TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM & THE HOLY SPIRIT

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A proper understanding of the Trinity helps us understand the Holy Spirit.[1] This paper will demonstrate how Social Trinitarianism provides the most coherent understanding of the Trinity, and that this is most evident in regards to the person and work of the Holy Spirit. In these pages, aspects of both Western and Eastern traditions will be gathered to form a distinct version of Social Trinitarianism. By the end of this paper, it will be shown (1) that the Holy Spirit suggests a social view of the Trinity, and (2) that Social Trinitarianism can better inform us about the Holy Spirit. In other words, it will be argued that Social Trinitarianism should be taken seriously because of its *coherence* with biblical revelation – particularly in regards to how Scripture describes the Holy Spirit.

The Traditional Latin View of the Trinity

Tertullian stands as an important figure for developing our understanding of the Trinity. Tertullian was the first to use "person" in reference to the three members of the Trinity, and this terminology had an enormous impact on the development of Western theology. Tertullian believed that the Trinity consisted of three persons that existed as one *substantia* or essence.[2]

As a consequence of Tertullian's use of personhood, the Western tradition of Christian theology has at times defended an *individualistic* understanding of the Trinitarian persons. For example, Boethius believed that relationship was a consequence rather than a necessity of personhood. In this Latin view, relationality is not necessary prior to existing as a person, so in

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[1] See McIlroy's "Towards a Relational and Trinitarian Theology of Atonement."

[2] John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him : The Doctrine of God* (, The foundations of evangelical theologyWheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 474.

theory, each member of the Trinity could exist individually, without the other two members of the Trinity.

Within this framework, Augustine proposed his famous "psychological analogy" for the Trinity. Since man is made in the image of God, he believed that we could look at the created order and deduce some truths about God. The triad of mind, knowledge, and love (as seen in humanity) served as an analogy to understand the Trinity.

As a result, Augustine viewed the Holy Spirit as the bond of love between Father and Son. Feinberg notes that for Augustine, the Holy Spirit "unites believers to God, allowing God to dwell in us and us in him. He is God's love gift to us in this respect."[3] The problem with Augustine's view is that a "bond of love" is impersonal, so the de-emphasis upon the Holy Spirit in Christian theology was a natural consequence. For much of Christian theology, the Spirit has been the "unnoticed third" who works behind the scenes, while the Father and Son take center stage.

Following Tertullian, the Nicene Creed developed Trinitarian doctrine in creedal form in 325 AD. One weakness of Nicene was an inadequate definition of the Holy Spirit. "And we believe" affirmed belief in the Holy Spirit, but did not explain how the Spirit related to the other members of the Trinity. Vagueness about the Holy Spirit should concern us, especially when it comes to affirming the Trinity, because without the Spirit, there is no Trinity.

Although it took nearly 60 years, the Holy Spirit was given more attention at the Council of Constantinople. In 381, the Church added to the description of the Spirit: "the Lord and Giver-of-Life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is

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[3] John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him : The Doctrine of God* (, The foundations of evangelical theologyWheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 486.

worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets."[4] Though brief, these details were added

to describe the role of the Holy Spirit, and from that, we can infer that the Spirit should take

greater place in our understanding of the Trinity.

This wording (or lack of wording) led to the *filioque* controversy – which concerns the

"source" of the Holy Spirit – is responsible for dividing the Western and Eastern Church. The

Western Church believed that the Spirit proceeds from *both* the Father and the Son, while the

Eastern Church believed that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone. These differing views of

the Holy Spirit led to the largest schism in Church history, and for that reason, the Spirit deserves

our attention.

Worldwide, most Christians today assume the Latin or Western understanding of the

Trinity. Practically speaking, even the terms "person" and "essence" are considered inerrant.

More recently, however, theologians like Karl Barth and Karl Rahner have distanced themselves

from the traditional terms and coin terms of their own. They reason that "person" is an

unsatisfactory term to describe the Trinity. Yet the majority view is not always the correct view,

so for that reason, we should be willing to reevaluate our understanding of the Trinity.

Here the point is simple: the doctrine of the Trinity developed over the centuries, and often,

there was a lack of consensus. This recognition should encourage us to explore the doctrine

further, as well as to consider alternative models that fit within the orthodox views of the

Christian faith. In particular, the Holy Spirit has not been adequately embraced or understood,

which has led to a variety of views of the Trinity. One such model is Social Trinitarianism, to

which we now turn.

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[4] John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him : The Doctrine of God* (, The foundations of evangelical
theologyWheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 481.

