

Where two or three are gathered:

Miroslav Volf's Free Church ecclesiology

by

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I begin this essay with two questions in mind. The first relates to the broad phenomenon of North American evangelicalism. With a future doctoral dissertation in mind, I am interested in identifying the essential elements of evangelical ecclesiology. Succinctly put, what are the marks of the church, and how are they expressed, from an evangelical perspective? The second question is a narrower facet of evangelical ecclesiology. I am interested in the "Free Church"¹ ecclesiology of Miroslav Volf. To what extent does his trinitarian ecclesiology resonate with specifically Free Church concerns, or with broader evangelical concerns? It is this second question that I intend to address in this essay. I hope that the first question will come into focus as a result of exploring the second, opening the door to future research and reflection.

Miroslav Volf bears an interesting biography that almost begs to be explored. He is Croatian, but was raised in Novi Sad, Serbia during Tito's Yugoslavian regime. The son of a Pentecostal preacher, he completed his doctorate at Tübingen under Jürgen Moltmann. He has been professor of theology at Fuller Seminary, and more recently at Yale, while continuing to return to Croatia to teach at the Evangelical Theological Institute at Osijek. The experience of eastern and western Europe, and later of the United States, has clearly shaped both his choice of theological topics and his approaches to them. As one friend and commentator has pointed out, a critical response to Tito's Marxism is evident in Volf's doctoral dissertation and first book: *Work in the Spirit: Toward a theology of work*.² He himself acknowledges that *Exclusion and embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation* is a direct result of his theological and emotional struggle with the violence between Croatia and its neighbours. *After our likeness: The church as the image of the Trinity* is remarkable in many ways, not the least of which is his careful and thoughtful reading of Catholic and Orthodox theologians. His attempts to draft an ecclesiology for the Free Church tradition that avoids the

¹ Throughout this paper, the term Free Church will be used to refer to churches sharing a congregationalist polity. These churches come from a broad theological spectrum, including Reformed, Wesleyan, Holiness, Pentecostal, and Anabaptist traditions. Many of these churches practice a believer's baptism and are sometimes designated as the believer's church.

² A. James Reimer, "Miroslav Volf: One of the new theologians," Introduction to a special issue of the *Conrad Grebel Review* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 3-19.

individualism typical of this tradition while affirming congregational freedom, lead him to explore trinitarian perspectives on ecclesiology.

Volf shares with other Free Church theologians the conviction that the church is a community gathered in Christ's name, though his trinitarian perspectives also set him apart from most other Free Church theologians.³ The distinctiveness of Volf's contribution to ecclesiology is precisely in his ability to bring these two themes into dialogue: the church as gathered community, and the church as image of the Trinity. The synthesis of these two themes is the subject of his book: *After our likeness*. In the next section, I will explore understandings of trinitarian personhood and intra-trinitarian relations.

I. Trinitarian personhood

Volf turns to Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiologies, both for insight and to provide a foil for his own reflections. As representative of the Catholic ecclesiological tradition, Volf has chosen Joseph Ratzinger, cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. As an Orthodox representative, he has chosen John Zizioulas, metropolitan of Pergamon, and sometime professor at St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York. Both of Volf's selections provide him the opportunity to explore clearly articulated and distinctive trinitarian ecclesiologies. Neither of these theologians has written a complete systematic ecclesiology. However, ecclesiology has been the central theme of much of their work.⁴ As we shall see below, both Ratzinger and Zizioulas present innovations of their own such that they could not be described as articulating definitive Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiologies, just as Volf's contribution could not be described as a definitive Free Church ecclesiology.⁵ Nevertheless, Ratzinger and Zizioulas do make good dialogue partners for Volf's purpose. His study offers significant insights for Free Church theological reflection and continues to receive considerable

³ A few other notable exceptions can be found to the generally christocentric ecclesiology of the Free Churches, in particular John Howard Yoder and James William McClendon.

⁴ Volf has compiled an extensive bibliography of their writings. Cf. Miroslav Volf, *After our likeness: The church as the image of the Trinity*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 298-300 & 305-306 respectively.

⁵ He is aware of this problem, but suggests that his own purpose is not to establish an ecumenical consensus but rather to reformulate Free Church ecclesiology. For this purpose he is satisfied to enter into dialogue with at least "one incontestably 'not un-Catholic' ecclesiology." (*After our likeness*, 31) A similar approach would apply to Zizioulas. Cf. *After our likeness*, 130, note 9

attention throughout the ecumenical academy. In this section of my paper, I will explore Volf's consideration of Ratzinger and Zizioulas on trinitarian personhood.

a) Ratzinger: Church as "Christus totus"

In Ratzinger and Zizioulas, Volf finds two very different trinitarian anthropologies, which when applied to ecclesiology result in different perspectives on the relation of the person to the community. Volf understands Ratzinger's ecclesiological works to be a polemic against "the paradigmatic model of an *individualistic* view of what is Christian,"⁶ namely Free Church ecclesiology. In a brief summary sentence: "Ratzinger locates the essence of the church in the arc between the self and the whole; it is the communion between the human "I" and the divine "Thou" in a universally communal "We."⁷ Volf considers Ratzinger's ecclesiological anthropology in two parts: firstly, the communal character of the act of faith; and secondly, the sacramental structure of communion.

Ratzinger's starting point is the personal act of faith. This is grounded in the central Catholic conviction that faith has an essentially communal character. Faith in the triune God can only be expressed in relationship with others that share this faith. As early as his doctoral dissertation, Ratzinger insisted that communion is not only an "external circumstance of salvation, but virtually enters into its metaphysical essence."⁸ In its developed form, Ratzinger's position presumes that belief involves the surrender of one's existence to God. Because the God to whom we surrender ourselves is triune, we necessarily enter into the divine community. One cannot have a private relationship with a God that is in essence a community. "Fellowship with the triune God is therefore at once also fellowship with all other human beings who in faith have surrendered their existence to the same God."⁹ This is the communion of saints. So far, Ratzinger's theology is generic Catholic theology. It is at the next point that he offers his distinctive contribution.

