

FREE CHURCH AND *FILIOQUE*? ON THE PROSPECT OF FREE CHURCH ENGAGEMENT WITH THE DOCTRINAL CONTROVERSY

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Abstract: Roger Olson has made the observation that when it comes to the centuries-long debate over the filioque clause, “Free-church Protestants, such as Baptists, who generally do not recite the Nicene Creed, have tended to sit out this controversy.” This paper explores the extent to which Olson’s observation is correct and attempts to explain the potential reasons for such Free Church theological disengagement. The paper then considers what a distinctively Free Church contribution to the ecumenical conversation would look like (particularly by examining the contributions of Fred Sanders, Malcolm Yarnell, and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen), making the case that an overcoming of this doctrinal impasse will necessarily involve the collaborative insights from the various catholic traditions and that the Free Church tradition has the greatest contribution to make at this juncture of the controversy. The paper ends with a call for Free Church theologians to respond accordingly out of their distinctive convictions.

Key words: *filioque*, Free Church tradition, creedal theology, pneumatology, eternal procession, ecumenism

Roger Olson has made the astute observation that when it comes to the centuries-long debate¹ between Eastern and Western Christianity over the added *filioque* clause in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed, “Free-church Protestants, such as Baptists, who generally do not recite the Nicene Creed, have tended to sit out this controversy.”² David Wilhite concurs in an entire article dedicated to exploring Free Church disengagement from the longstanding dispute, particularly citing the Free Church tradition’s “noncreedal approach to theology ... [which] often ignores theological debate over matters inherent to the ancient Christian creeds.”³ The question remains whether we should be in any way troubled by this reality. Is the lack of Free Church engagement with perhaps the deepest theological disagreement in church history a concern or merely an interesting tidbit? What are the deeper reasons why Free Churches have consistently bowed out of an increasingly ecu-

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¹ A debate recently reignited thanks in part to Barth’s strong defense of the clause, Moltmann’s deep challenge of the same, and the emergence of the ecumenical movement.

² Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 153. Olson is not all that perplexed or troubled by the refusal to participate, going on to note that the *filioque* controversy presents “perhaps the murkiest, deepest waters of Christian theology, and most ordinary Christians [understandably stay] out of them and even shake their heads in bemusement over such controversies” (267).

³ David E. Wilhite, “The Baptists ‘and the Son’: The Filioque Clause in Noncreedal Theology,” *JES* 44 (2009): 285.

menical conversation with seemingly huge consequences for establishing (or preventing) greater Christian unity and theological agreement? What implications does the absence of a Free Church voice at the ecumenical table have, and what development in doctrinal understanding of the eternal procession of the Spirit might be possible if Free Church theologians were to take the issue seriously and further engage the controversy? It is this important set of questions relating to one of the deepest theological rifts of the church that I take up in this paper, arguing that though the Free Church has indeed undercontributed to the long-standing debate, this is not necessarily the way it has, or ought, to be. On the contrary, given the vigor and variety of more recent Free Church contributions toward the question of the *filioque*, contributions which depart quite evidently from the Free Church disengagement of yesteryear, it will be argued that the Free Church tradition has great potential to bring its distinctive theological insights to bear on the doctrinal controversy and maybe contribute in some small way toward its clarification and ultimate resolution. The only question that remains is: Will Free Church theologians step up to the doctrinal plate?

In order to support this argumentation, I will first briefly explore the preliminary concerns of the *who* and the *why*: *who* is in view as we speak of the “Free Church tradition” and *why* should we once again engage the seemingly endless and potentially hopeless question of the *filioque*. Next, I will offer a very brief history of the controversy in order to understand how such severe doctrinal division within the global church of yesterday and today has developed and thus what issues must be addressed in order to move toward its resolution. I will then investigate the extent to which Olson’s observation regarding Free Church disengagement from the controversy is correct and further elucidate the reasons for such disengagement. After this, I will consider the significance of more recent Free Church contributions to the doctrinal controversy, contributions which showcase both the possibility and potency of a Free Church theological contribution. I will close with an appeal to Free Church theologians that there are good reasons based on our own values to engage the debate as well as significant consequences if we do not, arguing that the Free Church tradition has a vital (and now quite tardy) contribution to make to a theological issue of great import both yesterday and today.

I. PRELIMINARIES: THE WHO AND THE WHY

First, we must briefly define what we mean by the “Free Church,” a notoriously difficult task in large part because the banner attempts to group churches which are resistant to such a grouping, often exhibiting a deep-seated commitment to the autonomy of the local church and at times a degree of skepticism regarding the existence of any earthly ecclesial entity beyond the locus of God’s people gathering for fellowship in Christ by the Spirit. Miroslav Volf, writing at the time as a self-proclaimed Free Church theologian, gets us a helpful start by noting that the tradition can be broadly identified by two primary characteristics: “It designates

first those churches with a congregationalist church constitution, and second those churches affirming a consistent separation of church and state.”⁴ Stated theologically, these are churches which hold to the collective authority of God’s faith-filled, Spirit-empowered people as “a royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9) gathered in a local congregation “of two or three” (Matt 18:20) under the authority of Christ alone as its head, free to partner with other churches (or not) as the local congregation sees fit.⁵ We have also noted above that Free Churches tend to be (but are not necessarily) “non-creedal” in the sense that, as Wilhete nicely summarizes: “formalized creeds or confessions are always [understood as] an interpretation of scripture and should, therefore, neither be elevated to the same authoritative status as scripture nor carry any binding authority on church polity or private belief.”⁶ This is often expressed in its simplest form of “no creed but Christ” or “no creed but the Bible”⁷ but can take a more nuanced expression.⁸ Based on this cursory sketch, we can say for the purposes of this paper that many traditions can rightly be understood to come under a broad “Free Church” banner, including, but not limited to, Evangelical Free, Congregational, Baptist, Pentecostal, Mennonite, Brethren, and the broad spectrum of what have come to be known as Non-denominational, Independent, Community, or Bible Churches.

One other preliminary question must be addressed before we proceed to our main inquiry, and it is this: Why the *filioque* (again)? This question is legitimate and emerges out of a common sentiment that views the doctrinal controversy as exhausted at best and as inherently schismatic and counter-productive at worst.⁹ In-

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9. For our purposes, we will be primarily orienting around the first characteristic in our definition, confirming the Evangelical Free Church of America’s (EFCA) point of emphasis when they note in *Evangelical Convictions* that though the separation of church and state played a vital role in the history of the movement’s founding (seeking independence from State Lutheran incursions on their faith and practice), “In our American context, the term ‘Free’ now refers to the autonomy of the local church.” *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America* (Minneapolis: Free Church Publications, 2011), 24.

⁵ So, e.g., the EFCA defines itself as “an association and fellowship of autonomous but interdependent congregations of like faith and congregational government” (*ibid.*, 261). There is thus a strong emphasis on the people of God (rather than ecclesial authorities, sacramental practices, denominational structures, or theological symbols) constituting the church.

⁶ Wilhite, “Baptists ‘and the Son,’” 287.