A Social Definition of the Trinity

Social Trinitarianism emphasizes distinction within the Trinity, as well as unity within the community of persons. In contrast to the Latin definition of personhood, the Eastern tradition has defined personhood in terms of a social community. This has attracted the attention of Western theologians, and as individualism has become rampant in industrialized society, the social view has been increasingly accepted in the West.

Social Trinitarianism emphasizes interaction within the Father, Son, and Spirit. Daniel Migliore has summarized this position by stating, "God is one, but the unity of God is a living unity."[5] Rather than seeing static persons who have limited interaction, Social Trinitarianism understands the three persons as unified, interactive, and mutually dependent. Some have criticized Social Trinitarianism as having a "dynamic energy" that necessitates a fourth member of the Trinity, but while there is a dynamic aspect to the Trinity, there is no need to concretize the relationship as an energy. Social Trinitarianism takes seriously the relationship that exists between the persons of the Trinity.

In fact, according to the social view of the Trinity, it is *impossible* for God to exist apart from relationship. Relationship is essential to personhood in the fullest sense. Thus, even Feinberg agrees that "those who point to relatedness that involves genuine interaction with others are surely correct in thinking that this is at least part of what we mean by 'personal' as opposed to 'impersonal.'"[6] However, instead of being dependent upon a relationship with creation, God

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[5] Daniel Migliore. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology.* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 77.

[6] John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him : The Doctrine of God* (, The foundations of evangelical theologyWheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 229.

exists because of who He is – the internal relationship within the three persons of God. Simply stated, this view understands monotheism as the unity of a community.[7] It is impossible for God to exist apart from this communion.

The term "personhood" is often employed in theological writing, but is not always defined. In some cases, theologians have been known to assume a definition of personhood that supports their viewpoint, then base their understanding of the Trinity upon their assumed definition of personhood. Thus, it is essential to define personhood prior to speaking of the divine persons.

Within the Western tradition, personhood is often thought of in terms of rationality, consciousness, volition, or psychology. It is helpful to note, therefore, that such personality is "defined exclusively by the complex of human individuum" and marked by a "prevalence of egocentric categories."[8] Rather than taking the Latin view of personhood for granted, we must determine a satisfactory definition before we use the term.

Famously, Boethius (c. 475/480-524) defined personhood as "an individual substance with a relational nature," but that assumes that relationality is an accidental property – meaning that relationship is not necessary for personhood. However, this leads to serious problems when we consider the Trinity and imagine the persons existing without relationship to one another.

For that reason, theologians like Graham Cole have argued that we must most beyond Boethius' definition towards a more relational definition. An alternative to Boethius' definition is that of Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173), who defined personhood as being *constituted* by

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[7] C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 108.

[8] M. William Ury. *Trinitarian Personhood: Investigating the Implications of a Relational Definition*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 4.

relations to others. In other words, relationality does not come *after* personhood, but is a necessary aspect of what "makes" personhood. Donald Bloesch has spoken of "the three subjectivities that compose the Godhead" because of the interactions within God, and we can benefit from reconsidering how and *why* the persons interact with one another.[9]

For those who hold the social view, personhood requires the ability to relate. Relationality is one dimension that separates human beings from animals. Human persons are social beings. Personhood is more than just intellectual or volitional capacity. Human persons are relational because of their ability to relate through speech, disclosure, intimacy, and fellowship. Not surprisingly, when these are taken away – such as when a family member dies – we feel part of ourselves "die." This is metaphor, of course, but the reality is that our well-being as persons is connected with our interrelation with others.

According to Eastern tradition, relationship is an ontological aspect of both human beings and God. This is not a new idea, of course, but has been passed down from the early church and has been held by the Orthodox church for centuries. If relationship is, in fact, an essential attribute of personhood, then the Eastern understanding of personhood reframes our discussion of the Trinity. In order for God to exist, He must essentially be in communion. He could not exist as anything other than a communal being.

While this may at first seem to hint at tritheism, this need not be the case. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, illustrates how this can be with universal and local categories. As the illustration goes, "'man' refers to human nature in general, while Peter, James, and John are

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[9] Donald Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, and Love.* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 169.

particular instances of the common human nature."[10] In the illustration, "man" is the universal, but Peter, James, and John are local instances of mankind. Of course, three human beings have three separate wills and cannot perfectly know each other, so the illustration is somewhat flawed. Within the Trinity, the Father, Spirit, and Son are one because they exist in perfect community. Even still, though the illustration is weak, such an illustration shows that a social view is logically possible.