⁶ *After our likeness*, 30

⁷ *After our likeness*, 30

⁸ *After our likeness*, 33, citing Joseph Ratzinger, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche*. Münchener theologische studien 2/7. (Munich: Zink, 1954), 245, note 21

⁹ *After our likeness*, 33

Christian faith is faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in Christ is never private because Christ is not an “individual, self-enclosed person.” Jesus Christ is the new “Adam.” Ratzinger insists that the New Testament use of the term “Adam” is a reference to general humanity, expressed not as a concept but as a “corporate personality.” He embodies within himself “the unity of the whole creature ‘man.’”¹⁰ Ratzinger’s insistence on a unitary principle derives from his own philosophical paradigm. Unity is an ontological category that cannot be expressed except as wholeness and uniformity. The incarnated Christ as paradigmatic human is also the corporate wholeness of humanity. Thus, believing in Christ entails entry into the corporate personality.

Faith see in Jesus ... the man in whom perfect unity ... and perfect individuality are one; the man in whom humanity comes into contact with its future and in the highest extent itself becomes its future, because through him it makes contact with God himself, shares in him and thus realizes its most intrinsic possibility.¹¹

To distinguish oneself from the unified corporate personality is imperfection, and thus is contrary to the perfect unity of humanity. To surrender oneself to Christ leads to communion with all those “who are in Christ.” The Pauline flavour of this expression is deliberate. Ratzinger refers to Gal. 2:20: “now it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

Recall that unity is an ontological category. As such, union with Christ entails sharing in one substance with Christ. In union with Christ, the individual is not lost, but is converted into a single subject with Christ. Thus, all who are in Christ are “one in Christ.” The church as the Body of Christ united with its head is the “whole Christ.” For Ratzinger, this is an ontological and incarnational statement.

“The deepest essence of the church” consists in being “together with Christ the *Christus totus, caput et membra*.”¹²

According to Ratzinger, the church as an agent receives its subjectivity from Christ. Moreover, the church is not an independent subject. In the church, Christ’s own subject is active. Thus, the presence and action of Christ can be discerned in the acts of the church and its agents: bishops, priests, and

¹⁰ *After our likeness*, 33. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*. (London: Search Press, 1971), 176.

¹¹ *Introduction to Christianity*, 179

¹² *After our likeness*, 34, quoting Ratzinger, “Kirche II, III,” *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 6: 180.

deacons. Of course, Volf objects to this. His objection begins with the legitimacy of Ratzinger's theological interpretation of the Pauline "one in Christ." He contends that the transformation of "one in Christ" into "a single subject *with* Christ" requires an unfounded exegetical and theological reinterpretation.¹³ Additionally, Volf is concerned that the distinction between the church and Christ is sufficiently blurred such that the dialogue between church and Christ "within the *one, single* subject ... becomes mere conversation with oneself."¹⁴

So far, with Volf's assistance, I have outlined two of Ratzinger's major concepts: that faith involves surrender of oneself to Christ; and that the church is to be conceived as *totus Christus*. These two concepts converge with Ratzinger's reflection on the assent of faith. Faith can never be a private relationship with God, but is mediated in the community. As Ratzinger puts it, faith means: "coming to participate in the already existing decision of the believing community."¹⁵ Because faith is in its very essence communal, one receives the vocabulary and content of the faith from the community. However, the act of faith itself, by which one receives and integrates the content of faith, is not an act of personal agency.

For Ratzinger, however, faith is essentially communal, not only in its emergence, but in its very *structure*. By believing, one *allows oneself to be taken up* "into the decision already there [in the believing community]."¹⁶

Assent to faith means that one allows oneself to be taken up, surrendering oneself to the subjectivity of Christ expressed through the structure and doctrine of the Christian community. Thus, faith is both a personal act of the believer and a collective act of the church. Conversion, however, is a completely passive act on the part of the believer. "Activity would merely confirm the old self and in this way fail precisely in precipitating the *change* of the self."¹⁷ The soteriological implications of this formulation are not lost on Volf who describes it as an "unequivocally un-Protestant formulation."¹⁸ If

¹³ *After our likeness*, 34

¹⁴ *After our likeness*, 34

¹⁵ *After our likeness*, 35, quoting Ratzinger, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre: Bausteine zur Fundamentaltheologie*. (Munich: Erich Wewel, 1982), 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *After our likeness*, 36

¹⁸ *After our likeness*, 35

faith is a collective act of the church, then justification becomes a gift of God that is necessarily and exclusively mediated in the church.

Just as earlier Volf was concerned that the boundaries between church and Christ were blurred, now he has a similar concern that the boundaries between the individual and the church are blurred. While Ratzinger argues that the individual must surrender their selves completely in order to be renewed completely in Christ, Volf is concerned that surrender of the self negates personal responsibility for faith, salvation, confession, and proclamation. Furthermore, in practical terms, the individual is asked to surrender not to Christ but to the church and its authorities. For Ratzinger, this is an aspect of the trust implicit in the act of faith. For Volf, it is a surrender of the very possibility of faith.