⁷ Wilhite (*ibid.*) rightly points out that this mantra still “sounds very much like a creed.”

⁸ Such an example is on offer in the EFCA where a ten-point statement of faith governs doctrinal belief and what is understood as the proper interpretation of biblical teaching (and clearly draws on creedal affirmations). Doctrine in the Free Church tradition can at times be divisive (after all, each local church determines where to draw the boundaries of orthodoxy) but can also be understood through a unitive framework. Again, the EFCA is illustrative here when they note their “strong conviction [that] Evangelical unity in the gospel ... [should unite] around the essentials of the gospel ... not wanting minor issues of doctrine to divide.” *Evangelical Convictions*, 24.

⁹ We could cite here Jaroslav Pelikan’s exaggerated assessment that “if there is a special circle of the inferno described by Dante reserved for historians of theology, the principle homework assigned to that subdivision of Hell for at least the first several eons of eternity may well be a thorough study of all the treatises ... devoted to the inquiry: Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father only, as Eastern Christendom contends, or from both the Father and the Son as the Latin Church teaches?” Quoted in A.

deed, why should we bother with another discussion of the perennial doctrinal debate that has showed no signs of resolution in over a millennium of substantial (and often heated) attention? After all, John Webster is correct: “The so-called ‘Filioque’ clause is infamous as a cause of schism between east and west, and is frequently dismissed as abstraction or pedantry.”¹⁰ But Wilhite, when he takes another look at the oft-despised controversy, rightly makes much of the fact that it has endured for so long, noting: “Christians have debated the Filioque clause for well over a millennium; that fact alone should convince us of the controversy’s importance for any robust and well-informed theological tradition.”¹¹ Wilhite is right to note that a doctrinal concern that has remained on the table for a thousand years is one that ought to get our attention, especially because it deals with such a central aspect of Christian confession. Wilhite goes on: “the Filioque clause, at least implicitly, is central to any sophisticated foray into the doctrine of the Trinity—a doctrine ... at the heart of theological discourse.”¹² While Gerald Bray overstates the case by saying that the *filioque* concern “may even be the central question of NT theology, at least if we study it from the perspective of its practical application to the life of the believer,” he does not miss the mark in noting that “if it is true that the Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts by faith and that the Church is the fruit of Pentecost, then surely it must be a matter of more than passing interest for us to know how this Spirit is linked to the Father to whom we pray and to the Son of whom we bear witness in the world.”¹³ In addition to the merits of its longevity, its centrality to the doctrine of the Trinity, and its import for the life of the believer we can also hold with the Klingenthal Memorandum that “the question of reconciliation between East and West ... inevitably involves the filioque ... [and therefore that issue] deserves to be widely and seriously considered.”¹⁴ Far from Dean Stanley’s assessment that the filioque question “is an excellent specimen of the race of ‘extinct controversies,’” we are justified in saying that the question deserves our attention perhaps now more than it ever has before; indeed, the ecumenical prospect of East/West reconciliation (at least to some degree) necessarily makes it so.¹⁵

Edward Sicienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), v.

¹⁰ John Webster, “The Identity of the Holy Spirit: A Problem in Trinitarian Theology,” *Them* 9 (1983): 6. C. F. D. Moule (quoted in *ibid.*) could note that the *filioque* was “one of the most deplorable chapters of hair-splitting theology” which, in light of the deep-seated division that followed in its wake, is a chapter we should close and to which we should never return.

¹¹ Wilhite, “Baptists ‘and the Son,’” 288.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Gerald Bray, “The Double Procession of the Holy Spirit in Evangelical Theology Today: Do We Still Need It?,” *JETS* 41 (1998): 417.

¹⁴ “The Filioque Clause in Ecumenical Perspective,” in *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ: Ecumenical Reflections on the Filioque Controversy* (ed. Lukas Vischer; Faith and Order Paper 103; London: World Council of Churches, 1981), 4.

¹⁵ Quoted in David Guretzki, “The *Filioque*: Assessing Evangelical Approaches to a Knotty Problem,” in *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark H. Pinnock* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2003), 183.

II. THE *FILIOQUE* CONTROVERSY: A VERY BRIEF HISTORY

Space constraints prevent us from providing more than the roughest of sketches of the *filioque* controversy's history.¹⁶ We begin with the fact that in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, proto-heretical views emerged which forced the church to develop and consolidate its doctrine of the Trinity through the development of its doctrines of Christ and the Spirit. This development was formalized at the councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), and Chalcedon (451) and codified in what came to be known as the Nicene Creed (though its final form was not approved until Constantinople). Meanwhile, theologians in the Christian "West" (writing in Latin, centered in Rome) as well as in the Christian "East" (writing in Greek, centered in Constantinople) began to develop models for instruction and apologetics surrounding the burgeoning Trinitarian doctrine.¹⁷ As Wilhite points out, Latin theologians such as Tertullian, Hilary of Poitiers, and Ambrose each emphasized the unity of the Father and the Son and correlated the Spirit, noting his divinity but not yet reflecting on the Spirit's eternal procession other than to emphasize that the Father was the source of God's eternal being. It was only with Augustine, the most significant of the Latin writers, that the continued battle with Arianism brought forth such an emphasis on the full divinity of the Son that it created the space to insist that the Spirit eternally proceeded not just from the Father but also from the Son.¹⁸ The (Western) Council of Toledo in 589 officially affirmed

¹⁶ All we can do here is give attention to key developments and trace the line that runs through them and thus outline the contours of the doctrinal contribution to the East-West divide all the way to the present day. For a very helpful, brief introduction see Guretzki's summary in *Karl Barth on the Filioque*, 6–12. For the sharpest and most exhaustive treatment in the English language to date see Sicienski's magisterial *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*. For an excellent account of the East-West Schism that includes but goes beyond the *filioque* debate, see Chadwick's masterful *East and West: The Making of a Rift in the Church*. And for a distinctively Eastern take and telling of the controversy, see Timothy Ware's *The Orthodox Church*, 43–72.

¹⁷ What has come to be known as the "social model" (beginning with the divine persons, the "threeness" of God's triune being) has typically been associated more with the East while what has come to be known as the "classical" or "Latin" model (beginning with the divine essence, the "oneness" of God's triune being) has typically been associated more with the West. It has been recently and convincingly demonstrated that this traditional East/West division is arbitrary and overstated, such that Mark Husbands can note that cases such as Gregory of Nyssa's emphasis on unity of the divine nature in the "East" and Augustine's employment of social analogies in the "West" prove that "standard accounts of the putatively distinct characteristics of 'Eastern' and 'Western' trinitarian theology are misguided." Still, this does not mean that these categorizations are not helpful to a point, so long as we do not drive a wedge between Eastern and Western views and act as if the two have never met or been mutually informed. See Mark Husbands, "The Trinity is Not Our Social Program" in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* (ed. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 132.

