

WHAT GOD HATH DONE TOGETHER: DEFENDING THE HISTORIC DOCTRINE OF THE INSEPARABLE OPERATIONS OF THE TRINITY

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I. INTRODUCTION

The anti-Arian polemics of the fourth century eventually gave rise to a consensus Trinitarian grammar, often referred to as pro-Nicene theology,¹ by which the unity of God is understood in terms of one divine essence common to all three persons. Understood as a consequence of this account of divine unity, the doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity *ad extra* contends that all of the works of the Triune God with respect to the creation are works of all three persons of the Godhead.² This doctrine, often expressed by the Latin axiom, *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*³ has been a staple of orthodox Trinitarian theology for centuries. Statements and defense of the doctrine can be found among the Church fathers of the East (e.g. Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa) and the West (e.g. Hilary of Poitiers and Augustine) as they engaged in anti-Arian polemical discourse. The doctrine is later expressed and defended by the medieval giant Thomas Aquinas and is fully embraced by the seventeenth-century Reformed Orthodox in their polemical engagement with the Socinians. The nineteenth-century heirs and defenders of Reformed Orthodoxy (e.g. Herman Bavinck and Charles Hodge) also held to this doctrine without wavering.

In recent years, however, Trinitarian theological discourse has taken a so-called “relational turn,”⁴ and the pro-Nicene account of divine unity has come under attack. As a consequence, the historic doctrine of inseparable operations has

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¹ For a very helpful discussion of the difference between the early Nicene theology of Athanasius and his contemporaries and the pro-Nicene theology of Hilary, Ambrose, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine, see Michel René Barnes, “One Nature, One Power: Consensus Doctrine in Pro-Nicene Polemic,” in *Theologica et Philosophica, Critica et Philologica, Historica* (Studia Patristica 29; ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone; Louvain: Peeters, 1997) 5–23.

² Stating the doctrine generally like this raises more questions than it answers. The precise meaning of this proposition and the ontological framework which necessitates it will all be considered in detail throughout the essay.

³ “The external works of the Trinity are undivided.” See Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 213.

⁴ The term “relational turn” is commonplace in discussions of recent Trinitarian theology. It refers to attempts to conceive of divine unity in relational rather than substance terms. See Stanley Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); and Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004).

fallen out of vogue in theological discourse. At times, the doctrine has been challenged directly.⁵ More often, it is simply ignored, being summarily dismissed as a component part of the unfortunate Trinitarian theology of Augustine and the West, with its emphasis on divine unity, which is considered deleterious to a healthy understanding of divine threeness and relationality.

1. *Toward a thesis.* The doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity *ad extra* is a difficult one indeed. While the doctrine comports easily with the conviction that God is one, it raises difficult questions concerning the equally significant conviction that God is simultaneously three. Is it theologically coherent to distinctly appropriate divine works to one person of the Trinity if all the works of the Trinity are the inseparable acts of the one Godhead? Or is this simply doublespeak that fails to avoid the charge of modalism? Furthermore, the doctrine raises important questions about divine revelation in Scripture with respect to Trinitarian issues. Given the scriptural propensity for speaking of the persons of the Godhead as distinct agents, is it biblically faithful to affirm the old maxim, *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*? These are questions that any Christian theologian wishing to uphold the doctrine of inseparable operations must address.⁶ Answers to these critical questions will be attempted here. Specifically, this essay will argue that the historic orthodox doctrine of inseparable operations, with its concurrent affirmation of distinct personal appropriations, is both theologically coherent and biblically faithful.⁷ If indeed this is the case, then, given its staunch historical pedigree, it should continue to be embraced as a staple element in contemporary proposals of Trinitarian theology.

2. *Method.* This essay will be divided into two major sections: (1) historical-theological context and (2) constructive theological analysis. Beginning with historical-theological considerations is important because the debate about inseparable operations is only one part of a much larger debate about how best to understand Augustine's account of divine unity. This larger debate is complicated by an historical-theological paradigm, which presents the early development of Trinitarian theology as an ideological struggle between the divergent theologies of East and West. Therefore, this East vs. West paradigm will be surveyed, along with some recent

⁵ See Alan Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007). See also Arie Baars, "'Opera Trinitatis Ad Extra Sunt Indivisa' in the Theology of John Calvin," in Calvinus Sacrarum Literarum Interpres: *Papers of the International Congress of Calvin Research* (ed. Herman J. Selderhuis; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

⁶ Of course, it is not only the proponent of inseparable operations that must answer challenging questions. The tables could be turned. Any theologian wishing to deny the historic doctrine of inseparable operations must be able to answer the following questions. If the Trinity is ontologically one, is it theologically coherent to affirm that divine action is divisible, such that the works of one person of the Godhead are not the works of the other persons as well? Or is this simply doublespeak that fails to avoid the charge of tritheism? Furthermore, given the scriptural propensity to appropriate divine action to all three persons of the Godhead (creation, resurrection of Christ), is it biblically faithful to deny the old maxim, *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*?

⁷ The term "biblically faithful" is used to mean "consistent with the NT propensity to speak of the divine persons as distinct agents." It is beyond the scope of this essay to engage in detailed exegesis of all the pertinent passages. Therefore, only a few key texts will be briefly examined.

cogent challenges to its legitimacy, in order to help the reader locate the specific issue of the doctrine of inseparable operations within this larger debate. Augustine of Hippo is the most notorious proponent of the account of divine unity that gives rise to the doctrine of inseparable operations. Therefore, his theology of Trinitarian agency will be discussed with a specific view to some of the criticisms leveled against him from the vantage point of the East vs. West paradigm. Once the historical smog surrounding Augustine is dispersed, the constructive theological analysis can commence. In the second major section, this essay will attempt to demonstrate the theological coherence and biblical fidelity of the historic doctrine of inseparable operations with its attendant doctrine of distinct personal appropriations. The Trinitarian theology of John Owen will be introduced to this end because Owen is a conscious heir of Augustine's Trinitarian theology who affirmed the doctrine of inseparable operations unwaveringly yet made great use of the concurrent doctrine of distinct personal appropriations. It will be shown that both Augustine and Owen maintained a conceptual distinction between the *principle* of divine action and the *subject* of divine action. This distinction, while observed by the great theologians, is never made explicit by them, but it is critical to the theological coherence and biblical faithfulness of their articulation of Trinitarian agency. The historic doctrine of inseparable operations will then be assessed in light of key biblical statements regarding the incarnation of the Son of God, arguably the Achilles' heel of inseparable operations. It will be shown that the historic doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity *ad extra* is both theologically coherent and biblically faithful. Near the end, a few brief suggestions will be offered concerning the potential fruitfulness of this study for further theological reflection and devotion.

