

ON THE EXCELLENCY OF “SISTERLY LOVE”:
PSALM 133 IN THE CONTEXT OF WOGA KOREA 2007

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In his exposition of psalm 133, the Puritan Matthew Henry used the word “excellency” to describe the brotherly love portrayed so eloquently by King David.¹ Keeping in mind the same word, “excellency,” I will interpret Psalm 133 and delineate theological reflections that will benefit all believers, especially the sisters in Christ who will participate in WOGA Korea Christian Women Leaders Conference in October 2007.² In my analysis of Psalm 133, I will pay special attention to analyzing the Hebrew text itself and interpretations rendered by some of the major Christian theologians.³ The second part

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¹Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible*, comment on Psalm 133 as found online at <http://www.studydrive.org/com/mhc-com/view.cgi?book=ps&chapter=133> (accessed September 27, 2007; hereafter Henry, *Commentary*, web). Spurgeon [C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, comment on Psalm 133 as found online at <http://www.spurgeon.org/treasury/ps133.htm> (accessed September 27, 2007; hereafter Spurgeon, *Treasury*, web)] notes that his translators gave this psalm the admirable explanatory heading, “The Benefit of the Communion of Saints.” The Davidic authorship of this psalm is assumed, but it is not crucial for its interpretation. Note that while David clearly uses the word “brothers” (see the analysis below) to refer to the ones dwelling and having fellowship together, this word is usually inclusive in the Bible and may refer to both men and women. In this context, since the Psalm is applied to a specific situation (see note 2), I believe that it is warranted to be applied to a gathering of Christian women (sisters in Christ) coming to worship and to fellowship (some even dwelling) together.

²The acronym WOGA stands for Women of Global Action and it refers to a world mission conference for women which intends to bring approximately 1,200 emerging Christian women leaders from over 80 nations in and around the 10/40 window. The intention is “to equip and produce a new leadership of young Christian women” and to encourage them in their evangelistic calling. For more information about the conference, see www.wogakorea.com (accessed September 24, 2007).

³I will pay special attention to the interpretations of Augustine, Calvin, Matthew Henry, and Spurgeon. One intention of this paper is to try to demonstrate that the study of any psalm can be greatly enriched by consulting these well known and loved interpreters of the Psalter from their works which are now readily available on the

of this essay will present some theological reflections that are relevant to the notion of “fellowship.” I will end with some practical applications for the upcoming conference.

UNDERSTANDING PSALM 133

Psalm 133 is a brief didactic psalm which attempts to describe poetically “the excellency of brotherly love.”⁴ It appears in the section of the Psalter that includes 15 songs of ascent (120-134), and there is a strong possibility that these psalms were sung as the Israelites journeyed as pilgrims to the Feast of the Tabernacles.⁵ It is likely that the original setting of the Psalm was the family. It may have been a “song of greeting” addressed to brothers living together by a guest.⁶ In the ancient Near East, specifically among the people of Israel, it was very common for brothers to live together in the same place. We know that Abraham and Lot, and also Jacob and Esau “dwelled together” (see Gen 13:6; 36:7 and Deut. 25:5),⁷ thus, it is probable that we are dealing here with a poem that originated among the wisdom teachers who took into consideration an “everyday situation.”⁸ However, in the present context and use, it seems that the psalm was applied to a larger gathering, as it was recited during the festivals when the people of Israel⁹ came together to worship at the temple. In these contexts, the

internet. Thus, all the quotations of these writers in this essay will be from their works as they are found on various websites (these are found in the bibliography).

⁴It can also be categorized as a “wisdom psalm.” See Hans Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 485 and A. Weiser, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 783.

⁵See C. H. Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 79. It is possible that these psalms were sung as the pilgrims made their way up on the stairs of the temple. John Eaton, [*The Psalms* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 446] thinks that “the psalmist may have deliberately reapplied the phrase to the ‘brotherhood’ of worshippers.”

⁶See Kraus, *Psalms*, 485. He is referring to a suggestion of H. Schmidt. This is also the interpretation of Weiser, *The Psalms*, 783. Weiser titles the exposition of this section: “The Unity of the Family.”

⁷Note the start of Deut. 25:5 (ESV): *If brothers dwell together...*

⁸Kraus, *Psalms*, 485.

