of flesh that made it possible for the Logos to experience human emotions and transform them...Christ's temptations, suffering and emotions were not attributed simply to his human nature but ascribed to the one incarnate Logos; to do otherwise would render asunder the unified subjectivity of Christ into a human self and divine alter ego...In contemplating Christ's emotions, the healing of a fallen humanity through the communication of idioms within the hypostatic union is what mattered, not whether an emotion was natural or unnatural. Christ did not suppress his humanity and its passions but divinised them ⁴⁹

The purpose of all this is so that Christ's followers can henceforth be taught to feel things beyond their nature, so that a healed affectivity can become the norm in their emotional life.

Thus Robert Jenson has missed the point about the Gethsemane scene, by not grasping the deeper dimension of Cyril's Christology. There is no "pedagogical play acting" going on in Gethsemane, but rather an entering into the depths of human distress, while at the same time remaining immune from its internally destructive effects, in such a way as to heal and heighten human affective capacities. Divine immutability is not abandoned, nor is it necessary for it to be jettisoned. There could be no question or possibility of the divine mission being abandoned. While divine aspiration and human response has entered into close combination in the gospel story they are not so symbiotically intertwined as to change the inner nature of God, or to alter his being as the developing story of salvation plays out in the post resurrection, post Pentecost era. Whatever surprise awaits believers at the End it will not involve encountering a Triune God who has changed in himself as a result of encounters with the human situation.

⁴⁹Andrew Mellas, "The Passions of His Flesh," *Phronema*, 1 (2014): 82, 97, 95.

What does await believers is a re-ordered affectivity, restored back to what it should have been from the beginning, and now elevated to the enhanced emotional capacity of the pioneer of salvation. The new humanity will be neither overwhelmed by nor deceived by their feelings. This outcome will be a sub set of the ending of the reign of sin, of the redeemed's ontological elevation and greater existential density.

What is not clear, and awaits that ultimate resolution and discovery, is whether this will be a uniform style of rightly ordered emotions or whether the different cultural expectations and expressions of emotional registers known in this world's pluralist cultures will be mirrored in heaven. The only clue to this puzzle is the way Dante pictured heaven as a multi layered reality in his *Paradisio*.

Conclusion

In this chapter we drew the conclusion that while Jenson pays lip service to the tradition that Christ ascended into heaven to be Lord of the Church this is in fact such a nuanced and ambivalent affirmation as to be of little account. For him Christ's risen body is firmly located within the Church. The Ascension in its fullest and fulfilled sense is a future event.

We noted that Jenson has made a major effort to clearly distinguish between the second identity of the Trinity and the completed *totus Christus* in heaven by inserting three ontological buffers between them. We noted too the attempt to distinguish between Christ as groom and church as bride in the present existence of the church, and between Christ as source of sacramental grace and the church as nurtured and nourished body. However, many of Jenson's critics are not satisfied on this score.

In an extended discussion of Jenson's commitment to Cyrillian single subject Christology and the *communicatio idiomatum* we called into question Jenson's commitment to overturning Divine immutability, and raised concerns about the possibility of God changing and developing in dialogue with human salvation history. We concluded that Jenson has failed to appreciate Cyril's significant contribution to the link between Christ's

self-possession in the face of disabling distress and human affectivity – that he thereby offers a pathway to healed human affectivity. This is available for partial appropriation now, and for complete reception in the life of the world to come when sin and death will be banished.

We turn now to a consideration of intra-Trinitarian relations and their implications for a doctrine of God that is shaped by the doctrine of eschatology.

Chapter 3

The Spirit of Freedom and Love

In this chapter we consider how intra-Trinitarian relations have a bearing on the End in the Jensonian scheme of things. Particular attention will be paid to the *proprium* of the Holy Spirit and that of the Son.

New Zealand theologian Andrew Burgess is a trenchant critic of Jenson's Trinitarian thought. He asserts that Jenson has collapsed the Spirit into being the spirit of Jesus in such a way that one cannot differentiate the Spirit from the Son.¹ In fact almost the opposite is the case. The Spirit's independent role (in terms of subsistent relations) is robust and remarkable. Jenson's highly original pneumatology gives the Spirit pride of place within the workings of the Triune persons, and bestows upon him a pre-eminent and privileged significance.

In what has now become a famous article about Barth's theology of the Holy Spirit entitled "You wonder where the Spirit went" Robert Jenson set out to address an issue noted by the North American Karl Barth society, that long stretches of Barth's thinking seemed binitarian rather than Trinitarian.² He contended that in Barth's theology the Spirit does not appear as a party in the triune actuality, that the Spirit was condemned by his treatment of the *vinculum* doctrine to remain a *modus* only, and that the Spirit disappeared from Barth's pages whenever he would appear as someone rather than something.³ He concluded with two questions "How is the Spirit at once his own person and what 'all three' hypostases are together? How is the Spirit at once who has power and that power itself?"⁴ Jenson has set out to remedy these pneumatological issues with energy and élan.

¹Andrew Burgess, "A Community of Love? Jesus as the Body of God and Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Thought, *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 3 (July 2004): 298.

²Robert Jenson, "You Wonder Where the Spirit Went," *Pro Ecclesia* 2 (1993): 296-304.

³*Ibid.*, 296, 301, 302, 304.

⁴*Ibid.*, 304.

The Spirit and the *totus Christus*

If one were to give the Spirit a particular title that expressed in catch all terms what he primarily does it would be that of relationship initiator, repairer and reconciler, in which the quality of these relationships is elevated. This has an immediate significance for what shall be in the life of the *totus Christus* in the life of the world to come because the Spirit will be the giver and enhancer of individual potentiality and fully realised existence within the completed *totus Christus*. We have noted before Jenson's conviction that the redeemed will not "become identical with one another, or melt into one monadic superperson, even one named *totus Christus*."⁵ That is because the Spirit will confer a relationship of freedom within the *totus Christus*. The redeemed are, "liberated for one another by the Spirit - as we may recall are the Father and the Son...this means that the *totus Christus*, as the one as whom I am available to myself, becomes the subject by whose liveliness I am what I am. And that is to say, Christ himself becomes the subject by whose liveliness I am what I am. In the Spirit, the Christ who is *what* I am is the Christ who is *who* I am."⁶ To express that in a less convoluted form, the redeemed will be supremely who they are, in fact will be more themselves than they have ever been, because they will find themselves in Christ and in one another as the Spirit makes this possible as the spirit of freedom who takes away the threat of otherness posed by this ego re-location process. The Spirit will resolve the apparent antinomy of a highly communitarian style of existence that at the same time permits a highly individualised mode of existence.

Furthermore this differentiation and elevation of the identity of the redeemed in the completed *totus Christus* is not just a process that the Spirit bestows upon the redeemed, for it also carries out a vital function in the identity formation of the Spirit. "The Spirit finds his "I" in the Son just insofar as the Son is the *totus Christus*, insofar as the Son includes and is included in his community. And the Spirit himself is nothing other than the Freedom that occurs in these relations. Thus the Spirit himself is located at the Goal of God's ways."⁷ Although he does not refer to a particular Russian Orthodox source, and is perhaps unaware of it, this has fascinating parallels with Vladimir Lossky's pneumatology

⁵ST 2: 354.

⁶ST 2: 298-9.

⁷ST 1: 160-1.

and eschatology where he writes, “For the Holy Spirit is the sovereign unction resting upon the Christ and upon all the Christians called to reign with Him in the age to come. It is then that this divine Person, now unknown, not having His image in another Hypostasis, will manifest Himself in deified persons: for the multitude of the saints will be His image.”⁸ So just as the Father finds his ego in the Son, so the Spirit will eventually locate his ego in the deified ones who make up the communal Christ. Here we see another Jenson theme repeated – that the events of human salvation history and the economy of the Trinity are so intertwined that human creatures can have a vital influence on the internal life of God. What they do has the potential to affect the final shape of the Triune identities.

Before leaving this important eschatological differentiation point we can note also that it addresses in part a concern raised in the last chapter – that of Christ as second person of the Trinity being differentiated from the completed and perfected *totus Christus* in the life of heaven. Accordingly the Spirit will provide a further ontological buffer between the communal body of Christ and the individual second identity of the Trinity.

To be clearer about this, Robert Jenson believes that the Father generates the Son, and breathes the Spirit upon the Son. Thus the Spirit is closely associated with the Son, and so the Son can bestow the Spirit upon the Church. It is the Spirit that agitates the Church into life with his liveliness, hence the outbreak of prophecy at its birth. The Spirit gives the church its group spirit, its communal spirit, just as a successful sports team has a good team spirit.⁹ That spirit is one of congruence and faithful identity with the risen Christ. The church is kept on track as the body of Christ as the Spirit links the Head to the body, and moves this present availability of Christ to the world through time. Scott Swain expresses this memorably in a telling phrase, drawn in part from another source - “The Spirit thus ‘blazes a trail through time on the way to the kingdom’:¹⁰ birthing, nourishing and perfecting the *totus Christus*, head and body.”¹¹

⁸Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (Cambridge and London: James Clarke and Co. Ltd, 1973), 173.

⁹ST 2: 181.

¹⁰Willem Van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*, (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 193.

¹¹Scott Swain, *The God of the Gospel*, 206.

The Spirit and the Church

Robert Jenson describes the resurrection of Jesus as an unanticipated surprise. Furthermore the resurrection of Jesus is not a once and for all event – it is a process that is still working its way through in the unfolding life of the church as the body of Christ. In that sense Christ is said to possess the fullness of his risen body only in anticipation, and will not reach that place of fullness until the *totus Christus* is completed and perfected at the End. This following through of the process of resurrection from beginning to end in the life of the communal Christ is the work of the Spirit as it frees up the life of the members of the body to be truly the body of Christ. Thus the church acquires greater ecclesial density, an enhanced hinterland of *koinonia* and theological content, through the operation of the Spirit. Unusually for Jenson he uses sociological terms to describe this leavening process, the sociological distinction between *Gesellschaft* (“society” or “association”) and *Gemeinschaft* (“community”). The transition from society to community can only happen when the Spirit enlivens the church to be more than the spirits of its members.¹² The church *in via* is moving from the one to the other, a useful distinction for it both explains the disappointing and etiolated *koinonia* of the western church, offers hope for its anticipated future eschatological development, while at the same time enabling a distinction to be made between Christ as head of his church and Christ as husband of his church:

The object that is the church-assembly is the body of Christ, that is, Christ available to the world and to her members, just in that the church gathers around objects distinct from herself, the bread and the cup, which are the availability *to her* of the same Christ. Within the gathering we can intend Christ as the community we are, without self-deification, because we jointly intend the identical Christ as the sacramental elements in our midst, which are other than us.¹³

Jenson is even clearer about the roll out consequences of Christ's resurrection in the developing life of the church in this place:

There is even a sense in which Christ, *insofar* as his body the church is still an association also and not purely a community, possesses his risen body only in

¹²Robert Jenson, *On Thinking the Human: Resolutions of Difficult Notions*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 43.

¹³ST 2: 213.

anticipation; thus the Lord's own resurrection awaits a future also. Removal of the interim separation between the members of Christ and their Head, which appears in the sacramental character of his presence with them, is the heart of the resurrection.¹⁴

Before leaving this consideration of the intertwined fortunes and destiny of the Triune persons and the church I offer two points to ponder. Robert Jenson has made it clear that despite the fact of heavy Christological and pneumatological investment in the textures and structures of the body of Christ on earth it is quite conceivable that a church may so depart from faithfulness to God's ways that he may withdraw from its life. Indeed he considers that some ecclesial communities in the western/American church may be rapidly approaching the point of apostasy, and in consequence the withdrawal of the Shekinah presence from their collective life. This of course provides a helpful let out clause from his high ecclesiology. The Triune persons are not so symbiotically connected to the church that their integrity can be undermined by human sin, folly and unfaithfulness. God is free to withdraw his presence from churches that have gone wrong.

However, should such a separation take place where does this leave God? A God of protological origins can cope, existing in sovereign freedom from humankind and all its machinations, his shimmering plenitude of being not requiring human praise and adoration, even though he loves to have it if it is offered. What though of the God who only exists in the future, and in the here and now? The possible shape(s) of the future, its contours and outcomes, are developing in dialogue between the God who is event and conversation with his dialogical partner, the wayward western church. Such a God and such a future(s) might well be vulnerable to human rejection, indifference and mendacity.

The second point to ponder is closely related. Missiologists and church historians often point with growing concern to the speed with which the church and the Christian faith are evaporating in western culture and societies. The possibility of the church reaching vanishing point within a generation is now a potential and credible scenario. A possible response is that God may pack his bags and go to Africa, where the faith has been spreading like wildfire since the continent's nineteenth century evangelisation. However, as Missiologists often point out, the Christian faith in Africa is 'a mile wide and an inch

¹⁴ST 2: 347.

deep,' hence its lack of impact on endemic problems in African society such as corruption and civil conflict. Again, the God of the future, whose fortunes and destiny are so closely intertwined with his body on earth, and whose Son lives in his church, may find himself homeless, ignored and unloved in the west, and reduced to a thin overlay existence in Africa. The inner life of the Trinity could be thinned out in tandem with his reduced and etiolated life in the church, and the eschatological destiny of his *totus Christus* derailed. Earlier we noted that Jenson considers that Christ might have turned away from his cruciform destiny in the Garden of Gethsemane, might have failed to follow through in his mission at the eleventh hour, since this is the way things could be given the dynamic stream of unfolding teleological events that he calls God. Thus also the church as *totus Christus* could unravel, and with it Christ's embodied presence in the world disappear, with unpredictable consequences for the inner life of God. The God who existed before time began, before he created the people of God, could exist in sovereign freedom and undiminished radiance of being, despite their rejection of him and his winnowing judgement of them. The God of only future location, and present inhabitation of his communal earthly existence, is in a more vulnerable position.

There is a possible Jensonian counter argument to this, one he engages with in his commentary on Ezekiel, particularly in the section on the departure of the cherubim throne and the Shekinah from the Temple in Jerusalem¹⁵. Despite the diminution of the Covenant community to a small exiled remnant God's presence was still with them as he worked among them to make them more than they were. God's rejection of Israel and Judah as a faithless people, the destruction of the Temple and those nation states, and the seventy years of exile did not diminish the being of God? Perhaps only a small number of faithful followers are required to keep the dynamic stream of events that Robert Jenson calls God as a living presence in the world?