II. HISTORICAL-THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT: WHAT TO MAKE OF AUGUSTINE

1. *Assessing the East vs. West paradigm.* The paradigm for understanding the early development of Trinitarian dogma, which pits the West's emphasis on the unity of the Godhead against the East's emphasis on the three persons of the Godhead, has become commonplace in recent decades. Colin Gunton is perhaps the best-known proponent of the paradigm of East vs. West, plurality vs. unity.⁸ For Gunton, Augustine is the chief culprit behind the unfortunate Western theology of divine unity. Augustine conceived of divine unity in terms of "the inseparable equality of one substance,"⁹ which, for Gunton, implies that God's divine identity somehow stands *under* or *behind* the three persons. This account of divine unity is considered highly

⁸ Robert Letham agrees that Gunton is the most important and well-known critic of the theology of the West, according to this paradigm (*Holy Trinity* 184–85). See Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Also see idem, "The Trinity in Modern Theology," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology* (ed. Peter Byrne and J. L. Houlden; London: Routledge, 1995) 937–55.

⁹ Augustine, *The Trinity (De Trinitate)*, ed. and trans. Edmund Hill; series 1, vol. 5 of *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (ed. John E. Rotelle; Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1991) 1.2.7, 70–1. All subsequent citations will take the following form: *The Trinity*, 1.2.7, 70–1.

problematic for two important reasons. First, the inevitable result is a modalistic understanding of the Trinity. Gunton laments, “[Augustine] stressed the unitary being of God at the expense of the plurality, and effectively generated a modalism in which the real being of God underlies rather than consists in the three persons.”¹⁰ Second, Augustine’s emphasis on divine unity results in a complete severing of the triune God from his revelation. Gunton complains that Augustine’s theology represents “a cutting off of the ‘inner’ and eternal Trinity from the economic and revealed. It is as if much that is of interest to writers about the Trinity in later Augustinian theology could be said almost without reference to the divine economy of creation and salvation made real in the Son and the Spirit.”¹¹ Gunton believes it unfortunate that Augustine’s Western theology became the dominant view for the next 1,500 years. For Gunton, the theological trajectory of Augustinian theology can be corrected only by a return to the Trinitarian thought of the Cappadocians, in which divine unity is conceived not in terms of substance but in terms of relationship.

Gunton’s pointed criticisms of Augustine and his theological legacy are not unique to him. In fact, his analysis provides just one example of the historical-theological paradigm that has been almost ubiquitous among historians and theologians of the last one hundred years. Michele René Barnes claims that the progenitor of the East vs. West paradigm is Theodore de Régnon in his *Études de théologie positive sur la Sainte Trinité*, published late in the nineteenth century. Barnes laments, “Nothing is more common in contemporary systematics than the inability to read Augustine outside of de Régnon’s paradigm.”¹² Barnes goes on to list several systematic theologians of the last fifty years who have made theological proposals based on this paradigm: Colin Gunton, Catherine Mowry Lacugna, John J. O’Donnell, and Jürgen Moltmann. In addition to these, some prominent evangelical theologians have followed suit. Two examples are Stanley Grenz and Clark Pinnock. Grenz is dissatisfied with Augustine’s Trinitarian theology, which focuses on “the oneness of God in contrast to the Eastern emphasis on the divine threeness” and has its “starting point in the divine essence revealed in the human psyche rather than the saving act of God in Christ.”¹³ Similarly, Pinnock, after lauding the efforts of the eastern Cappadocians to present a genuinely social model of the Trinity, says that Augustine “made a bad move for Trinitarian reflection when he proposed a psychological analogy of Trinity which could not handle relationality in God The analogy sounds modalistic and even Unitarian.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Gunton, “Trinity in Modern Theology” 940.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 941.

¹² “Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology,” *Theological Studies* 56 (1995) 237. Adolf Von Harnack is another late nineteenth-century historian who reads the development of Trinitarian theology through this paradigm (*History of Dogma* [trans. E. B. Speirs and James Millar, vol. 4; London: Williams and Norgate, 2011]).

¹³ *Rediscovering the Triune God* 9

¹⁴ *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 33. An evangelical theologian who appropriates a more modest version of the paradigm is Robert Letham (*Holy Trinity* 2–7).

This reading of the sources, once uncritically assumed, is now being challenged. Many historical-theological studies are now in print by scholars who offer trenchant critiques of the paradigm by which Gunton and others have understood the development of Trinitarian theology.¹⁵ These scholars have called for a rereading of Augustine and his fourth-century patristic predecessors (from East and West) in light of their common commitment to defending and explaining the Nicene Creed against the threat of Arian theology. The consensus theological paradigm for Trinitarian discourse, shared by theologians from East and West, which emerged in the mid-to-late fourth century, is referred to as pro-Nicene theology. Such a rereading of the sources will demonstrate that Western theologians (Augustine chief among them) did not emphasize divine unity to the point of erasing the hypostatic distinctions in the Godhead, thus irretrievably severing God's revelation from his being. Neither did Eastern theologians have a fundamentally different concept of divine unity from theologians in the West. The author of this essay finds these challenges to the East vs. West paradigm convincing.

The scholars who have challenged and rejected the East vs. West paradigm have much to say about the doctrine of inseparable operations. In fact, Lewis Ayres believes that the articulation of the doctrine across the theological spectrum is one of the most telling factors in identifying pro-Nicene theology as a consensus understanding among fourth-century orthodox Trinitarian theologians. According to Ayres, both Latin and Greek pro-Nicene theology "focused around the need to explain the inseparable operation of the triune God."¹⁶ Ayres's purpose is primarily historical. Therefore, it is enough for him to demonstrate that the theologians from East and West held the doctrine of inseparable operations and the corresponding account of divine unity in common. This essay will argue for the theological coherence and biblical fidelity of the doctrine and thus make a positive contribution to the discussion.

2. *Augustine's doctrine of inseparable operations misrepresented.* The dominance of the East vs. West paradigm has made it easy for theologians to caricature the Trinitarian theology of Augustine without ever engaging him carefully. Michele René

¹⁵ For a specific and thorough critique of Colin Gunton on this score, see Bradley G. Green, *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine: The Theology of Colin Gunton in Light of Augustine* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011). For a helpful survey of the historical development of Trinitarian doctrine, which points out the problems associated with a stark bifurcation of East and West into two distinct "theologies," see Franz Dunzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007). For detailed analyses of the proposals of fourth-century theologians, see Michele René Barnes, "Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology"; idem, "Rereading Augustine's Theology of the Trinity," in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 145–76; idem, "Divine Unity and the Divided Self: Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology in its Psychological Context," *Modern Theology* 18 (2002) 175–96; Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*; idem, *Augustine and the Trinity*; and idem, "'Remember That You Are Catholic' (Serm. 52): Augustine on the Unity of the Triune God," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000) 39–82. For an example of a systematic theologian who depends on the historical work of Barnes and Ayres, see Keith E. Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity & Religious Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011).

¹⁶ "Remember That You Are Catholic" 39.

