



YOU MAY NOW SERVE THE BRIDE: THE TRINITY AND GENDER

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Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation* was an exposé of what he called “the dark side” of the fast-food industry. It became a global phenomenon, eventually being made into a movie. The fast-food giants have been on the back foot ever since. The chapter on slaughterhouses put me off burgers for a very long time.

But as well as identifying some of the dubious practices of some well-known fast-food brands, Schlosser's research also introduced him to some of the amazing technological innovation that lies behind this industry. Just take the technology used to produce French fries:

Conveyor belts took the wet, clean potatoes into a machine that blasted them with steam for twelve seconds, boiled the water under their skins, and exploded their skins off. Then the potatoes were pumped into a preheat tank and shot through a Lamb Water Gun Knife. They emerged as shoestring fries. Four video cameras scrutinized them from different angles, looking for flaws. When a French fry with a blemish was detected, an optical sorting machine time-sequenced a single burst of compressed air that knocked the bad fry off the production line and onto a separate conveyor belt, which carried it to a machine with tiny automated knives that precisely removed the blemish. And the fry was returned to the main production line.

Sprays of hot water blanched the fries, gusts of hot air dried them, and 25,000 pounds of boiling oil fried them to a slight crisp. Air cooled by compressed ammonia quickly froze them, a computerized sorter that spun like an out-of-control lazy Susan used centrifugal force to align the french fries so that they all pointed in the same direction.

The fries were sealed in brown bags, then the bags were loaded by robots into cardboard boxes, and the boxes were stacked by robots onto wooden pallets.¹

All in all, the technology put into making French fries is huge, and so is the money it takes to make French fries. But the end product shows the pay-off: millions and millions of French fries that look, and more importantly taste, exactly the same.

We like uniformity.

Think about it. You could be anywhere on the globe, facing an unfamiliar climate and trying to deal with unfamiliar languages and customs. Immersed in an utterly alien world. And yet step into McDonald's and you know exactly what they will have and exactly how it will taste. It's the same with countless global chains: coffee shops, restaurants, hotels, you name it. It doesn't matter if you are in Delhi, Detroit, Dublin, or Dubai; you are never far away from your favorite frappuccino.

There's something reassuring in all this. Surrounded by unpredictability and unfamiliarity, there is value in this kind of sameness. And we go to considerable lengths to attain it.

As we think about what it means for God to be Trinity, we have to come to terms, sooner or later, with a fundamental principle: the one God is three persons, and always has been. These three persons are distinct; the Father, Son and Spirit are not identical. They cannot be interchanged. Yet these three persons are one. And so the unity that God has always exhibited and enjoyed, the unity that stands at the center of reality and has done for all eternity—this perfect and foundational unity—this unity is of a particular kind.

What we see in God is this: unity not in sameness, but unity in difference.

A MUSICAL ILLUSTRATION

It was 5:00 in the morning and it had woken me up again. I had only been in Kuala Lumpur for a few days, and so far each one had started involuntarily at this hour. We were staying in a guesthouse, and just around the corner the local mosque was broadcasting its morning call to prayer.

I'll be honest, I'm not at my best at 5:00AM. My initial thoughts were not of peace and goodwill towards my fellow man. But once the grumpiness had eventually subsided and I had become reconciled to the fact that the day had now started, the call to prayer got me thinking.

I'm not much of an expert on Islam, but it struck me that the call to prayer might be a pretty good musical expression of what Muslims believe about God. Allah is understood to be a solitary entity, a singularity. In the language of people who know these things, he is a monad. (Note to self: a *monad* is an irreducible, singular entity or being. A *nomad* is someone looking for affordable accommodation anywhere in London.)

This, it seemed to me, was what the call to prayer was reflecting musically—aural theology, if you like. It was the cry of a lone voice (in this case, I think, pre-recorded). No instrumentation. No accompaniment of any kind. No polyphony. No harmony. Just a singular melody.

It is surely no accident that societies that have been significantly influenced by biblical Christianity and, by extension, the Christian understanding of Trinity, have produced complex polyphony. One thinks, for example, of the music of a devout Christian like J. S. Bach. It would be natural for there to

¹ Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation* (Penguin, 2002), 130–131.

be a relationship between a society's theology and its music. Interestingly, in his book on the Trinity, Robert Letham notes that touring orchestras tend to be in less demand in strongly Islamic cultures.²

If this is so, then it should not surprise us. The God of Scripture has revealed himself as Trinity: unity in three different persons. Theological harmony, a beautiful musical integration.