⁹That the term “brother” can be and was applied beyond the immediate family is clear from several Old Testament texts. See for example Lev. 19:17-18, 25:35-46,

people of Israel (both men and women) literally “dwelled together,” especially during the Feast of Tabernacles. In this case, the psalm goes beyond the simple celebration of “dwelling together,” and proceeds to applaud the “dwelling together *in unity*,” and the fellowship that this dwelling together made possible.¹⁰ In my opinion, there is no weighty reason to discount the possibility that this psalm was written by David, more specifically, to celebrate the unity of the Israelite tribes as described in 2 Samuel 5.¹¹

EXCURSUS: “DWELLING TOGETHER”

The translation of the Hebrew שָׁבַת אֶחָיִם גַּם-יָחַד as “brothers dwelling together” is somewhat misleading, and this literal interpretation of the sentence limits its application.¹² It is well known that the primary meaning of יָשַׁב is “to sit (down).” The verb is

Deut. 1:16, 15:2-3, etc. Many times it applies simply to fellow Israelites. In my application I will apply it specifically to “sisters in Christ.” Note also the relevant comments of John Calvin [*Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 12: Psalms*, translated by John King, 1847-50, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/calvin/cc12/cc12016.htm> (accessed September 27, 2007; hereafter Calvin, *Psalms*, web)] who notes that “[t]he word brethren is not limited to those who are descended from the same parents; it denotes such as are members of the same community, profess the same holy religion, and are governed by the same institution.”

¹⁰See for example ESV, NIV and KJV. Matthew Henry and Augustine also rely on texts that have “unity.” The Vulgate has “*in uno*,” and Matthew Henry [*Commentary*, web] also points out that some have read it: “to dwell even as one.” *The Message* masks the idea/possibility of living together completely (“*How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!*”). The Hebrew (יָחַד) does not seem to require anything beyond “together,” but the interpretive addition of “in unity” seems to me justified on the basis of the following cola, and on the basis of the rest of the poem. It is clear that the psalmist describes believers gathered (and possibly dwelling) together and having a pleasant and harmonious fellowship. This sweet fellowship (see Excursus and the discussion below) would not be possible without unity.

¹¹Note also the sensible and insightful introductory comments of Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, web.

¹²Notice for example the interpretations of Kraus and Weiser in note 6. Most “classic” interpreters (see for example Augustine, Calvin, Matthew Henry and Spurgeon) apply this psalm to the believers’ fellowship. In my application I do not wish to completely exclude the element of “dwelling together.” I am just arguing that the psalm is applicable to believer’s fellowship in general, whether they dwell together and have fellowship, or they simply meet together for worship and fellowship.

sometimes applied to the “sitting down to hold a meeting.”¹³ Thus, in Deut. 6:7 we have the following use: “*You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house . . .* (ESV).” It is clear from this verse that the phrase does not refer to “dwelling/inhabiting,” but rather to sitting down for fellowship and conversation. It is even clearer that “dwelling” is too restrictive and inadequate in other passages. Thus, in Psalm 84, the verb appears in two important verses, 4 and 10 (Hebrew- vv. 5 and 11):

Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise! Selah. (v. 5)
For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness (v. 11).

In both of these verses interpreting the verb שׁב as simply “to dwell/inhabit,” is both restrictive and inaccurate. The psalmist does not want to literally “dwell” in the house of God, but rather longs for the fuller fellowship with God that seems possible there (see also Ps 23:6). In the second verse there are no such places as “the tents of the wickedness,” the psalmist simply wants to avoid the fellowship of wicked people. The translation of *The Message* is certainly too far from the original,¹⁴ but the other translations err on being too literal. I suggest the following translation for this cola: “*Behold, how good and how lovely it really is when brothers fellowship together.*”

This psalm tries to charm us into imitation,¹⁵ and can be read as “an effusion of holy joy occasioned by the sight of the gathering of Israel as one great household at the yearly feasts”¹⁶ Indeed, the joy and admiration is present from the very beginning. The psalm starts with “behold” (Hebrew- הִנֵּה) in a clear attempt to solicit attention and perhaps admiration from the very the start;¹⁷ because the sight of the

¹³See for example Deut. 6:7; Jer. 39:3 etc.

¹⁴*The Message* has: “*How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!*”

¹⁵The expression is from Spurgeon, *Treasury*, web. Note also the book of Proverbs where feminine Wisdom tries to charm the young men to pursue her.

¹⁶Joseph Addison Alexander, as noted by Spurgeon, *Treasury*, web.