Barnes laments, “It is impossible to do contemporary Trinitarian theology and not have a judgement [*sic*] on Augustine; unfortunately, this is *not* the same thing as saying that it is impossible to do contemporary Trinitarian theology and not have *read* Augustine.”¹⁷ Arie Baars is one scholar who has recently presented a caricature of Augustine’s Trinitarian theology based on the East vs. West paradigm. Baars writes about Calvin’s appropriation of Augustine’s doctrine of inseparable operations.¹⁸ After rehearsing the stereotypical criticisms of Augustine’s emphasis on divine unity, Baars identifies Augustine as the chief proponent of the doctrine of inseparable operations. He opines, “It cannot be denied that the main emphasis in Augustine’s concept of God’s Trinity is on the unity of his essence. And when he stressed that the external works of the Triune God are undivided, it is indeed a very apt illustration of this principle.”¹⁹ Baars goes on to argue that the theology of inseparable operations is present in Calvin’s theology. However, Baars contends, Calvin significantly modifies the traditional account of inseparable operations because the Genevan reformer affirms that the actions of the three persons in the economy of salvation can be distinctly appropriated to one person as distinct from the others:

[I]n Calvin’s opinion, the external works of God are only undivided *intrinsically*. When we consider these works *extrinsically* – i.e. as God reveals himself in these works *to us* – it is quite possible for us to distinguish between the special activity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, these distinct operations of the three Persons remain the work of the one and only triune God!²⁰

Baars believes that he has identified a genuine advance on Augustine’s doctrine of inseparable operations in the thinking of Calvin because the reformer appropriates divine action to distinct divine persons. Baars is right to identify Augustine as a champion of the doctrine of inseparable operations. Is Baars correct, however, to assume that Augustine’s doctrine of inseparable operations *ad extra* left no place for distinct personal appropriations *ad extra*? To answer this question, Augustine’s theology of Trinitarian agency will now be examined.

3. *Augustine and Trinitarian agency*. A theology of Trinitarian agency seeks to answer the question, “What is the appropriate way to conceive of the *actions* of God in the economy of salvation with respect to his unity and his threeness?” Augustine understands that this is difficult theological terrain, and mistakes made here are dangerous indeed. He says famously, “*Nowhere else is a mistake more dangerous*, or the search more laborious, or discovery more advantageous.”²¹ The North-African theologian’s account of Trinitarian agency is an attempt to navigate this dangerous terrain within the framework of the pro-Nicene theological categories of the late

¹⁷ Michel René Barnes, “Rereading Augustine’s Theology of the Trinity” 145 (emphasis original).

¹⁸ Baars, “*Opera Trinitatis Ad Extra Sunt Indivisa*” in the Theology of John Calvin.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 133.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 134. Emphasis and exclamation in citation.

²¹ *The Trinity* 1.1.5 (emphasis added). To err on the side of divine unity is to fall into the pit of modalism with Praxeus and Sabellius; to err on the side of threeness is to fall into the heresy of tritheism or some kind of Arianism.

fourth century. In this analysis of Augustine's theology of Trinitarian agency, attention will first be given to his summary of catholic teaching offered in Book One of *De Trinitate*. It will be shown how this passage gives the framework for Augustine's account of Trinitarian agency, which is expounded throughout *De Trinitate*. It will be seen that two principles govern Trinitarian agency for Augustine: (1) The unity of the one God *ad intra* entails the inseparable operations of the three persons *ad extra*; (2) the distinction between the three persons *ad intra* entails a recognizable distinction between the operations of the three persons *ad extra*. From these observations, it will be concluded that Augustine's theology of Trinitarian agency does not fit easily with the stereotype put forth via the East vs. West paradigm. Specifically, it will be concluded that Baars's representation of Augustine is misguided. In fact, if Baars's reading of Calvin is correct, the Genevan Reformer did not *modify* Augustine's doctrine of inseparable operations; he simply embraced it.

a. *Augustine and the catholic doctrine of the Trinity*. Near the beginning of *De Trinitate*, Augustine offers a summary of the catholic doctrine of the Trinity as he understands it:

The purpose of all the catholic commentators I have been able to read on the divine books of both testaments, who have written before me on the trinity which God is, has been to teach that according to the scriptures Father and Son and Holy Spirit in the inseparable equality of one substance present a divine unity; and therefore there are not three gods but one God; although indeed the Father has begotten the Son, and therefore he who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but only the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, himself coequal to the Father and the Son, and belonging to the threefold unity.

It was not, however, this same three (their teaching continues) that was born of the virgin Mary, crucified and buried under Pontius Pilate, rose again on the third day and ascended into heaven, but the Son alone. Nor was it this same three that came down upon Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism, or came down on the day of Pentecost after the Lord's ascension, with a roaring sound from heaven as though a violent gust were rushing down, and in divided tongues as of fire, but the Holy Spirit alone. Nor was it this same three that spoke from heaven, *You are my Son*, either at his baptism by John (Mk. 1:11), or on the mountain when the three disciples were with him (Mt. 17:5), nor when the resounding voice was heard, *I have both glorified it (my name) and will glorify it again* (Jn 12:28), but it was the Father's voice alone addressing the Son; although just as Father and Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so do they work inseparably. This is also my faith inasmuch as it is the catholic faith.²²

In this summary are four key theological affirmations of Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity. First, the three divine persons constitute one God, and the *locus* of divine unity is found in "the inseparable equality of one substance."²³ Second, the real distinction between the persons, such that "he who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son" is found in eternal relation-

²² *The Trinity* 1.2.7, 70–1.

²³ *The Trinity* 1.2.7, 70.

ships of origin (the Son is generated from the Father, and the Spirit is “the Spirit of the Father and of the Son”).²⁴ Third, divine actions in the economy of salvation can be appropriated to one particular person as distinct from the others: “*It was not however this same three ... that was born of the virgin Mary ... but the Son alone,*” etc.²⁵ Fourth, the inseparable unity of the one divine substance entails the conclusion that the actions of the three persons are inseparable: “Just as the Father and Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so do they work inseparably.”²⁶

The real insight, however, comes by identifying how each of these four affirmations relates to the others in Augustine’s theology. Commenting on Augustine’s above-cited summary of catholic doctrine, Keith Johnson identifies the following chiasmic structure:

- A The unity of the three persons in the inseparable equality of one substance
- B Real distinctions between the divine persons via eternal relations of origin
- B’ Distinction of the actions of the three persons in the economy of salvation
- A’ Inseparable action of the three divine persons in the economy of salvation²⁷

While Augustine does not call the passage a chiasm, making the chiasmic structure of the passage explicit in this way is helpful in demonstrating that Augustine’s theology of Trinitarian agency *ad extra* (B’ and A’) is the logical consequence of his theology of Trinitarian ontology *ad intra* (A and B). More specifically, Augustine’s commitment to the inseparable action of the divine persons in the economy of salvation (A’) is directly entailed by his commitment to the ontologically inseparable unity of the three (A).²⁸ Also, Augustine’s commitment to the distinction of the action of the persons in the economy of salvation (B’) is directly entailed by his commitment to the eternal distinction of the persons by relations of origin within the Godhead (B).