¹⁵Robert Jenson, *Ezekiel*, Brazos Commentary on the Bible, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2009), 88-91.

The Pre-existence of Christ

Since we are about to embark upon a careful consideration of the *proprium* of the Son, and are at present in Old Testament territory, it is time to consider the issue of Christ's pre-existence. This concerns the subject matter of this thesis because Jenson's difficulties with beginnings have a follow on effect in his consideration of the End. The way he thinks about the origins of Christ, and his relationship to the Father, have a bearing on Christ's stature over against the *totus Christus* and his location within it.

As with his theology of the Ascension Jenson wants to assert that he believes in the pre-existence of Christ, but in like manner wants to do so in his own particular and unusual way. Prior to his conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary Christ did not exist as an independent and unique metaphysical entity, the *logos asarkos*, who then added a human nature to himself to become incarnate. To ask where and how he was before that is to receive the answer that "the most obvious pre-existence of Christ attested by Scripture is his active presence in old Israel: as the Glory of the Lord, the Angel of the Lord, and the Word of the Lord."¹⁶

To assert that Jenson is a crypto-Arian is to forget his rejection of what he calls the notion of unbaptized time, the conception of time as put forward by Plato and Aristotle. He does not say that there was a time when Christ was not because Jenson's "God is his own past, present and future, and thus transcends time. Hence, eternity is not the absence of time but rather God's co-opting of all time into his service: the victory of God's love within time, bringing everything into the service of the future which God himself is."¹⁷ This is why the three Triune persons occupy the three poles of time, the Father the past, the Son the present, and the Spirit the future.

Christ is the Son of God not by way of divine origin but rather from the future by being declared so at the resurrection, "the supreme act of the Spirit who is "giver of Life."¹⁸

¹⁶Robert Jenson, "Once More the Logos Asarkos," *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 2 (April 2011), 131. I draw from the arguments in this article because they answer criticisms made of Jenson's original pre-existence proposals in *Systematic Theology* 1.

¹⁷Burgess, "A Community of Love?" 291.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 132.

Indeed the Spirit is as important in determining the Son because his *telos* matters as much as the Father's *arche*, given the Bible's pervasive eschatological-pneumatological orientation. The key text in this matter is Romans 1: 3-4: "It is about his Son: on the human level he was born of David's stock, but on the level of the spirit- the Holy Spirit – he was declared Son of God by a mighty act in that he rose from the dead: It is about Jesus Christ our Lord." (NEB)

Jenson defends himself against charges that he has ignored Scriptural warrants and proofs for the pre-existence of Christ by stating that the prologue in John's gospel is a gloss on Genesis 1.¹⁹ This ignores the thorough marshalling of New Testament evidence by Simon Gathercole in which he insightfully considers texts such as Hebrews 1: 2, 1 Corinthians 8: 6, 1 Corinthians 10: 1-10, Colossians 1: 16-17, John 12: 41, Philippians 2: 6-11, and in the coming and sending language of Galatians 4: 4-5 and Romans 8: 3.²⁰ However, it is not the business of this thesis to become drawn into an exercise in New Testament exegesis, but rather to address the issues involved in Robert Jenson's proposals on their own terms.

If one assumes Jenson's background assumptions that God is not a metaphysical entity out there behind and beyond the universe, and that God lives in time and not outside time, then it becomes possible to acquit Jenson of the charge of crypto-Arianism. Christ has always been present to some extent in the world as described by the Scriptures. The problem comes in his somewhat shadowy phantom like existence as a literary underlying pattern in the pages of the Old Testament. We might like to consider also that the canon of First Testament Scripture only came into existence late in the history of the children of Israel. It is this lack of substantial reality in the second person of the Trinity that causes problems in the Jenson project at several levels. He is clearly delineated in the flow of events from the womb of Mary to the Ascension, but is an incognito subtle background influence in the prior history and Scriptures of his people. This in turn raises the credibility of his independent existence over against the *totus Christus*, an issue we have considered at some length earlier. Fade in, fade out, come into clear focus, recede into

¹⁹Robert Jenson, "Once More the *Logos asarkos*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2 (April 2011), 131.

²⁰Simon Gathercole, "Pre-existence, and the Freedom of the Son in Creation and Redemption: An Exposition in Dialogue with Robert Jenson," *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 1 (Jan 2005), 39-42.

background ambience – it is hard at times to see Christ at the centre in this way of doing theology.

Gathercole has pointed to other difficulties around this issue. New Testament language posits that Christ came in to this world as an act of choice, that he freely chose to do so in glad co-ordination and co-operation with the will of his Father. However, “if Jesus simply exists in his incarnation with no pre-history, with no real *prius*, then his situation is one – like every other human being – of ‘thrownness’, whereby he finds himself in the world unconsulted, independently of any other will on his part. In this respect, there is a serious distortion of the idea of the Son's freedom, which is regarded by the New Testament authors as such a key component of Christology.”²¹

There is also the issue of incoherence in terms of the concept of baptised time that Jenson is so keen on. There needs to be a “before and after” dimension of Christ's coming into the world for this to be a genuinely free choice in which Jenson's dynamic sense of time is closely associated with the style of personal existence which the second Triune identity enjoys. “Without this 'before and after', the pre-existence of Christ has actually – paradoxically for Jenson- become *atemporal*. It therefore means that this aspect of the Son's identity fails really to function as a part of the drama-concept to which Jenson is so attached.”²²

“In my end is my beginning,” wrote T S Eliot in the *Four Quartets*, and this is where the pinch comes in the Jensonian assessment of Christ's pre-existence. Here we have a Christology in which Christ acquires a growing density of ontological existence as he proceeds through time, and successive stages of existence, only to be trumped at the last by the Spirit who will deploy his ego in the *totus Christus*, just as the Father found and deployed his ego in the Son. Christ in a sense will never be more powerfully influential and available than he is now at the heart of the church's life – these are his glory days. He was a subtle, background influence in Old Testament times, he was a vivid Galilean

²¹Ibid., 47.

²²Ibid.

personality and inspiring spiritual leader in the incarnation, he will be a flagship presence in the life of the world to come, but his big time is now.

The Son as Co-creator of the World

Before leaving this topic it will be useful to consider the Son's role as co-creator in the foundation of the world(s). At first Jenson appears to be going along with the tradition. "The second triune identity is *Logos* and Son. The *Logos* that God speaks to command heaven and earth into being is no other Word than the word of the cross."²³ However, once again what starts out to be a traditional understanding of a key doctrine has travelled to a different place. The world was created on behalf of the Son for the sake of bringing the church into being. The church comes first before everything, it is the reason creation came into being, it is the crown of creation. Here we see again that Jenson is above all an ecclesial theologian, one claiming more for it than just about anyone else on the Protestant end of the theological spectrum, and one moreover who has subordinated the doctrine of creation to the doctrine of the church. Simon Gathercole has brought down vigorous counter-battery fire on Jenson's reading of Colossians 1: 15-20 and 1 Corinthians 8: 6 as proof texts for this point of view²⁴, but again it is not our task to be drawn into a New Testament textual argument, but rather to note again how everything zeroes into the here and now situation of the church as primary location point for Christ's indwelling presence and availability to the world, and as final delivery vehicle for the eschatological end. The doctrine of creation deserves more respect and more attention than it receives here, for apart from anything else it has major implications for the doctrine of God. The limitations of defining God only at midpoint events in the drama of salvation are politely pointed out by J.A. DiNoia, who proposes an expanded alternative to the famous Jensonian definition of God. God is "whoever rescued Israel from Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead, *and who is also the cause of the world*" (my italics). He goes on to amplify this with Catholic philosopher Peter Geach's question, "What kind of life does the cause of the world enjoy" and to answer it with "a life of sheer existence in which there is no potentiality to further perfection or determination."²⁵

²³Robert Jenson, "The Hidden and Triune God," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2 (2000), 11.

²⁴Gathercole, "Pre-existence, and the Freedom of the Son in Creation and Redemption" 49.

²⁵Joseph Di Noia, "Three Responses to Robert Jenson," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1 (March

Subject Object Relations within the Trinity

We come now to the aspect of Jensonian intra-Trinitarian relations that has caused the most excited comment among his critics. Scott Swain offers the most succinct summary of the proposals under discussion:

the relationship between the Father and his Son Jesus, whatever might else have been, is one inherently threatened by opposition and struggle against bondage. In dialogue with Hegel's *Phanomenologie des Geiste*, Jenson argues that the two – in fact, *any* two – must always stand in tension with each other, must always live under the threat of mutual subjugation and alienation, always, that is, *unless* a third person comes to the rescue. The Spirit's role on this scheme is to rescue the Father and the Son *from* a relationship of mutual subjugation and alienation *for* a relationship of mutual acceptance and love.²⁶

There is an aspect of this overcoming dimension of the Spirit's role in the relationship between the Father and the Son that this Jenson reader does not have difficulties with – the one relating to the abandonment by the Father of the Son on the cross summed up in the cry of dereliction (Mark 15: 34). In this context the Spirit overcomes and prevents the possibility of a rupture within the first and second identities of the Triune identity, and thus a temporary disintegration of the inner Triune life.

It is a commonplace assumption that Jesus goes to the cross in accord with the essential pattern of love and obedience to the Father that undergirds his mission and ministry. Yet what many struggle to accept is that the Father drives and directs the Son to his death, both abandoning him, and even appearing to have surrendered him to his enemies. This occurs not because the Father is a patriarchal child abuser but so that the mystery of human sin and rejection of God is drawn into the space opened up between the Father and the Son in the Son's saving death, to be contained, neutralised and transformed in the crucible of Triune love. The Spirit's role in bridging this temporary gap of alienation and apparent estrangement is crucial. He holds the ring, prevents a rupture in the inner life of the Trinity, and resolves the tension by raising Jesus from the dead.

1999), 103.

²⁶Swain, *God of the Gospel*, 197.

Balthasarian Parallels

Few have articulated this more lucidly and boldly than Hans Urs Von Balthasar whose *descensus* theology is at the heart of his theological project. He is clear that the absolute, infinite distance that opens up between the Father and the Son in the events of the Paschal Tridium is at the same time united, bridged and held open by the Spirit.²⁷ Far from being a diminishing of the inner Triune life it takes it to the next level:

This participation and completion of the creation in Christ are possible because, paradoxically, the separation of the Son from the Father in death only intensifies their inner-trinitarian communion. This paradoxical claim for the continuity-in-discontinuity of the Father and the Son is rooted in the deeper 'logic' of the eternal relationship between the Trinitarian persons. Because the Son's separation from the Father is undertaken in free self-abandonment, the Spirit is able to come forth from the Father and enter the Son through the bond of his perfect obedience, thereby reinfusing him with eternal life...According to this doctrine, the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son opens a space between the trinitarian persons that humans can enter and 'dwell.'²⁸

Jenson's pneumatology of renovation and reconciliation in the events constellating around Golgotha is a gentler version of this, but it shares with Balthasar a willingness to address the crucial and indispensable issues of the Father's surrender of the Son, its implications for intra- Trinitarian life, and the reality that the full depth of human alienation from God was in some sense brought within the Divine nature to be neutralised there:

The Father and the Spirit take the suffering of the creature who is the Son into the triune life and bring from it the final good of that creature, all other creatures, and of God. So and not otherwise the true God transcends suffering...Father and Son are one God even as the Father abandons the Son, in that the Spirit who will raise Jesus had come in advance – as Spirit, anticipation is his being – and 'rested' on him from the moment of his dedication to his death, to be the bond of triune love also in abandonment. Just so, this abandonment and its suffering become integral

²⁷Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama Theological Dramatic Theory 4: The Action*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1994), 362.

²⁸Kevin Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs Von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval*, (New York: Herder and Herder, The Cross Road Publishing Company, 2002), 93, 97. See also parallels with the notion of *pacified dialectic* in Eberhard Jüngel's *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, 220, in which Christ in the crucifixion draws nothingness into his being in a dialectic of being and non-being, of life and death, which in turn recalls Barth in *CD IV.2*, 347 about "the Spirit of the antithesis but also the *peace* which is in God."

to what the Spirit means for the Father and the Son, and so to the love that is God.²⁹

However Jenson departs from Balthasar and many other theologians deeply committed to the atonement in downgrading the significance of the crucifixion, and instead putting the major emphasis on the resurrection. He argues that the cross was not 'an original element' in the church's faith,³⁰ and he rejects the notion that 'Christ fully accomplishes our salvation at Golgotha,³¹ though he does not deny that Christ died for our sins.³² Thus the overcoming of human sin on the cross, or the notion of Christ taking the place of sinful humanity on the cross, does not figure prominently in his estimation of the significance of Golgotha, for the defeating of sin is not a major priority here. Reconciliation only has significance in an ecclesial and eschatological sense, for "Jesus' sacrifice accomplishes our reconciliation only when we are actually brought together with him and his Father in one community."³³ So once again we have a soteriology that starts out looking the same as others, but is in fact rather different. Yet Jenson can take shelter in claiming the good company of Pannenberg, Kasper and Moltmann in this de-emphasising of the crucifixion.

Inherent Binary Oppositional Relational Patterns

Where Jenson's intra-Trinitarian relations theory runs into trouble is in his enthusiasm for the Hegelian master slave parable, with its follow on implications for subject/object relations, which he takes in tandem with his theory of bodiliness as availability. Having a body makes me both available, locatable and vulnerable to others. This is important because without this corporeal solidity I could and would dominate others as pure, invisible spirit. This is in part why Christ must inhabit the church as body of Christ in the most complete theological sense, for it is in locating himself among his followers in their communal existence that he becomes available to the world and to the unredeemed in a way that is both accessible and vulnerable. There is a sense too that as embodied one within the Triune persons Christ is in a mediating function. In a way the traditional

²⁹ST 1: 191, 191.

³⁰ST 1: 180.

³¹ST 1: 179.

³²ST 1: 333.

³³ST 1: 192.