Clearly, the social view of the Trinity emphasizes relations. When personhood is defined in terms of relations, then God is relational in His ontological being – not merely relational as an accidental attribute. God exists as three persons because of the community within the Trinity.

The Social Trinity in Scripture

Our view of the Trinity should be rooted in Scripture, and for that reason, we should consider how each member of the Trinity is described to us in God's own terms. For our purposes here, we will limit our focus to the Holy Spirit. The reason for this is because according to Scripture, the Holy Spirit cannot be reduced to an impersonal force or a bond of love. As we will see, the Holy Spirit needs to be considered as a genuine and complete person, meaning that the Holy Spirit is able to commune with the other members of the Trinity. In Scripture, we are first introduced to the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. Some theologians believe that the Holy Spirit "hovered" over the waters at creation, though that is not altogether conclusive. At the least, this is an early allusion to the Spirit. When we read the Bible as Christians, informed by the New Covenant, we can be fairly confident that Genesis 1 alludes to the Holy Spirit.

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[10] John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him : The Doctrine of God* (, The foundations of evangelical theologyWheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 483.

It is particularly significant that a community is present within God at the very beginning. During the creation of the world, God said "let *us* make man in *our* image," using plural forms in the original Hebrew, which implies that one, unified plurality was involved in creation. The fact that this community shared *one* image is important. Even with this divine community, there is one unified God, so that from the beginning, the Jewish people could affirm One God even in light of a plural noun.

In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit has a distinct role that cannot be minimized to merely a force or a "bond" of love. The Spirit is attributed with specific tasks, such as prophecy (Acts 1:16) and sanctification (1 Pet. 1:2). Yet the Spirit is not unrelated to the other members of the Trinity. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the Spirit is described as both the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:11-12; Rom. 8:9-17) and the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9), indicating both relationship and indivisibility within the Trinity.[11] For these reasons, a relational view of the Trinity fits well with biblical revelation.

Social Trinitarianism's Recovery of the Holy Spirit and Personhood

Social Trinitarianism has many strengths, but one of the most compelling reasons is its understanding of the Holy Spirit. Christians disagree about the role of the Spirit, and a relational view helps to resolve some misunderstandings. Jurgen Moltmann wrote that determining the personhood of the Spirit is "the most difficult problem in pneumatology," but in this effort, Social Trinitarianism helps to make sense of the Spirit as a person.[12] Like others who hold a

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[11] David Noel Freedman, vol. 2, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 1055.

[12] Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation,* trans. Margaret Kohl. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 268.

social view of the Trinity, Moltmann understood personhood to involve "working together in social commonality without absorbing the other's identity into oneself and one's interests." [13]

When personhood is defined in terms of relation, the Holy Spirit would certainly fit that necessary qualification. Even though the Holy Spirit is described with metaphors like fire and wind (Acts 2:2-4), the Spirit is also described in terms of an I-Thou relationship. In Acts 13:2, the Spirit uses "I" for the purpose of self-reference, and as a result, the Spirit would be distinguished from the Father (Matt 3:17) and the Son (Mk. 14:62). In other words, the Spirit is not described as an impersonal substance. The Holy Spirit is just as personal as the Father and the Son.

Furthermore, within the social view, *perichoresis* or circumincession refers to the relational equality within each person of the Trinity. These terms are used to describe the mutual indwelling of the three persons. No tension exists within the Trinity because one person is *in* three and three persons are *in* one.[14] The concept of mutual indwelling comes from John 14, where Jesus says the Father is *in* him, and that he is *in* the Father. This mutuality extends to the Holy Spirit as well.

Because of this emphasis upon mutuality, Social Trinitarianism maintains the personhood of the Holy Spirit better than other views of the Trinity. A major weaknesses of the Latin psychological model is that the Holy Spirit resembles an impersonal force. As a result, the Spirit does not seem to be a person, but merely a binding force of love. In contrast to this, Social

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[13] Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (electronic ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 392.

[14] Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 93.

Trinitarianism affirms that the Holy Spirit must be in communion to the Father and the Son, and this means that the Holy Spirit cannot be an impersonal force or bond of love.

In contrast to the Latin understanding of the Trinity, Social Trinitarianism maintains that the Holy Spirit has equal value to the other members of the Trinity – that is to say, the Spirit is not merely a force that enables communion, but *all* of the members exist in perfect communion.

The *filioque* controversy that splits Western and Eastern theology helps bring this difference to light. Here, however, we should side with the Latin understanding of the Holy Spirit. Western theologians, affirm that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father *and* the Son.[15] Scripture seems to support the idea that *both* send the Spirit (Jn. 16:13-15; Acts 2:33; Tit. 3:6). While the Eastern view can lead towards monarchialism or subordinationism, double procession from Father and Son supports the mutuality within the Trinity. Considering these two options, we should side with the Western view because actions within the Trinity are more communal than they are divisible.