²⁴ *The Trinity* 1.2.7, 70. Augustine lists the generation of the Son as the ground for the Son’s distinction. He lists the ground for the Spirit’s distinction as being “the Spirit of the Father and the Son.” Though he does not use the language of “procession” at this point, it is clear from the rest of *The Trinity* that this is what Augustine means by the word “of” with respect to the Spirit’s relationship to the Father and the Son.

²⁵ *The Trinity* 1.2.7, 70.

²⁶ *The Trinity* 1.2.7, 71.

²⁷ Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity*, 102. As far as I know Johnson is the only scholar who explicitly identifies a chiasm in this passage. However, I believe he is correct for the following reasons: (1) it fits the structure of the passage; (2) the logical connections demonstrated by the chiasmic structure are evident throughout the larger body of *De Trinitate*; (3) the logical connection between A and A’ is made explicit in the passage; (4) although Johnson has not identified it, the chiasm could be expanded to include the opening and closing words of the passage cited. The words, “The purpose of all the catholic commentators I have been able to read ...” correspond chiasmally to the words, “This is also my faith inasmuch as it is the Catholic faith.”

²⁸ The logical connection between A and A’ is clear in the passage even without identifying the chiasmic structure because Augustine explicitly states it: “*Just as Father and Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so do they work inseparably*” (*The Trinity*, 1.2.7, 71. Emphasis mine).

b. *Inseparable action* ad extra entailed by *divine unity* ad intra. The logic of Augustine's commitment to the inseparable actions of the Trinity becomes clear through an examination of his pro-Nicene account of divine unity. It has already been observed that the unity of the Godhead consists in the "inseparable equality of one substance." What does Augustine mean by "substance" here? The substance of God refers to the being of God; Augustine uses the term substance (Latin *substantia*) synonymously with the Greek οὐσία, usually translated by "essence."²⁹ While Augustine stands in a long line of theologians who believed that the substance of God cannot be defined (divine incomprehensibility), he did believe that divine attributes could be predicated of it. For Augustine, whatever can be said truly about the being of God is said about the divine substance: "The chief point that we must maintain is that whatever that supreme and divine majesty is called with reference to itself is said substance-wise."³⁰

That divine attributes are predicated of the divine substance, which is common to the three persons, is significant for understanding why Augustine was so committed to the doctrine of inseparable operations. First Corinthians 1:24—"Christ the power and the wisdom of God"—was a hotly debated text in the Arian controversies of the fourth century. As a pro-Nicene theologian, Augustine interprets 1 Cor 1:24 such that the power and wisdom that the Son is, is identically the same power and wisdom that the Father is. According to the commonly accepted account of divine simplicity, God is identical with each of his attributes, and every attribute is identical with every other attribute.³¹ By this reasoning, God's substance just is his power and his wisdom. Furthermore, given divine simplicity, the divine attributes cannot be multiplied; there cannot be two powers of God or two wisdoms of God. Therefore, to call Christ the power and wisdom of God is to affirm that Christ is God by virtue of his sharing in identically the same substance as the Father (identified by power and wisdom).³² Of course, the logic of this exegesis extends to the Holy Spirit as well.³³ Augustine's exegesis of this passage is im-

²⁹ "There is at least no doubt that God is substance, or perhaps a better word would be being; at any rate what the Greeks call *ousia*." (*The Trinity* 5.1.3, 190).

³⁰ *The Trinity* 5.2.9, 196.

³¹ The thesis of this essay does not stand or fall with Augustine's acceptance of the identity thesis. This is evident from Gregory of Nyssa's account of divine unity and inseparable operations in his famous work, "On 'Not Three Gods'" (in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises* [ed. and trans. Alexander Roberts; 2d series, vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*; ed. Phillip Schaff; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994] 616–25). Gregory employs the same logic of divine unity as Augustine, even though he has a significantly nuanced (transformed) understanding of divine simplicity. For a thorough discussion of Gregory's significantly nuanced understanding of divine simplicity, see Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). For discussions of Gregory's account of divine unity and inseparable operations, see Mark Husbands, "The Trinity is Not Our Social Program: Volf, Gregory of Nyssa, and Barth" in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, and Worship* (ed. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009) 120–41; and Archbishop Basil Krivocheine, "Simplicity of the Divine Nature and the Distinctions in God, According to St. Gregory of Nyssa," *Theological Quarterly Review* 21 (1977): 76–104.

³² Augustine's exegetical discussion of 1 Cor 1:24 is found in *The Trinity* 6.1, 205–11.

³³ "The Holy Spirit too takes his place in the same unity and equality of substance" (*The Trinity* 6.1.7, 210).

portant for this essay because it shows that the power by which God acts in the world is to be predicated of the one substance, which is common to all three persons; this substance is the basis of their eternal ontological unity.³⁴ Hence, when any person of the Trinity acts in the economy of salvation, he acts by the one power which is common to all three persons. At this point, it is important to avoid the conclusion that the divine substance is somehow a fourth thing in addition to the three persons like a sort of reservoir of attributes, which the three can tap into at will.³⁵ Rather, the one divine substance exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit simultaneously; conversely, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are subsistences of the one divine substance simultaneously. To keep with the attribute of power as an example, the one power of God is always simultaneously the power of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and cannot be properly conceived apart from any one of them or apart from all three. Therefore, when any person of the Godhead manifests his power *ad extra*, it is the one power of all three persons at work.³⁶ It is in this way that the operations of the Trinity are inseparable: the inseparability of divine operations *ad extra* is entailed by the inseparable unity of the divine persons *ad intra* via the one divine substance: “Just as the Father and Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so do they work inseparably.”³⁷

c. *Distinction in action ad extra entailed by distinct persons ad intra.* Augustine conceives of the distinctions of the three persons *ad intra* in terms of relationships of origin.³⁸ For Augustine, the distinction between the persons *ad intra* entails the distinction between their actions *ad extra*. The chiasmic structure of Augustine’s summary of orthodox Trinitarian theology (examined earlier) helps to make this connection clear.³⁹ What needs to be considered now is *how* Augustine’s concept of the Trinitarian order (*taxis*) of subsistence *ad intra* relates to his understanding of the appropriation of divine action to particular divine persons *ad extra*.

³⁴ I emphasize the divine attribute of power here because of Augustine’s extended treatment of 1 Cor 1:24 and because power is the attribute most obviously associated with action. In fact, Michele René Barnes argues cogently that the common power of the persons of the Godhead was the key factor in the pro-Nicene consensus concerning divine unity (“One Nature, One Power”).

³⁵ This is the way Colin Gunton wrongly interprets Augustine: “the real being of God underlies rather than consists in the three persons” (“Trinity in Modern Theology” 941) However, Lewis Ayres has convincingly refuted this understanding of Augustine and demonstrated that “Augustine consciously argues against any presentation of the Trinity that would envisage a divine essence prior to or in any way separable from the three persons” (“Remember That You Are Catholic” 41).