Christian understanding of prayer as a Trinitarian exercise reflects this – Christians pray to the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet it is just at this point that intra-Trinitarian difficulties arise. Andrew Burgess lays out his criticisms in this way:

If Jesus of Nazareth is the embodiment of God, then what can be said of his relationship with his Father? As subject of his own body, Jesus cannot know the Father except as pure subject, disembodied spirit, which on Jenson's account would mean that the Father's relationship to the Son is one of totalitarian enslavement! Either this, or the Father cannot be seen as having any significant *otherness* in relation to the Son...From this it follows that any sort of talk of relationships within the being of God must break down. Jenson identifies God as an event of love, but within his own scheme love does not seem possible without otherness, without objectivity in relationship, and by definition there is only one object in God the man Jesus and his risen body the church. The Father cannot give himself in *love* to the Son when he has no objectivity to give apart from the Son's own body!³⁴

Before addressing these concerns it is helpful to make it clear why this issue is central to the subject matter of this thesis. What the redeemed participate in in the life of the world to come is the life of the Trinity, this is the content of salvation, and this is what Christianity is about. Furthermore Robert Jenson has declared that the central concern of his theological project is to get away from contentless eschatology, to say what can be said about what comes next, so that while the End is a surprise the redeemed have a right to know roughly what they are in for. Thus the quality and style of intra-Triune relations is a matter of no small importance, for the life that really is life will be lived out within the vectors and contours of their relationship patterns. We can note at this point an irony in passing – a theologian who believes it is no business of theology to investigate, speculate about, or pronounce upon the inner life of God is doing just that here – as he indeed he must if he is to address these eschatological concerns.

There is another reason why these complex Trinitarian arguments affect the future:

First, we must remind ourselves what all these word games are about. The 'hypostases' are Jesus and the transcendent Will he called 'Father' and the Spirit of their future for us. Just as vital to remember, the hypostases 'relations' are Jesus' historical obedience to and dependence on his 'Father' and the coming of their Spirit into the believing community...Whatever happens between Jesus and his

³⁴Burgess, "A Community of Love?" 297, 299.

Father and our future *happens in God* – that is the point...It is just and only in that 'the Father' *gives*, Jesus obediently receives, and their Future *is sent to us* that the relation of Creator to creature is established in the evangelical events, that these three are, so to speak, on both sides of the God/creature line. It is by the temporal dynamic between Jesus and his Father and *our Destiny* (my italics), that the three are *God*.³⁵

There are three obvious counter-moves that Jenson can make to the Burgess concerns. First, it is after all one God we are talking about in three persons, so therefore it isn't necessary to have three embodiments for the three identities. Jenson has never been prepared to go as far as Pannenberg, and to speak of three centres of consciousness in the Trinity. He sees intra Trinitarian relations as operating in a perichoretic way of close exchange.³⁶ The unity of God is maintained by way of narrative coherence and perichoretic mutuality. Therefore it is sufficient for Jesus to be the only one with embodied/object status within the Trinity. Secondly, the Hegelian Master Slave parable is used to refer to human to human relationship, and also to the asymmetric relationship between God and creatures. Jenson does not intend it to be used to refer to or explain intra-Trinitarian relationships.³⁷ Then thirdly, for Jenson the intra-Trinitarian liberationist motif is right at the heart of the *proprium* of the Holy Spirit. At this point Jenson uses an analogy from family life to describe the life of the Trinity, one drawn from the evolution of a marriage. A newly married couple require a child to come out of their relationship to complete it, and to prevent their relationship with each other from turning in on itself. The Spirit is like that new arrival who enables the other two to be presented to each other in a new way that deepens and renovates their love for each other. As Jenson puts it in his typically taut way, "the Spirit himself is nothing other than the Freedom that occurs in these relations...the Father begets the Son and freely breathes his Spirit; the Spirit liberates the Father for the Son and the Son from and for the Father; the Son is begotten and liberated, and so reconciles the Father with the future his Spirit is."³⁸ Thus Jenson's pneumatology gives the Spirit the capacity to overcome relational difficulties between the Father and the Son by re-presenting each to the other, and thus enabling them to be what they ought to be and wish to be each to the other.

³⁵Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, 106, 107.

³⁶ST 2: 300.

³⁷ST 1: 121.

³⁸ST 1: 161.

However it is not the solution to this possible relational Father/Son stand-off that is the problem here. It is the all-embracing claim that all binary relationships, either within the Triune life, or in human relationships, are inherently oppositional. At first sight this appears to contradict the common sense observation that there are happily married couples, enduring friendships and loyal sibling relationships. Yet step by step Jenson lays out a convincing rationale for his claim in one of his more recent books *On Thinking the Human*. He contends that Nietzsche and his French epigones have persuaded many in western culture "that all human intercourse is violence...whenever we confront one another, each of us incorporates - under various levels of concealment - the 'will to power'...violence is the one inescapable fact, the infinite to which all good-faith tracings of finite beings' intercourse must lead."³⁹ Thus, those who think they love are deceiving themselves because the twentieth century masters of suspicion know better:

Of course, we certainly do sometimes seem nevertheless to love each other, but 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' are there to disillusion us. I may think I love you and even act like I love you, but Freud or Nietzsche or Marx will be at hand to explain how this is a mere disguise for self-aggrandizement in one mode or another. Indeed...what the famous and praised hermeneutics of suspicion are at bottom suspicious of, is always and only love.⁴⁰

Even without the baleful effects of these elite intellectual deceivers, recent developments in popular western culture have also betrayed fragile attempts at genuine human love:

We should, anyway, be aware that much called 'love' in modernity's decadence is in fact flight from personhood, the search for absorption into the other and of the other into me. The sixties stage of the sexual revolution, with its group sex under drugs and similar assisted suicides of personal identity, shows this blatantly. That sort of 'love, love, love' is no longer quite so prevalent, but only, I think, because its motivations and attitudes have been taken into the wider culture.⁴¹

Furthermore, inherent within human loving is a built in contradiction, for its dual nature:

³⁹Robert Jenson, *On Thinking the Human: Resolutions of Difficult Notions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans 2003), 67.

⁴⁰Ibid., 79.

⁴¹Ibid., 80.

is to give and to desire...And to love is not merely to desire something of the beloved; it is to desire the beloved entire...This sinister shadow in fact shades our more exalted loves also: the love that eats up the beloved is too well known, and fear of being devoured is surely some part of late modernity's 'fear of commitment'...It may be already apparent where the hurt lies: the will to give and the will to possess make mischief at their intersection.⁴²

Attempts to separate out the components of love into *agape* and *eros* on theological lines so as to neutralise the binary opposition inherent in love do not convince Jenson, for even God is no stranger to desire:

Whether in relation to God or to one another, gift and desire are; I think, not easily separable. Indeed, I think it is theologically dubious even to say that *God* loves with a purely disinterested *agape*; he may not need us, but does he not *want* us? Moreover, if he loves us as sisters and brothers of the Son, do not, by the orthodox doctrine, the Father and the Son need each other? Precisely to be Father and Son? So that if it is once established that we are inalienable sisters and brothers of the Son, must not the Father indeed need us too? Is not God's love in fact *eros* also?⁴³

This goes some way to explaining why for Jenson God cannot be impassible. It also helps to explain the inherent binary oppositional nature of Father/Son relationships, an issue we will return to shortly. For now we can note the Spirit's indispensable and vital role in solving the human love problem – providing, that is, if human beings are within the life of the church, or are influenced by it:

the Spirit who frees the Father and the Son to love each other, and who thereupon is their love, is the very Spirit who animates the church. In the church, every human third party is animated by that very Spirit who does not fall into mutual bondage with those he frees to love one another.⁴⁴

We return now to the issue of why Jenson is at odds with the consensus view of Father/Son relationships within the Trinity as being one of mutuality, accord and of interdependent relatedness. Jenson contends that there is an inherent oppositional dynamic in the religions of the world, that within polytheistic paganism, the starting point and template of much religion, there are always tales of Gods in competition with one

⁴²Ibid., 75-76.

⁴³Ibid., 76.

⁴⁴Ibid., 85.

another and slaying one another. This same dynamic presents itself in a different form in emanation, the next step up in the evolution of religion. As in Freud's version of the oedipal complex each successive emanantist stage finds it hard to let go of the next. This dynamic intrudes itself also into Father/Son Trinitarian relations.⁴⁵

Enter on the scene then the Spirit of freedom and love:

what rescues the real God the Father and the real God the Son from the Hegelian face-off, from Oedipal mutual bondage, is God the Spirit, whose biblical role is precisely that he is freedom and love. The Spirit intends the Father and the Son, and the Spirit's intention for them is that they shall love one another. The Spirit frees the Father to let the Son go, and so actually to love him. The Spirit frees the Son from servility to the Father, and so actually to love him.⁴⁶

George Hunsinger has commented on the reductionist implications of this for the ontological status of the Father and the Son, for if the Spirit "liberates Father and the Son to love each other"⁴⁷ then this implies that "they were somehow otherwise metaphysically incapable of a fully actual eternal love, as if they were somehow in bondage or prisoners of metaphysical roles in the scheme of panentheistic historicism, as if the Father and the Son represent 'past-imposed conditions' that only their common Spirit can overcome."⁴⁸ Hunsinger goes on from this point to accuse Jenson of a reverse subordinationism in which the three persons of the trinity are unequal in power, dignity and substance because the Spirit has been ranked above the other two, since the Father can only initiate and not complete or fulfil, and the Son can only accept his role as the man born to die on the cross - he lacks freedom because of his dubious pre-existence status. The Spirit trumps them both because the Spirit dwells in the time zone that really matters - the future. As he puts it "The precedence of the future over past and present is the precedence of the infinite Spirit over the finitude of the Father and the Son."⁴⁹

Hunsinger's is an angry essay lacking in scholarly objectivity, which is why Jenson barely

⁴⁵Ibid., 83-84.

⁴⁶Ibid., 84.

⁴⁷ST 1: 156; cf ST 1: 161.

⁴⁸George Hunsinger, "Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*: a review essay, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 2 (2002) 193.

⁴⁹Ibid., 193.

bothered answering his main points in his reply opportunity.⁵⁰ While he raises thought provoking points at various points, here he has overstated the case. If one accepts the Jensonian reckoning of all time as God's time, and assesses his schema on its own terms with the three Trinitarian persons occupying the three poles of time, then the Father and the Son do have sufficient cohesion and density of identity (with some reservations about the pre-existence of Christ). Hunsinger declares his hand in the last paragraph of his essay where he concludes that Jenson's is the last and greatest effort in a forty year project of distinguished pedigree involving Pannenberg, Moltmann, Jungel and Rahner of subordinating the doctrine of God to the doctrine of eschatology. It was an interesting project, but misguided, and it has failed, so there is not further need to pursue this option.⁵¹

Third Article Rebalancing

My conclusion is that while Jenson certainly privileges the future, and does give precedence to the Spirit, this is an exercise in third article rebalancing rather than over balancing. It addresses, amongst other things, a major issue of considerable ecumenical concern – the *filioque* clause. For those of us who long for the western church to be delivered from its Babylonian captivity to this regrettable late innovation Jenson has provided a pneumatology that is a possible way forward for those who find the Spirit's role in the Ambrosian/Augustinian Trinitarian scheme of things to be unsatisfactory.

A succession of ecumenical dialogues and statements have put *filioquists* on the back foot, and Jenson as an ecumenical theologian builds on their work. To mention but one of these influential conversations, perhaps the most important, the Klingenthal Memorandum of 1979, organised by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches – a multilateral commission of Orthodox, Protestants and Roman Catholics. It questioned whether the *filioque* “involves the unbiblical subordination of the Spirit to the Son...(and perhaps is) inadequate as an articulation of a full and balanced doctrine of the Trinity.” It concluded that the traditional Western formula should not be used, “for this would efface

⁵⁰ Robert Jenson, “Response to Watson and Hunsinger.” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 2 (2002): 228-233.

⁵¹Hunsinger, “Review Essay” 200.

the difference in the relationship to the Father and the Son.” It offered several alternatives which, “well deserve to be given attention and consideration in future discussion.” These were:

- The Spirit proceeds from the Father of the Son
- The Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son
- The Spirit proceeds from the Father and receives from the Son
- The Spirit proceeds from the Father and rests on the Son
- The Spirit proceeds from the Father and shines out through the Son

It concluded that, “the original form of the third article of the creed, without the *filioque*, should everywhere be recognised as the normative one and restored.”⁵²

Within this context Jenson's re-vitalised pneumatology can be seen as something of a redressing of and catch up on a long overdue deficit in western third order theological thinking.

There is however an odd caveat in Jenson's description of the relational freeing up work of the Spirit within Trinitarian relations that appears to work against his heightened role and elevated significance for the Spirit:

The Spirit is both the one who intends the Father and the Son to love one another *and* in classical doctrine is himself the love between them: within God the Spirit exhausts himself in the gift he gives – here is the moment of truth in Eastern doctrines of self-emptying. After all, spirit is always *someone's* spirit and nothing else; the Holy Spirit is the Spirit *of* the Father and the Son whom the Father lets love one another, and he is nothing else at all.⁵³

The Spirit of freedom and love is the architect of the future, the generator of the surprise ending to salvation history, who will find his ego in the faces of the redeemed in the completed and perfected *totus Christus*. How then can he be also the self-emptying gift giver, who is 'nothing else at all?' Here is a conundrum to be worked out in the conclusion to this thesis.

⁵²See Lukas Vischer, ed., *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ*, 9-10, 15, 18, cited in A. Edward Sicienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 208-209.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 84-5.

Conclusion

The central concern of this thesis is about the way in which the Holy Spirit as the 'Lord of possibility' will bring about a deeply satisfying end to the human story that will surprise both the recipients of salvation, and the other two Triune persons.

In this chapter we investigated the *proprium* of the Spirit under the title of the Spirit of freedom and love, and offered a summary of Jenson's conception of the Spirit as that of relationship initiator, repairer and reconciler. We noted that the Spirit will find his ego within the faces of the redeemed in the fully realised *totus Christus*. We then considered the Spirit's relationship with the church, particularly the way in which the church's transition from association to community depends upon its animation by the Spirit, who makes it much more than the individual spirits of its members. We considered also the way in which Jenson's tight connection between the Trinity and the developing life of the church has the potential to thin out the life of God should the church's fortunes be radically diminished.