For Social Trinitarians, community, or interdependence within the persons, is crucial for a biblical understanding of God. We should be wary of claims that subordinate the Son or the Spirit in the immanent Trinity because it implies aseity of the Father alone. As Strong noted, "the Son is no more dependent upon the Father than the Father is dependent upon the Son, and so that, if it be consistent with deity to be Father, it is equally consistent with deity to be Son."[16]

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[15] F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd ed. rev.; Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1653.

[16] Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Bellingham, Wa.: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004), 342.

Strong is also correct that "Essential subordination would be inconsistent with equality."[17] Viewing the Trinity as a hierarchy leads to many theological problems, including a devaluation of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, the social view leads us to value each person as equal participants, united and without demotion.

Persons of the Trinity are not distinguished by their value or their hierarchial position, but by their relationship to one another. Scripture implies that each person is responsible for a particular role, yet even here, we see overlap between the activities of the three. The entire Trinity is involved in creation, salvation, sanctification, and glorification. Never does one person act alone – in a rogue, individualistic act – apart from the other persons.

Some object that Social Trinitarianism is flawed because of a flawed definition of personhood. A significant objection includes cases where human beings are separated from other human beings – for example, a prisoner in solitary confinement, a shut-in without any visitors, or a lone astronaut in outer space. When separated from community, do they somehow become less of a person? This, of course, is an important objection and one that needs to be taken seriously.

In response to this objection, Social Trinitarianism understands personhood in relationship to God first and foremost. Iraneaus defined human beings as body, soul and the Holy Spirit, so that without the Holy Spirit, a human being is less than fully alive as a person.[18] As a result, non-Christians exist as human beings, yet are incomplete without the presence of God in their lives. In other words, true humanity was lost in the Garden of Eden, and it is only restored when people are reunited in relationship with God.

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[17] Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Bellingham, Wa.: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004), 342.

[18] Hopko, "The Holy Spirit: An Orthodox View." *The Living Pulpit*, 11.

For the reasons introduced above, Social Trinitarianism can offer a robust perspective of the Trinity, and in particular, help to explain the role of the Holy Spirit. In terms of embracing a view, coherence is an important factor to consider, and Social Trinitarianism offers a more coherent view of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit According to Social Trinitarianism

According to Social Trinitarianism, the Holy Spirit is not only personal, but relational. The Spirit's social dimension can be seen in the way that the Spirit *unites* persons together. The Spirit does not merely observe the Father and Son, but helps to unify the Trinity as one. The Spirit does not unify as an impersonal bond, however. Rather, the Spirit unifies in the same way that a person unifies a group.

Likewise, the Spirit unites the Church in two-fold manner. To ignore either aspect will neglect the social nature of the Holy Spirit on earth. The Spirit displays personhood through relationship within the Trinity and within the Church. Rather than reducing the Holy Spirit to a impersonal force or "bond," we can see that the Holy Spirit actively engages, similar to how a human person would, in the effort to unite other persons. Because the Spirit knows perfect community, the Spirit is able to share perfect community with humanity.

First, the Holy Spirit enables relationship between humanity and the Trinity. Scripture describes the Holy Spirit as convicting, drawing, and calling. The Spirit welcomes us into the community that exists within the Godhead. While we remain distinct from God, we are invited to commune with God. The Spirit glorifies by introducing and relating us with God.

Relationship with God is evident when the Holy Spirit indwells believers. The fact that the Holy Spirit indwells should not be overlooked. Christianity does not end with the atonement,

but continues with indwelling. The Spirit's indwelling remains a mystery, and does not make very much sense, unless we consider the social nature of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit makes community possible, and as such, He enables humanity to connect with Trinity.

Not only does the Spirit enable communion with God, but the Spirit also *assures* us of our communion. The Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are in fact children of God (Rom. 8:16), and when we have difficulty relating with the Trinity, the Spirit Himself helps us to pray (Rom. 8:26). Because the Holy Spirit develops this communion, Jesus described the Spirit as the "Helper." Interestingly, the Spirit does not act as a lone ranger, but is sent by God the Father in the name of Jesus Christ (Jn. 14:26), so that the entire Trinity is engaged in the process of helping us in our spiritual journey – teaching and reminding all that Jesus taught.