³⁶ The Reformed Orthodox theologians of the seventeenth century distinguished between the *opera dei essentialia* (the essential works of God) and the *opera dei personalia* (the personal works of God). All of the works of God *ad extra* were *opera essentialia*. Therefore, being works of the essence of God, they are necessarily works of all three persons. The *opera personalia* referred only to those works of the distinct persons of the Godhead by which each individual person is distinguished from the other two. See Mulder, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* 211–13.

³⁷ *The Trinity* 1.2.7, 71.

³⁸ The Father eternally begets the Son, but the Father is unbegotten. The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son.

³⁹ The distinct hypostatic identity of the three persons in the Godhead (B in the chiasm) entails the observable distinction between the actions of the three persons in the economy of salvation (B’ in the chiasm).

For Augustine, the distinct actions of divine persons in the world *reveal* the eternal intra-Trinitarian order of subsistence of the three divine persons:

Just as Father, then, begot and the Son was begotten, so the Father sent and the son was sent. But just as the begetter and the begotten are one, so are the sender and the sent, because the Father and the Son are one; so too the Holy Spirit is one with them, because these three are one (1 John 5:7). And just as being born means for the Son his being from the Father, so *his being sent means his being known to be from him*. And just as for the holy Spirit his being the gift of God means his proceeding from the Father, so *his being sent means his being known to proceed from him*.⁴⁰

All actions of the Son *ad extra* reveal his fixed place in the eternal intra-Trinitarian order of subsistence. Thus, the Son's being sent from the Father *ad extra* reveals his eternal generation from the Father *ad intra*. Likewise, the gift of the Spirit from the Father and the Son to the church *ad extra* reveals his eternal procession from the Father and the Son *ad intra*.⁴¹ For Augustine, each action performed distinctively by each divine person is appropriate only to that person as a revelation of the eternal and irreversible *taxis* present in the Godhead.

Such is Augustine's theology of Trinitarian agency. Divine unity *ad intra* entails inseparable actions *ad extra*; personal distinctions *ad intra* entail distinct personal actions *ad extra*. When one divine person acts in the economy of salvation (e.g. the Son assuming a human nature), he acts by the one power of the one divine substance, shared equally by the three persons, making the act of the one person an act of all three. The act is appropriated to one person as distinct from the other two *ad extra* because there is a fixed order of subsistence *ad intra*, which God reveals by his actions in the world.

3. *Weighed in the balance: stereotypes found wanting.* The stereotype that emerges from the East vs. West paradigm presents Augustine's Trinitarian theology as modalistic, but it has been shown that Augustine offers a robust account of eternal distinctions between the three persons who simultaneously subsist as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The East vs. West paradigm presents Augustine as divorcing the immanent Trinity from the economic Trinity, but Augustine intimately links the two by arguing that the economic actions of God reveal the immanent God. Put differently, for Augustine, the immanent Trinity *is* the one God who reveals himself in the economy of salvation. With respect to the specific doctrine of inseparable operations, Arie Baars's contention that Augustine does not appropriate divine action distinctly to particular divine persons demonstrates Baars's failure to understand Augustine's theology of Trinitarian agency. The stereotype of Augustine's theology of divine unity, when weighed in the balance of the text of Augustine's *De Trinitate*, is found wanting.

⁴⁰ *The Trinity* 4.5.29, 181–82. Augustine cites 1 John 5:7 often in *De Trinitate*. Scholars almost unanimously agree that the text is an interpolation into the epistle.

⁴¹ Augustine explains, "By saying then, Whom I will send you from the Father (Jn 15:26), the Lord showed that the Spirit is both the Father's and the Son's So the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son is traced back, on both counts, to him of whom the Son is born" (*The Trinity* 4.5.29, 182).

III. CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Augustine's Trinitarian theology became the standard of orthodox Trinitarian reflection in the West for the next 1,500 years. Therefore, Augustine's doctrine of inseparable operations is the historic orthodox doctrine. While Augustine, contrary to stereotypes, clearly *affirmed* the doctrine of distinct personal appropriations alongside of the doctrine of inseparable operations, the questions of coherence and biblical fidelity still remain. Is Augustine's affirmation mere theological doublespeak? Does he avoid the charge of modalism consistently and logically, or in word only? Furthermore, is the doctrine of inseparable operations faithful to God's self-revelation in Scripture, or is it an imposition of a foreign philosophical framework onto the revelation of God in Scripture? In order to help answer these questions, the Trinitarian theology of John Owen will be briefly considered alongside that of Augustine. John Owen, like nearly all Reformed theologians of his era, clung tenaciously to the Augustinian doctrine of inseparable operations.⁴² His theology is ripe for consideration in this essay because he utilizes Augustine's formula for Trinitarian agency to great effect in his theology, especially Augustine's method of distinct personal appropriations.

1. *Alan Spence and the coherence of John Owen.* Alan Spence rightly recognizes that the historic orthodox doctrine of inseparable operations was "accepted by and large without criticism" by the seventeenth-century Reformed theologian, John Owen.⁴³ Statements of the doctrine are legion in Owen's writings,⁴⁴ such that Richard Daniels refers to the doctrine of inseparable operations as a sort of "regulative principle in his theological thinking."⁴⁵ Spence wonders, however, whether Owen's commitment to the doctrine of inseparable operations is "consistent with some of the major areas in his theology."⁴⁶ Two emphases in Owen's theology give Spence concern. First, in the ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΑΛΟΓΙΑ (or *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*), Owen argues at length that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person who acts as a distinct agent. Spence asks critically, "But does not an unqualified doctrine of the indivisibility of God's external activity ... preclude such an argument? How can an undivided activity demonstrate ..." the distinct personal identity of the Holy Spirit?⁴⁷ The second of Owen's emphases giving rise to Spence's concern is the doctrine of the incarna-

⁴² Nowhere is the appropriation of Augustine's Trinitarian theology seen more clearly than in the era of Reformed Orthodoxy in the seventeenth century. For a summary of the Reformed Orthodox theologians' appropriation of the terminology and theology of their predecessors, especially with respect to the doctrine of inseparable operations, see Muller, *Past Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* 4.167–95

⁴³ Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration* 129.

⁴⁴ In his ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΑΛΟΓΙΑ, Owen says, "The several persons are undivided in their operations, acting all by the same will, the same wisdom, the same power. Every person, therefore, is the author of every work of God, because each person is God, and the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations; and this ariseth from the unity of the persons in the same essence" (John Owen, ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΑΛΟΓΙΑ, vol. III of *The Works of John Owen* [ed. William H. Gould; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003] 93; subsequent references will take the form *Works*, III, 93.).

⁴⁵ *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2004) 101.