Much of the chapter was taken up with the subject of intra-Trinitarian relations since insertion into the life of the Trinity is both the goal of salvation and the content of the End. Our attention was drawn to the issue of the pre-existence of Christ, who, in Robert Jenson's Christology, has a somewhat shadowy mode of existence in the pages of the Old Testament. The Logos acquires a growing density of ontological existence as he transitions through successive modalities of existence until resurrection establishes him as indwelling Lord of the church, which in many ways seems to be his most powerful mode of existence. While the completed and perfected *totus Christus* will arguably be his finest hour this is in fact the disclosure time of the Spirit, who will animate that body, while at the same time enhancing and elevating the ontological status of the individual members of it, thereby disclosing himself within their collective existence.

We noted again the relentlessly ecclesial focus of Jenson's theology as our attention turned to the Son as co-creator of the world. He was involved in this beginning of the world process because the point of creation is to bring about the church. We concluded that

Jenson gives insufficient attention to the doctrine of creation, an inherent weakness in a theological system that steers clear of accounts of protological origins.

The chapter then engaged with the issue of subject object relations within the Trinity. The Spirit's role in overcoming the temporary gap of alienation and apparent estrangement between the Father and the Son in the events of Good Friday and Holy Saturday was appreciatively explored.

The chapter concluded with a consideration of Jenson's account of inherent binary oppositional patterns both within the Godhead and within human relationships. The Spirit's vital role in overcoming these relational patterns of deadlocked estrangement was perceived as his prime function. Andrew Burgess' criticisms of Jenson's use of the Hegelian master slave parable within the Triune relationships were discounted. It was concluded that Jenson has offered a thoughtful and insightful analysis of binary oppositional patterns within contemporary western culture. Finally, the chapter came to the conclusion that Robert Jenson's account of the *proprium* of the Spirit is a timely and useful exercise in third article rebalancing, while at the same time pointing to an apparent contradiction in Jenson's account of the Spirit's role and status at the End. If the Spirit empties himself in reconciling the Father and the Son, and in completing and perfecting the *totus Christus*, how can the eschaton be at the same time his point of maximal disclosure? This issue is to be wrestled to the ground in the conclusion of the thesis.

Chapter 4

Evil and Eschatology

Stating the Problem

We have noted in a number of places how closely God as stream of events is intertwined with human history in the proposals of Robert Jenson. The God who is only known as economic Trinity is located within the development of salvation history as these events continue to play out. Furthermore we noted that since Jenson rejects the doctrine of Divine impassibility he believes that God is sensitive to, influenced by, and has the potentiality to be changed by his interactions with human beings. This is saying more than the traditional Christian understanding that in intercessory prayer God allows human beings to consult with him about his plans, and to make requests about the unfolding pattern of Divine providence. It goes beyond this role of lending human beings a sympathetic ear, and being prepared to entertain the possibility of changing his mind about what he intends to do. It alleges that God sympathises with human beings to the point of suffering with them. What they do and say can move him to extremes of emotion, can make things happen in him.

There are a number of follow on theological difficulties with this point of view. In this chapter we confine ourselves to the issue of whether Robert Jenson has opened up God to the possibility of radical evil flowing into his being as a result of an inappropriate proximity to the nastier aspects of human history. David Bentley Hart gets to the heart of the matter when he writes:

If God's identity is constituted in his triumph over evil, then evil belongs eternally to his identity, and his goodness is not goodness as such but a reaction, an activity that requires the goad of evil to come into full being. All of history is the horizon of this drama, and since no analogical interval is allowed to be introduced between God's eternal being as Trinity and God's act as trinity in time, all of history is this identity: every painful death of a child, every casual act of brutality, all war, famine, pestilence, disease, murder...all are moments in the identity of God, resonances within the event of his being, aspects of the occurrence of his essence: all of this is the crucible in which God comes into his own elected reality.¹

¹David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 165 166.

Though he did not have Robert Jenson specifically in mind Paul McPartlan nevertheless spells out the follow on consequences for Jenson's doctrine of God in one biting sentence: "this implies that God needs the world...it compromises his freedom...it projects history into God...as with Moltmann's crucified God, God comes to need his continual fix of suffering and history to be himself, the true God."²

Although Jenson is an admirer of Hegel it is important to be clear that he does not believe that God is to be identified with the world historical process. What is at issue here is not a claim that God is completely identified with the deep patterns and totalising outcomes of world history. Rather it is a particular difficulty that accompanies theologies that try to resolve theodicy issues by positing a suffering God. In this particular case the key issue is the lack of analogical interval between God's being and occurrences of radical evil in human history that have the potential to provoke changes in the Divine being, and to invade the life of the world to come. We noted earlier Robert Jenson's insistence that sin and evil will be excluded from the life of the world to come. At first glance Jenson does not appear to have provided himself with the resources to protect God and the sunny uplands of eschatological outcomes from the vitiating effects of spiritual evil.

Jenson on Evil

What does Robert Jenson have to say about evil? The Bible treats evil and sin as a major topic and references it many times. The Jenson *oeuvre* does not give it this generous attention, but it is worthwhile briefly outlining what he has to say on the subject. An illuminating paragraph concludes the chapter *Thinking Wickedness* in *On Thinking the Human*:

In classical Augustinian doctrine, evil is pure absence, the darkness where the light of being runs out. The devil is the personal reality of evil: thus there is nothing to him but his deficiencies. The wicked person is the one whose encounter with nothingness in all connections of his or her permeability is such as to make emptiness his or her longed for-milieu, the devil his or her master.³

²Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 159.

³Robert Jenson. *On Thinking the Human: Resolutions of Difficult Notions*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 73.

To unpack this in a little more detail - for Jenson a key characteristic of human beings is their permeability. They are nested within webs of varieties of communities, so the company they keep, and the influences they thereby expose themselves to define who and what they are. To be nested within the Triune persons is to be a Christian, and to be on the path to righteousness, even if different and competing communities tug at their essential loyalty through the siren call of *libido dominandi*. To locate oneself within contexts and communities where *libido dominandi* prevails and where evil waxes strong is to be on the road to becoming a wicked person. The end result of becoming a wicked person is hatred of God because that is what loyalty to evil masters requires.⁴

Jenson is acute and insightful on the predominant expressions of evil in western culture and in the western church. He has a particular dislike of Nietzschean nihilism and its French epigones whose key conclusions are that there is no such thing as meta-narratives, and that "all human intercourse is violence in a metaphysical sense," whatever its "various levels of concealment."⁵ Herein is the love of nothingness, the belief that there is an endless futurity without conclusion or hope of a fulfilled future, that violence is the key theme of this nihilist eschatology in which the human story does not contain meaning or purpose.⁶ In the church this dark side of post-modernism takes the form of antinomianism, with its therapeutic analysis of human moral failure, its easy acceptance of different and irregular lifestyles, and its channelling of the struggle against oppression and evil into the paths of *en courant* identity politics.⁷

Jenson concedes the existence of Satan, that evil has an ontological and personified status. As he puts it "as *God values* the creation, so there seems to be an active and somewhat powerful *subjectivity that despises it*, that hates all being."⁸ The devil is a fallen angel, an evil spirit who wants to be like God, but cannot be since he is a creature. Here Jenson fascinatingly harks back to the Hegelian insight about embodied status in subject/object

⁴ Ibid., 70-71.

⁵ Ibid., 67.

⁶ ST: 219-220, St 2: 147-8

⁷ Jenson, *On Thinking the Human*, 65-6. It is worth taking a look also at ST 2: 133-152 Jenson's chapter on sin in which he analyses sin under the headings of idolatry, lust, injustice and despair.

⁸ ST 2: 130.

relationships, and how this promotes healthy and life giving relationships within the Trinity. Here we may recall that a disembodied consciousness who had humankind in its continual gaze, and would not let humankind look back at it and locate it within creation would be a universal tyrant. This is precisely what the devil tries to do because unlike the angels he refuses to inhabit creation, he wants to assume triune status, but fortunately for humankind he cannot achieve this because he is a creature. In summary the devil “is what we would be could our sin finally and wholly triumph;” he is “pure and utterly compulsive hatred, and nothing else at all.”⁹ His ultimate fate is described thus:

As the pseudopersonification of sin, the loveless liar, he will be cast “into the lake of fire and sulphur,” and that will be that. What his mode of being thereafter will be need not concern us; the universe will be rid of him.¹⁰

It has been worth dwelling on Satan’s status in the Jenson order of things because much of this chapter will discuss evil as privation and nothingness. Yet the Christian assessment of evil includes the other side of the coin – its pernicious dynamism. This Jenson seems to have taken account of, both in his analysis of what mars creation now, and of what will be done about evil in the final eschatological outcome. The quote above that includes the biblical reference Revelation 20: 10, and thus provides Jenson with part of his answer as to how sin and evil will be excluded from the promised End, and the life of the *totus Christus*.

Two Illuminating Possible Solutions

Yet has Jenson given sufficient time or attention to the issue of how God places an analogical interval between himself and radical evil? It is instructive at this point to consider how two heavyweights of twentieth century systematic theology have attempted to extricate themselves from similar difficulties. Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Eberhard Jüngel were both admirers of Karl Barth and were deeply influenced by him, in similar fashion to Robert Jenson. The three of them have carried the Barthian inheritance to uniquely different places. Balthasar and Jüngel appear to have given more attention to the matter at hand here.

⁹ ST 2: 132.

¹⁰ ST 2: 334.

The Balthasarian Solution

Called “the Catholic Barth” Balthasar took seriously Barth's insistence on the eventfulness of God, while at the same time insisting on using ontological categories and traditional catholic language of *substance* and *essence* to talk about God's being. Such metaphysical descriptors of God did not, in his opinion, leave God in a static, immobilised state, but rather made him more lively, and opened up dynamic eschatological possibilities for the redeemed¹¹ The eventfulness of God who shares his Divine plenitude of being with enraptured believers creates by participation a series of dynamic eschatological scenarios for them in the life of the world to come.¹²

Balthasar sails close to the wind in almost denying the immutability and impassibility of God, while at the same time positing a God who becomes deeply involved with the human predicament in his overcoming of sin, suffering and death. His controversial theology of Holy Saturday suggests that in the estrangement between Father and Son from Gethsemane to sealed tomb a potential rupture opens up within the Trinity. As the Son descends into Sheol this creates the possibility also of human estrangement entering the Divine being. Balthasar's defence at this point is interesting.

In considering the life of the Trinity he draws the usual distinction between its inner life, what is called the immanent Trinity, and its external life that is orientated to the human race and the business of its reconciliation and restoration, what is called the economic Trinity. Balthasar wants to maintain the freedom of God over against the creation. Although he is intent on saving the human race, God's inner being is not entirely taken up with the drama of bringing this about – he does not need us to be himself. This is in contrast to Karl Rahner, who insisted that the inner and the outer aspect of God's triune being are integrally related.

¹¹ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama Theological Dramatic Theory Volume 5: The Last Act*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 57, 67.

¹² Balthasar, *Theo-Drama 5*, 396-7, 402, 404, 408, 511.

Balthasar then goes on to say that in the dramatic events of the Paschal Tridium the Father and the Son remained in intimate communion with one another within the inner life of the immanent Trinity while at the same time being estranged within the dimension of the economic Trinity as it was engaged with the consequences of Golgotha and beyond. They could operate at these two levels of being because the immanent Trinity is not totally identified with the economic Trinity.¹³

Far from collapsing the Trinity Balthasar sees this Trinitarian event of the cross as a divine redefining of what love is. David Luy uses a wonderful linguistic metaphor to say that the cross represents the translation of the inner Trinitarian life of God into the language of the world.¹⁴ As God speaks his language of Divine love in to the world it takes shape and form in the events of Christ's death on the cross. Given the way the world is, and given how God defines intimacy, these events of innocent suffering love are the expression of what true love is.

Balthasar then takes this redefining of what intimacy is a step further. He maintains that there is an unfinished part of creation that has been generated by humankind's rejection of God. Christ's mission is to complete it, which he accomplishes by his descent into death and hell. As Christ encounters "this unfinished part of the creation" he completes it by drawing it into the newly available space of his empty self where it can be infused with the life-giving power of the Trinitarian circuit. Thus the separation of the Son from the Father in death only intensifies their communion within the immanent Trinity. There is a pneumatological dimension to this because the Son's allowing of a distance to open up between himself and the Father, makes it possible at the same time for the Spirit to come forth from the Father and enter the Son through this bond of love and obedience. This gift of the Spirit is what fills the Son with eternal life.¹⁵

¹³ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theodrama Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume 4: The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 362.

¹⁴ David Luy, "The Aesthetic Collision: Hans Urs Von Balthasar on the Trinity and the Cross," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13:2 (2011): 167.

¹⁵ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord 7 Theology: The New Covenant*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press,

This defence is of course not possible for Jenson because he has denied the possibility of an immanent Trinity as either a subject of theological investigation, or as a useful descriptor of the life of God. He cannot and will not allow the possibility of a division between the inner and outer life of God. The Trinity it would appear must take the consequences of its close identification with the world of human affairs and the apparently follow on exposure to human mendacity.

However, as we consider the issue of whether God suffers Balthasar and Jenson move closer together. Balthasar wants to maintain that he believes in the immutability of God.¹⁶ He prefers such a traditional descriptor for his position so that he will not be misunderstood as waywardly speculative or off centre with orthodoxy in what he is about to put forward. And he is clear that God is happy and at peace within his inner life, he is not needy in his relationship with the world. However in his desire to do justice to the kind of God spoken of in the Bible, and in accordance with his view of the liveliness of God, his event-fullness, he will find it necessary to go beyond the rather static view of God that has often gone with the traditional doctrine of his immutability.

This is after all a God who is open to being touched by dialogue with creatures, and who is available to human beings through what he calls, "the *analogia adorationis* in which God gives his children power over his will and heart."¹⁷ The creation of free creatures capable of sin has opened up a vulnerability in God because from then on the divine love can be scoffed at by sin.¹⁸ God can be said to suffer when the reckless generosity of his love encounters a calculating self-interestedness and self-protectedness on the part of those to whom it is directed.

2008), 226, 234, 362-65, 389.

¹⁶ Gerard F. O'Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 42-43, 176-177.

¹⁷ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, (Austin: Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 149.

¹⁸ O'Hanlon, *Immutability*, 32.