Second, the Holy Spirit brings communal life to the Church. In a unique way, the Spirit unites individuals into one, common body – the body of Christ. As Albert Curry Winn put it, "The primary work of the Holy Spirit is to bestow shared life on the people of God." We miss the Holy Spirit if we think that He exclusively works with individuals. The Holy Spirit offers shared life with the entire body of Christ.

In the Western view, this social aspect can be lost. Consider, for instance, how many evangelicals speak of a "relationship with God" or a "relationship with Jesus Christ." While such a relationship is made possible through the Holy Spirit, the Spirit is sometimes seen as a signpost that points to someone else. The result is that the Spirit is quite impersonal. Instead, it is better to see the Holy Spirit as a person who introduces us to One God, the entire Trinity.

The connection between the Holy Spirit and community is portrayed through Pentecost. Not only does the Holy Spirit fill the believers, but the Spirit enables the believers to speak in other tongues. On the Day of Pentecost, this created unity between the disciples and all of the

nations who were in Jerusalem. But beyond Pentecost, the "tongues of angels" enables believers to communicate in a way that goes beyond comprehension (1 Cor. 14:1-19). Language is necessary for relationship, so it makes logical sense that the Holy Spirit would make these relationships possible.

Increasing Our Understanding of the Holy Spirit

With a social or relational view of personhood, the Holy Spirit becomes more understandable in terms of Christian practice. Who can make sense of an impersonal bond of love? If we embrace a psychological model, what is a Christian supposed to do with such an abstract notion of the Holy Spirit? In stark contrast to the abstractions of mind, knowledge, and love (which Augustine said represented three different persons), the Church knows how to comprehend a relational being who invites into relationship. This is how we experience other human persons – in terms of relationship or non-relationship – so it should not surprise us that God would infinitely supersede this through the Holy Spirit. If we are to understand the Holy Spirit at all, then a social view is far more helpful than a psychological analogy.

In addition, the social view of the Trinity directly influences how Christians worship. The Holy Spirit is not merely a "pointer" to the Father or the Son. Instead, the Spirit is part of the divine community, and any interaction with the Spirit leads us to the Trinity. As Christians embrace the full personhood of the Holy Spirit, they avoid both binitarianism and abstractionism. The Spirit is not merely a force between the Father and Son, but the Spirit is a person who enables our communion with God. This reality affects how we should worship – not only individually, but corporately.

In Social Trinitarianism, the Holy Spirit is not forgotten, but *active* in the Eucharist. Rather than part of God, all three persons are present and active. It is a communal event. The Church proclaims the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is made possible through the Father, and made known to the Church through the Holy Spirit. Community within the God, therefore, offers a more complete and Trinitarian perspective of the Eucharist.

Social Trinitarianism also makes more sense of our experience of the Holy Spirit. Because each person dwells in perfect communion with the other two persons, this explains how Cessasionists and Pentecostals are able to pray to the same God. There is not division or partition, but community within the Trinity. According to the Orthodox view, "in every action of God toward the world, the Holy Spirit is necessarily acting."[19] As Christians, we do not experience a transition from one person to another (which would be comparable to modalism), but we experience one God.

Conclusion

The doctrine of the Trinity can feel overwhelming at times. We will never fully understand the intricacies of God, particularly when it comes to understanding a mystery like the Trinity. That being said, partial knowledge is preferable to no knowledge at all, and for that reason, it is beneficial to explore the Trinity.

Many theologians have proposed models and illustrations for comprehending the Trinity, but rather than assuming a Western viewpoint, this paper has argued that Social Trinitarianism (which is more common in the East) has many strong points. There are good reasons to hold to a relational definition of God's personhood.

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[19] Thomas Hopko, "The Holy Spirit: An Orthodox View." *The Living Pulpit*. 5, no. 1 (January 1, 1996): 11.

Most significantly, I have argued that there is a connection between Social Trinitarianism and the Holy Spirit. Not only does the Holy Spirit point us towards Social Trinitarianism, but in return, Social Trinitarianism helps us to better understand the Holy Spirit. For that reason, even though Social Trinitarianism is not as common in the West, it would benefit us to revisit the contributions of the early church fathers and Orthodox theology. Maybe their development of Social Trinitarianism could help us better understand the Holy Spirit, and as a result, we may be able to build bridges between various Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox views of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, there are many strengths of the Western viewpoint, and each perspective offers a positive contribution to theology, but Social Trinitarianism has the benefit of being more coherent with the rest of Christian theology. Rather than reducing the Holy Spirit to an impersonal force, Social Trinitarianism upholds the Spirit as an equal partner in the Trinity. In particular, the Holy Spirit may be the defining aspect that leads to a social view over the other competing views.

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