¹⁷Psalm 133 has this word on the second line in Hebrew. The first line can be translated, “A Song of Ascents; Of David,” (ESV) or “A Pilgrimage Song; Of David.” While this interjection appears elsewhere in the psalms, it is only here and in the following psalm (134) where we find it at the very beginning.

people of God dwelling and having fellowship together in unity is “well worth of admiration, pause and gaze upon it.”¹⁸ It is the “characteristic of real saints” what is described further in the psalm.¹⁹

The opening line—“*Behold, how good and how lovely,*”—contains an exclamation characteristic of wisdom form (cf. Prov. 15:23; Sir. 25:f),²⁰ and the parallelism between “good” and “pleasant”²¹ is found elsewhere in the Psalter.²² It seems that the Hebrew מְעִיָּם (usually translated “pleasant”) carries the connotation of harmony and sweetness, perhaps that of a melodious sound. Thus, in Ps 81:3 the term is applied to the sound of the lyre: “*Raise a song; sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp* (ESV).” In Psalms 135 and 147, the term is applied to the praising and singing of the name of the Lord. Thus, the image conveyed by the fellowship of the people of God (lit. “brothers” in the Hebrew text) is of something that is both good and “pleasant/sweet;” it makes one burst into singing.²³

The poem is not difficult to follow in its development. I suggest the following structure and translation for this psalm:²⁴

Title A Pilgrimage Song (Of David)

Exclamatory Introduction *Behold, how good and how lovely it really is
when brothers fellowship together.*

¹⁸Spurgeon, *Treasury*, web.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰The Hebrew is מְדֵה-טוֹב. See Kraus, *Psalms*, 485, who also points out that there are parallels in Egyptian texts for this wisdom expression. Qoheleth is also concerned to find out what is good for men in the few days of their vain life (see Eccles. 6:12), but does not seem to arrive to a satisfactory answer. One only wishes that he was familiar with this psalm.

²¹The Hebrew is מְדֵה-טוֹב וּמְדֵה-נְעִיָּם.

²²The word for good (טוֹב) is extremely common in the Bible, while the word for pleasant (נְעִיָּם) is found only 6 times in this form in the Bible (Pss. 81:3, 135:3, 144:1; Prov. 22:18; Eccles. 6:12).

²³Note the insightful comment of Spurgeon [*Treasury*, web.] here: “All men love pleasant things, and yet it frequently happens that the pleasure is evil; but here the condition is as good as it is pleasant...”

²⁴My translation follows closely that of ESV.

Description/Image I ²⁵	<i>It is like precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the fringe/collar?²⁶ of his robes.²⁷</i>
Description/Image II	<i>It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.²⁸</i>
Conclusion	<i>For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, (even) life forevermore.²⁹</i>

²⁵The lovely fellowship that produces wonder in the introduction is “described” in the following verses by using two figures of speech (similes). I call them simply “images,” to emphasize the importance of the imagination to analyze and picture them. Kraus [*Psalms*, 486] calls them “pictures that radiate refreshment and recreation.”

²⁶Literally “mouth.” Hence many translate: “collar” (ESV, JPS etc.). KJV has “skirts.” The Hebrew word can certainly refer to the “edge” (of a sword – Gen. 34:26). It is difficult to choose between “collar” and “edge/fringe,” though it seems that the former is more likely. Isidor cav. de Onciul [*Cartea Psalmilor* (Cernăuți, 1898), 465] makes the following relevant observation: “La întrebuintare se turnă pe cap adese atât de mult, încât de pe cap mirul se scurgea pe barbă, și chiar și pe partea de sus a veșmintelor” [When used, the oil was poured in such great quantity that often it dripped on the beard and even on the *upper part* of the garments].

²⁷Note that the BHS suggests the deletion of these last two cola. Kraus, [*Psalms*, 484-85] also thinks that this is a gloss. This and the reference to Zion in the following verse represent for him “an effort at sacralizing the secular saying.” The problem with both of these suggestions is that they lack any textual witness to support them. I side with the Masoretic text (which is supported by the LXX, the Vulgate, the Syriac, and the Targum), and I take a canonical approach by working with the text that we have.

²⁸BHS (perhaps following H. Gunkel) suggests to read יִיֶן and thinks of the “hills of Ijon” to the southwest of Mt. Hermon. Kraus, [*Psalms*, 484] corrects to יִיֶן, and translates “to the *parched* hill country.” Again, there are no significant textual witnesses to support these suggestions. I will analyze the “canonical text” which is supported by the most important textual witnesses.

²⁹Note the translation of *The Message*: *ordains eternal life*. It seems to me that the Hebrew biblical expression at the end this poem comes the closest to the New Testament concept of “eternal life.”