The way the drama of salvation unfolds continues this theme of Divine vulnerability. The cross is the most dramatic example of an historical event that affects God, and is the end point of an incarnation that presupposes an event in God, which affects and changes God.¹⁹ As O'Hanlon puts it, "In this drama the divine Son and the Holy Spirit not only approve of and execute the plan of the Father; in fact they conceive of this plan in perfect unity with him. The plan involves the suffering of the Son in order that this world might in the end be judged "very good."²⁰ This suffering is not the Son's simple acquiescence in the Father's proposal – it is the Son's proposal too, and the Son offers himself to accomplish it. And this proposal by the Son, humanly speaking, touches the heart of the Father more deeply than the sin of the world does. In this way one may speak of a wound of love in God from before creation.

Traditional views of the atonement have often limited the suffering of the Son by stating that Christ only suffered in his human nature, but Balthasar declines to stop short there, and firmly insists that the divine Logos is the subject who unites the two distinct natures in Christ. So it is that the suffering of the world is drawn directly in to the heart of God. While this makes for a powerful antidote to the alienation and distress of humankind it appears to directly undermine the immutability of God. How does Balthasar get himself out of this bind?

He does so in a daring manner by using that part of his *descensus* theology that causes the most concern, namely the absolute, infinite distance that opens up between the Father and the Son and which is the same time united, bridged and held open by the Spirit. In the same way the distance that opens up between the Divine persons is the space in which all other inner-worldly distances are contained, embraced and overcome, including the reality and consequences of sin. So Balthasar posits a Trinitarian God who is so lively and dynamically acting that he can allow sin to affect him, "without in any sense forcing or dominating him."²¹ Thus the distance that opens up between the Father and the Son in the

¹⁹ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theodrama 4: The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 206), 289, 466-73.

²⁰ O'Hanlon, *Immutability*, 33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

passion is in fact a special form of intimacy such as the world has never known. What this speaks of is the relational style of Divine persons who are so self-giving that their mutual intimacy can contain and surpass all loves and intimacies, and this includes the adverse effects of humans who refuse to love God back.

So it is that Balthasar can speak of a supra-kenosis or supra suffering in God, a something like suffering. And he goes on to say that God has a supra-mutability about him.²² This is a kind of having your cake and eating it option in which God is both free from the world yet can be affected by it without being overcome by it. Immutability has been redefined.

Here it is worth recalling what I wrote in chapter three about the similarities between Jenson and Balthasar in their consideration of the Spirit's role in overcoming the apparent estrangement and distance between the Son and the Father in the events of the Paschal Tridium. "Jenson's pneumatology of renovation and reconciliation in the events constellating around Golgotha is a gentler version of this, but it shares with Balthasar a willingness to address the crucial and indispensable issues of the Father's surrender of the Son, its implications for intra-Trinitarian life, and the reality that the full depth of human alienation from God was in some sense brought within the Divine nature to be neutralised there."²³ However, Jenson does not tell us how the full depth of human alienation is neutralised within the Divine nature, or how the Triune being can firewall himself off against the destructive effects of suffering shared around within the Triune persons. It is instructive at this point to consider how Eberhard Jüngel deals with this issue.

The Jüngel Solution

Jüngel defines evil as nothingness. He writes of:

the annihilating power of nothingness which, in its absolutely undefined and empty state as a negatively virulent vacuum without a nameable position, in this its ontological placelessness, creates for itself a phantomlike attraction, an

²² Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 23-24, 35.

²³ Chapter 3, 13.

annihilating undertow into itself, into nothingness. Nothingness does not let itself be located. It is undetermined. And for that very reason, that nothingness has no place and is undetermined, it leads to chaotic consequences. It absorbs being until it is full, so to speak, by annihilating what exists. But because it takes being into itself only on the attraction of annihilation, it never *has* being. And because it never has being, it must constantly seize hold of being in the act of annihilation. Because it has nothing, its egoism is total, and it wants everything.²⁴

Having defined evil as nothingness Jüngel goes on to define how God deals with evil through the death and resurrection of Jesus. In these two crucial events God involves himself with nothingness by struggling against it, and in so doing gives it a place, a location within himself which identifies it for what it is, and thus depotentiates it:

In that God identified himself with the dead Jesus, he located nothingness *within* the divine life. But by making for nothingness a place within divine being, God took away from it the chaotic effect of its phantomlike attraction. In bearing annihilation within himself, God proves himself to be the victor over nothingness, and he ends the negative attraction of "hell, death, and the devil." By proving himself to be this victor, God reveals what he truly and ultimately is. God is that one who can bear and does bear, can suffer and does suffer, in his being the annihilating power of nothingness, even the negation of death, without being annihilated by it. In God nothingness loses its negative attraction and thus its annihilating effect. Once it is taken up into God's being, it creatively sets for itself a new function. It receives its own *determination* and thus loses its abstract and its phantomly attraction.²⁵

For Jüngel this locating of nothingness within the Divine being is an act of Divine self-determination. It shows that God is the *one who exists for others*. "In this self-determination for the sake of others, this peculiar dialectic of being and nonbeing, of life and death, takes place, which as pacified dialectic is called *love*."²⁶

²⁴ Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, translated by Darrell L. Gruder (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1983), 219.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

What Jüngel has done is to create a space within God to contain the nihil, a theological container as it were within which the destructive effects of sin and evil are held, named and neutralised. A follow-on result of this is that the nothingness that wants to suck all existent vitality into itself is excluded from the life of the world to come, it cannot enter the eschatological realm because it does not lodge permanently in God's being. Jüngel has generated the kind of analogical interval between evil and God's being that David Bentley Hart finds missing in Jenson's theology. Thus the onus is back on Jenson to say how radical evil does not enter God's being despite his high exposure to it given the way God is an unfolding stream of events proceeding in close congruity with history. Since this God lives in and proceeds from the future, the future that the redeemed will one day inhabit, it would be helpful if Jenson could say how radical evil cannot enter and poison the dwelling place of the *totus Christus*.

Here we offer an observation and a speculation. Balthasar and Jüngel both have a theological system in which the cross has central place. This is their chief resource for explaining how God deals with sin, suffering, evil and death. To quote what I wrote in Chapter three of this work, "Thus the overcoming of human sin on the cross, or the notion of Christ taking the place of sinful humanity on the cross, does not figure prominently in his estimation of the significance of Golgotha, for the defeating of sin is not a major priority here."²⁷ Robert Jenson has de-emphasised the cross in his theological vision. This leaves him less equipped to deal with the issue at hand.

We are left speculating how Jenson might explain the way in which his suffering and changeable God remains uncontaminated by evil, and manages to exclude it from the fulfilled future. We have noted before how much weight the Jenson proposals put on the role of the Holy Spirit as completer and perfecter of salvation. The Spirit of spontaneity and surprise has great tactical agility in responding to and outflanking human refusals and spiritual evil. Might Jenson be counting on the Holy Spirit to outwit the wiles of radical evil, to bend the rules of Divine and human freedom if necessary to his own advantage to bring about the promised End in which only the good, the beautiful and the

²⁷ Chapter 3, 13-14.

true are present? Just as he supposes that the Father and the Son must trust the Holy Spirit to accomplish this in his own way and in his own good time, are the readers of Jenson's theology also required to make a similar act of faith?

The Ontological Distinction between Creator and Creatures

If the Spirit is able to bring about such an End he will be struggling against a fundamental problem that dogs all theologians who argue for a suffering God. Robert Jenson is of course one such, and I am not aware that he has resolved the problem, which can be stated in this way.

Where does evil come from, where is it located in the constitution of things, and how does God relate to evil? Classical theology, particularly of the Thomist variety, has always been clear that evil is located within and contained within the created order. Although it belongs there it is nevertheless not lodged within the very stuff of reality, within as it were the very structures of being and matter and the world. In fact it has no existent reality, since it is the privation or absence of a good that should and could be present in it. Evil comes about because human beings misuse the good things of the world. They misappropriate and distort what is to be shared, or is to be used in a self-controlled and prudent manner, or should be shunned as unhelpful and a threat to their integrity. Evil thus has the phantomlike nature that Jöngel writes of, always promising what it cannot deliver, and always deceiving in what it offers. Furthermore it belongs resolutely and unalterably on the human and worldly side of the line.

There is a clear distinction between the creator and the creatures he made, between the Divine and human orders of reality, between heaven and earth. Although God made the world and sustains it in being he is not of the world he made. This clear distinction and barrier means that evil cannot cross the line to invade and infect the uncreated order, where God dwells as the quintessence of goodness. Of course this is an ontological distinction between God and the created order, and it is precisely these ontological

categories of thinking about God that Robert Jenson has ruled out of order. It is precisely here that the problem comes, for such a distinction protects God from being contaminated by evil, while at the same time being the principal positive reason why God does not suffer, a conclusion that Jenson does not want to come to as being unbiblical and immobilist in its effects on the doctrine of God.

Process theologians, panentheists and supporters of a suffering God (Jenson would only admit to being the last and latter) pay a heavy price in downwind philosophical and theological consequences for their doctrine of God. The consequences are as follows. Divine suffering places God and everything that exists on the same plane in the same ontological order because God can only suffer if he exists in the same reality field, the same order of existence as everything else, including the created order. If this is where he is located then it calls into question the doctrine of creation since God is as a result just one of the created things. A further consequence is that evil becomes ontological in its essential nature, it assumes a far heavier weighting in its nature and in its consequences, on a par with the ancient religious and philosophical dualisms. This makes evil a giant because it is now located within the fundamental structures of reality. To have consented to evil, to have co-operated with it in even a mild form, is not just to be morally impaired, but also to be ontologically damaged.

A Diminished God

There are also serious consequences for the being of God. If God suffers then he is diminished. Sin and evil cause suffering, they are a privation of some good or perfection, and if this is at work within God then his fundamental nature as pure goodness, pure act, fully actualized being turns out to be not true. He becomes a limited being, a small God, perhaps not God at all, but just a benign, struggling spiritual influence for good in the universe. This cannot be, for the truth is that God is pure act, *ipsum esse*, fully actualised being. This is why Bentley Hart's criticism of Jenson is valid. God does not need evil to provoke him to further development of his being, nor is it possible for evil to have that

effect upon him. Bentley Hart has made this very clear in his latest book *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*, where he writes, "God cannot change over time...as he would then be dependent upon the relation between some unrealised potentiality within himself and some fuller actuality somehow 'beyond' himself into which he may yet evolve; again, he would be a conditional being."²⁸ He then goes on to state, "God's knowledge of something created is not something separate from his eternal act of creating that thing; so he is not modified by that knowledge in the way that we are necessarily modified when we encounter things outside ourselves."²⁹

This also explains why Jenson's criticism of the God of classical Theism as being a lazy God of frozen, immobilist tendencies is off the mark. Thomas Weinandy gets to the heart of matter when he writes:

God is unchangeable not because he is inert or static like a rock, but for just the opposite reason. He is so dynamic, so active that no change can make him more active. He is act pure and simple...God's immutability is not opposed to his vitality. Nor need one hold together in some dialectical fashion his immutability and his vibrancy, as if in spite of being immutable he is nonetheless dynamic. Rather it is precisely God's immutability as *actus purus* that guarantees and authenticates his pure vitality and absolute dynamism.³⁰

This is in contrast to human beings who are the ones with the low wattage relational and warm affectivity capacities. They are the ones who are short on passion, relational vibrancy and loving dynamism.

God cannot become more passionate or loving by actualising, as human beings do, some further potential and so become more passionate or loving...God has no self-constituting relational potential which needs to be actualised in order to make him more relational...Because human beings are not fully relational, they must relate

²⁸ David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 135.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁰ Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press 2000), 124.

and be related to one another through mediating actions – hugs and kisses. They must actualise their latent and inert relational potential and so positively become related to one another through their actions. This brings about changes in human beings.³¹

Thus the flow of relational dynamism proceeds from God to human creatures, God is so relationally alive that he does not need to be provoked into further relational development. He combines in himself both complete otherness and the passionate vitality of pure goodness:

The persons of the Trinity need not, and cannot do this... Thus... to be related to the Trinity in whatever manner, is to be related in the most intimate and dynamic manner. No other relationship could exceed their vitality and intimacy.³²

David Bentley Hart expresses this another way when he writes:

In the end, the crucial question is whether any of the relations that finite contingencies have to God's infinite absolute being require alterations in God himself; and the traditional assumption is that God is not like some finite bounded substance that undergoes change as a result of external forces but is the transcendent source of the actuality of all substances and forces, and so he does not receive anything from "outside" himself, for everything is always in him and already realised in his own essence in an immeasurably more eminent way. More simply said, the finite does not add to the infinite but merely expresses the power of the infinite in a limited mode.³³

Thus to sum up:

- 1) There is a clear distinction between the world and the Divine order;
- 2) Evil is located only within the world, and is a limited reality since it feeds on good;
- 3) A suffering God is a diminished God, since he must inhabit the same order of reality as the world, and must allow evil to work within his inner being since this is

³¹ Ibid., 127, 128.

³² Ibid., 129.

³³ Bentley Hart, *Being, Consciousness, Bliss*, 139.

- the cause of suffering, thus making him less than he could and should be;
- 4) The effect of this is to valorise evil, to make it more damaging in its effects since it is now located within the very stuff of reality both in the worldly and the Divine order, and can now enter the Divine being with devastating consequences;
 - 5) The God of classical theism cannot be provoked into further development of his being by interactions with humans or with evil. He is fully actualised, a vital and dynamic being, in contrast to the limited and only latent potentiality of human beings;
 - 6) The God who is wholly other is both immune to evil and suffering, and is thus wholly available to human beings because he is able to empathise with them and assist them without being trapped in their dilemmas or reduced by their limitations. A metaphysical way of thinking about God is a help and not a hindrance since it makes God more vital.

Radical Evil and the Church

So far this chapter has focussed on the issues of the possibility of human history in its negative aspects entering the being of God, and thus having follow on eschatological consequences. It has also focused on the issue of the origins of evil, and the way in which a suffering God is a diminished God. However, there is another dimension to this issue that also requires attention – the consequences of radical evil entering the life of the Church.