⁴⁶ Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration* 129.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 130.

tion. While Owen contends that all three divine persons are operative in the event of the incarnation,⁴⁸ the key question for Spence is, “Who actually assumed the human nature, the Trinity or the Son?”⁴⁹ Owen’s answer, according to Spence, is clear. Owen states, “The Father did not assume the human nature, he was not incarnate; neither did the Holy Spirit do so; but this was the peculiar act and work of the Son.”⁵⁰ For Spence, this statement appears to indicate that the external work of God in the incarnation is divided.

Spence’s concern about the coherence of John Owen’s double affirmation of inseparable operations and distinct personal appropriations is a fitting point of departure for this essay. So far this essay has utilized Augustine’s account of Trinitarian agency to introduce the doctrines of inseparable operations and distinct personal appropriations. However, a strong case can be made that Owen’s theology of Trinitarian agency is drawn directly from Augustine. Sebastian Rehman has observed that “references to Augustine outnumber any other author in Owen and that his library possessed Augustine’s *Omnia Opera*.”⁵¹ Furthermore, according to the “Index of References to Authors, Opinions, Councils, and Sayings” found in volume XVI of *The Works of John Owen*, the Puritan theologian cites Augustine thirty-five times in the ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΑΛΟΓΙΑ alone, more than in any other treatise.⁵² This observation is significant because it is in the ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΑΛΟΓΙΑ that Owen offers his most sustained treatment of the doctrine of inseparable operations. In addition to these direct citations of Augustine in support of Owen’s Trinitarian theology, a careful reading of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* alongside the first two books of Owen’s ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΑΛΟΓΙΑ will demonstrate that the two theologians held to the same theology of Trinitarian agency. However, the different polemical contexts of the two great thinkers have resulted in different emphases in their theological writings. Writing in the context of fourth-century anti-Arian polemics, Augustine championed the inseparability of Trinitarian action *ad extra*. Writing in the context of seventeenth-century anti-Socinian polemics, Owen championed the doctrine of distinct personal appropriations. In fact, a case can be made that Augustine and Owen are the two most important theologians to study with respect to the concurrent Trinitarian doctrines of inseparable operations and distinct personal appropriations. In light of the pivotal position occupied by Owen and Augustine on this issue, and the connection between the two theologians, Spence’s concerns are not only apropos when considering Owen’s proposals specifically, but his arguments represent a challenge to any positive appropriation of the Trinitarian doctrine of inseparable operations.

⁴⁸ See John Owen, ΧΡΙΣΤΟΛΟΓΙΑ, vol. I of *The Works of John Owen* 225.

⁴⁹ Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration* 130.

⁵⁰ Owen, *Works* III, 160. Cited in Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration* 130.

⁵¹ Sebastian Rehman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 41.

⁵² Owen, *Works* XVI, 608. An entire chapter of *Pneumatologia* is devoted to a presentation of the work of the Spirit in the life of Augustine during his conversion, as recorded in the *Confessions*. Interestingly, this entire chapter only accounts for one of the thirty-five citations of Augustine in *Pneumatologia* listed in the “Index.”

According to Spence, how does Owen navigate the apparent dilemma between the peculiar works of one Trinitarian person (e.g. the incarnation) and the inseparable operations of the Trinity *ad extra*? Spence believes that Owen makes two *exceptions* to the doctrine of inseparable operations: the office of the Son as incarnate mediator and the office of the Spirit as gift to the church. Spence argues that Owen maintains consistency by holding to the doctrine of inseparable operations only insofar as the divine persons act absolutely (apart from their particular office in the economy of salvation). However, when they act in their peculiar office—the Spirit as the gift of God to the church and the Son as the incarnate mediator—they act divisibly from the other persons of the Trinity.⁵³ Spence suggests:

[T]he incarnate Son, in his office as Mediator, is not considered without qualification as divine, but as subordinate to and dependent upon God. His activity in that office is that of an agent distinct from the Father. However, in the Son's work, *asarkos*, he acts absolutely as God and his work is in reality indivisible from that of the Father and Spirit, even though it is ascribed as appropriate to the different persons.

He goes on to suggest that if Owen can make such a move with respect to the Son's condescension to his office, then he can make the same move with respect to the Holy Spirit. If Spence is correct concerning how Owen resolves the apparent tension between inseparable operations and distinct personal appropriations, then the resolution is fraught with insurmountable difficulties.⁵⁴ However, a careful reading of Owen will reveal that Spence has fundamentally misunderstood the Puritan theologian on this point.

Spence is right that Owen has a magnificently robust understanding of the peculiar works of the Spirit as a distinct personal agent. In fact, Owen's primary objective in writing the ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΑΛΟΓΙΑ is "to treat of the operations of the Holy Ghost, or those which are peculiar unto him."⁵⁵ However, Owen in no way intended his treatment of the peculiar operations of the Holy Spirit (or of the Son in the incarnation) as an *exception* to the doctrine of inseparable operations. Rather, before Owen can treat of the peculiar operations, he feels the need to give a lengthy exposition of the doctrine of inseparable operations and the intra-Trinitarian order of subsistence which makes the doctrine of distinct personal appropriations possible. Owen says, "Some things must be premised concerning the operation of the Godhead in general, and the manner thereof; and they are such as are needful to guide

⁵³ Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration* 132–33.

⁵⁴ First, this solution turns the doctrine of inseparable operations on its head. The orthodox doctrine holds the indivisibility of divine action *ad extra*. If inseparable operations does not apply to economic action, we are left with the doctrine of inseparable operations *ad intra*. In another way, this solution completely avoids the problem at its most basic level. It is the Son *asarkos*—as the absolutely divine second person of the Godhead—who must condescend to assume a human nature, thus entering into his mediatorial office as the incarnate Son. The tension comes at precisely this point. How can the Son, whose activity is always the undivided activity of the three persons, assume a human nature *alone*? If Spence is right, then Owen's theology of Trinitarian agency is no slight modification of the tradition but a radical break from it.

⁵⁵ Owen, *Works* III, 92.

us in many passages of the Scripture, and to direct us aright in the things in particular which now lie before us.”⁵⁶ The “things which must be premised” are the orthodox accounts of inseparable operations and distinct personal appropriations according to the eternal order of subsistence.⁵⁷ Owen labors to show that his theology is consistent with the doctrine of inseparable operations, not an exception to it.