¹⁸ Wilhite, "Baptists 'and the Son,'" 289–90. Augustine's influence in the West was unparalleled and was likely directly related to churches in Spain inserting the *filioque* clause in their liturgical reciting of the Nicene Creed as early as the sixth century, thus professing belief that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son."

the *filioque* in large part to counter the Arianism which was still prevalent in the West.¹⁹

Meanwhile, in the East, churches had begun to recite the Nicene Creed in Greek without the *filioque* addition.²⁰ But the increasing affirmation of the clause in the West was not a source of controversy until more than 200 years after Toledo, and by then the drift of East and West away from each other was much more pronounced and the political ingredients for schism much more developed.²¹ In Guretzki's opinion, the "real watershed . . . at which the *filioque* became significant as both a theological and an ecumenical problem was the Photian-Carolingian exchanges in the ninth century."²² The situation continued to escalate until the climactic events of the eleventh century, when in 1014 Pope Benedict VIII officially endorsed the *filioque* for use in the Latin Mass and thus made the doctrinal teaching Roman Catholic dogma. The dam broke, however, in 1054 when in response to Patriarch Cerularius closing all Latin churches under his jurisdiction and commissioning a treatise against the perceived Western errors (including the *filioque*), papal representatives to Constantinople publically excommunicated the Patriarch (and thus all under his oversight). When the reciprocal excommunication came with haste, what has come to be known as the "Great Schism" of the church was wrought. There were now two churches in Christendom: the Catholic Church of the West and the Orthodox Church of the East.

Though attempts were made for reconciliation, most significantly at the Council of Lyons (1274) and the Council of Florence (1438–1439), neither was able to heal the wound.²³ The Reformation era in the Western church prompted no progress in the *filioque* controversy in large part because the Reformers accepted the Roman Catholic position with no disagreements. It was only in the latter part of the

¹⁹ King Reccared I and his largely Arian Visigoth kingdom were required to recite the Nicene Creed with the additional clause as validation of their true conversion to catholic Christianity, for no self-respecting Arian (with his refusal to acknowledge the full divinity of Jesus) would make such a lofty confession of the Son.

²⁰ To do so would have been, in their view, a violation of the Council of Ephesus's (431) prohibition of making any additions or deletions to the established Creed.

²¹ For example, Charlemagne's crowing on Christmas Day in 800 (by Pope Leo III) as the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire established a rival to the Byzantine empire that embittered East/West relations, and this was followed by a kerfuffle in Jerusalem between Western and Eastern monks over the proper recitation of the Creed (*filioque* or not) that led Pope Leo III to write in 810 that though the clause was *not* to be inserted in the text of the Creed, the doctrinal truth that the clause expresses is indeed defensible and true.

²² David Guretzki, *Karl Barth on the Filioque* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 7. Patriarch Photius did much to clarify the Eastern position by insisting that "the Spirit proceeds from the Father *alone*" (rather than the more ambiguous affirmation that "the Spirit proceeds from the Father" which allowed teachings such as "*through* the Son" found consistently in the Eastern tradition). Photius also passionately decried the *filioque* as a Western innovation along with overreaching claims of papal authority, and these accusations set a new tone in souring East/West relations (*ibid.*, 8).

²³ Lyons failed to have sufficient Orthodox representation for its results to be accepted by the East, while the unitive results of Florence failed to take root thanks to the East feeling abandoned by the West when promised military aid to fight the Turkish army never came and Constantinople was sacked in 1453.

nineteenth century that any thawing in the icy relationship between East and West began to occur, but the road to reunion still seemed closed by disagreement over the *filioque* (among other items).²⁴ The rise of ecumenism (as embodied in the World Council of Churches, for instance) in the post-WWII environment breathed new hope into the possibility of East-West reunion, but it has mostly brought attention to the amount of work that still needs to be done in coming to greater clarification as to what is truly at stake in the *filioque* clause and what doctrinal affirmations are and are not possible for each of the divergent traditions (major contributors and dialogue partners being Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed communions). Today, the history of the *filioque* controversy is still very much unfolding.

III. THE FREE CHURCH ON THE *FILIOQUE*: EXAMINING DISENGAGEMENT

We must begin this section by frankly acknowledging the fact that on a very large scale it does appear that Olson's observation is correct: Free Churches and their theologians have indeed demonstrated a consistent neglect of the doctrinal controversy and the theological issues surrounding it.²⁵ A survey of some standard systematic theology texts by Free Church theologians bears this out with ease. Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, for instance, dedicates a mere one page (out of 1,290) to the issue and ultimately dismisses it as merely "an obscure point of doctrine."²⁶ Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology* offers only one paragraph, and the *filioque* is again minimized as "not the really significant issue dividing the East from the West."²⁷ Even in the Evangelical Free Church of America's exposition of its ten-point statement of faith (two points of which involve issues related to the doctrines of the Trinity and the Holy Spirit), the *filioque* itself is only given treatment in a footnote.²⁸

²⁴ Vladimir Lossky appeared to be right when he observed that "whether we like it or not, the question of the procession of the Holy Spirit has been the sole dogmatic grounds for the separation of East and West" (cited in Guretzki, *Karl Barth on the Filioque*, 11).

²⁵ A starting point may be an initial survey of the literature on the controversy itself, and to date the most exhaustive treatment is Sicienski's *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*. Given the fact that the Free Church tradition is relatively new on the ecclesial scene we wouldn't expect it to make an appearance until fairly late; but in fact, the Free Churches make absolutely no appearance whatsoever, at least in his recounting. A similar observation occurs when we survey twentieth-century ecumenical dialogues, such as the WCC-organized Lambeth Conference: once again, there was no Free Church presence or voice. Now one could argue that this merely indicates the exclusion of the Free Churches from these assessments and conversations out of a bias against the tradition, and in some cases such an assessment would indeed be fair. But on the whole this is much better explained by the fact that Free Churches have simply not been interested or have not thought there was much at stake in the controversy to elicit their participation.

²⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 247.

²⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 868.

²⁸ The clause is assumed as the default position of the EFCA, noting simply that "the Scripture affirms that the Spirit proceeds from the Father (John 14:26; 15:26).[And] in the context of the Arian heresy, the church in the West affirmed that the Spirit proceeds from the Son also (cf. John 15:26,

So we might ask at this point: What reasons are there to explain this collective disengagement? Several come into view rather quickly. First, we must recognize that, as mentioned earlier, the Free Church tradition is defined in many ways by a lack of emphasis on the creeds and creedal theology. In such a tradition where the Creed plays little to no role in liturgy or catechesis, both a lack of familiarity with the *filioque* debate and a corresponding conviction that not much is actually at stake in the debate should be no surprise.²⁹ Second, the Free Church tradition (at least certain strands of it) is apt to disengage from the *filioque* controversy because of a pervasive skepticism or agnosticism regarding the immanent Trinity and the legitimacy of moving from God's economic activity to God's inner-trinitarian being. Olson is right on target in assessing that "many ... [in the] free-church traditions do not think we can even know that much about the 'inner workings of the Trinity,' so this whole controversy is unnecessary if not absurd."³⁰ This relates to a third reason for disengagement: the perceived lack of sufficient biblical grounding for the issue. When we remember that certain segments of the Free Church tradition express a *salvo* something along the lines of "no creed but the Bible" and skeptically ask the perennial question "Where stands it written,"³¹ we recognize why a handful of scattered verses from John's Gospel (heavily debated in terms of what they

16:7)." *Evangelical Convictions*, 42. Revealing of the larger issue is the fact that in the section on the Holy Spirit, only three pages are devoted to the question of the Holy Spirit's person and relation to the other persons of the Godhead; seventeen pages are dedicated to questions regarding what the Holy Spirit does in the world and in the life of the believer. This relative emphasis on the Spirit's work and the practical import of the doctrine is typical of the Free Church movement, and Bray draws out the concerning implications: "[The] tendency to skip over [the Spirit's person and relations] and go directly to that of the work of the Spirit is unbalanced and unhelpful, not least because the work the Spirit does is directly dependent on who the Spirit is, and his identity is defined by his relationship to the Father and the Son. In this respect, therefore, the question of the Spirit's procession is fundamental to our understanding of how he works in the life of the believer and of the Church." Bray, "Double Procession of the Holy Spirit in Evangelical Theology Today," 423.