In Chapter three we noted the extent to which Jenson has valorised the significance of the church giving it a dense ecclesial texture exceeding the consensus of mainstream Roman Catholic ecclesiology. Protestant ecclesiology has been deeply reluctant to give the church this kind of theological weighting, in part because Protestantism was born out of an ecclesiological crisis in the western church. In its view the church of the Borgia papacy, the Avignon papacy, and the Inquisition required the Reformation and the emergence of a reformed catholicity to put the church right. Protestantism also remains keenly aware of the continuing possibility of human sinfulness and satanic wiles entering the life of the

church with devastating consequences. A Reich church, or an Apartheid approving church, or a church compromised by the complacent acceptance of the sexual revolution cannot be described as the true church of God. Nor can it be assumed to be nesting the Triune presence by an over pressing of the Body metaphor from the Pauline epistles. Perhaps typical of Protestant ecclesiology is Barth's occasionalist view of the church – sometimes, occasionally, it rises to its best game, its truest self, and is an appropriate vehicle for God's purposes in the world – but often, and usually, it is far from that, and lapses back into its typical compromised self.³⁴

To some extent Jenson has tried to take account of the church's compromised state. He writes:

Since believers present deification is their habitation of the gate of heaven, it is the difference between the church and the Kingdom that must be grasped. A first step is to remind ourselves that the church is what she is, and the believers in the church are what they are, only in anticipation, and so in separation from their own truth. The people of God cannot yet assemble. This people is the temple of the Holy Spirit precisely in a longing for a sanctity she now constantly loses hold of. The polity of God still battles with other principalities and powers and is invaded by them. The church is now the body of Christ only in that within herself she confronts the body of Christ as an other than herself. Believers existing communion in the Trinity is the painful intrusion there of a plurality of still decidedly self-centred persons. And perhaps most decisively, the church of Jews and gentiles is still a separate community from Israel according to the flesh.³⁵

³⁴ For an alternative take on Barth's ecclesiology see Christopher Holmes thoughtful and well-argued paper "The Church and the Presence of Christ: Defending Actualist Ecclesiology" in *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 3 (2012), 268-280. He argues that Barth's dynamic event oriented Christology gives rise to a concrete ecclesiology for Christ always wills to be present with his apostles and his people in a concrete form. In this asymmetric relationship it is Christ's echo, it has an instrumental nature as the place where Christ's saving acts operate effectively in relation to those who respond to the gospel, while at the same time being the earthly historical existence of Christ, the place where Christ eloquently speaks of himself through the Scriptures. Thus the church cannot exist only occasionally or spasmodically. However, one is left pondering a key quote of Barth's, "She is not the church, she becomes the church again and again." Karl Barth, *The Knowledge and Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 160.

³⁵ *ST* 2: 323.

Despite this acknowledgement of the power of *libido dominandi* in the life of the church Jenson cannot concede its insidious internal effects too far because of other strong theological commitments in his ecclesiology. His scathing critique of western culture obliges him to create strong boundaries between the church and its surrounding society and culture. The corrupting and insidious influences of the culture cannot ultimately vitiate the life of the church, although he concedes that it is a process that he believes is very much at work at present, thus undermining the true nature of the church. The church must be reckoned to be true to itself because it is the crown of creation, its existence is the reason God brought the world in to existence. Furthermore Christ resides there having risen into its collective life after the resurrection. This is where God is available to the world, where he may be found, where the “now” of salvation known in Jesus Christ reaches out to develop the process of salvation in believers.

Since the second person of the Trinity resides within the life of the church we can note a possible line of defence that Jenson could adopt to the possibility of evil infiltrating the Divine being and the life of the world to come. Such a sharp demarcation between church and surrounding culture could mean that the world can go to hell in a hand basket while the church sails majestically on, untouched in its inner core of true purpose, and thus becomes in itself the insulation point between God and radical evil. Its robust ecclesiology and Trinitarian invested life would make it an antiseptic against infiltrating evil. Its existence anyway is the point of history, its boundaries enclose where the action is in God’s eyes, and the world to some extent is a backdrop to its high profile existence. This is the part of the world that matters in God’s eyes, and if its life excludes radical evil then God too is insulated against it.

Here two counter arguments come to mind, ones that have to some extent already been discussed in this work. What if the church apostatises? Jenson believes some churches may be on the brink of doing this, or may have already crossed the threshold into apostasy, particularly in North America. Yet Jenson has an answer to this. God will lop off these parts off the vine, will withdraw his Shekinah presence from them, as he did from the Temple in the time of Ezekiel, so that they become not the church.

What if the church becomes so diminished in numbers, becomes so vitiated by the attrition of indifference and secularism that it effectively ceases to exist as an organised entity? Does this leave God at the mercy of a casually contemptuous or totally unknowing of him by human creation, so that his existential buffer zone is removed? Here too Jenson has a possible counter argument. Just as in the time of Ezekiel when the faithful remnant diminished to a very small number, a chastened and purified small group from whom the Yahweh only tradition could become the seedbed of a renewed Jewish religion, so too a small number of the faithful on whom God's favour rests can become the nucleus of a renewed church. The church could become as few as the tiny house churches that received the Pauline epistles yet this would be enough for God's life to be adequately present within it, and so still be an ecclesial Berlin wall against radical evil.

Three Buffers

There is an additional resource that Jenson might deploy with particular reference to preventing evil entering the fulfilled future of the Kingdom. In chapter two we discussed the three ontological barriers that maintain Christ's separation from the *totus Christus*.³⁶ In that discussion the primary focus was on clarifying whether Jenson had put sufficient space between Christ as second identity of the Trinity and Christ as *totus Christus* to prevent Christ in his second modality simply dissolving into the community. The points made there are important for the way in which Christ might distance himself from toxic elements in the here and now partially fulfilled life of the *totus Christus*. This is particularly the case with the first buffer, the fact that Christ's robust risen presence in the church is through the medium of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Thus he is in its midst, sustaining it, inspiring it and feeding it with his risen life, while at the same time not being completely identified with it in every detail.

³⁶ Chapter 3, 10-11.

However, the second and third buffers are particularly significant for their potential capacity to filter out the infiltration of evil into the fulfilled life of the *totus Christus* as it makes the transition from *Gesellschaft* to *Gemeinschaft*, and enters the beatitude of the triune life. The second buffer is the way in which Jenson uses the Scriptural metaphor of bride for the church so that the risen Christ as groom is clearly distinguished from his marriage partner. The two are sharply distinguished from one another, both in the present life of the church, and at the End when Christ brings his bride with him to live within the beatitude of the Triune persons. Here the third buffer comes in to play for at that highly desired End point the Divine life will so move the life of the redeemed as to clearly distinguish them from one another as distinct identities, while at the same time demarcating Christ off from them. It is worth quoting Jenson at this point. "Christ is and remains the second identity of the community as one only; yet he and the community he brings with him into the life of the Trinity are one and the same "whole Christ" ...Nevertheless, the relation between Christ and the church is the prototype of my relation to my body, so that analogies can be drawn: just as I am my body yet can stand over against my body to discipline it or harm it or suffer it or enjoy it, so Christ is the church yet stands over against the church to discipline and shape and suffer and enjoy it."³⁷ Thus there is a degree of helpful separation between Christ and his body and bride even at the End.

Are the Buffers Sufficient?

While it is helpful that Robert Jenson has provided three degrees of separation between Christ and his church the only gain in my opinion is to prevent Christ dissolving in to the *Totus Christus*. The case made out by Thomas Weinandy on behalf of Thomas Aquinas and the advocates of classical theism in the preceding section cannot be answered by the Jenson proposals. By refusing to allow metaphysical or ontological ways of thinking about God, by denying the Trinity an immanent or inner life, by closely identifying God with the unfolding events of human history as two streams of interweaving teleological

³⁷ Robert Jenson, "Christ as Culture 1: Christ as Polity," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (November 2003), 325.

events, by insisting on a suffering God Jenson has inserted God into the limiting dimensions of the world order in which evil thereby becomes an elevated reality. Such a God is not sufficient to protect himself against radical evil. Jenson may insist that sin, suffering and death will not be present in the life of the world to come, but I cannot see how they can be excluded given the above.

The Final Judgement

Towards the end of *Systematic Theology 2* Jenson includes a chapter on *The Last Judgement*. Here he writes, "When history is taken into the Kingdom, all its accumulated wrongs must be rectified."³⁸ He quotes with approval Jonathan Edwards that this will include the resolution of causes and controversies between the nations, between the generations, and between ethnic groups of conquerors and the conquered. The Son will also exercise his judicial power over his Spouse the church. "The Final Judgement will be the rectification of the community of God's people by bringing them into exact concert with the triune community and its righteousness, as this is defined by Christ's death and resurrection."³⁹ This will result in the members of the *totus Christus* enjoying the blessedness of being unable to sin since the entangling and opposed communities of *libido dominandi* will have been abolished and can no longer compete for the loyalty of the faithful. The great scandal and sorrow of the division between church and faithful Judaism will be abolished as the eschatological detour is ended with Christ as head of his reunited body. The Last Judgement will bring about a dramatic closure to history, thus delivering humanity from the nightmare of a post-modernist futurity that will go on and on without closure or meaning.

On the face of it Jenson appears to have found an effective barrier to the irruption of radical evil into the transformed life of the Kingdom. The Last Judgement brings evil to an end, resolves the contradictions it has introduced into the structure of reality, rebalances

³⁸ *ST 2*: 325.

³⁹ *ST 2*: 326.

the distortions it has brought into the structures of being, and cleanses and purifies the church to be what it ought to be. The problem lies with the kind of God Jenson postulates, and whether this God has the heft to deliver the Last Judgement and to thereby halt radical evil in its tracks. Jenson's economic Trinity is on the wrong side of the ontological line to be and do all that. As previously discussed he is a suffering God located within the travails of suffering sinful humanity and is therefore unable to be wholly other, and to judge and cleanse it from a transcending distance.

It is worth referencing John Webster at this point in what he calls the "backward reference" of the economy of God which obliges theologians to say something about the source of God's dynamic saving energies. As he puts it, "God's outer works are not real relations between himself and creatures, but the overflow of God's wholly realised life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."⁴⁰ Christopher Holmes comments on this reference that, "without the 'backward reference' little recourse is available for resisting the immanentizing tendencies of contemporary theology and for doing descriptive justice to the biblically attested completeness of God's inner life...it is necessary, on the basis of God's loving self-disclosure *in* freedom, to give an account of God as one whose identity is forever secure, intact, and complete in relationship to what God does."⁴¹

Robert Jenson's version of God is not "secure, intact, and complete" in his essential being because he has only a forward reference, a future orientation, which means that he is shaped by and vulnerable to the developing story of human history. His saving works towards the human race are not an excess of his fully developed life that always was what it is. Rather they are "real relations between himself and creatures," thus putting him on a par with creatures, fully immanent within their world, and thus incapable of standing over against it to judge it, purify it, and to edit out the vitiating effects of radical evil. He

⁴⁰ John Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology," in *The Domain of the Word* (London: T&T Clark, 2012) 143.

⁴¹ Christopher Holmes, "The Aseity of God as a Material Evangelical Concern" *Journal of Reformed Theology* 8 (2014): 2, 3.

cannot stop them invading the life of the world to come because they have provoked aspects of his being.

Conclusion

This appreciative reader of Jenson has struggled in this chapter to provide Jenson with a reasoned counter argument to David Bentley-Hart's accusation. He has been at a disadvantage because Jenson has not to his knowledge directly addressed this issue in the *Systematics*.

Jenson's analysis of evil in western culture and in the western church was outlined and reckoned to be insightful and apposite. His well-rounded consideration of evil as not just privation but also pernicious dynamism was acknowledged. In this connection his belief in the existence of the devil and his habitual style of operation was considered to be accurate and true. The logging of the devil's ultimate fate as outlined in the book of Revelation was thought to be a possible future resource in dealing with Bentley Hart's charge.

We have noted the way in which Balthasar and Jüngel have provided for themselves possible answers to the problem of evil and eschatology, rather wishing that Jenson had done the same. We observed that Jenson cannot utilise the Balthasar solution because he does not permit a distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity, or allow the ontological and metaphysical modes of thinking about God that Balthasar combines with a commitment to Barth's way of describing the eventfulness of God. Jüngel's positing of a container within God to neutralise the nihil was noted with interest and appreciation. The absence of such a Jenson solution was noted and regretted. It was observed that both Balthasar and Jüngel are theologians of the cross, that Jenson is not, and that this has put him at a disadvantage in this respect.

We then outlined the distinction between creator and creatures, and came to the conclusion that Jenson's commitment to a suffering and changeable God who is not wholly other and is not a wholly actualised being opens up a fatal weakness in his doctrine of God. Such a God has all the disadvantages and limitations of the God of process theology, and is vulnerable to the enhanced status of evil in this way of reckoning reality.

We tried to extricate Jenson from this dilemma by recalling the three buffers between Christ and the *totus Christus*, but came to the conclusion that these merely differentiated Christ from the *totus Christus*. They did not firewall him or the *totus Christus* off from radical evil.

We also considered whether Jenson's consideration of the Last Judgment provided an eschatological barrier against the transmission of radical evil into the Kingdom. We concluded that it did not because the lack of backward reference to God's original complete, intact and secure being from before time began put him on a par with suffering humanity, and so denied him the capacity to carry out such a cleansing judgment.

Conclusion

Content Filled Eschatology

In the introduction we noted that Robert Jenson's *Systematics* are motivated in large part by a desire to get away from the contentless eschatology of the Bultmann proposals, a theologian who had greatly interested him in his youth. Jenson is part of a movement of future oriented systematics in the twentieth century, perhaps its last and greatest exponent.¹ Has he delivered on his promise to provide a content filled eschatology, to say what can be said about what human creatures can expect at the promised End?

In the judgement of this writer he has. To briefly rehearse the points made in the introduction – at the promised End:

1. The Church and Torah observant Judaism will be reunited;
2. All causes and controversies will be decided by the supreme Judge;
3. Human beings will not be able to sin any more;
4. The promised future must include the Trinity;
5. It will be a polity since it will be a political achievement described in political metaphors;
6. Its shape and content will not contradict the 10 commandments;
7. The universe will continue to be necessary as the stage for the fulfilment of the story of God with his people, though with the difference that matter will have a raised and elevated quality;
8. The appearance of the new spiritual bodies of the redeemed will express their special spiritual character; it will be possible to read their Kingdom identity by their appearance;
9. Sexual differentiation will continue;
10. The redeemed will be incorporated within the *totus Christus*;
11. The redeemed will have the privilege of the *visio Dei* by means of the simultaneous gift of Deification that will heal and enhance their minds and organs of perception to be able to do this;
12. The vitiating effects of temporal time will be removed as it becomes congruent with the Trinity's temporality.