2. *Toward theological coherence and biblical faithfulness: a better path.* So, if Owen does not make exceptions to the rule of inseparable operations to remain coherent in his robust distinct personal appropriations of peculiar works to the Spirit and the Son, then how does he achieve coherence? We have already seen that the intra-Trinitarian order of subsistence is the ontological basis for appropriating divine activity to a particular divine person as distinct from the others. When Scripture appropriates divine activity *ad extra*—such as the incarnation of the Son—to one person of the Trinity, this reveals that person’s place in the eternal and irreversible order of subsistence *ad intra*. However, if Scripture merely *appropriates* the activity *ad extra* to one person for the purpose of revealing the eternal distinctions *ad intra*, then scriptural appropriation might be conceived of as a kind of Trinitarian nominalism. But neither Owen nor Augustine understand the doctrine of distinct personal appropriations in a nominalist way. Rather, the *revelation* of the distinct personal acts of the Trinitarian persons in Scripture is a realist account of *actual* distinct personal acts. When considered broadly, it is not difficult to see how every divine act is both the undivided work of the one God (per the one divine essence) and distinctly appropriated to each of the three persons (per the order of subsistence). However, as is often the case, a detailed investigation of divine actions makes the case more difficult. Nevertheless, the orthodox doctrines of inseparable operations and distinct personal appropriations—as articulated by Augustine and Owen—can sustain both a broad and a detailed investigation of any divine action.

In order to demonstrate coherence, the doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God, arguably the Achilles’ heel of inseparable operations, will be considered. First, the doctrine will be considered broadly. The incarnation of the Son of God is a work of all three persons of the Godhead. This is clearly demonstrated in Scripture. First, consider the involvement of the Father. It is the Father who takes the initiative in sending the Son to become incarnate. Jesus himself said, “I have proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on my own initiative, but He sent me” (John 8:42).⁵⁸ Additionally, Paul proclaims that “God sent forth his Son, born of a woman” (Gal 4:4). So, the Father is at work in the incarna-

⁵⁶ Ibid. 92–93.

⁵⁷ Owen says, “But as to the manner of subsistence therein [in the divine essence], there is distinction, relation, and order between and among them [the divine persons]; and *hence there is no divine work but is distinctly assigned unto each person, and eminently unto one*” (*Works* III, 93; emphasis added).

⁵⁸ Jesus’ statements during his earthly mission can be tricky with respect to Trinitarian issues. One must always be cognizant of the fact that Jesus, at times, spoke according to his humanity, without specific reference to his divine nature. In this text, however, Jesus is referring to his being sent into the world by the Father. Therefore, this text refers to the pre-incarnational sending of the Son to become incarnate.

tion of the Son of God as the One who sends the Son to become incarnate. Second, consider the involvement of the Son in this divine act. It is the eternally divine Son, who is the Word of God, who “became flesh” (John 1:14). Paul reminds us that it was the Son who “emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant” (Phil 2:7). So, the incarnation of the Son of God is the work of the Son, who is sent by the Father, and assumes a human nature. Third, consider the involvement of the Holy Spirit. When the angel announces to Mary that she will give birth to a son, she asks how this can be. The angel answers, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” (Luke 1:34–35). Also, as Joseph contemplates the appropriate action to take with respect to Mary’s pregnancy, the angel tells him in a dream, “The child who is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 1:20, cf. v. 18). So, the incarnation of the Son of God is the work of the Holy Spirit who brings about the miraculous virgin conception of the human nature which the Son assumes as his own. Considering the one divine act of the incarnation in this way not only highlights the involvement of all three persons of the Godhead, but it illustrates how the order of divine operation *ad extra* reveals the order of personal subsistence of the three persons *ad intra*. Just as the Son is eternally from the Father *ad intra*, so in the incarnation he is sent from the Father *ad extra*. Just as the Spirit is third in the order of subsistence *ad intra*, so his role in the incarnation follows the active sending of the Father and the willing condescension of the Son by preparing the human nature for Christ to willingly assume. The incarnation is the work of all three persons of the Godhead, and the incarnation occurs from the Father (sending), through the Son (condescending to assume the human nature), and by the Spirit (creating the human nature from the womb of Mary).

However, this broad investigation of the divine act of the incarnation of the Son of God does not go far enough. All that has been demonstrated thus far is that the three divine persons *cooperate* in their distinct activities. This could be said of creaturely activity as well. Broadly considered, the construction of a skyscraper is one act in which many parties participate. The engineer designs the building, the construction superintendant sees to the building of the edifice, and the electrician gives it “life,” as it were, by wiring the facility and connecting it to a power source. But the doctrine of inseparable operations is saying far more than this. The engineer, the construction superintendant, and the electrician are three separate men, and although they share a common *kind* of essence—humanity—they do not possess identically the same essence.⁵⁹ The three human persons in the analogy are not one man. The Trinity is altogether different than this. The three persons of the Trinity possess identically the same essence, so that the three are one God. Fur-

⁵⁹ Owen himself recognizes the inadequacy of this broad approach: “I say not this as though one person succeeded unto another in their operation, or as though where one ceased and gave over a work, the other took it up and carried it on; for every divine work, and every part of every divine work, is the work of God, that is, of the whole Trinity, inseparably and undividedly” (*Works* III, 94). In his famous letter to Ablabius, “On ‘Not Three Gods,’” Gregory of Nyssa deals with the question of human cooperation in an act vs. divine indivisibility in an act. He argues that Trinitarian action is more than mere cooperation but flows from a common principle of operation, the one undivided divine essence (“On ‘Not Three Gods’” 616–25).

thermore, it is this one identical essence which is the ontological ground of the doctrine of inseparable operations. Therefore, for the historic doctrines of inseparable operations and distinct personal appropriations to be coherent when affirmed together, it must be shown how each specific action appropriated distinctly to one person is *simultaneously the unique act of the one person and the common act of all three*.

With respect to the doctrine of the incarnation, it must be demonstrated that the act of *sending the Son* is the peculiar act of the Father and the undivided work of all three persons. The same must be demonstrated with respect to the act of *assuming the human nature* (peculiar to the Son, common to all three) and the *creation of the human nature* in the womb of Mary (peculiar to the Spirit, common to all three). This is a difficult undertaking, but it is precisely this undertaking which the historic doctrine of inseparable operations requires if it is to be shown that the doctrine is theologically coherent and biblically faithful.

There is an important distinction that is present in the writings of Augustine and Owen which must be identified in order to defend the theological coherence and biblical fidelity of their articulation of Trinitarian agency. Neither Augustine nor Owen makes this distinction explicit, but they utilize it in their discourse. It is the distinction between the *principle* of divine action and the *subject* of divine action. The principle of all divine action is the one undivided divine essence.⁶⁰ The subject of divine action is either Father, Son, or Holy Spirit. To my knowledge, while Owen uses the term “principle”⁶¹ to refer to the divine essence, neither Augustine nor Owen use the term “subject” to refer to the relation that each Trinitarian person bears to the divine actions appropriated distinctly to him. Nevertheless, they speak of the persons of the Trinity in terms that are best described by the word subject. For example, in Augustine’s summary of the catholic doctrine of the Trinity, the Son is the one born of the Virgin Mary; the Spirit is the one who descends upon Jesus at his baptism; the Father is the one who speaks from heaven at Jesus’ baptism.⁶² Furthermore, when Augustine speaks of the inseparability of the actions of the one God, he uses the plural pronoun, “they,” indicating three acting subjects: “Just as Father and Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so do *they* work inseparably.”⁶³ Consider also Owen’s statement about the Son’s act of becoming incarnate: “The Father did not assume the human nature, he was not incarnate; neither did the Holy Spirit do so; but this was the peculiar act and work of the Son.”⁶⁴ For

⁶⁰ The word is being used according to its older meaning of source or origin, derived as it is from the Latin *principium*.