Ratzinger's ecclesiology is actually more christological than trinitarian. Although he acknowledges that communion is a trinitarian concept, he is less interested in the relations between the trinitarian persons than he is in the ontology of oneness. The Eastern Church has frequently criticised the west for this precise tendency. The stereotypical approach of western churches is to affirm the perfect oneness of God (monotheism), and then to proceed to explain the persons of the Trinity in light of the principle of unity (unicity). Ratzinger, exaggerating the western approach, begins his trinitarian reflection from the unicity — and thus unity — of God, and only subsequently considers the diversity of trinitarian persons expressed in dogmatic terms as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As Volf describes it:

Although Ratzinger considers the one substance of God and the three divine persons equiprimal, he takes the dominance of unity as his point of departure. Because he locates this unity at the level of substance, the one substance of God must take precedence over the nonaccidentally conceived persons.¹⁹

This contrasts with the eastern approach, which affirms the divine equality of the three persons before proceeding to affirm the unity expressed in their mutual relations (*koinonia*). Zizioulas, representing the eastern traditions, ignores ontological notions of personhood in favour of a theory of trinitarian

¹⁹ *After our likeness*, 201

personalism expressed in mutual relations. The communion of the divine persons is expressed as unity. Zizioulas offers the following critique of western approaches:

If we believe in a God who is primarily an individual, who first *is* and then *relates*, we are not far from a sociological understanding of *koinonia*; the church in this case is not in its *being* communion, but only secondarily, i.e. for the sake of its *bene esse*.²⁰

Perhaps this distinction would not seem terribly significant were it not for its implications for further theological reflections. Both Orthodox and Catholics stress the church as the image of the Trinity, and thus the diverging understandings of the Trinity result in diverging ecclesiologies. Following the western approach to the Trinity, Ratzinger affirms the essential unity of the church and then proceeds to explain the particularity of the church in place and time. The local church is dependent for its ecclesiality on the universal church. The horizon of linguistic and cultural diversity — not to mention theological diversity — is limited by his *a priori* conception of the church as one. Perfect unity requires uniformity, and all else falls before its hegemony. Ratzinger's role as prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) has given this position greater prominence. Consider, for example, the 1992 letter from the CDF: "Some aspects of the church understood as communion," where it is stated:

The *Church of Christ*, which we profess in the Creed to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, is the universal Church, that is, the worldwide community of the disciples of the Lord, which is present and active amid the particular characteristics and the diversity of persons, groups, times and places. Among these manifold particular expressions of the saving presence of the one Church of Christ, there are to be found, from the times of the Apostles on, those entities which are in themselves *Churches*, because, although they are particular, the universal Church becomes present in them with all its essential elements. They are therefore constituted "*after the model of the universal Church*," and each of them is "*a portion of the People of God entrusted to a bishop to be guided by him with the assistance of his clergy*."²¹

The alternate position from the eastern churches has never been as systematically articulated as it has in the Latin west. However, when one begins with the particularity of the church and proceeds to affirm the fundamental unity therein, it is not possible to posit an ontologically prior unity. Instead

²⁰ John D. Zizioulas, "The church as communion: A presentation on the world conference theme" in *On the way to fuller koinonia: Official report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela, 1993*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 104.

²¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Some aspects of the church understood as communion," (Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church, May 28, 1992), § 7

one must search for another means by which the “one and the many” may be affirmed. A trinitarian understanding that begins with the unity of God and then moves to the persons, i.e. the western tendency, risks treating the persons as mere expressions of the Godhead, a position dangerously close to modalism. Similarly, as Zizioulas cautioned, an ecclesiology that begins with the unity of the church and then moves to the diversity of local expression treats the bonds of communion as inessential to the nature of the church. The CDF letter demonstrates precisely this problem. For the CDF, the relationship of the individual bishop and his diocese to the church is hierarchical. The particular church is true church only insofar as the universal church is present in it.

b) Zizioulas: Trinitarian personalism

Like Ratzinger, Zizioulas grounds his ecclesiology in theological notions of trinitarian communion. Zizioulas is, however, different from Ratzinger in many ways. His conclusions bear a certain resemblance in that he proposes an external hierarchy of bishops, priests, deacons, and laity. Indeed, for either of these theologians, the understanding of the relationship between the differing *ordos* is modelled upon his notion of communion. For Ratzinger, the differing orders are ontologically distinct. This corresponds with his ontological reading of trinitarian personhood. For Zizioulas, trinitarian personhood has no ontological character. He begins his reflections on ecclesiology from the perspective of the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus. The critical contribution of the Cappadocians is the identification of *hypostasis* with person. For Zizioulas, this means that no ontological content can be applied to the hypostases.

Consider the Chalcedonian formula. God is one *ousia* (substance) and three *prosopa* (persons). In Greek philosophy *ousia* and *hypostasis* both referred to substance. *Ousia* corresponds to the “secondary substance” of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, referring to the general and common. *Hypostasis*, used for the “primary substance,” refers to the individual and concrete. In Greek philosophy, it gradually displaced an earlier term that held material connotations.²² By identifying *prosopon* (person) with *hypostasis* (substance) the formula is changed. According to the Cappadocian interpretation “one substance,

²² Zizioulas, *Being as communion: Studies in personhood and the church*. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1985), 38, note 30.

three persons,” is to be read as “one substance in three persons.” The formula no longer asserts a temporal priority of substance over personhood, and the unity of the Godhead no longer negates the diversity of the trinitarian persons. The significance of this approach is expressed by Zizioulas in a two-fold thesis:

(a) The person is no longer an adjunct to a being, a category we *add* to a concrete entity once we have first verified its ontological hypostasis. *It is itself the hypostasis of the being.* (b) Entities no longer trace their being to being itself — that is, being is not an absolute category in itself — but to the person, to precisely that which *constitutes* being, that is, enables entities to be entities.²³

The second thesis points to Zizioulas’ own particular contribution to trinitarian ecclesiology. Being is not an absolute category in itself; thus, Ratzinger’s unifying ontology is rejected. Instead, the trinitarian persons derive their being from the person who is their source. The Son is begotten by the Father, and thus derives its being from the Father. The Spirit proceeds from the Father, and thus derives its being from the Father. “That which constitutes being” is not the Godhead as Ratzinger’s ontology proposed, but the Father. The nature of trinitarian personhood is therefore not ontological but relational.