After the exclamatory introduction of the psalmist, he finds it impossible to describe the "excellency" of this fellowship propositionally, so he uses two refreshing and rich images for this purpose. The first image (v. 2 in English) likens the fellowship of believers with the fine oil that was especially made for the consecration of the Tent of the Meeting with its utensils, and also for the anointing of Aaron and his sons. The text that unpacks for us the richness of this image is found in Exodus 30:22-32. Because of its importance for interpretation, it is necessary to cite the whole biblical text (ESV):

The LORD said to Moses,²³ "Take the finest spices: of liquid myrrh 500 shekels, and of sweet-smelling cinnamon half as much, that is, 250, and 250 of aromatic cane,²⁴ and 500 of cassia, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and a hin of olive oil.²⁵ And you shall make of these sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil.²⁶ With it you shall anoint the tent of meeting and the ark of the testimony,²⁷ and the table and all its utensils, and the lamp stand and its utensils, and the altar of incense,²⁸ and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils and the basin and its stand.²⁹ You shall consecrate them, that they may be most holy. Whatever touches them will become holy.³⁰ You shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests.³¹ And you shall say to the people of Israel, 'This shall be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations.³² It shall not be poured on the body of an ordinary person, and you shall make no other like it in composition. It is holy, and it shall be holy to you.

This passage helps us see that the oil used for the anointing of Aaron had a sweet (fragrant) perfume; it was holy, and also precious. It was not intended for ordinary men, and it consecrated (set apart) the utensils and people anointed with it. In this image of precious oil running or flowing down from the head over the beard, and to the collar of Aaron's clothes, there seems to be abundance and a clear movement from above toward the ground.³⁰ The repetition of the Hebrew ירד (to go down)³¹ further enforces this movement from the top toward the bottom, and reminds one of the words of apostle James (1:17): "Every

³⁰Note the relevant observation for interpretation and application of Eaton [*Psalms*, 446] that the vestments of Aaron are symbolic of the twelve tribes (Exod. 28:9f).

³¹It appears three times in this poem, twice in the first image, and once in the second image (here translated "to fall").

good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights”

Matthew Henry unpacks very nicely the “pleasantness” of this fellowship:

It is fragrant as the holy anointing oil, which was strongly perfumed, and diffused its odors, to the great delight of all the bystanders, when it was poured upon the head of Aaron, or his successor the high priest, so plentifully that it ran down the face, even to the collar or binding of the garment (1) This ointment was holy. So must our brotherly love be, with a pure heart, devoted to God (2) This ointment was a composition made up by a divine dispensatory; God appointed the ingredients and the quantities. Thus believers are *taught of God to love one another*; it is a grace of his working in us. (3) It was very precious, and the like to it was not to be made for any common use. Thus holy love is, in the sight of God, of great price; and that is precious indeed which is so in God's sight. (4) It was grateful both to Aaron himself and to all about him. So is holy love; it is like *ointment and perfume which rejoice the heart*. Christ's love to mankind was part of that *oil of gladness* with which he was *anointed above his fellows*. (5) Aaron and his sons were not admitted to minister unto the Lord till they were anointed with this ointment, nor are our services acceptable to God without this holy love; if we have it not we are nothing, 1 Corinthians 13:1, 2.

To this may be added the insights of Augustine about the significance of Aaron in this refreshing picture. He notes in his exposition that Aaron was the one Priest who entered into the Holy of Holies, and proceeded to make a connection with Christ (our High Priest) and the Holy Spirit which descended over us from the head (which is also Christ).³²

It is possible and desirable to “Christianize” this psalm when it is interpreted for a Christian audience. The precious oil from Psalm 133 and Exodus 30 can indeed be understood as representing the Holy Spirit which refreshes and sanctifies (consecrates). It is mediated to the fellowship of believers through our High Priest Jesus Christ, as Augustine suggested above. The Holy Spirit is not given with measure, and it reaches to the very “edges” of the High Priest’s clothes. Spurgeon nicely applies this image by focusing on the extent of

³²See Augustine, “Church Fathers: An Exposition of Psalm 133” as found online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801133.htm> (accessed September 27, 2007; hereafter Augustine, “Psalm 133,” web). Note that this Christological exposition is not surprising. Augustine does that throughout the Psalter. For an interesting but questionable example, see his exposition of *Psalm 3*.

brotherly love: "Brotherly love comes from the head, but falls to the feet. Its way is downward . . . love for the brethren condescends to men of low estate, it is not puffed up, but it is lowly and meek. . . oil would not anoint if it did not flow down, neither would brotherly love diffuse its blessings if it did not descend."³³

The second image uses the "dew of Hermon" to add a "fructifying"³⁴ aspect to the believers' fellowship. It is also an image of refreshment and fruitfulness. An important biblical passage that sheds light on this poetical image is found in Hosea 14:5-7 (Hebrew, vv. 6-8). In this passage the Lord God compares Himself with the dew and describes poetically the beneficial effect upon Israel:

I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon; ⁶ his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon.⁷ They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine; their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

This passage conveys images of beauty, fragrance, flourishing, and fruitfulness. The presence of God upon Israel brings blessings and expansion. One can almost see the growing and blossoming caused by the presence of God who acts "like the dew" toward Israel. It adds new and important dimensions to the image of "precious oil" from the first part of the psalm. We have here a second simile that attempts to describe "the sweet descending diffusiveness of brotherly unity."³⁵ Just as both Hermon and Zion would wither without the dew, so would the fruitfulness of sacred fellowships.³⁶

³³Spurgeon, *Treasury*, web.