⁶¹ “Every person, therefore, is the author of every work of God, because each person is God, and *the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations*; and this ariseth from the unity of the persons in the same essence” (Owen, *Works* III, 93; emphasis added). Augustine, to my knowledge, does not use the term *principium* to refer to the divine essence/substance. However, the term appropriately describes Augustine’s understanding of the divine substance. He speaks of the divine substance as the ontological basis for inseparable operations because the three persons all act by the same power, will, mind, etc., which are predicated of the divine substance. Therefore, for Augustine, the divine substance is the principle of divine operation.

⁶² *The Trinity* 1.2.7, 70–1.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 1.2.7, 71.

⁶⁴ *Works* III, 160.

Owen, the Son is the unique divine *subject* of the assumption of the human nature. It is by the observance of this distinction between the *principle* of divine action—the one divine essence—and the subject of divine action—one of the divine persons—that the coherence of the doctrines of inseparable operations and distinct personal appropriations is maintained.

So, how does the application of this distinction work with respect to the doctrine of the incarnation? All who take the Bible seriously, as Augustine and Owen do, agree that the Father sent the Son to become incarnate. Accordingly, the Father is the unique *subject* of the act of sending the Son. However, the *principle* of this divine act is the one undivided divine essence. That is, the Father sends the Son according to his power (and wisdom, will, etc.). The power of the Father is identically the same power possessed by the Son and the Spirit. Thus, the Father alone sends the Son to become incarnate, and he does this by the power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *subject* of the act of sending is the Father alone, and the *principle* of the act of sending is the one essence of the whole Trinity. The act of sending is, therefore, simultaneously a work of the entire Trinity (with respect to the principle of the action) and a work of the Father alone (with respect to the subject of the action). The same logic could be applied to the assuming of the human nature. The act of assuming the human nature is simultaneously a work of the entire Trinity (with respect to the principle of the action) and a work of the Son alone (with respect to the subject of the action). The creation of the human nature can be understood in the same way. The act of creating the human nature from the womb of Mary is simultaneously a work of the entire Trinity (with respect to the principle of the action) and a work of the Spirit alone (with respect to the subject of the action).⁶⁵

For Augustine and Owen, the works of the Trinity *ad extra* are inseparable because of the unity of the Godhead according to one indivisible divine essence *ad intra*. The works of the Trinity *ad extra* can be appropriated to one distinct person as a revelation of the unique place that divine person holds in the eternal order of subsistence *ad intra*. The key to holding these affirmations together in a coherent and biblically faithful account of Trinitarian agency is found in the consistent observance of the distinction between the principle of divine action and the subject of divine action.

IV. CONCLUSION

This precise discussion of Trinitarian theology is bound to raise the question: “So, what?” That is, what practical application does such an analysis as this one

⁶⁵ Alan Spence makes much of this statement by Owen: “There is a peculiar condescension of any person unto a work, wherein the others have no concurrence but by approbation and consent” (*Works* III, 94). Spence believes this is evidence that Owen makes exceptions for the doctrine of inseparable operations. However, in light of Owen’s distinction between the subject and principle of divine action, it is far more satisfying to understand Owen’s statement to refer to the concurrence of the other persons as *subjects* of the action. That is, the other two only act *as subjects* in so far as they approve and consent of the action of the other. With respect to principle, however, the work is an undivided work of the Trinity.

have for the Christian life? It is beyond the scope of this essay to answer this question with any detail. However, a few brief comments are in order. First, this study lays the foundation for fruitful reflection on both the limitations and the legitimacy of appealing to the Trinity as the ground of human social relationships. If the strong account of divine unity defended in this study is correct, then the unity of the three persons of the Godhead is without parallel in the created order. Any continuity between the triune being of God and the social structures of human relationships is analogical at best, and never exact. Thus, God is to be reverently adored as utterly unique before appeal is made to his triune identity as the basis for a social agenda. That said, the inter-subjectivity of the three persons serves as a reminder that, keeping the Creator/creature distinction firmly in place, nuanced analogical appeal to Trinitarian relations may be legitimate and helpful for understanding appropriate social structures in human relationships, especially if the analogy is made in the text of Scripture itself.⁶⁶ Second, this study also lays the foundation for thinking through the relationship of the Holy Spirit toward the human nature of Christ in the incarnate state, a subject commonly referred to as “Spirit Christology.”⁶⁷ The distinction proposed here between the principle and subject of divine activity may prove useful in articulating a form of Spirit Christology that is consistent with orthodox Trinitarian theology, including the doctrine of inseparable operations. I hope to pursue each of these subjects in the future and would delight to see other theologians take up similar pursuits.⁶⁸

Concerning the challenge of Trinitarian theology, Augustine has famously remarked, “Nowhere else is a mistake more dangerous, or the search more laborious, or discovery more advantageous.”⁶⁹ The doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity *ad extra* highlights the truth and wisdom of his words. The difficulty of the doctrine is compounded by the complex historical-theological debates that rage on the landscape of Trinitarian theology. Additionally, the most prolific proponents of the embattled doctrine wrote in a distant era, and in the case of Augustine, an unfamiliar language, making the arguments for the doctrine difficult to access and evaluate. Nevertheless, the doctrine of inseparable operations has been a staple of orthodox Trinitarian reflection for many centuries. Therefore, it is not wise to ignore it or to dismiss it lightly. In this essay, it has been argued that the

⁶⁶ For example, would anyone dispute that there is some analogical comparison to be drawn between the Father/Son relation in the Trinity and the Father/Son relation among humans, even though the comparison is by no means univocal? Might similarly limited but legitimate light be shed on other human social relationships?

⁶⁷ See Myk Habets, *The Anointed Son: A Trinitarian Spirit Christology* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series; ed. K. C. Hanson, Charles M. Collier, and D. Christopher Spinks; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010) for an introduction to the subject of Spirit Christology.

⁶⁸ I will explore the question of the limits and legitimacy of appealing to the Trinity as an analogy for human social relationships in my essay, “God is the Head of Christ: Does 1 Corinthians 11:3 Ground Gender Complementarity in the Immanent Trinity?” in *One God in Three Persons* (ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke; Wheaton: Crossway, forthcoming). I will explore the application of this proposal to the issue of Spirit Christology in my dissertation on that subject at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

⁶⁹ *The Trinity* 1.1.5.

historic doctrine of inseparable operations, with its concurrent affirmation of distinct personal appropriations, is both theologically coherent and biblically faithful. If indeed this is the case, then, given its staunch historical pedigree, the doctrine should be embraced as a staple element in contemporary proposals of Trinitarian theology. What God hath done together, let no man conceive asunder.