¹ Hunsinger, "Review Essay," 200.

This is a lot of information, a great deal of content, to have provided about the End. It has been culled from a wide variety of sources. This is one of Jenson's strengths – his wide, omnivorous and appreciative reading from many ecumenical sources.

We note here one feature of the fulfilled future that he has missed out that we referred to in Chapter two. The redeemed can anticipate a healed and re-ordered affectivity, restored to what it should have been from the beginning, and now elevated to the enhanced emotional capacity of the pioneer of our salvation, the first of the new humanity, Jesus the incarnate Word. Jenson missed this point because of his misreading of Cyril of Alexandria's take on Divine impassibility.

The provision of this thoughtful amount of detail about what will obtain in the life of the world to come is a strength of the *Systematics*. It is also of considerable assistance to the preaching and teaching life of the church since having something to say about what comes next, about what can be anticipated in the life of the world to come, is an essential part of the church's proclamation to a doubting and uncertain world, at least in the opinion of this parish priest.

Yet this generous amount of eschatological detail raises a problem that comes in large part from the way Jenson proposes to describe the End. It is to be a surprise, but how can it be a surprise when we know so much about it thanks to Jenson's cataloguing of what the best of Christian minds have had to say about it. He has laid out the contours and characteristics of life in the world to come in such a way that we know pretty much what to expect. While he has no doubt missed some details, and perhaps even got one or two of them wrong, we are proceeding thanks to him in a well-informed way into expected scenarios. The element of surprise has been considerably reduced.

It is for this reason that Jenson has introduced his concept of the antinomy of hope. In the face of defined promises, of clear eschatological expectations, of a love from the future that has taken hold of the believer, the element of surprise matters a great deal. What comes at the end will still be unexpected, and it is this that keeps the promises fresh and interesting. It is also in the nature of genuine personhood and of love:

When my hope to love and be loved by some specified person is fulfilled, what then? The remarkable phenomenon that must be observed at this point is that experienced love is itself a new opportunity of love. Persons live just as they are capable of surprising. To love some person is to accept in advance the surprises he or she will bring to me, as revelations of my own proper good. Therefore when love comes, hope comes with it.²

Thus novelty and innovation are hallmarks of the way the God of futurity operates. They are his trademark and signature tune. Perhaps the biggest surprise of all is where the narrative will leave God at the end, the extent to which the story of salvation history, and within it the actions and reactions of human creatures, has the capacity to change God in unexpected ways, an issue we will address at the end of this conclusion.

The Nature of Surprise

We noted in the introduction that Aristotle does not appear to be the source that Jenson supposes him to be for the way in which a satisfying story ends. This is the notion of the suspense filled surprise ending that leaves us thinking “of course, it couldn’t have happened in any other way, “even though it wasn’t at all obvious that this was what was going to happen as the narrative proceeded. Furthermore this surprise ending resolves all the themes, sub-plots and character developments that were unfolding in its intriguing and tension filled main plot lines. In fact, in the Greek tragedies that Aristotle wrote about we know what is going to happen right from the start. What matters is the essence of what goes on inside the story, not the way in which it concludes.

We decided that it doesn’t matter that Aristotle didn’t think this, just in the same way that we concluded that it doesn’t matter that Gregory of Nyssa and Cyril of Alexandria are not in fact allies of his proposals. What matters is that Jenson thinks they support his proposals, and that they are sufficiently interesting and useful to be worth pursuing in their own right. Furthermore this writer finds the Jenson notion of the surprise ending to the human story in a deeply satisfying way to be a credible notion of the way God may indeed proceed at the end.

² ST 2: 321.

The problem comes though in the way in which time and surprise are talked about here, and their follow on consequences for some of Jenson's core proposals. Francesca Aran Murphy has highlighted the difficulties in her book *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited*. She points out that Jenson has concentrated on the notion of story in its most commonly perceived mode of understanding in our contemporary culture. In this modern sense of story the narrative operates by arousing our curiosity as to what comes next. Thus the plot operates through the mechanism of intrigue, which holds the audience's interest and attention by building up to a sense of high excitement. The story is ordered to its denouement, its suspense filled curiosity satisfying conclusion.³

Two problems follow on from this. "Despite their efforts to revise our notion of the Trinity in a biblical direction, story theologians like Jenson seem to render God more static than the classical views did. Viewers are more likely to recall a movie's essential plot-line than the names of its characters: what they are *most* likely to recall, however, is its ending, because this is what the cinematic plot is for. It is constructed out of futurity"⁴ She describes this process as "cinematizing the Trinity."⁵ She then points out that "Although Jenson hopes to differentiate 'the God of the gospel' from those of pagan cultures, privileging future over past and present is a mark of our secular, technological culture. The apocalypticizing orientation of narrative theologies displays the modern equation of drama with *plot*, in which one question leads on to another, and the audience's attention-horizon is filled with suspense."⁶ On balance I think that Aran Murphy has made a telling point here.

Of course a static view of God is precisely what Jenson has sought to avoid all along. It is why he has shunned any metaphysical explanation for the doctrine of God. Yet it appears that an immobilist conception of God has crept in through the back door through what appeared to be a very contemporary way of making God and his way with the world interesting.

³ Francesca Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited*, (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2007) PDF e-book, 294.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁵ Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, Chapter 6

⁶ Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, 296.

An even more intriguing consequence is that the Holy Spirit as Future Spirit is playing a game of hide and seek with the human race, and with the other Triune persons, concealing himself within “pockets of unknowability, in the sense of disclosures yet to come.”⁷

Concealment within the story in order to keep everyone guessing both promotes interest in the story and its final outcome, while at the same time demonstrating the supremacy of the Spirit in the ordering of the Triune persons. It also means that God himself may have undergone a surprising development in his own being as the story has progressed to its unexpected ending.

Aran Murphy also points out that this stress on the suspense motif has the effect of changing the drama of salvation into a melodrama. The multivalent qualities of good drama are thinned out to a simple focus on the curiosity inducing single focus on what happens next, with the caveat that it must be a surprise. Furthermore the plot lines reduce to a simple confrontation between good and evil in which God and Satan are opposed in melodramatic confrontation. They are a dramatic necessity to one another. This of course has the effect of making evil a necessary part of the story since Christ’s overcoming of it is an essential part of his narrative.⁸ We will circle back to the issue of evil and eschatology later in the conclusion, but for now we note that the quality of drama in the Jenson proposals is more of a modern reductionist kind rather than of the classical variety. Our attention may be held by it for the moment, but does it satisfy in an abiding sense, does it provide a pleasure that never cloys?

This is also a type of drama that lacks a sense of the sacred. “Thus, melodrama differs from tragedy in that it is secular, or post religious. The melodramatic cosmos is anthropocentric in that the ‘sacred’ does not hover around it. It gives us ‘combat’ in place of the tragic or comic ‘rite of sacrifice.’”⁹ Theologian of culture that Jenson is, highly critical of the western church’s post-modernist surrounding culture, and fearful of its encroaching inroads into the church’s life, this cannot be what he intended for his *Systematics*.

⁷ Ibid., 302.

⁸ Ibid., 132, 151.

⁹ Ibid., 143

The Lord of the Future

What then of the Spirit who brings about this surprising end to the story? How effective and credible is Jenson's pneumatology?

This thesis has been highly appreciative of Jenson's pneumatology. It has concluded that his *Systematics* is an exercise in third article rebalancing, rather than third article overbalancing. It has gratefully considered the way in which Jenson has resolved the *Filioque* conundrum by way of a revitalised pneumatology that is a redressing of and a catch up on a long overdue deficit in western third order theological thinking.

In Jenson's pneumatology the Spirit's primary role description is that of relationship initiator, repairer and reconciler. He animates the church in its transition from its present associational nature to its eventual genuine community status. He is the giver and enhancer of individual potentiality and fully realised existence within the completed *totus Christus*. The Spirit is the freedom between the redeemed that will enable them to be most fully themselves while they can, at the same time, relate to others at depth in close communal association without being submerged or threatened by such close communal abiding. This freeing of others to love each other in true freedom is of course what that Spirit does for the Father and the Son.

The overcoming of oppositional binary patterns of relating is one of the most significant works of the Holy Spirit in God's life and in our life too. We decided to acquit Jenson of the charge of introducing Hegelian motifs in to his understanding of intra-Trinitarian relationships. The issue of lack of embodied status of the Father and the Spirit is a red herring. The master-slave parable from *Phenomenology of Spirit* is applied by Jenson only to asymmetric relationships between the Trinity and humanity, and between human persons. In this latter category of relationships we concluded that, while at first it seemed a wild exaggeration to suppose that all human relationships have this antagonistic, oppositional nature, it is precisely at this point that Jenson has provided an acute and insightful analysis of some of the more toxic elements of contemporary western culture. Post-modernist nihilism *a la* Nietzsche and Derrida has decisively coloured all human

relationships in the minds of many with just such a hermeneutic of suspicion, and various liberationist motifs from the 1960's on have led their followers in to self-defeating cul de sacs of vitiated relationships. It is as a theologian of culture that Jenson is at his strongest and most valuable. Conferring on the Holy Spirit the role of overcomer of and deliverer from just such opposed and conflicted relationship patterns is one of the most worthwhile elements of Jenson's pneumatology. We note however that he supposes that it is primarily Christians and those who live within the church who are likely to receive this gift.

In the *Systematics* the Spirit is the completer and perfecter of our salvation. As such he is the Lord of the future, it is his time because the perfected *totus Christus* will be the disclosure time of the Spirit. Furthermore we are told that the Spirit of freedom will find his ego in the faces of the redeemed. It is worth recalling at this point that Jenson had earlier written of the Son as the space in which the Father deploys his ego, since the Son lives only for the mission of the Father in a relationship of love and obedience. He also writes of the resurrection of the Son as a not yet completed process. This only comes to conclusion in the fulfilled and perfected *totus Christus*. Yet Christ as the now of our salvation is at his most disclosed and influential in the present life of the church, an issue we will return to soon. For now we focus on the futurity of the Spirit, the time dimension in which he will disclose himself fully. There are two paradoxes here.

Just at this point of finding his ego in the faces of the redeemed he is also revealed as the self-emptying gift, who is nothing else at all. This kenotic self-emptying calls to mind Jenson's critique of Barth in *You Wonder Where the Spirit Went?* Just when you expect the Spirit to turn up he disappears. In Barth's case it was supposed that he had made this happen by overplaying the *amoris vinculum*. Here Jenson has made it happen by overplaying his eschatology. Has the Spirit disappeared and dispersed just when you would expect him to come into his own?

In fact Jenson is being true to the Scriptures and the tradition at this point for they both insist on the Spirit's self-effacing nature, his always pointing away from himself to the Father and the Son. He does not want to be a separate person apart from the Father and the Son. In that sense a fully realised personhood of the Spirit at the End is not possible in

a satisfactory Trinitarian theology, and to that extent Jenson is being both orthodox and faithful to the tradition.

Secondly, this creates the unnerving possibility, touched on at several points in this work, that human beings, in this case the redeemed, may change God, may provoke and generate changes in God bringing him at the last to an unexpected end point in his life. We are left asking, theologically speaking, who is in charge here?

That the Spirit assists in the completion of the fully realised *totus Christus* few would dispute. That he generates the freedom between the persons of the *totus Christus* we can applaud and affirm. However, the classic metaphysical teachings are on the mark here. There cannot be any real relations between the Trinity and the persons of the *totus Christus*. God cannot receive anything from us. There can be no traffic between the creator and the created. God gives to human creatures out of the overflowing excess of his being. God is fully realised, and cannot be added to or modified by the *totus Christus*. We will explore this theme at greater length in the final section.

What Then of Christ?

In this work we concluded that Christ has four modalities of existence in the Jenson proposals.

He has a shadowy phantom like existence as a literary underlying pattern in the pages of the Old Testament. One can only speak of his pre-existence as an incognito subtle background influence in the prior history and Scriptures of his people. Given Jenson's deep reluctance to assign any protological explanation for the being of God one can understand why Christ is given such a low key status in this first way in which he presents himself. We concluded that the charge of crypto Arianism against Jenson is unfair for it fails to take account of his concept of time. There never was a time when Christ was not. Indeed, he was a co-creator of the world along with the Father, though interestingly that was because the world was made for the sake of the church, the doctrine

of creation is ordered to ecclesiology, and of course Christ reigns in power in the midst of the church.

Christ then comes from the future to be implanted in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The second modality of existence is his incarnate life on earth. His death on Golgotha does not have the same high profile significance for Jenson that it does for many theologians. The atonement is just the cost of coming in to close contact with deadly human creatures. The resurrection is what matters.

Raised by the Spirit Christ ascends in to the church. We noted that while Jenson says he believes in the Ascension he is really only paying lip service to the doctrine. Indeed it would appear that for him the Ascension is a future event. Christ is not at the right hand of the Father because he is in fact present in the church as the now of our salvation. He rules over it from table, font and pulpit. We concluded that in many ways this is Christ's optimal time. He will never be more powerfully influential and available than he is now at the heart of the church's life – these are his glory days.

The resurrection of Christ will be completed when the *totus Christus* is fully assembled and made perfect in the fulfilment of the End. Christ will not need to discipline his body for it will be made clean of any possibility of sin, and of the rival claims of the world's varieties of *libido dominandi*. This fourth modality of Christ's existence is the way the world of human creatures finds its eschatological fulfilment. They are to be located within his collective mode of existence. Yet at the same time Jenson has made it clear that the second person of the Trinity, the Word, is distinct from the *totus Christus*. The *totus Christus* does not contain and exhaust him as a monadic super person.

At this point one is left pondering whether the Holy Spirit as the Lord of the future trumps the other triune persons. The Spirit is the freedom between the redeemed persons in the *totus Christus*, the relationship enabler of this fourth modality of Christ's existence. The future, the preferred time zone of Jenson's *Systematics*, is the time of the Spirit. Where does this leave Christ? The Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed has more to say about Christ than it does about the Father or the Holy Spirit. Its long middle paragraph lays out where

he came from, whom he came from, what he did for our salvation, and how we will come to experience him in the future. The church's theological reflection has always given him pride of place. Has the Spirit eclipsed him as the centre of theological attention in the theology of futurity?