Unity-in-diversity. This is significant. We will get God wrong if we don't grasp this. We will also get some other key things wrong. As we have come to expect, what God shows us about himself will have innumerable practical implications. We are not just to notice this aspect of what it means for God to be Trinity, but to live in the light of it.

We are not left in the dark as to how this applies. This feature of God's unity is applied directly in the New Testament to the area of gender. Consider Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:3, "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God."

Paul lists three things that are the "head" of other things:

1. Christ is the *head* of man.
2. Man is the *head* of woman.
3. God is the *head* of Christ.

Taken together, Paul has just mentioned the words "man," "head," and "woman" in the same sentence.³ Wherever he's going with this, we who inhabit the egalitarian West immediately feel ourselves stepping onto dodgy ground. It feels a little like Paul might be about to roll back all that has been achieved in women's rights over the last century. But he isn't.

Whatever Paul means by 'headship' it flows out of how God exists as Trinity. Whatever man is supposed to be to woman is meant to correspond to how God (the Father) is to God (the Son). The dynamic of this relationship within the Trinity is something we are to map onto our relationships as men and women, with especial application to marriage. In other words, to properly understand what it means to have been created as men and women, we need to understand how the Father and Son relate to each other. Our view of gender needs to correspond with our view of the Trinity.

This being so, what is actually at stake in this discussion is not whether we find ourselves out of step with the surrounding culture, but whether we find ourselves in step with God himself. Therefore, we need to understand who God is and from there what 1 Corinthians 11 says about gender.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FATHER AND SON

There exists, somewhere deep in my psyche, an unshakeable conviction that I am a "maps person." All I need is a casual glance at a map before heading off, and I have, according to this conviction, a virtually flawless internal compass. I can confidently assert that I am oriented in a south-south-west direction as I type this. I also possess, where cartographic information is concerned, unusual powers of retention.

² Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004), 445.

³ The words translated (in the NIV) as 'man' and 'woman' can also mean 'husband' and 'wife' (as in the ESV). There is some discussion about whether Paul primarily has marriage relationships in mind, or whether he is talking about male/female relationships more generally. I am inclined to favor the latter. Briefly, Paul seems to be addressing public/church matters more than home matters, and issues that relate to "all men" and "all women," rather than just husbands and wives. Most interpretations that favor the husband/wife view still acknowledge that there is a wider, more general application.

At least, that's the theory.

The reality presents a rather different case. It is a curiosity of my self-belief where directions are concerned that it has endured, unwavering, in the face of so much evidence to the contrary. Many times I have found myself in places that were patently not my destination. On one memorable occasion, my navigational instincts forced me to execute a U-turn on a railway station platform.

There are times when we need to come back and look at something again, this time more closely. The first glance might have given a helpful overall sense of where things lie. But closer study is what is needed if we are to find our way around at street level. It is true for me (I need to learn) when it comes to maps and directions. And it is also true when it comes to the Trinity.

We have already seen something of the equality and distinction that exist between the persons of the Trinity. But a closer look is needed—a closer look at the equality and difference between the Son and the Father.

Probing more deeply into their equality

When it comes to the equality between the members of the Trinity, Bruce Ware hits the nail on the head:

There is one and only one God, eternally existing and fully expressed in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each member of the Godhead is equally God, each is eternally God, and each is fully God—not three gods but three Persons of the one Godhead. Each Person is equal in essence as each possesses fully the identically same, eternal divine nature, yet each is also an eternal and distinct personal expression of the one undivided nature.⁴

Father and Son are each fully divine. The Son is as much God as the Father is. They share the same nature and same substance. The words of the Nicene Creed help shed a little more light on this. Jesus, we are reminded, is:

The only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.

“Begotten, not made” is an important distinction. C. S. Lewis explains why:

When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers and a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds. But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself. A bird makes a nest, a beaver builds a dam, a man makes a wireless set . . . What God begets is God; just as what man begets is man. What God creates is not God; just as what man creates is not man.⁵

⁴ Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 43.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 157–158.

Jesus is fully divine. The Father and Son are equal in essence and divinity.⁶

Probing more deeply into their difference

The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father. There are differences in their roles. They play different parts within the divine economy. And this means that there is a particular shape to their relationship.

Difference during Jesus' earthly ministry

We see this in operation during the time when Jesus was on the earth. Consider the following: "I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him" (John 8:28–29).

The Father teaches the Son what the Son is to say. The Father is the one who sends the Son. We see the Father being the one who leads, and the Son the one who follows that lead.