As Zizioulas explains, according to the Cappadocian interpretation the “ground” of God’s being is the Father. This is known as the monarchy of the Father.²⁴ It involves an asymmetrical relationship in the trinitarian communion that can be viewed as “a kind of subordination” without requiring that the *Logos* be considered created.²⁵ The relationship is also reciprocal. The persons are unable to live as communion without the Father, and the Father is unable to exist without the persons. Thus, implicit in the understanding of trinitarian personhood is the concept of hierarchy. This will become important when Zizioulas considers the structure of the Christian community and the relations between the different *ordos* of Christians. As Volf explains:

It is easy to understand why the Father alone is called the origin of the Son and Spirit. Their origin must be a person to preserve the precedence of person over substance; however, not all the persons can exhibit

²³ *Being as communion*, 39. Cf. *After our likeness*, 76.

²⁴ *After our likeness*, 78

²⁵ *Being as communion*, 89

mutually reciprocal causality, for then it would be impossible to distinguish them from one another ... The monarchy of the Father is the presupposition of the distinction between the persons.²⁶

The reciprocal character of the trinitarian relationships involves a distinction between “being constituted” and “being conditioned.” The Father constitutes the being of the Son and the Spirit while the Son and the Spirit conditions the being of the Father. Of course, God is immutable. To say that the Father is conditioned is not to say that the being of the Father is caused or changed by the Son or Spirit, but to say that the Father cannot be God except as Father. Such an understanding is imperative if one is to hold, as Zizioulas does, that the constitutive entity within God is not the Godhead but the Father alone.²⁷

There is one final point before I move to a discussion of Zizioulas’ understanding of human personhood. The structure of the trinitarian relationship as described by Zizioulas follows this general paradigm: the One constitutes the many, and the many condition the One. This structure is used analogously in Zizioulas’ ecclesiology. It is found in the relationship between the people and their bishop, and between the church and Christ. Like Ratzinger, Zizioulas considers Christ the head of the church, which is composed of the people. The One Christ constitutes the many people as church, while — at least within the economic Trinity — the many people condition the One head of the church. The bishop is not to be thought of apart from the people, and yet the bishop representing the One Christ as head of the body constitutes the people as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic through the eucharistic *synaxis* (gathering).²⁸ Unlike the Roman understanding of ordination, the Orthodox understanding does not involve an ontological change. A person is constituted in a particular ministry within the church (the many) by the One. The ordained person is not set apart from the community, but rather joins a particular *ordo* within the community. To be ordained means to be ordered — or conformed — to a particular *ordo*. Hierarchy within the community is a result of the differing *ordos* of the church, and the tasks assigned to each.²⁹

²⁶ *After our likeness*, 79

²⁷ *After our likeness*, 80

²⁸ *After our likeness*, 112

²⁹ *After our likeness*, 113

On the relationship of the bishop to other bishops, Volf detects a moderate change in Zizioulas during his career. In his earliest work, Zizioulas insists that the paradigm of “one and many” does not apply to the relations between bishops within the communion of the church. Zizioulas is concerned that the local church should not be conceived as constituted by the one universal church. Such a view would conflict with the understanding of the church as constituted in the eucharistic assembly, and as fully church in its own right. A development can be seen when in later works Zizioulas uses the “one and the many” paradigm to refer to the college (or *ordo*) of bishops. The bishop is not constituted as bishop, nor is the local church constituted as church, by the universal church. Zizioulas does not open himself to a Ratzinger-like universalism. The universal church remains an eschatological reality since it is not an eucharistic *synaxis* or gathering. The congregational acclamation “*agios!*” (holy, worthy) is essential in the ordination of a bishop. This is the means by which the many condition the one who is to lead the community. It, however, should also be understood that the bishop is ordered in communion with all other churches. The many bishops are constituted as successors of the apostles and sit on the *cathedra Petri* through the apostolic succession.

[Apostolic succession] should be viewed neither as a chain of individual acts of ordination nor as a transmission of truths but as a sign and an expression of the *continuity of the Church's historical life in its entirety*, as it was realized in each community.³⁰

The *ordo* of bishops to which the bishop belongs is a community of equals, structured as a college. Each bishop as successor of all the apostles shares the Petrine ministry. Within the college of bishops there are those who serve with a higher honour. This is not a result of honour due to their person, but to their church. This honour is expressed in the ancient title: *primus inter pares*, first among equals.

Volf's purpose of exploring Zizioulas' trinitarian doctrine is because they consider the communion of human persons to be modelled upon the communion of trinitarian persons. Following the Cappadocian lead — identifying hypostasis with person — Zizioulas distinguishes between the biological and the ecclesial hypostasis of the human “being” in light of the trinitarian persons. The biological hypostasis, to paraphrase Zizioulas, is the conjunction of the biological nature of the human

³⁰ *Being as communion*, 168

— as a body that is born, which lives, and will someday die — and the recognition of being uniquely an individual. The result of this hypostasis is a radical sense of freedom. As Zizioulas explains:

[The human] body is the tragic instrument which leads to communion with others, stretching out a hand, creating language, speech, conversation, art, kissing. But at the same time it is the “mask” of hypocrisy, the fortress of individualism, the vehicle of the final separation, death.³¹

The human body allows us to exist as solitary individuals. The same hand that can be offered in friendship can be used to strike another. Language, speech, and conversation that allow us to bridge the isolation of individualism can be used to lie, cheat and slander one another. Art that can express the greatest of human aspirations can be used to propagate hate, despair, and depravity. Kissing, normally a sign of love and intimacy between parent and child or husband and wife has the potential of losing its intimacy and becoming a matter of routine and obligation. Even worse, sexual expression between partners can degenerate into abuse and oppression. Far from forging communion with one another, the biological hypostasis is — for Zizioulas — the vehicle by which communion is broken.

The ecclesial hypostasis is much more complex. It is “constituted by the new birth of man by baptism”:

Consequently, if, in order to avoid the consequences of the tragic aspect of man which we have discussed, the person as absolute ontological freedom needs a hypostatic constitution without ontological necessity, his hypostasis must inevitably be rooted, or constituted, in an ontological reality which does not suffer from createdness.³²

This ontological reality is given to the person by baptism. It is a new birth in Christ, which because of Christ’s nature is freed from the individualism of human nature.