²⁹ Wilhite helpfully connects the dots by reminding us that Free Churches can find themselves on either side of the controversy but not because they have engaged the theological issues or come to a well-thought out conclusion on the matter; rather, "many noncreedalists see themselves as part of the Western tradition and are therefore biased toward the Filioque teaching, while other noncreedalists are adamantly anti-Catholic in their approach to theology and therefore privilege the Eastern (that is, non-Roman) stance that omits the Filioque." This is a mere defaulting to a position on the *filioque* that has its roots in non-creedalism as well as a lack of interest or stock in historical theology. Wilhite, "Baptists 'and the Son,'" 288.

³⁰ Olson, *Mosaic of Christian Belief*, 267. Along the same lines, what Swain and Allen say with regard to evangelical circles in general holds true for many Free Churches: "grounding trinitarian missions in processions or ... considering God's inner trinitarian depths prior to the economic acts which flow therefrom [is] commonly regarded as excessively speculative, even 'disastrous,' for trinitarian theology." Scott Swain and Michael Allen, "The Obedience of the Eternal Son," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15 (2013): 117. Allen elaborates: "Reflections upon the 'immanent Trinity'—that is, God's life in himself—are [often] viewed suspiciously as being prone to speculation that is separated from or opposed to God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ." R. Michael Allen, *Justification and the Gospel: Understanding the Contexts and Controversies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 6.

³¹ As we see in the 1884 Swedish Evangelical Free Church statement of faith, where its singular confession was: "this organization accepts the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, as the Word of God, containing the Gospel of salvation for all men and the only perfect rule for teaching, faith and life" (quoted in *Evangelical Convictions*, 257).

actually tell us about the Trinity *ad intra*) are not viewed as sufficient to prompt engagement with the debate. Fourth, the relative neglect of the *filioque* within the Free Church can be attributed to a perceived lack of payoff for how engaging the controversy would further spur on and enrich Christian life and mission. Francis Schaeffer's question "How shall we then live?" has often been at the forefront of the Free Church movement, accentuating the activism (vs. dogmatism) that has tended to characterize evangelicalism in general. In short, when a theological issue is deemed irrelevant to how we are to live in Christ, it is often a death knell in the Free Church tradition.³²

IV. ENVISIONING A FREE CHURCH CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONTROVERSY

Given these roadblocks, we have a lot of imaginative work to do in envisioning how this disengagement might be overcome, and what a distinctive Free Church contribution to the controversy might look like. The work of Guretzki gets us a start by helpfully delineating five predominant approaches to the *filioque* controversy that have characterized evangelicals within the debate, and they can provide a way for us to initially envision what a Free Church approach and contribution to the questions at hand might involve. Guretzki's first category of approach is viewing the *filioque* as mere metaphysical speculation with the end goal of minimizing attention to it as much as possible.³³ His second category involves viewing the *filioque* confession as biblically grounded but theologically insignificant.³⁴ The third category involves viewing the clause as a theologically necessary affirmation.³⁵ The fourth category includes those who believe there is a mediating or synthetic stance between *filioque* and non-*filioque* positions.³⁶ The fifth category is that the *filioque* is

³² For such matters are often understood as "a speculative distraction from the serious business of the gospel." Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 8.

³³ He summarizes this view as understanding the controversy as "a wholly speculative debate that cannot be settled either positively or negatively without transgressing the canonical bounds of Scripture," and it would seem that a good number of Free Church theologians would fall into this grouping. Guretzki, "The *Filioque*: Assessing Evangelical Approaches to a Knotty Problem," 188.

³⁴ Guretzki actually labels Erickson and Grudem as belonging to this camp, noting "the minimal attention given to the filioque and the minimal efforts to support it from Scripture ... even if it is received and defended." Again, many Free Church theologians would find themselves in this camp. *Ibid.*, 189–190.

³⁵ Unable to cite any Free Church theologians for this camp, Guretzki describes their position thus: "[In addition to] a common acceptance of the filioque as part of the Western theological heritage ... these thinkers are more vocally adamant about its theological significance" (*ibid.*, 190).

³⁶ Guretzki places the Free Church theologian Stanley Grenz here, demonstrating that Grenz has significantly engaged the *filioque* controversy and the theological issues involved, going against the Free Church norm. He notes that Grenz "seeks to forge a middle path of understanding between Eastern and Western positions ... [arguing] that it is important to try to understand the theological rationale on both sides of the debate and to incorporate positive aspects from either side into [our] pneumatology" (*ibid.*, 191). Exemplary of Grenz's engagement is his comment that "the filioque controversy allows us to understand more fully the relational dynamic of the triune God. Two movements logically inhere within the one God. From the West, we learn that the second movement, the procession of the Spirit, is

to be rejected for ecumenical and theological reasons.³⁷ As it stands, Guretzki's categorizations lead us to envision the possibilities of the Free Church and the *filioque* something like this:

1. Most Free Church theologians (especially those with the broadest influence in the church, such as Grudem and Erickson) belong in categories 1 & 2 above (either dismissive or minimalist).
2. There are seemingly no Free Church theologians who affirm the *filioque* as a theologically *necessary* affirmation (category 3 above).
3. The contemporary Free Church theologians who have engaged the controversy the most (whom Guretzki believes to be Stanley Grenz and Clark Pinnock) belong solidly in categories 4 and 5 above (either positing a mediating position or counseling outright rejection).

However, as a survey of other contemporary Free Church theologians and their engagement with the controversy will show, this initial framing of Free Church and *filioque* possibilities is ultimately too simplistic of a picture to be satisfactory.³⁸

The first Free Church theologian we will examine in this regard is Fred Sanders. Sanders's reputation as a leading Evangelical theologian with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity became firmly established with his book *The Deep Things of God*, where he made the argument not only that "the Trinity changes everything" but that "Trinity and gospel ... are internally configured toward each other ... [and thus] Christian salvation comes from the Trinity, happens through the Trinity, and brings us home to the Trinity."³⁹ Sanders makes a compelling case as to why evangelicalism (and Free Churches to the extent they are a part of that tradition) ought to be engaged in exploring the depths of God's Trinitarian being. He notes, "Trinitarianism is the encompassing framework within which all Christian thought takes place and within which Christian confession finds its grounding presuppositions. It is the deep grammar of all the central Christian affirmations."⁴⁰ Sanders does not talk about the *filioque* controversy or take an explicit stand regarding it in the book,

connected with both the Father and the Son. But the position of the East reminds us that ultimately both movements find their source in the priority of the Father." Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 90.