And the Son *always* does what will please the Father. Jesus is not selective in this. He doesn't exercise his own discretion at this point. He is not even pleasing generally. But always. In everything. No exceptions. In all he did, Jesus showed unswerving commitment to bringing pleasure to his Father. So Bruce Ware says: "The eternal Son of the Father is both 'God the Son' and 'God the *Son*.'"⁷ Equal in divinity; submissive in role.

We see this again later in John's Gospel: "I love the Father and I do exactly what my Father has commanded me" (14:31).

This is the shape of their relationship. The Father sends, teaches, and commands. The Son responds and obeys. And this dynamic is never reversed. We never see the Son commanding the Father or sending the Father. We never see the Father obeying the Son or following him.⁸

We also need to see that this is not a cold, heartless dynamic. The Father is not some faceless autocrat firing off instructions to a distant underling. Jesus is not some lackey trapped in a thankless existence that he would love to break out of. Listen again to what Jesus says: "I love the Father and I do exactly what my Father has commanded me." Jesus is not under the thumb or serving his Father through clenched teeth. There is a delight for him in obeying the Father, precisely because by doing so he is able to express his love for the Father. As he walked this earth, it was his pleasure to do so in full obedience to all that the Father had commanded him.

But this arrangement was not temporary.

Difference in eternity past

When I organize interviews for those applying to become ministry apprentices at our church, I and the other interviewers normally work out in advance who is going to cover which questions. I like to take the chatty, tell-us-about-your-hobbies questions that we tend to ask during the first part of the

⁶ For a more theological (and exegetical) defense of Christ's deity, as developed in the New Testament, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁷ Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, p. 74; emphasis his.

⁸ For an exploration of the trinitarian relations in John's Gospel, see Andreas J. Kostenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son, and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (NSBT; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2008).

interview. And I like my female colleague to take the deeper theological questions: she tends to sound more gentle and less threatening. It's our version of good cop/bad cop.

It is not like that with the Trinity. As we have seen, before the birth of Jesus, there was not a conversation within the Trinity about who was going to come to earth, and who was going to stay behind, who was going to take the "Son" role and who the "Father" role. No, the Father-Son dynamic we see during Jesus' earthly ministry has actually existed for all eternity.

Before the birth of Jesus, there was a sender and a Son, one who initiated in love and one who followed in obedience. It is part of the Father's *father-ness* to send and part of the Son's *son-ness* to respond. The Father and Son have always had these roles.

Or again, "What about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world?" (John 10:36). The dynamic we saw during the earthly life of Jesus was not an anomaly, but a reflection of the dynamic that has existed between the Father and Son for all eternity.

And will continue to exist.

Difference in eternity future

The exaltation and ascension of Jesus after his death and resurrection is not a graduation from being the Son of the Father to some supposedly better, less submissive role. In fact, his very exaltation is itself "to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:11).

Elsewhere, Paul looks forward to the day when everything in creation will be subject to the Son:

Then the end will come, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power . . . When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Cor 15:24, 28)

Creation will be entirely subject to the Son. Everything will have been put under his feet. But it is the Father who has put everything under him, and the Son will hand over the kingdom to the Father and will himself be subjected to the Father. The dynamic we have seen all along will continue into the future forever.

So the relationship between Father and Son has a particular shape. They share the same essence and divine nature, and yet express that divine nature differently. They are Father and Son; there is authority and submission. This shape has always existed and will always continue to exist. And, returning to where we began, Paul sums up this shape using the concept of headship: the head of Christ is God the Father.

Headship in the Trinity

Having seen this dynamic at work between the Father and the Son, we can now begin to anticipate what Paul means by "head." "Head" in Paul's day could refer to the same things as it does today:

- The peculiar cranial protrusion on top of your shoulders.
- The origin or source of something. (I grew up just down the road from a place called Riverhead, though I have yet to find any evidence of a river starting there.)

- A position of leadership and responsibility: someone might be the head of a company or of a department or a school, or even the head of a state.⁹

Although Bible-believing Christians sometimes differ on this, it seems clear from what we have already seen that there is an authority-submission dynamic in relation to the Father and Son. And so it makes most sense for this to be the kind of headship Paul is talking about here. It fits with what he says elsewhere about men and women, where the context is clearly one of differing roles and authority: “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church” (Eph 5:22–23).

Headship here is clearly not referring to the husband being the “source” of his wife, but of his having a position of authority over her. It is a headship the wife is to submit to. This sense of headship also fits in with the first part of 1 Corinthians 11, where, again, the issue concerns the woman being under the authority of the man (see v. 10).