Christology ... is the proclamation to man that his [Christ’s] nature can be “assumed” and hypostasized in a manner free from the ontological necessity of his biological hypostasis, which, as we have seen, leads to the tragedy of individualism and death.³³

Zizioulas recognises the problem in treating humanity as purely natural creatures. The problem is the fundamental gulf between created nature and the creator. To bridge the gulf — Zizioulas asserts — God has given us the sacraments, particularly baptism and the eucharist.

³¹ *Being as communion, 52*

³² *Being as communion, 54*

³³ *Being as communion, 56*

The biological hypostasis, as a result of the fall, leads to a radical sense of individuality and of freedom. This is contrary to the action of the ecclesial hypostasis. The ecclesial hypostasis serves to translate disunity to unity. The ecclesial hypostasis is, as Zizioulas explains, the divine gift of the Incarnation. Christ takes upon himself the biological necessities of birth and death, of simple survival, and in death leads the people of God into the divine unity that is God. Christ is, thus, the first along a path that he leads between the radical individuality of the biological hypostasis and the divine unity of the Godhead.

I have called this hypostasis which baptism gives to man “ecclesial” because, in fact, if one should ask, “How do we see this new biological hypostasis of man realised in history?” the reply would be, “In the Church.”³⁴

This ecclesial hypostasis, according to Zizioulas, is only made possible in the church. It is in the church that the eucharist is celebrated. The eucharist is the manifestation of the Incarnation of Christ, it is the Body of Christ, and it brings the community itself into the Body of Christ. It celebrates the unity of the community: the church; and it is a foretaste of the kingdom to come: the divine unity, salvation.

My own reading of Zizioulas differs from Volf’s in the understanding of the durability of the ecclesial hypostasis. Volf understands Zizioulas to be proposing a view of ecclesial being as a punctiliar event. He interprets Zizioulas’ assertion that ecclesial being is only realised in the eucharist to imply an event. He asserts that Zizioulas does not conceive of personhood as a progressive experience, but in a binary sense: in the eucharistic liturgy one experiences full ecclesial personhood only to revert to biological personhood when one returns to the world. For Volf, the eschatological paradox of “already, but not yet” places its emphasis on the “not yet,” and thus he is receptive to a criticism that Zizioulas presents an “overrealized eschatology.”³⁵

Volf’s misreading of Zizioulas is precisely at the point where Zizioulas contends that the eucharist is a foretaste of the kingdom to come. Volf derives two conclusions from this point,

³⁴ *Being as communion*, 56

³⁵ *After our likeness*, 101, citing Gaëtan Baillargeon, *Perspectives Orthodoxes sur L’Église Communion: L’œuvre de Jean Zizioulas*. Brèches théologiques 6. (Paris: Mediaspaul, 1989), 256f.

although he only seems to be aware of one. Neither is an accurate reading of Zizioulas in my view. The first point is that ecclesial hypostasis is a fleeting experience that is absent when the congregation returns to the world. Although Volf later defines the church as an assembly of the people of God, he gives little weight to Zizioulas' thoroughly Orthodox description of the eucharist as *synaxis* (gathering). Understanding the eucharist as an event introduces a temporal interpretation to the experience that is not found in Zizioulas. Volf reaches this conclusion because it is consistent with his second conclusion. Volf, criticising Zizioulas for an "overrealized eschatology," offers a purely futurist eschatology. Thus for Volf any foretaste of the kingdom that he might admit in the sacrament is ephemeral.

As I understand Zizioulas, the experience of ecclesial personhood follows a *theosis* paradigm. Theosis is an Orthodox soteriology that is incorrectly translated as divinisation. Unlike the western concepts of justification or sanctification, theosis is the rhythm of relationship between God and the human. The theosis model is expressed in the Divine Liturgy by the major and minor entrances. Passing through the gates of the iconostasis, the priest enters the sanctuary and returns to the congregation on multiple occasions throughout the liturgy, each time conveying the human to the divine, and the divine to the human.³⁶ The human person — the biological hypostasis according to Zizioulas — experiences in the liturgy a foretaste of the kingdom of God becoming the ecclesial hypostasis. The eucharistic feast provides the bridge between the biological and the ecclesial hypostasis. In this way, the person becomes the image of the trinitarian communion (which is why the term divinisation is sometimes used), and may be described as participating in the divine life.

[T]his *relational* nature of the Church is constantly revealed by way of a *double movement*: (1) as a baptismal movement which renders the Church a community existentially "dead to the world" and hence separated from it, and (ii) as a eucharistic movement which relates the world to God by "referring" it to God as *anaphora* and by bringing to it the blessings of God's life and the taste of the Kingdom to come.³⁷

Unlike the Latin liturgy that places a premium on the reception of the eucharistic elements, the Divine Liturgy is understood as a whole. It is for this reason that Orthodox churches have

³⁶ Cf. *Being as communion*, 220f.

³⁷ *Being as communion*, 220-221

consistently resisted Catholic attempts to define the moment, means and character of the eucharistic consecration and have rejected Catholic practices of eucharistic adoration.

II. Volf: Church as confessional assembly

Volf recognises the implications that the different approaches offered by Ratzinger and Zizioulas have for ecclesiastical questions of the relation between the local and universal church, and between the individual and the Christian community. Volf is concerned to safeguard the egalitarianism, voluntarism, and independence of the Free Churches. Similarly, he is attentive to the communal implications of trinitarian faith. Unlike his dialogue partners, Volf does not build his ecclesiology upon a trinitarian analogy, an ecclesiology “from above.” He begins with the conviction that Christ is found “where two or three are gathered” in Jesus’ name. (Matt. 18:20) This gathered community is the church, the community of salvation. It is not a human creation, but a community gathered together by the Spirit and possessing the ministries necessary to fulfil the task given to it by Christ. Though Catholics and Orthodox might understand “where two or three are gathered in my name” as a eucharistic reference, for Volf it carries no immediate sacramental connotation. Volf’s identifies his starting point as borrowed from John Smyth; an English reformer that Volf describes as the first Baptist. In fact, this conviction is the necessary basis for any Free Church, and is found in a variety of other Free Churches.³⁸ It provides the independence that permits the forming of communities of close doctrinal affinity. If, however, “each believer arrives with his or her relationship to Christ, then the Church they set up remains external to their faith, and without their intending it, promotes an individualistic understanding of Christian and human existence.”³⁹ This has also allowed these churches to splinter over relatively minor matters. From Volf’s perspective, we live “in a culture resembling a warehouse, where a person can take whatever he or she wants.” As such, religion has become a commodity.⁴⁰ The individualist character of many Free Church traditions accommodates

³⁸ Cf. Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The believers’ church: The history and character of radical Protestantism*. (New York: McMillan, 1968; reprint, Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985).