³⁴The expression is from Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, web. Most commentators notice the impossibility of the dew of Hermon to come down on the mountains of Zion. See for example Kraus in note 27. That is certainly true. It is possible to solve this problem by following Weiser [*Psalms*, 784] who thinks that the term "dew of Hermon" was used in a proverbial sense to refer to an ample quality and quantity of dew. It is well known that Mt. Hermon is the highest mountain in the area of Syria-Palestine. Its highest point reaches 9,230 feet above sea level, and during biblical times it had luxurious vegetation. It seems that mountain lions and leopards were common there (see Song of Songs 4:8). Today, Mt. Hermon houses Israel's only ski resort, because its peaks get a considerable amount of snow during the winter.

³⁵Spurgeon, *Treasury*, web.

³⁶See Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, web.

In the second part of this colon, it is significant to analyze the mention of Mt. Zion, the place *par excellence* where God reigns. It is God's "holy hill,"³⁷ and is virtually identical with Jerusalem, the place where Solomon built the temple. Zion is depicted in a series of pilgrim psalms as "the place of blessing," and is the place where YHWH chose to dwell.³⁸ In New Testament theology, Mt. Zion is the focal point of the messianic reign,³⁹ and in Hebrew 12:22 it is closely connected with "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." It is clearly a place where God is present with his holy angels and all the church (lit. "the assembly of the firstborn"). One can sense again the refreshing and "fructifying" presence of the Holy Spirit coming from above (from the Father) in and upon the assembly of believers.

It is significant that the poetic images in this psalm draw our whole being into the description of this lovely "communion of saints." One can almost smell the fragrance of the perfumed oil,⁴⁰ feel the refreshing falling of the dew, and visualize the fruitfulness that follows. These images convey an abundance of blessings and life, and this is stressed in the conclusion of the psalm: "*For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, (even) life forevermore.*"

The Lord does not "command" much in the Psalms. This usually happens in the Pentateuch. However, we know that what God commands happens: "*Let them praise the name of the LORD! For he*

³⁷See for example Psalm 2:6.

³⁸See Bullock, *Book of Psalms*, 80, and the observations of Erich Zenger on the pilgrim psalms. Note that David knew that the Lord chose Zion as His "dwelling place" and built an altar there (see 2 Samuel 24 and also Ps. 132:13). For Zion as a place where "the blessing" is found and from where it proceeds, see especially Pss. 128:5, 134:3. Note also that for Eaton, [*The Psalms*, 446], this psalm "can be understood as a 'Song of Zion', praising the Lord's work through his chosen sanctuary." Thus, for him the mention of the "mountains of Zion" is crucial for the understanding of this psalm. I agree with Eaton.

³⁹See Rev. 14:1.

⁴⁰Note the contrast in today's slang being represented by the verb "to stink." When something does not go well and lacks pleasantness, a typical phrase to describe that is: "it stinks." For the exposition of this psalm (and of course for other texts), it is useful to bring out the Old Testament illustrations that present us with negative examples (1 Cor. 10). See, for example, the following pairs of brothers: Cain and Abel, Abraham and Lot (in Gen. 13:18 Abraham calls Lot "brother"), Jacob and Esau, the sons of Jacob, etc.

commanded and they were created (Ps. 148:5; see also 33:9).⁴¹ The psalmists occasionally ask God to command something, being well aware about the power and effectiveness of his command.⁴² In this place, where believers fellowship in a sweet and refreshing manner, God is sure to command "the blessing." If "the blessing" is "the power of life," "enhancement of life," "elevation of life,"⁴³ the second part of the colon simply extends the benefit of life into eternity.⁴⁴ In my opinion, this is the closest we come in the Old Testament to a phrase that approximates the New Testament promise of "eternal life." It seems that "Yahweh himself turns salvifically"⁴⁵ toward the community life of believers. Calvin, like Augustine before him rightly conditions the blessing to the unity of the brethren, "God commands his blessing where peace is cultivated . . . he testifies how much he is pleased with concord amongst men, by showering down blessings upon them."