³⁷ Guretzki identified Free Church theologian Clark Pinnock as in this category and interacts substantially and critically with his position. Pinnock's vantage point can be seen in such statements as "the Western church acted unilaterally by inserting this term without heeding protests from the East, and this resulted in the first great division of the church. Making this insertion represented a misuse of power ... adversely affect[ing] our understanding of salvation ... [and obscuring the fact that] the Spirit is universally present, implementing the universal salvific will of Father and Son." Clark H Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 196–97.

³⁸ Space does not permit us to explore an important correction to Guretzki's taxonomy above, which would involve reassessing Millard Erickson's placement in category 2. A survey of his *Christian Theology* is not enough; we must also closely examine his three monographs dedicated to the doctrine of the Trinity and its implications for the Christian life: *God in Three Persons* (1995); *Making Sense of the Trinity* (2000); and *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?* (2009).

³⁹ Sanders, *Deep Things of God*, 9–10. Sanders is particularly interested in making the case that as a movement of "gospel people," "Evangelicals are profoundly Trinitarian whether they know it or not" and evangelicalism "is Trinitarian deep down" (*ibid.*, 27, 11).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

which might lead some to determine that he downplays issues relating to the immanent Trinity, especially *that* issue. However, this is evidently not the case in Sanders's more recent contribution to the New Studies in Dogmatics series entitled *The Triune God*, where he argues that though we *begin* with the divine missions in the order of knowing, they inevitably lead us back to and are in fact grounded in the divine processions which have priority in the order of being.⁴¹ In fact, this progression helps Sanders to be slow and methodical in asking and then answering what he sees as the crucial question: "What do the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit reveal about God?"⁴² His conclusion to that all-important question is this: "The temporal missions of the Son and the Spirit make known the eternal processions of the Son and the Spirit ... and that in this way the identity of the triune God of the gospel is made known."⁴³ Now, the absence of any explicit discussion of the *filioque* is still quite noticeable; Sanders again and again chooses to emphasize merely that "the Son ... stands in an eternal relation of origin with regard to the Father ... called generation ... and the Spirit ... stands in an eternal relation of origin with regard to the Father ... called spiration."⁴⁴ Why this apparent side-stepping of the particulars concerning the *filioque* debate? I believe it would be incorrect to say that Sanders does not engage the controversy because his theology lacks rigor, because he is skeptical regarding what we can know about the immanent Trinity, or because he views such considerations as too far afield from the Christian life or the heart of Christian doctrine. Rather, it seems to me Sanders is properly operating within the theological constraints that his Free Church confession allows for, not bound by an ecclesial tradition that requires a particular stance on the *filioque*, but rather exercising a freedom to, borrowing a phrase from the EFCA exposition of their statement of faith, "major on the majors and minor on the minors."⁴⁵ In going as deep as he possibly can in reflecting on the inner-trinitarian life and valuing what we find there more than many Free Church theologians *while* intentionally pulling back from the heat of the *filioque* debate, Sanders does not fit any of Guretzki's categories and opens up a wider space for Free Church contributive possibilities.

The second figure we will briefly examine is Malcolm Yarnell, a Baptist (thus, in my configuration, Free Church) theologian whose book *God the Trinity* reveals quite a bit about another potential Free Church contribution, captured quite well in its subtitle: "Biblical Portraits." Indeed, the book is a *tour de force* of substantive engagement with Scripture, examining eight passages deemed significant for establishing, informing, and ultimately evaluating the church's doctrine of the Trinity along with modern theological reflection on the same.⁴⁶ Unlike Sanders, Yarnell explicitly

⁴¹ Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 93–96.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 112–13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴⁵ *Evangelical Convictions*, 24.

⁴⁶ Contrary to the stereotype of Free Church theologians, Yarnell is very conversant with both the church's tradition and the modern theological landscape. One example comes in his very close (and church-historically informed) study of John 15:26 where he notes that "it is instructive that the Spirit is theologically derived only from the Father in the biblical text. Augustine's argument that the Holy Spirit

discusses and engages the *filioque* controversy, noting that he believes a mediating position is the way forward, preferring “to speak of the procession of the Holy Spirit as occurring from the Father through the Son.”⁴⁷ His article “The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit” is a place where he meticulously walks through the tradition of the *filioque*, and the significance he assigns to this theological confession is revealed in the extensive space that Yarnell gives to exploring the *person* of the Holy Spirit (including his eternal procession) as a foundation for the *work* of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ Clearly Yarnell sees a need for greater reflection from a Free Church vantage point on the *person*, rather than just the work, of the Holy Spirit, reflection that would necessarily involve, in his view, exploring questions relating to the immanent Trinity and the relations of origin. Once again, Yarnell breaks the categories established by Guretzki, for he argues for a mediating position between East and West due primarily to biblical convictions rather than an ecumenical mindset, believing that the Scriptures are sufficient to move us beyond the impasse.

The third contribution we will assess is that of Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. Writing as a Pentecostal theologian, Kärkkäinen has very intentionally pursued what Barth described as “a theology of the third article,” desiring to “think theologically as a Pentecostal ... [working out] a Pentecostal ecclesiology, soteriology, and theology ... from an explicitly pneumatological starting point.”⁴⁹ Yet, significantly, Kärkkäinen also understands himself to be writing from the Free Church tradition, of which he believes Pentecostalism to be the largest manifestation.⁵⁰ In fact, Kärkkäinen is convinced that “a more active participation of the Free Churches ... [in ecumenical] forms of searching for unity, would challenge in a healthy way older participants and their agendas,” including the longstanding impasse regarding the *filioque*.⁵¹ This conviction grows out of a recognition that Olson’s observation is lamentably correct. Kärkkäinen says, “If Pentecostals have paid little attention to the doctrine of the Trinity, the issue of the *filioque*...has received even less attention.”⁵² But he goes on to note that while ecumenical dialogue “has helped Pentecostals to think more clearly about their theology of the Trinity and *filioque*,” there

is the love between the Father and the Son, and therefore proceeds from both, is theologically thick, but is exegetically thinner.” Malcolm B. Yarnell, *God the Trinity: Biblical Portraits* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 154.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁴⁸ Indeed, Yarnell goes on to lament the “paucity of treatment of the person of the Holy Spirit by evangelicals in the last century. For instance, the idea that the Holy Spirit is the love between the Father and the Son—an idea rooted in the exegetical work of Augustine and developed in the Western filioque—is not seriously treated by Baptist writers. Such neglect toward divine ontology ... betrays a preoccupation with modern ideas concerning the work of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, most twentieth-century Baptist writers on the Holy Spirit have focused, often exclusively, on his work. Those Southern Baptist writers who have dealt with his person have done so only summarily while addressing contemporary concerns about the Spirit’s work” (*ibid.*, 523).