³⁹ Gregory Baum, “The church we love: A conversation with Miroslav Volf,” *The Ecumenist* 37 (Winter 2000): 13.

⁴⁰ *After our likeness*, 14, quoting Franz-Xaver Kaufmann, *Religion und Modernität: Sozialwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*. (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1989), 143, 223.

itself to the prevailing warehouse culture, and thus fails to express the fullness of the Gospel while contributing to the growing individualism in our society. Thus, a Free Church ecclesiology that proclaims the communal and ecclesial character of Christian faith is called for.

Voluntarism and egalitarianism are goods that must be preserved, but they must be redeemed from their own dark shadows — from the false autonomy of self-enclosed individuals whose relationships are at bottom contractual and whose attachment lasts only “until better return is available elsewhere.”⁴¹

Volf provocatively begins his elaboration of Free Church ecclesiology with a reference to the rally cry of German reunification: “We are the people!” For Volf, this assertion is true not only in the political arena but in the ecclesiastical as well. He alludes to the liberal Catholic reform movement that chose as its rally cry “We are the church!” but perhaps from ecumenical sensitivity he does not explore it further.⁴² However, he does assert that one distinction between Free Church ecclesiology and that of the Catholic and Orthodox churches is found at this point. Free Church ecclesiology has a democratic character that is generally unknown in episcopally ordered churches.⁴³ According to Volf, this is a result of a Catholic and Orthodox tendency to equate the church with Christ, and to transfer Christ’s subjectivity to the church, displacing that of the members.

Both Ratzinger and Zizioulas, each in his own way, have appropriated the Augustinian notion that Christ and the church constitute a single person, the whole Christ. Within this unity, not only is Christ the subject of the church — of the universal church — but the *church itself becomes a subject*, that is, the subjectivity of Christ is transferred to the church.⁴⁴

Objecting to this, Volf argues that the “church, both the universal *communio sanctorum* and the local church, is not a collective subject, but rather a communion of persons.” However, this communion does not degenerate into a mere collection of individual “self-contained subjects.” We must understand communion as “a differentiated unity ... of those who live in Christ.”⁴⁵ Volf insists that “church” is a

⁴¹ *After our likeness*, 3, citing Michael Luntley, *Reason, truth and self: The postmodern reconditioned*. (London: Routledge, 1995), 190.

⁴² “We are the church” was a relatively small movement in Germany at the time of Volf’s original writing. The movement became widely known in Europe and North America in the late 1990’s on account of their petition campaign for local autonomy in the church, women’s ordination, and optional clerical celibacy. Their confrontational approach gave them publicity but doomed their efforts.

⁴³ The conciliar practices of the Anglican communion are a notable exception to this general rule. However, even in the Anglican experience, there can be an uneasy relationship between the synod and the bishop.

⁴⁴ *After our likeness*, 141

⁴⁵ *After our likeness*, 145

collective noun. The church is not a relationless multiplicity. “The ecclesial plural is not to be confused with the grammatical plural. While several ‘I’s’ together do constitute a grammatical plural, they do not yet constitute an ecclesial ‘we.’”⁴⁶ Volf therefore understands his task as:

placing this cry of protest of the Free Churches — “We are the church” — into a trinitarian framework and ... elevating it to the status of an ecclesiological program, and ... doing so in dialogue with Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiologies.⁴⁷

Volf’s argument in summary is as follows: the church is the assembly of the people of God, called together by the Holy Spirit in the confession of Jesus as Lord. Insisting on the necessity of the confession of faith, Volf contends that the church cannot exist without some form of kerygmatic identification of the community with Jesus.⁴⁸ It is important to note here, that Volf understands the confession as having both personal and communal dimensions. A personal confession of faith remains essential for a personal relationship with Christ. However, the communal confession is expressed as doctrine, and provides:

a means of preserving and fostering the relation between the assembled congregation and Jesus Christ. It serves to identify unequivocally the person in whose name the congregation gathers. In this limited sense, however, it is true that “there is no church without correct doctrine.”⁴⁹

Volf leaves unanswered the obvious question: “who determines correct doctrine?” The purpose of doctrine is to serve the personal relationship with Christ. For Volf, the church exists for its mission to proclaim the Gospel, to the world and to each member of the church. These two complementary dimensions of the mission of the church — the outward proclamation to the world and the inward nurture of the congregation — are essential to the ecclesiality of the church. Assembled in the name of Christ, they “attest that he is the determining ground of their lives.” They “bear witness before each other and before the entire world.” They hear the word, they respond in faith and they are baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.⁵⁰ The believer’s baptism paradigm expressed here is central to Volf’s understanding of the Christian community. For Volf, the believer’s church is the paradigmatic church

⁴⁶ *After our likeness*, 10

⁴⁷ *After our likeness*, 11

⁴⁸ *After our likeness*, 146

⁴⁹ *After our likeness*, 146

⁵⁰ *After our likeness*, 146

of Christ, even though he later acknowledges ecclesiality beyond the strict confines of believer's baptism churches. Given his otherwise strong trinitarian focus, it seems unusual that Volf requires only a simple christological proclamation at baptism. While baptism in the name of Jesus is not unknown in believer's baptism communities, Volf's wide reading in ecumenical material should have alerted him to the sensitivity of many churches to this issue. However, he seems to pass by the issue without comment. The Free Church appears to be synonymous for Volf with the believer's church.