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS⁴⁶

One cannot fail to notice that in a Christian reading of this psalm the whole Trinity⁴⁷ is present at work in and upon the "Church." The

⁴¹Note the relevant comment of George Swinnock: "Where the word of a king is, there is power." Quoted in Spurgeon, *Treasury*, web, under the section "Explanatory Notes and Quaint Sayings."

⁴²See for example Psalm 44:5 [4] where the psalmist asks God to command (ordain) salvation.

⁴³So Kraus, *Psalms*, 486.

⁴⁴See also Deut. 11:27 where "the blessing" is conditioned on obedience to God's commandments.

⁴⁵Kraus, *Psalms*, 486.

⁴⁶This section of the essay relies heavily on the following two articles: Colin Gunton, "The Forgotten Trinity," *Perichoresis* 1/1 (2003): 45-58, and J. Scott Horrell, "The Self-Giving Triune God, The *Imago-Dei* and the Nature of the Local Church: An *Ontology of Mission*." Dr. Horrell handed me a copy of this article in June, 2007 in Amman, Jordan. I also found it later on the internet at http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=219 (accessed September 27, 2007; hereafter Horrell, "The Self-Giving Triune God," web). Note that the journal *Perichoresis* can also be accessed online: <http://www.emmanuel.ro/perichoresis/>.

⁴⁷Unfortunately, the Trinity has been a Christian doctrine that has been much neglected, especially in the Western church. Both Horrell and Gunton document the neglect and the recovery of the importance of this doctrine (see note 46). Their articles also go a long way to point out to the church the practical relevance of this doctrine

communion of believers is possible, lovely, and fruitful because the blessings are coming from above (from the Father) and are mediated by Christ through the Holy Spirit (represented by both the oil and the dew).⁴⁸ The ending of the psalm with the emphasis on “life” calls to mind an important and relevant quote by Colin Gunton: “The Trinity is about life, life before God, with one another and in the world. If we forget that God’s life is mediated to us trinitarianly, through his two hands, the Son and the Spirit, we forget the root of our lives, of what makes for life and death.”⁴⁹

Gunton alludes here to the simple but relevant image of Irenaeus about how God works in the world. In this image, God the Father is presented as working (creating and redeeming) through his “two hands,” the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus, “the Son and the Spirit are God in action, his personal way of being and acting in this world...The Son of God, who is one with God the Father, becomes flesh and lives among us The result of Jesus’ lifting up . . . is the sending of the Spirit – ‘another paraclete,’ or the second hand of the Father. The Spirit is the one sent by the Father at Jesus’ request to relate us to the Father through Him.”⁵⁰

In this relevant image, our salvation is made possible through the work of God which involves the whole Godhead. The possibility of our “relating” to God, and thus of receiving “life forevermore” is made possible through the Spirit sent at Christ’s request. This understanding of how the Trinity operates has clear parallels to psalm 133, where the divine blessings come down from above (from the Father) in the form of precious oil mediated by the High Priest (Christ).

today. I am afraid that the following comment by Immanuel Kant: “Taken literally, absolutely nothing worthwhile for the practical life can be made out of the doctrine of the Trinity” [quoted by Horrell, “The Self-Giving Triune God,” web.], reflects the thinking of many evangelical Christians today.

⁴⁸Note the interpretation of the Jewish interpreter David Kimhi in J. Baker and E. W. Nicholson, ed., *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi on Psalms CXX-CL* (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), 55-59. He thinks that the psalmist is speaking about the Messianic King and the High Priest. For him the oil is used to denote the High Priest and the dew is a “figurative expression for the king” (see Proverbs 19:12).

⁴⁹Gunton, “The Forgotten Trinity,” 51-52.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 51.

It is also significant to understand that the Trinity does not "divide" God. We are not dealing with three gods here, but rather with a unity in diversity. Horrell explains well that "the unity of the Trinity is to be found in *perichoresis*, the inner habitation (or coinherence) of each divine person in the other The essential unity of the Godhead, then, is found both in their intrinsic equality of divine characteristics and also in the intensely personal unity that comes from mutual indwelling."⁵¹

The amazing and humbling fact of New Testament revelation is not only that the Son of God chose to "dwell among us" (John 1:14ff), but that the fellowship (and dwelling?) within the Trinity is extended to all believers. Thus, Apostle John writes to us too and wants us to participate in fellowship with him: "and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). In the Eastern Orthodox perspective "finite beings might enter into the joyous fellowship of the Holy Trinity,"⁵² and this is clearly biblical.