⁴⁹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen and Amos Yong, *Toward a Pneumatological Theology: Pentecostal and Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology, Soteriology, and Theology of Mission* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), xiii.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 104.

is still the question “what a distinctive Pentecostal contribution to these issues [would be], and what directions it might take.”⁵³ Whatever that contribution is, Kärkkäinen believes that “Pentecostalism might be able to sharpen other traditions’ perception of the role of the Spirit in the Trinity ... [by correcting the] alleged pneumatological deficit in Western theology.”⁵⁴ It is clear that Kärkkäinen, as a self-professed Free Church theologian, is charting a course for seeking the resolution of the *filioque* controversy particularly by leveraging the (up until now largely neglected) insights of the Pentecostal theological community, and this, too, transcends Guretzki’s categories, for it provides us an example of a Free Church theologian surveying the fences of the controversy and wondering if a different, and currently untapped, theological paradigm (especially one known for its emphasis on pneumatology) might be exactly what is needed to deepen insights and perhaps even resolve longstanding doctrinal divisions, with the *filioque* controversy as the first order of business.⁵⁵

Having merely surveyed the work of three Free Church theologians, we can only offer the tentative conclusion in light of their work that Guretzki’s fivefold categories for engaging the *filioque* controversy, while providing a helpful start, are indeed found to be incomplete. For instance, Sanders seems comfortable plumbing the depths of the inner-trinitarian life without feeling compelled to take a stand for or against the *filioque*, pointing to a sixth category of engagement: dogmatic exploration while avoiding polemical debate. It may very well be that Sanders sees the need to have both *filioque* and non-*filioque* positions bringing the depths of their theological resources and tradition to the table. After all, each position highlights vitally important (yet conflicting?) insights regarding the nature of God’s triune life. Proponents of the *filioque* emphasize how it guards the full divinity of the Son against any sort of subordinationism, establishes the full hypostatic particularity of the Son and the Spirit,⁵⁶ and is necessary for delineating the proper relationship between the Son and the Spirit (holding that the Eastern position only establishes the eternal relationship of each to the Father).⁵⁷ Opponents of the *filioque* believe that the

⁵³ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Space prevents us from exploring other Free Church contributors which would further nuance the options for engagement with the *filioque* controversy, including the work of Gregory Liston, Myk Habets, Stephen Holmes, Bruce Ware, and Gregg Allison, among others.

⁵⁶ Here the issue can be seen by asking: If the Son and the Spirit’s relations of origin are identical, what is it that ontologically distinguishes them? For instance, without the *filioque*, how do we know that the Father does not have two Sons? This view assumes that eternal generation and spiration are insufficient for establishing the difference (on the grounds that it is very difficult to articulate exactly what the difference between these two things might be); only the *filioque*, in the minds of its defenders, establishes a proper distinction among the divine persons in eternity: the Father processes from none, the Son processes from one (the Father; generation), and the Spirit processes from two (the Father and the Son; spiration).

⁵⁷ Wilhite is right to note that these proponents do not see themselves as violating the Creedal formula but rather making explicit what was implicit within it; in their view, “the Niceno-Constantinopolitan expression ... [was] incomplete in that it had yet to be applied to the Spirit’s procession; by adding the *Filioque* the dual-processionists understand themselves to be applying Nicaea consistently and comprehensively.” Wilhite, “Baptists ‘and the Son,’” 298. The opponents of the *filioque*,

clause drastically compromises the monarchy of the Father⁵⁸ and the full divinity of the Spirit.⁵⁹ If, as Thomas Weinandy has proposed, theology is at its best when it functions as a “mystery discerning enterprise” versus a “problem solving” one, then Sanders might be right in insisting, thanks in part to the possibilities open to him as a Free Church theologian, that we need all (doctrinal) hands on deck to discern (not solve!) the mystery of mysteries: the processions of God’s inner-trinitarian life.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, Yarnell’s work points to yet a seventh categorization that seems necessary: viewing the *filioque* confession as biblically grounded and theologically *significant*. Far from minimizing questions that have arisen out of the controversy, Yarnell rightly calls us to press into them out of the conviction that we have yet to plumb the depths of biblical testimony regarding the nature of God’s life *ad intra*, including the relations of origin. Sicienski wonderfully underscores this point by emphasizing that the basic desire to understand in greater and greater ways what the text of Scripture tells us about God in and of himself has always served as the touchstone of the long-standing debate. For his case in point he draws our attention to Augustine, whose project when it came to the *filioque* could be summarized thus: “to make sense of the biblical affirmation that the Holy Spirit ‘who proceedeth from the Father’ is also ‘Spirit of the Son’; in other words, to read John 15:26 and Matthew 10:20—‘from’ and ‘of’ the Father—in concert with Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:16—‘of’ the Son.”⁶¹ We do well, then, to unhitch the *filioque* controversy from the label of “obscure historical theology” or “creedal polemics” and instead return to the source of the controversy itself: What *can* we say (and not say) about God’s relations of origins based upon Scripture, and how can we *best* say it? This is a question that can indeed serve to motivate many a Free Church theo-

meanwhile, often insist that theological reflection upon the Creed and from the Creed should continue, but absolutely no additions to the Creed itself should be permitted *even if they represent true theological confessions*.

⁵⁸ That is, the Father being the “eternal fount” of all divinity that he and he alone shares with the Son and the Spirit. What the West views as protecting the full divinity of the Son, the East views as compromising what is distinct about the Father as the fount of divinity. Irenaeus’s ancient “two hands” metaphor has been the controlling image for the latter: as the Father has worked in history through the distinct economic missions of Son and Spirit, so their eternal relationship involves distinct processions from the Father. Bray nicely summarizes their concern: “To say that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Son would be to posit a second source of divinity, which in turn would destroy the Church’s fundamental monotheism.” Bray, “Double Procession of the Holy Spirit in Evangelical Theology Today,” 419.

⁵⁹ As Orthodox theologian Timothy Ware has noted, “Objections to dual-processionism, as customarily raised by the East, revolve around a concern that the Christocentrism of the Filioque actually implies a Christomonism of sorts, thereby compromising the orthodox teaching on the Father and the Spirit.” Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity* (London: Penguin, 2015), 222. Wilhite more particularly recognizes that “the East has repeatedly accused the West of losing sight of God’s threeness, usually at the expense of full recognition of the person of the Spirit. If full equality with God for the Son requires breathing forth the Spirit, then how can one affirm the full equality of the Spirit?” Wilhite, “Baptists ‘and the Son,’” 298.

⁶⁰ See Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 32–34.

⁶¹ Sicienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*, 59.

gian (among theologians of other stripes) to further engage the controversy rather than continue to remain on its sidelines.