Volf contends that the confession of faith is essentially a communication between persons. The doxological communication between the community and God, and the internal theological reflection of the individual seem to be of lesser importance to Volf. As interpersonal communication:

The confession of faith preserves the declarative and performative dimensions; by professing faith in Jesus Christ before others, I am both communicating something to them and simultaneously inviting them to something, actually, to someone.⁵¹

The confession of faith is not limited to kerygmatic or doctrinal formulae. Volf includes a variety of activities under the rubric of confession, including celebration of the sacraments, preaching, singing hymns, personal witness, and daily life. Francis of Assisi's famous dictum comes to mind: "Proclaim Christ, and if necessary use words." In all of these ways, Volf understands the Christian to be proclaiming the word to each other and to the world. This "pluriform speaking of the word is *the central constitutive mark of the church*."⁵² Volf appeals to Martin Luther in support of this contention. Luther stated that: "Wherever you hear such words and see preaching, believing, confessing, and commensurate behavior, you can be sure that a proper *ecclesia sancta catholica* must be there."⁵³ Volf agrees with Luther that there can be no church without sacraments. However, he understands sacraments to be a form of confession of faith. "The church is wherever those who are assembled, and be they only two or three, within the framework of their pluriform confession of faith profess faith in

⁵¹ *After our likeness*, 148

⁵² *After our likeness*, 150

⁵³ Martin Luther, *Werke*, 50.629.28-30 as quoted in *After our likeness*, 150. It should probably be recalled that the Augsburg Confession, article 7, states that the church is found where the word is proclaimed and the sacraments properly administered. Lutherans would certainly understand the celebration of the sacraments as having a declarative dimension, as Volf has acknowledged. However, Volf seems to understand the pluriform proclamation as constitutive as well as descriptive of the church. Even if one subsumes the sacraments under the rubric of proclamation, as Volf proposes, this is a stronger statement than that of Luther or the Augsburg Confession.

Christ as their Savior and Lord through baptism and the Lord's Supper."⁵⁴ Once again, the believer's baptism paradigm is central.

For Volf, the "confession of faith of one person leads to that of others, thereby constituting the church."⁵⁵ The objective profession of faith is matched by the subjective faith of the individual. While the individual is constituted as a Christian "first through faith and only then through confessional speech," the temporal and ontological sequence is reversed for the church.⁵⁶ For Volf, this ensures that the ecclesiality of the church does not depend on the subjective faith of its members. "The church is not a club of the perfect, but rather a communion of human beings who confess themselves as sinners and pray: *debita dimitte*."⁵⁷ As Volf acknowledges in a lengthy footnote, this definition of ecclesiality means that the church is only present where people confess Christ consciously. This excludes a variety of contemporary notions, including that of liberation theology, which finds the church in the poor and the oppressed. For liberation theology, Christ is present in the experience of poverty and oppression, and thus, the church is present. Volf's definition also excludes any understanding of the church in anonymous Christianity. Volf insists that Christ is not confined to the church, and may indeed be present in the experience of poverty and oppression. However, not every action of Christ is directly constitutive of the church.⁵⁸ Volf equates the essence of the church with that which also constitutes it: believing and confessing human beings. Rejecting the notion that church membership is an action of the individual, Volf states that the Holy Spirit gathers the members "even if the various members, commensurate with their individual charismata, participate in this process in different ways."⁵⁹

⁵⁴ *After our likeness*, 154. One wonders about Volf's opinion of the Salvation Army and the Society of Friends. These two traditions do not celebrate any sacraments, and yet they certainly proclaim Christ.

⁵⁵ *After our likeness*, 150

⁵⁶ *After our likeness*, 151

⁵⁷ *After our likeness*, 148, citing Luther, *Werke*, 34/I.276.8-13

⁵⁸ *After our likeness*, 151, note 96.

⁵⁹ *After our likeness*, 151

a) Church: community of persons

As mentioned earlier, Volf's motivation for developing a trinitarian Free Church ecclesiology is to address the problem of individualism that threatens contemporary churches of all traditions. Understanding the church to be constituted by the public pluriform confession of faith, Volf turns to the question of the individual's relation to the community. According to John Smyth, salvation is "ideally" between individuals and God. Thus, the church exists as "isolated individuals" who have become Christians.⁶⁰ Volf clearly disagrees with this view, insisting that the Matthean text "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt. 18:20) implies an ecclesial mediation. According to Volf's reading of this text, Christ promises his presence to the congregation rather than to the individual. "This why no one can come to faith alone and no one can live in faith alone."⁶¹ Volf is concerned that the interpersonal character of communal life be safeguarded. In the pluriform confession of faith, God is active in the salvation of the *communio fidelium*. Volf identifies the sacraments as examples of communal mediation.

The sacraments, which no person can self-administer and yet which each person must receive personally, symbolize most clearly the essentially communal character of the mediation of faith.⁶²

On the other hand, Volf is not prepared to exaggerate the mediation of the church in salvation. His concerns lie in the expected areas. In particular, he objects to what he identifies as the Catholic tendency to transfer the subjectivity of Christ to the church. This objection is broader than merely the issue of mediating salvation. By transferring subjectivity to the church, the church becomes the agent of salvation. This is the classic Protestant objection to sacramental approaches to soteriology. One need no longer have responsibility for one's faith; one merely places one's trust in the church. However, faith in the church cannot substitute for faith in Christ.