Thus, when we meet and have fellowship with our fellow believers, it is good and biblical to think deeper and farther, and to realize that when we gather together, the life and blessings are possible because the Holy Trinity (or the triune God) is "personally" involved in this communion. The pleasantness and fruitfulness that are present in the congregations united in Spirit and purpose are the direct result of being in fellowship with God. It is there, that life and blessings are possible. Life is indeed mediated to us "trinitarianly."

A look further into the mystery of Trinity, with its inter-relationships of love and "self-givingness" has foundational practical implications for the life of the Christian Church. Theologians note that the triune God is "one who has his being in communion."⁵³ In the Trinity, the "one is not played against the many, nor the many against the one," rather, they have their being in relation to one another. Thus, the "Father, Son and Spirit are persons because they enable each other

⁵¹Horrell, "The Self-Giving Triune God," web.

⁵²Ibid. Notice that even though the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in this verse, the assumption is that the fellowship is with the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit. Note the well known benediction from 2 Cor. 13:14 where the work of fellowship is clearly associated with the Holy Spirit.

⁵³John D. Zizioulas as quoted by Gunton, "The Forgotten Trinity," 56.

to be truly what the other is: they neither assert at the expense of nor lose themselves in the being of others.”⁵⁴

This Trinity functions for us as a “model of personhood,” and its expression should “best be reflected in the local church, the community of believers.”⁵⁵ In other words, the body of Christ “is the community called so to order its life with and before the triune God that it becomes a school of personal being—a place where, among other things, we learn to be with, from and for one another.”⁵⁶ Apostle John (4:7-13) describes well for us the essence of being God, and links this with the call to “love one another:”

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

It is clear from this text that one important way to describe God is as being “love.” And he is “love, not only towards us, but in his deepest and eternal being.” In other words, God’s love is not manifested only in the story of redemption, but also has to do with the very (eternal) being of God. Before human beings ever existed, God was love, because there has always existed reciprocal love within the Godhead. That is why it is crucial for the Christian Church to know what God is like, because “[if] we do not know who our God is, then we shall not know how we are to grow like him.”⁵⁷ Thus, theology is not an empty

⁵⁴Gunton, “The Forgotten Trinity,” 56.

⁵⁵Horrell, “The Self-Giving Triune God,” web. Of course, the divine oneness surpasses human understanding and capacity, thus “believers are called to be a “finite echo” of the divine. We are called only “in a limited way to be a communal expression of the Trinity.”

⁵⁶Gunton, “The Forgotten Trinity,” 57.

⁵⁷Ibid., 58.

academic exercise, but is essential for growth and has important practical relevance.⁵⁸

Gunton correctly laments that "[t]he church has failed to practice the Trinity."⁵⁹ This failure has resulted in a misrepresentation of God before the world, because without a clear and correct understanding of God as "being in communion," and that a communion characterized by love and perfect unity, "we might have a God of power, or a God in some way identical with the world, but not the God of the Bible . . ."⁶⁰

Because the fellowship with this God of love is extended to us and is possible by the mediation of the Spirit who comes from above sent by Christ, our churches should mirror the life in the Trinity: we should love one another and be ready to give ourselves and sacrifice ourselves for the ones in need.⁶¹ Thus, believers in the church who love and care for one another reflect the life of the Trinity, and display toward the world the true Christian (and biblical) God. This is a God, in which there is unity (the three are one) and diversity (the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father), and this should again be reflected in the unity and diversity of the local church. Thus, in the church of Christ the member does not lose his individuality, it is rather expressed and defined in relation with the rest of the believers and with God.⁶²

APPLICATIONS

Nothing kills fellowship more than the refusal to come together. In fact, when people do not come together, fellowship is not possible. Too

⁵⁸For some relevant examples about the practical use of the doctrine of Trinity in the history of the Christian church, see Gunton, "The Forgotten Trinity," 48-50.

⁵⁹Gunton, "The Forgotten Trinity," 58.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹See also the relevant comment of Gordon Fee, "God is not just saving individuals and preparing them for heaven; rather, he is creating a people among whom he can live and who in their life together will reproduce God's life and character" [G. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*, 66, quoted in Horrell, "The Self-Giving Triune God," web.]

⁶²In the "communion of the saints" we are not depersonalized by being melted in the "mass," but neither are we individualists in which we refuse (and forget) how to live with and for another. Notice the discussion and critique of our "deeply individualistic culture" by Gunton, "The Forgotten Trinity," 54-55.

many churches and youth groups look like deserted places because their members are too comfortable or indifferent to gather for worship. However, to rejoice in the gates of Zion, one had to make the trip there. A first and essential step for a good and pleasant communion to take place is simply for believers to come together. Many times this requires effort and money.