Finally, we can say that Kärkkäinen's work, while not requiring the need for a new categorization beyond Guretzki's initial five, certainly points to the expansiveness of his fourth category: those seeking a mediating or synthetic stance between *filioque* and non-*filioque* positions. As many have made clear, there is indeed much at stake in either accepting or rejecting the *filioque* clause.⁶² But, as the Klingenthal Memorandum strained to communicate, if there is a way beyond the doctrinal impasse, it will likely involve thinking beyond "*filioque*: yea or nay."⁶³ Indeed, it may involve taking up and parsing out the five possibilities Klingenthal believed might address the questions of the Son's relation to the procession of the Spirit in a way that could be amenable to both Western and Eastern sensibilities: "1. the Spirit proceeds from the Father of the Son, 2. the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son, 3. the Spirit proceeds from the Father and receives from the Son, 4. the Spirit proceeds from the Father and rests on the Son, 5. the Spirit proceeds from the Father and shines out through the Son."⁶⁴ Initially, it seems that the most hopeful option for resolution might be option 2, in large part because there is a pedigree of this confession in the Eastern tradition, and it is certainly present among the Church Fathers.⁶⁵ But it is still an open question whether such a confession would be equally satisfying to both East and West, and at this juncture there are several reasons to think that this would likely not be the case.⁶⁶ What, then,

⁶² Webster summarizes these stakes nicely: "The strength of [a Western] Christological definition of the Spirit is that it protects the identity of the Spirit from being generalized into a divine presence suffused throughout creation. The weakness of such an argument is that it may absorb the identity of the Spirit into that of the Son. ... To tie the Spirit too closely to the person and work of Christ is to underestimate that differentiation within the one divine life and thus to encourage the slow drift into modalism which is so common in western Trinitarian theology." Webster thus believes that on the whole the stereotypes are true: the Western Trinitarian model emphasizes oneness with the inherent danger of modalism; the Eastern Trinitarian model emphasizes threeness with the inherent danger of tritheism; both sides could be in danger of falling into a form of subordinationism, with the West subordinating the Spirit to the Father and Son, and the East subordinating the Son and the Spirit to the Father. Webster, "Identity of the Holy Spirit," 6.

⁶³ In other words, considering the enduring standoff between the Eastern and Western positions, it is unlikely that one side will fully embrace the previous confession of the other.

⁶⁴ *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ*, 16.

⁶⁵ Wilhite can note that "many Orthodox theologians believe that the ambiguous phrase 'through the Son' found in many patristic writers offers a way forward ... [including] Bulgakov ... [who] argued that the 381 Creed was ... concerned ... with the equi-divinity of the third hypostasis. Therefore, the question of procession is left open to theological speculation ... [guided by] the consensus of early Greek fathers [who spoke] of the procession of the Holy Spirit as 'through the Son.'" Wilhite, "Baptists 'and the Son,'" 296.

⁶⁶ Most prominent among them is a deep difference between the Eastern and Western tradition of how much we can actually say about the eternal life of the Trinity *ad intra*, with the East insisting that this life is shrouded in unapproachable mystery while the West has grown increasingly confident that much can be said about the inner life of the Trinity based on its true reflection in the economic works of the Trinity. Again, Wilhite very nicely summarizes: "Does scripture teach that the Son is included in the [economic] sending forth of the Holy Spirit? Yes. Does the scripture say that the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Son as well as the Father? No, but neither does it state the Spirit does *not* proceed eternally from the Son. The hermeneutical crux is whether or not God revealed (economic Trinity) reveals God *in*

might help Christ's church move beyond the continued theological/ecumenical impasse?

Kärkkäinen, among others, forces us to ask the question in a slightly different way: Could the distinctives of the Free Church theological tradition and its underutilized vantage point on the *filioque* controversy contribute toward further doctrinal development and ecumenical reunion? In answering this question, I believe that what Guretzki has said about evangelical contributions to the debate can be affirmed to an even greater degree in the case of Free Church contributions. To appropriate Guretzki's insight, we could say, "The filioque raises the question of whether [Free Church theologians] may be in the unique position of putting theological proposals regarding the doctrine of the procession of the Spirit on the ecumenical table in unhindered ways that ... Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions are prevented from doing because of their strict adherence to [their] tradition."⁶⁷ Wilhite makes a very similar point and is worth quoting at length. "We Baptists," he says, "and noncreedal theologians in general, have been known to tout our ability to look to 'scripture alone' to answer theological inquiry. Here, it would seem, where both East and West have been divided precisely over a creed, we should be able to address the issue without (what some noncreedalists would characterize as) the baggage and constraints of traditional dogmatism and ecclesial hegemony inevitable in any creedal approach." He goes on: "[Indeed,] noncreedal theology should be demonstrably most fruitful precisely in a debate such as the Filioque controversy wherein the source of the disagreement, the Creed, is something removed and distant to us—that is, it has no formal linkage to our theological reflections and is therefore more easily approached in a fresh and constructive manner."⁶⁸ Given all that is at stake in this longstanding doctrinal controversy, and the fact that Free Church contributions might have the greatest potential to forward the conversation simply by being the newest to arrive at the ecumenical table (with distinctive emphases that have previously been lacking), we conclude that it is *incumbent* upon Free Church theologians to work toward overcoming the impasse, an event that will only occur through the collaborative insights of the various catholic theological traditions. In this case, the lamentable tardiness of the Free Church tradition to the ecumenical table actually establishes it as best situated at this time to move the controversy toward greater resolution. This is to follow the insights of Kärkkäinen, Wilhite, and Guretzki whose work gestures toward the fruitful possibilities, especially in discovering mediating positions between *filioque* and non-*filioque* positions, that Free Church engagement with the doctrinal controversy could bring. For Free Church theologians who believe that much is at stake in the doctrinal unity of

se (immanent Trinity)." This is no small matter, as the Western debate around these issues (demonstrated, for instance, in varying interpretations and receptions of "Rahner's Rule") alone makes clear. Wilhite, "Baptists 'and the Son,'" 302.

⁶⁷ Guretzki, "The *Filioque*: Assessing Evangelical Approaches to a Knotty Problem," 206.

⁶⁸ Wilhite, "Baptists 'and the Son,'" 288.

Christ's church on earth, however imperfectly that unity might manifest until glory, this is no small reason to set our sights on the *filioque* debate anew.⁶⁹

V. A CALL FOR FREE CHURCH THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT

But I want to close by insisting that, in addition to any ecumenical gain, there are also reasons fully consistent with our own convictions and values as Free Church theologians to engage the *filioque* controversy.⁷⁰ Parallel to Sanders's conviction that we as evangelicals should be "Trinity people" because we are "gospel people," I want to argue that those of us who are Free Church theologians have values which lead us to see that we are, indeed, *filioque*-type people.⁷¹ The first of these values builds off of Sanders's conviction: If we as Free Church theologians are, perhaps above all else, "gospel people," then we have to follow the same logic Sanders believes holds for evangelicals; that is, we too have to understand ourselves as "Trinity people," people who believe that our doctrine of the Trinity really matters. But this automatically entails that we be theologians who take the *filioque* debate and its attendant concerns seriously. Why? Because we recognize with Wilhite that "the doctrine of the procession of the Holy Spirit intersects with any inquiry into the interior life of God." In fact, he rightly goes on, "Whenever we attempt to extricate the uniqueness of any person in the Trinity, we [ultimately] encounter Filioque concerns."⁷² In other words, because we recognize that we cannot have the gospel of God without the (triune) God who accomplished the gospel, the doctrine of the Trinity must matter to us. And once it does, we inevitably have to engage the attendant theological issues wrapped up in the *filioque* debate.