In fact, this has been Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 11:3. Just as the Father exercises headship over the Son, so too the husband is to have headship over his wife. The dynamic of the husband/wife relationship is to take its cue from, and correspond to, the dynamic of God the Father and God the Son, where this dynamic has eternally existed.

Implications of this relationship

Before we get into how this dynamic is reflected between men and women, we need to step back and draw a few conclusions from what we have seen about headship from its existence in the Trinity.

Equality and difference are not mutually exclusive

Equality and difference exist together within the Trinity and have always done so. There is no tension between them. They in no way threaten God’s unity, as if this depended on some kind of precarious stand-off between the two. The opposite is in fact the case. The complementarity of the persons of the Trinity is what constitutes God’s unity. His unity is not in uniformity or sameness but difference. The result is beautiful, relational harmony.

Within the Trinity, headship and submission do not involve inequality

There is always the potential for human expressions of this dynamic to lead to the demeaning of one party, but in such cases the wrong sort of headship is being promoted—one that does not faithfully reflect the loving headship of God the Father. The Son is never demeaned by the Father’s headship. He is not inferior because he submits to the Father, any more than the Father is superior because he has authority over the Son. In fact, both headship and submission are means of delight for the Father and Son, expressions of their love for each other.

⁹ For an exhaustive study on “head” (*kephale*) in biblical and secondary literature, see Wayne Grudem’s two articles: “Does *Kephale* (“Head”) Mean “Source” Or “Authority Over” in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples,” *Trinity Journal* 6.1 (Spring 1985): 38–59; “The Meaning Of *Kephale* (“Head”): An Evaluation Of New Evidence, Real And Alleged,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44:1 (March 2001): 25–65.

Headship and submission are not intrinsically bad

God is good. Nothing in his nature is flawed. What he exhibits is perfection. And that includes all the dynamics we see within the Trinity. We have already noted that the headship and submission between Father and Son were not temporary roles adopted only for Jesus' earthly ministry as a sort of regrettable necessity. They always existed and always will, as eternal qualities within the Godhead. It is always possible for humans to twist and distort the good things of reality into a means of evil. But this does not diminish the goodness of those things in the first place.

Often in Western culture, two people are only considered to be equal if they are allowed to do exactly the same things. But this is not so within the Trinity. Equality does not require sameness. And the different roles being exercised are how we end up with the God we know and love.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MAN AND WOMAN

Back to 1 Corinthians 11—Paul wants us to see that there is correspondence between the relationship between the Father and the Son, and the intended relationship between man and woman. Just as we saw equality and headship/submission within the Trinity, so too we see it between the sexes.

Equality and difference

The Bible shows us the equal worth and value of the persons of the Trinity; it also shows us the same of men and women. Just as with the Father and Son, so also men and women are made of the same stuff. Eve, Adam exulted, is “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). She shared his human nature and corresponded to him physically.

We have already seen from the creation account that men and women are created equal. Both are made in the image of God and share this dignity equally. Neither gender is more or less the image of God than the other. There is no inferiority of one sex and superiority of the other. Wayne Grudem can therefore say,

Wherever men are thought to be better than women, wherever husbands act as selfish dictators, wherever wives are forbidden to have their own jobs outside the home or to vote or to own property or to be educated, wherever women are treated as inferior, wherever there is abuse or violence against women or rape or female infanticide or polygamy or harems, the biblical truth of equality in the image of God is being denied.¹⁰

Tragically, there is no shortage of examples of these scenarios today. It is a reminder of how urgently this message needs to be heard in our world. There are many places where baby girls are less valued than baby boys, leading to gendercide, girls being aborted, killed, or abandoned. India and China, for example, have wildly disproportionate gender ratios, with tens of millions (if not hundreds of millions) of women effectively missing from the population.¹¹

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Evangelicalism and Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

We are equal. No one should feel particularly proud or ashamed that they are a man or that they are a woman, as if one was better or worse. Both equally have the dignity of bearing the image of God.

But equality, as we have seen, does not mean sameness. Adam and Eve were not interchangeable; neither are husbands and wives. Men and women are made of the same stuff, but in a way that means there is complementarity. Kathy Keller is worth quoting at length:

Using all the qualifiers in the world, in general, as a whole and across the spectrum, men have a gift of independence, a ‘sending’ gift. They look outward. They initiate. Under sin, these traits can become either an alpha male individualism, if this capacity is turned into an idol, or dependence, if the calling is utterly rejected and the opposite embraced in rebellion. The first sin is hypermasculinity, while the second sin is a rejection of masculinity.