In a few days, more than 1100 sisters in Christ from around 80 nations will leave their families and loved ones to come and dwell together in Seoul, thousands of miles away from their places of birth. They will be here to be part of WOGA, a gathering designed for equipping women leaders for mission.⁶³ For this communion to be possible, already much has been sacrificed. There are already exhausted volunteers, depleted pockets, and thousands of hours spent for planning schedules, housing, worship, and bible studies. This has already been a work of love, and self-giving. Sisters in Christ who have never seen each other, have already extended loving hands of love to make communion possible.

There is no doubt in my mind, that when thousands of sisters in Christ, “many bodies, but not many minds; many bodies, but not many hearts”⁶⁴ will be gathered together in all their colorful diversity, there will be a splendid opportunity to reflect and to experience the life of the triune God. Many will bring this beloved psalm to mind and will feel compelled to exclaim: “*Behold, how good and how lovely it really is when sisters fellowship together.*” Many will even dwell together under the same roof, but most important, they will gather together to share, to learn from each other, and to worship in one Spirit; the one sent down by God through Christ to refresh, to beautify, and to guarantee expansion and fruitfulness.

In this context of blessing and life, where their joyful communion will be entwined with the fellowship of the Father and the Son (through the mediation of the Spirit), it is useful to bring to mind the necessity of a life of holiness and humility; for nothing “stinks” worse than dirt and arrogance. Just as the oil that came down on the head of Aaron was

⁶³See note 2 for more detail on WOGA.

⁶⁴Augustine, “Psalm 133,” web. He refers to the text from Acts 4:32 - *Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul . . .* (ESV).

precious and holy, so should this coming gathering be. The precious oil of Old Testament consecrated (set apart) things and people for service, but the purity of these was assumed and necessary. Apostle John reminds us that for true and pleasant fellowship to be possible, the believers must not "walk in darkness."⁶⁵ Therefore, come to this conference with a clean heart and mind, confess your sins and prejudice, and your feelings of superiority (many of those sisters will be from the "third world"), and the blood of Christ will cleanse you from all sin (1 John 1:7).

This amazing (and it seems unique) "communion of saints" should strive to reflect the triune divine image. In this image we find "mutuality." Scott Horrell reminds us well: "Just as each member of the Holy Trinity is equally and completely God, so each believer in the local church is equally a son and daughter of God, coheir to the promises of the cross."⁶⁶ Each participant should be called to participate in his own distinctive (but ordered) way to fellowship and worship. They are to "be given real value and dignity" and not be left as "anonymous spectators amidst professional performances."⁶⁷ The rich and important should remember that "every believer is important and necessary in the Body of Christ" and "[a]ll members should be conscious of their responsibility of reciprocal submission by giving of themselves to the other."⁶⁸

This conference will also be a great opportunity for the beginning of formation of "deep friendships." The real community existing in God should begin to be reflected during the times of fellowship and beyond, and to imitate God it will be important to seek and cultivate deep friendships. These are relationships based on the love of God, the same love that existed from the very beginning in the triune God, and which was manifested in Creation and Redemption.

⁶⁵1 John 1:6-7 - *If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (ESV).*

⁶⁶Horrell, "The Self-Giving Triune God," web. Note that many of the following thoughts are adapted from this article.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid. See also the example of Christ in Phil. 2:5-11; 2 Cor. 8:9.

The image of the triune God is a “missionary image,” because our God is a missionary God. In the image of Irenaeus, God the Father is the Sender with both God the Son and God the Spirit as his divine missionaries. The Son and the Holy Spirit are the ministering hands of God bringing believers to salvation and into the family of God. This image has specific application to the local churches which are to imitate God in their missionary zeal, and reaching out to bless and be a blessing for the world.

All the sisters in Christ who will come to WOGA will bring much, but it is also hoped that they will take much. Just as others (and other churches) have reached out to them and they were blessed, they are to reach out to others in imitation of God, and in imitation of the sacrificing and visionary church.

I pray that most of the women who will come to WOGA (Women of Global Action) will become first and foremost “women of local action.” More specifically, they will be women who will work in and through their local churches. For, if the global God who created heaven and earth, became man, and brought us salvation by living and suffering in a small and insignificant (local) place (never having traveled more than 200 km from the place of his birth), through the grace of God and the power of his Spirit, God can continue to work wonders and salvation in the local communities where these visionary women will return. But return home with a vision of the greatness of God. Take with you a vision of a “missionary God” who has kindled a flame in Korea, and has poured His life giving Spirit over many local congregations who lovingly image him in their missionary zeal and sacrifice. And go praying. Pray that the richness of his Spirit will come down through Christ to the fringes of Islam, for in that parched land of darkness and death, the dew of Hermon is very much in need, and it is long overdue.

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