But we should also do so because of a second, related, Free Church value: we care about *guarding* the gospel. Any recounting of the historical debate around the *filioque* clause reminds us that it was employed in the West as a doctrinal defense of the essentials of the gospel (most commonly against a form of Arianism that sought to diminish the full divinity of Christ). Graham Cole is right to insist that a similar situation may be going on with the *filioque* today, noting that "what at first hearing to an evangelical might seem an arcane theological debate [actually] has

⁶⁹ For more on the nature and fruitfulness of contemporary ecumenical conversation regarding the *filioque*, including a summary and prospect of Free Church contributions in David Guretzki's article "The *Filioque*. Reviewing the State of the Question, with some Free Church Contributions," see *Ecumenical Perspectives on the Filioque for the 21st Century* (ed. Myk Habets; T&T Clark Theology; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

⁷⁰ It should be stated here that the values I will be highlighting through the end of this essay are in *no way* exclusive to the Free Church tradition; on the contrary, and thankfully, they are values shared by many theological traditions. My intention here is merely to highlight these values as a spur for Free Church theologians to engage the *filioque* controversy without implying that these values do not similarly exist across the spectrum of ecclesial traditions, especially within evangelicalism.

⁷¹ Again, to clarify, I do not mean by this statement that all Free Church theologians will necessarily adhere to the *filioque*, but rather that all Free Church theologians ought to see that there is something very important at stake in the controversy and that we should take a great interest in delineating its issues, parsing out its implications, and resolving its impediments to gospel clarity and unity as much as possible.

⁷² Wilhite, "Baptists 'and the Son,'" 298.

ramifications that affect the very fabric of the Christian's engagement with those of other faiths in a pluralist context."⁷³ Michael Bird summarizes this concern nicely when he says: "If the Spirit of God proceeds directly from the Father without the Son, there may be a theological argument that this same Spirit may relate adherents of other religions directly to the Father without the need for mediatorship of the Son. A Father-Spirit procession makes it possible, in theory, to share in the Spirit without the work of the Son."⁷⁴ And so this means that Free Church theologians ought to view the *filioque* not as an outdated piece of theological nitpicking, but actually as a potentially vital resource in guarding the gospel today, in this instance from a religious pluralism that denies the exclusive necessity of Christ's cross-work for salvation by appealing to the Spirit of God apart from any consideration of the Son. The *filioque* helps us safeguard the gospel by insisting that, not only is the Holy Spirit always and forever the "Spirit of Christ" (Rom 8:9), but also that the inner-trinitarian eternal relations of origin point irrevocably to one abiding truth: there has never been a movement of the Spirit, whether temporal mission or eternal procession, apart from the Son.

A third value also ought to motivate Free Church theologians to engage the *filioque*: We are theologians of the Book, dedicated to the authority of Scripture under the Reformational banner of *sola scriptura*. Again, what Guretzki notes regarding evangelicals can be accented when it comes to Free Church theologians: "It may be the case that no *biblical* solution to the *filioque* will be found; but this should in no way prevent the theologian from continuing to try ... [out of a conviction] that the depths of the riches of scripture have not yet been exhausted and it may well be that [Free Church theologians], in their characteristic attention to the text of scripture, could yet offer something of value to this question, but only if the question is not ruled out of theological court before the investigation begins."⁷⁵ Indeed, this is the very value that seems to be motivating Yarnell's exploration of the biblical portraits of our Trinitarian God, and Free Church theologians do well to imitate his insistence on the sufficiency and clarity of Scripture, returning to the Bible once again to ask: Is there yet more light that these words of life might shed upon our clouded and contested notions of the Spirit's eternal procession from the Father (and the Son)?

⁷³ Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 78.

⁷⁴ Michael F Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 620. This was indeed the deep concern of Karl Barth, and the same concern to guard against religious pluralism has been noted by many proponents of the *filioque* today (especially in regard to the work of theologians like Amos Yong). One insightful voice in this regard is Tom Smail, who asks if the Spirit proceeds from the Father and not the Son: "Can other religions receive the Spirit? ... Can Spirit-filled believers utter words of God that are not words of Christ? ... Can one speak of the Son (that is, doctrinally) without experiencing the Spirit (that is, spiritually)? Conversely, can one experience the works of the Spirit without knowing the benefits of Christ?" Thomas Allan Smail, *The Giving Gift: The Holy Spirit in Person* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 158.

⁷⁵ Guretzki, "The *Filioque*: Assessing Evangelical Approaches to a Knotty Problem," 197.

This bleeds very naturally into a fourth value which should motivate Free Church theologians to engage the *filioque* debate, namely that we seek to esteem what our Lord Jesus Christ esteems. Can there be any doubt in reading passages such as John 17 and Ephesians 4 that Christian unity is of great worth to our Lord and brings great glory to the triune God? Guretzki is quite right in imploring Free Church theologians to become more aware “of the theological and missiological implications of the longstanding ecclesiological division that has been a reality for the body of Christ from the eleventh century on,” largely because we know that our Lord desires such divisions to end out of a common recognition of our oneness in Christ.⁷⁶ Too often this biblical priority is undercut by an emphasis on the autonomy of the local church within the Free Church tradition, but I would argue that the best of the tradition has recognized that the primacy of the local church does not do away with the need for interdependence with other local churches and interaction with other ecclesial traditions. The Free Church emphasis on the local church ought not diminish the significance of the catholic church nor hinder the recognition that both of these dimensions of the church’s being (local and universal) are mutually dependent. In short, we too must be concerned about the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, as well as the division over the *filioque* which significantly hinders that church’s unity before a watching world.

Lastly, a fifth value that should lead Free Church theologians to engage the *filioque* controversy is, most surprising of all perhaps, the value we place on the import of theology for Christian life and mission. Here we do well simply to heed the insight of Sinclair Ferguson, who astutely notes that “when his disciples were about to have the world collapse in on them, our Lord spent so much time in the Upper Room speaking to them about the mystery of the Trinity. If anything could underline the necessity of Trinitarianism for practical Christianity, that must surely be it!”⁷⁷ Indeed, the final hours of Jesus’s earthly ministry show us that doctrine, far from being irrelevant to Christian living, is absolutely essential when it comes to equipping and encouraging disciples. And Jesus did not go to just any doctrine in the hour of greatest need; he went to the deepest doctrinal depths that Christianity has to offer: the ways that God’s triune life, all the way back to the eternal relations of origin, gloriously manifest in the missions of the Son and the Spirit for the salvation of God’s people and for the life of the world. It seems fitting, then, that we close by amplifying Ferguson’s insight, calling Free Church theologians (along with others!) to see the very *practical* import of deep reflection on the mysteries of God’s eternal Triune life, the *filioque* perhaps most of all. Who would have thought?

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 375.