On reflection we are not dealing with a Joachim of Fiore scenario here. As we discussed before, Jenson has retained the Spirit's self-effacing, self-emptying kenotic character that Scripture and the tradition point to. His argument would be that theology has made too much of the protological origins of the Trinity in the past, that the futurity of the Trinity now needs emphasis as a rebalancing measure, and that to speak of the Spirit as the completer and perfecter of our salvation is merely picking up a Cappadocian theme. By making the *totus Christus* the central content of eschatological salvation he has in fact kept Christ in central focus.

The Church and the *totus Christus*

Throughout this work we have had occasion to marvel at the high ecclesiology of the *Systematics*. Jenson claims more for it than the Roman Catholic Church does.

In large measure this is because of Jenson's concerns about the encroachment of a toxic surrounding western culture into the life of the church. Jenson is at his best as a theologian of culture, with many shrewd, sharp and insightful insights about what is wrong with western culture. He is clear that the church and western culture are in the middle of divorce proceedings. Thus the church must have high ramparts and a dense theological core at its centre to keep at bay the pathogens of post modernity and its accompanying nihilism.

The church must also be honoured and valued for the reason we recently discussed – Christ rose into it, and reigns in power in its midst. It is not just a pragmatic platform for mission. It is the crown of creation, the reason God brought the world into existence, and its doxological charter of praising and worshipping God matters even more than its

missiological imperatives. God loves the church more than any other part of creation, which is an additional reason for its rich and deep theological texture.

However, it is the church as eschatological gateway that is the most important reason for the high valuing of the church. The church is the final delivery vehicle for the eschatological End. The church will eventually morph into the *totus Christus*. As the Holy Spirit moves it from *Gesellschaft* to *Gemeinschaft*, as it thereby acquires a hinterland of deep *koinonia* belonging, as the church as bride comes to live in the groom's house – the dwelling place of the Triune persons, it becomes what it was always intended to be – the *totus Christus*.

Jenson uses the Augustinian concept of the *totus Christus* as his principal way of talking about the content of the End. In the opinion of this writer it is one of the main strengths of his eschatological proposals. It stresses that the end point of salvation history is a collective one of communal belonging in the Kingdom, rather than an individualised gain of personal mortality. It fleshes out with some detail the deification destiny of the redeemed that Jenson has endorsed at several points. It focuses on the fact that inclusion in the life of God is what salvation is. Jenson is one of the standard bearers of the revival of Trinitarian theology in the twentieth century, and with the *totus Christus* he is insisting that the life that really is life is life within the Trinity.

However, just at this point an anomaly presents itself:

Since our communion with one another will be established by our inclusion in the communion of Father, Son, and Spirit, it will be shaped by the 'processions' and 'missions' that make that communion. The Father will look on us as he looks on his Son. He will know what he is as God by seeing what he has made of us; and we will know him and ourselves as the outcome of the utter joyous Freedom that he is. As the Son offers himself in obedience to the Father the church will be both the self, the 'body' that he offers, and participant in the act of offering. And it is the very freedom of God as the Spirit that will be our freedom in this fellowship.¹⁰

This is odd because Jenson has ruled out talk of processions in the Trinity. The economic Trinity is what counts, not the immanent Trinity. As I pointed out earlier in this work

¹⁰ ST 2, 319-20.

there is an irony in setting out to say what comes next, to provide a content filled eschatology, because this means he must talk about the vectors and contours of intra-Trinitarian relations, something he says he is against, but in fact must do, since participation in the Trinity is the content of salvation.¹¹ Again and again in this work we have come up against Jenson's doctrine of God as a stumbling block. It is to this we must now turn.

The Doctrine of God

In order to be faithful to the God of the gospel Robert Jenson proposes that God is developing in dialogue with the human story, closely linked in to the developing plot lines of salvation history, that he is a dynamic teleological stream of events who goes before his people like the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night in the wilderness wanderings. To ensure that this God is lively he is not to be described in ontological or metaphysical terms. This would reduce God to the static immobilised status of Greek philosophy with its obsession with defeating the attrition of time.

We can note here how old fashioned this distinction between the God of the Bible and the God of Greek philosophy is, being a preoccupation and received opinion of late nineteenth century German liberal theology. Contemporary Patristic theologians now point out what a complex and nuanced issue this is. To name but two of their conclusions – the Bible itself contains sophisticated Greek thought forms, and the great names of Patristic thought worked primarily from the datum of Scripture, while making magpie like borrowings from contemporary Greek thought to suit their purposes, without being captured by their overall schema.

The effect of this is to place God on the human side of the reality line as the ontological distinction between creator and creatures is abolished. The God of classical metaphysics who is both wholly other while at the same time being intimately interior to human creatures does not figure in this scheme of things. God is with us in a very complete sense.

¹¹ Chapter 3, 15.

Jenson is a theologian of the missions of God but not of his processions. Talk of the immanent Trinity is ruled out. All that matters is the economic Trinity. God is as God does, and all we need to know is what God does for our salvation. We note here how very Lutheran Jenson is at this point. Speculation about the interior life of God is irrelevant and irreverent. That kind of a waste of emotional energy and inappropriate intellectual activity can be left to Calvinists and Catholics.

Also rejected is any notion of God's immutability, impassibility or unchangeability. This is a God who feels intensely, changes his mind, who needs the world of human creatures, and who thus loves erotically rather than with the disinterested love of agape. We can note how *en courant* this is with much popular opinion in mid to late twentieth century theology.

Several consequences follow. The stability and continuity of God's personal identity and being is called into question. Jenson says that what the Patristic church meant by *apatheia* is that God is unwavering in his faithfulness. While God is affected by changes in knowledge, will and emotions, he remains constant in his personal identity, character and nature. Presumably Jenson endorses this also. However he also believes that God's identity is shaped by temporal events. Human beings can interact with God in such a way as to generate changes within him, and there is a considerable element of surprise in the way salvation history will play itself out, even to God. The future is open in its possibilities both for the creation and for God. It is a future of anticipated possibilities and scenarios.

What kind of a God will the redeemed meet at the End then? This makes obsolete the traditional assumption that whatever surprise awaits believers at the End it will not involve encountering a God who has changed in himself as a result of interactions with human creatures. We recall Timo Tavast's conclusion that for Jenson the Trinity is free to be what God would not necessarily have been, an analysis of Jenson's doctrine of God that he endorsed as accurate and true of him. "The Spirit is able to bring new aspects to God's reality, and these new, contingent historical matters are now inseparable parts of the

Triune God's deepest nature."¹² Thus the developing interactions between God and humankind set the agenda for the final form of God himself. This agenda is completed by the Holy Spirit who has received such a radical charter of freedom that he is ready, willing and able to affect and alter God himself.

It might be supposed that believers will be delighted to hear that they have power to influence the final eschatological shape and form of God. However, the prospect is in fact concerning and somewhat anxiety inducing at a number of levels. If the redeemed are to be conformed to the image of God, and that is one of the primary understandings of what Deification is about, then this is a prospect of radical instability if it means being conformed to a God in flux. What brings peace of mind amongst the redeemed, and clarity about the content of salvation, is the prospect of being conformed to a solid state God who has continuity, constancy stability and being as his hall marks of identity.

The kind of God that Jenson proposes has a will o' the wisp style about him that leaves one wondering if he has any substance to him that will enable believers to connect with him. If any language of substance or essence has been dismissed as a descriptor of God then what is graspable about him? Is the God who is event, narrative and a set of decisions someone one can have an eternal relationship with? We can recall at this point that about the only time Jenson sets out to describe what goes on at the heart of the triune being, to give an account of their internal relations, he does so in terms of a kind of phantom junction box that co-ordinates the three Triune identities as they deploy in their respective poles of time, and as they relate to one another.¹³

Jenson is again thoroughly Lutheran in describing the *beneficia*, the affective states, and the relational goods that the redeemed receive from God, while at the same time refusing to speculate about the God who gives these good things. Yet this gap and lack raises the issue of one of the drivers of Luther's theology, the search for a gracious God, and the fear of a God behind God, a dark God who does not wish the human race well. This thesis has concluded that the search for a gracious God can only have a fruitful conclusion in a

¹² Timo Tavast, "Challenging the Modalism of the West: Jenson on the Trinity," *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (Fall 2010): 361.

¹³ Jenson, *The Triune Identity*. 120.

theology firmly focused on the immanent Trinity, so that believers can know with who and what they are dealing. The question of what God is, and how God is are inextricably connected to his salvific works.

What further complicates this issue is Jenson's refusal to interest himself in the origins of the Divine persons. Yet these protological considerations matter because Scripture raises the issue of origins at a number of points. One thinks of the long genealogy at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, and the prologue to John's gospel, together with the bread of life discourse in chapter six. Scripture does so because it wants to raise the question of who and what is the God who comes among us. It wishes to establish God's credentials as a trustworthy and reliable friend of the human race. Scott Swain accurately sums up the Jenson conception of God as "God is as God does."¹⁴ It is certainly true that we read off people's character and personality from the impact of their actions on us. However, this analysis usually proceeds to investigate and consider where the active agent came from, and from whom they came. Jenson wishes us to make an act of blind faith in a God who appears out of nowhere.

In this connection it is useful to recall how we noticed that Jenson privileges two major Scriptural events, the escape across the sea of reeds and the raising of Jesus, as the centrepiece of his proposals, while ignoring other major Divine disclosure events that might be considered disadvantageous to his doctrine of God. The incident of the burning bush, the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, the baptism and the transfiguration of Jesus, the high priestly prayer in John 17 - these are right up there with the Exodus event, and deserve to be included with the resurrection as key marker points in the story of salvation. Yet they receive little if any consideration. This thesis proposed that a likely reason is the way in which they raise the question of Divine origins in an acute form, and in fact press on to provide key information about the God who comes among us. We can note at this point also the way in which Jenson does not work closely with the datum of Scripture in the *Systematics*. References to it are relatively sparse, a neuralgia point with evangelical critics.

¹⁴ Swain, *The God of the Gospel*, 137.

However, the biggest problem with Jenson's doctrine of God is the way in which it leaves God unable to block the incursion of radical evil in to the eschaton. The traditional metaphysical description of God made a clear ontological distinction between creator and creatures, with the result that this clear distinction and barrier meant evil cannot cross the line to invade and infect either God or the eschatological order. Not only has Jenson abolished this ontological distinction, God after all is not to be described in ontological terms, but he has also posited an empathetic suffering God as essential to the God of the gospel. This divine suffering places God and the creation in the same ontological order. A suffering God must exist in the same reality field as the suffering creation. This has the effect of magnifying evil, making it ontological in its essential nature, thus assuming a far heavier weighting in both the world's affairs and in the final reckoning of things. It also limits God, since he requires evil to provoke the further development of his being. As a result evil to some extent lodges in the being of God.

We can note an interesting and decisive feature here. Jenson is often dismissed as being a process theologian, a charge he would indignantly deny insisting that for him God is the sovereign Lord of history. Yet a suffering God who is on a par with the suffering creation, is in the same reality field as it, is a limited God. This is a needy God, who needs human beings and the evil they generate to provoke him to further developments in his being. What is in fact required here is a God who combines complete otherness and the passionate vitality of pure goodness within himself. A God who is wholly other is both immune to evil and suffering, and is thus wholly available to human beings because he can empathise with them without being trapped in their dilemmas, or reduced by their limitations. Thus a metaphysical way of thinking about God is a help and not a hindrance since it makes God more vital and more useful, and maps on to the biblical testimony.

Jenson of course would seek to defend himself at this point by pointing out that he agrees with the book of Revelation that the devil will be cast into the lake of fire at the End, and that there will be a last judgement at which sin, and evil, and those who have given themselves over to it, will be excluded from the Kingdom. The problem is that the God he has presented to us lacks the capacity to do this because of his lack of backward reference. He does not have the heft to accomplish the last judgement because he is trapped on the

same side of the ontological line as the human race. What is required here is a Trinitarian God of processions as well as missions, who is both immanent as well as economic, who combines protology with futurity. Such a God can have the decisive last word on the human story.

Final Assessment

There is much to admire in the eschatological proposals of Jenson's *Systematics*; the content and the detail of what can be expected at the End; the astute let out clause of the antinomy of hope that prevents the element of surprise being eroded by all this information; and the placing of the concept of the *totus Christus* right at the heart of what can be expected at the End.

The pneumatology that goes hand in hand with this has also elicited an appreciative response in these pages. The Spirit who makes relationships work both within the *totus Christus*, and between the triune persons. The Spirit of freedom and surprise who brings freshness and vitality to these relationships, and to the script of the final conclusion. If the human story is a movie the Holy Spirit is both script writer and director, with the proviso that human beings have the ability to insert themselves into the writing of the script to some extent. The Spirit is Lord of the future, who has been mandated to complete and perfect the story of salvation. Appreciation has also been expressed for the third article rebalancing that Jenson has achieved, together with an elegant solution to the *Filioque* dilemma.

However, what has failed to convince, and what has undermined these proposals to a large extent, has been the deficiencies in Jenson's doctrine of God, as listed above. This is a pity because much of what Jenson has proposed and offered could have been expressed within the context of a traditional metaphysical definition of God.

There is a paradox here. Jenson is a loner, a maverick and an innovator, who at the same time insists that he is deeply orthodox. He is one of the pioneers and promoters of the revival of Trinitarian theology in the twentieth century. Yet a number of the peculiarities

and central planks of his doctrine of God are in fact the received opinion and commonplace assumptions of a liberal theology he so dislikes. The distinction between the God of the Bible and the God of unhelpful and mistaken Greek metaphysics, the insistence on a changeable and suffering God, the over application of Rahner's rule in such a way as to squeeze out the immanent Trinity by way of an exclusive focus on the economic Trinity - these are items in a tick the box standard menu of complacent liberal divinity. If Jenson could have walked away from these, and downplayed his enthusiasm for narrative theology, he might have positioned his eschatological proposals within a worthwhile revisionary metaphysics, thereby creating a truly revolutionary theology of futurity that was at the same time orthodox.

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