Using all the qualifiers in the world, on the whole and across the spectrum, women have a gift of interdependence, a ‘receiving’ gift. They are inwardly perceptive. They nurture. Under sin, these traits can become either a clinging dependence, if attachment is turned into an idol, or individualism, if the calling is utterly rejected and the opposite embraced in rebellion. The first sin is hyperfemininity, while the second sin is a rejection of femininity.¹²

Headship in male-female relationships

As we have seen, there is headship. The head of Christ is God the Father, and the head of the woman is man.

We see this applied to two contexts. In Ephesians 5, we see the headship of men within marriage: “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.” (Eph 5:22–23)

In 1 Corinthians 11, we see male headship within the local church. Let me quote the passage in full:

Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head – it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. (1 Cor 11:3–10)

¹² Kathy Keller, “Embracing the Other,” in Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 180.

This passage is part of a wider section dealing with various areas of local church life, such as the administration of the Lord's Supper and the exercise of spiritual gifts. But here Paul's concern seems to be the importance of headship of men in the church being acknowledged in the way men and women present and comport themselves.¹³

I am conscious that in both these areas—church life and marriage—the issue of male headship has felled entire forests. There is legitimate room for discussion about what it might look like in practice. Our main concern here is that we see how it comes from the Trinitarian nature of God. But before we go, let's consider some important implications.

All of us are under headship

It is not as if one gender is under a head and the other is not. Paul is not saying that women need headship and that men do not. Both men and women have a head. The head in each case is different, but each sex alike is under authority. Accordingly, no one is being demeaned. God the Son has a head. For a woman to be under the headship of her husband is no more demeaning than for God the Son to be under the headship of the Father, or for man to be under the head of Christ. All of us are under authority.

Christ is the example for us all

The Son is under the headship of the Father. He is also the head over every man. He is therefore an example both of headship and of submission. He is an example for both sexes to follow: an example to men of how to exercise loving headship, and an example to women of loving submission to headship. All of us alike are to look to him as our model.

Male headship is to correspond to the loving headship of God the Father

Headship is to be marked by responsibility. There is a general sense in which men are to take the initiative. This is particularly true in marriage, but is also true in a more general way. Men are especially to be looking out for the spiritual welfare of others and to be taking a lead in corporate spiritual life, not least in prayer. This, after all, is the point Paul makes in 1 Timothy 2:8, the verse which precedes Paul's exhortation to women not to teach or have authority over a man (v. 12).

Headship is also to be marked by kindness. The Father loves exalting the Son. He delights in him. There is authority, but it is not authoritarian. It is gentle and strong (Isa 42:1–4) and other-person-centered (Phil 2:3–4).

So, women, if you think it is demeaning to be under the headship of man, you have not understood the Trinity, in which this pattern of headship and submission is not only present but a beautiful reality. The headship Paul speaks of for you is akin to that of the Father's over the Son.

And men, if at this point you are smiling to yourself because this sounds like a fun deal, you have not understood the Trinity either. It does not mean you get to be a domineering jerk to women. The headship required of you is to be one of service, care, and love. In marriage, women must submit to men (Eph 5:22–24), but husbands must “die” for their wives (Eph 5:25–27).

It is only by understanding the triune nature of God that men and women can truly learn to relate rightly to one another. It is only the Trinity that can give us a true framework of difference and equality

¹³ It goes without saying that there are a number of details in this passage that are hard for us to understand.

going together, of the unity that comes from diversity being prized and cherished, and therefore people being encouraged to fulfill their vocation as men and women.

We perhaps see this most clearly by considering what would happen if we lost a trinitarian understanding of God. God would not be Trinity; he would just be a divine singularity: utter undifferentiated oneness. That would become our understanding of what is ultimate. And the presence of two different genders would be something of an obstacle to that. And so, inevitably, the physically stronger of the two sexes would assert itself over the other, forcing it indoors and away from visibility in the public sphere. Without the Trinity, one of the sexes will end up putting a veil over the other.

Similarly, if we retain a sense of the goodness of diversity and difference, but lose sight of the concept of that diversity being put into the service of unity, we will also end up with a dysfunctional understanding of gender.

We will affirm every expression of diversity, but without a rationale for how it could ever produce an integrated whole. There will be diversity aplenty, but with no sense of order, still less of any concept of headship. The result will be a denial of the idea of gender as being fixed and definite. It will become an entirely fluid concept, something as changeable (in theory, at least) as hair coloring.

But the Bible sounds neither the air-horn blast of uniformity nor the white noise of utter diversity. There are neither McPeople nor sub-people. Instead we hear music. The harmony of unity-in-diversity. The divine orchestra of the Trinity itself, and the echo played back by men and women made in their image.