It is from the church that one receives the content of faith, and it is in the church that one learns how faith is to be understood and lived. This ecclesial activity of mediation is meaningful, however, only if it leads one to entrust one's life to God in faith.⁶³

⁶⁰ *After our likeness*, 162

⁶¹ *After our likeness*, 162

⁶² *After our likeness*, 163

⁶³ *After our likeness*, 163

From a Catholic perspective, these sentiments expressed by Volf are not necessarily problematic. However, Catholics are more concerned about the ecclesial mediation of grace than of faith. While avoiding any “mere sacramentalism,” Catholics would want to safeguard an understanding of the meaningfulness of the sacraments. The subjective receptivity of a sacramental recipient does not negate the objective meaningfulness of the sacrament. Similarly, faith is a gift of grace. The subjective faith of church members does not negate the objective truth of the faith of the church, or the objective gift of faith mediated through the church. This being said, Catholics would agree that the purpose of the sacraments, doctrine and of the church itself is to strengthen people in faith in God.

The Catholic concern for the objectivity of sacraments is paralleled in Volf by a concern for the objectivity of faith. In order to ensure personal responsibility and voluntarism of faith, Volf argues that faith has a cognitive content. On this point, he differs with Zizioulas who is concerned that cognitive reflection strengthens individual identity as “other,” and thus interferes with the process of becoming a person. For Volf, the process by which the individual comes to faith does not negate their individuality and freedom. The free person responds to God in faith through their life, thought and action. This response is expressed in both verbal and non-verbal forms through the community’s pluriform confession of faith. Volf is not prepared to reduce faith to mere consent to the teaching authority of the church. Faith includes both trust in God (*fiducia*) and assent to the cognitive content of the word of God.⁶⁴ The mediation of the Christian community is involved in the proclamation of the word and the formulation of doctrine. In constituting the church, the personal subjectivity of the members is not displaced by the church. Thus, each person as subject is responsible for his or her response to the word. This conviction is a central feature distinguishing Volf from Ratzinger.

Ratzinger insists on the passivity of the individual in their assent to faith. He argues that any activity of the self “would merely confirm the old self and in this way fail precisely in precipitating the change of the self.”⁶⁵ For Volf, however, the individual personhood of each human being is grounded in their personal subjectivity. It seems to be important to say that God relates to each person in a

⁶⁴ *After our likeness*, 170

⁶⁵ *After our likeness*, 36

different manner. It is this that constitutes the personhood of each person, and indeed, the dignity of each person.⁶⁶ It should also be recalled that the individual is constituted as a Christian — and thus as a member of the Christian community — through his or her confession of faith. Thus, the individual subjectivity of each person is ground both of a unique personal relationship with God and of his or her communion with other Christians. Unlike the Catholic and Orthodox approaches that transfer Christ's subjectivity to the church, Volf retains the individual subjectivity of the person thereby safeguarding individual responsibility and the volitional character of faith. For Volf, the church is not a collective person to whom either Christ or the church members can transfer their subjectivity.

b) Church: local and universal

Volf differs from both Ratzinger and Zizioulas, arguing that the universal church does not find expression in the world. As we saw earlier, Volf offers a purely futurist eschatology. The universal church is “the ‘heavenly’ church gathered around the resurrected Christ in anticipation of its eschatological consummation.” Thus, the church of God finds its full physical expression only in the local church; the universal church is a “*heavenly and simultaneously eschatological* entity.”⁶⁷ The universal church can be conceived as *communio sanctorum*, but only as an anticipation of the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God.⁶⁸ The local church is not defined in relation to the *communio sanctorum*, but “from the perspective of its relation to the perfected church in the new creation of God.”⁶⁹ It is church insofar as it is a “concrete anticipation” of the “eschatological community.”⁷⁰

If the church, as Volf proposes, is constituted by the pluriform confession of faith, then the universal church is not found in the world. It might be argued that certain instruments of unity, such as world communions, councils of churches, or the papacy provide a universal witness to the profession of faith. Conceivably, it would be easier following this approach to assert the existence of a

⁶⁶ *After our likeness*, 182

⁶⁷ *After our likeness*, 139

⁶⁸ *After our likeness*, 140

⁶⁹ *After our likeness*, 140

⁷⁰ *After our likeness*, 203

universal church than for Zizioulas who recognises ecclesiality only in the eucharistic *synaxis*. Volf does not take this approach, of course. His own Free Church experience militates against such a view. From a Free Church perspective, international fellowship is provisional upon the catholicity of the local church.

Like Ratzinger and Zizioulas, Volf suggests that relationships within the local church must be lived in correspondence to the Trinity. The community of divine persons is the point of departure for conceiving of relations within the local community. This is not an ethical standard by which the conduct of church members is to be judged, but an analogy upon which the local church ought to be structured. This brings us to Volf's own trinitarian analogy: *perichoretic* personhood. Volf defines *perichoresis* as "the reciprocal *interiority* of the trinitarian persons."⁷¹ *Perichoresis* is an Orthodox theological concept that Volf has adopted. Recall for a moment Zizioulas' understanding of the mutual relations of the trinitarian persons. This relationship is described with the Greek word *perichoresis*, referring to a mutual indwelling. Zizioulas offered a particular expression of *perichoresis* where the reciprocal character of the relations is asymmetrical. The Son and the Spirit were conceived as constituted by the Father, while the Father is conditioned by the Son and by the Spirit. Volf, following Dumitru Staniloae and Vladimir Lossky, presents a more symmetrical reciprocity.

all mutually permeate one another, though in so doing they do not cease to be distinct persons. In fact, the distinctions between them are precisely the presupposition of that interiority, since persons who have dissolved into one another cannot exist in one another.⁷²

Though the distinct identities of the three persons remain, according to Volf, their subjectivities overlap. "Each divine person acts as subject, and at the same time the other persons act as subjects in it."⁷³ Only in this limited sense could one say that their subjectivity is mutually conditioned. In fact, many Orthodox theologians caution that because the subjectivities of the other divine persons act

⁷¹ Volf cites Dumitru Staniloae, "Trinitarian relations and the life of the church," in *Theology and the Church*. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1980), 11-44. Vladimir Lossky (*The mystical theology of the eastern church*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1976) also offers a thorough consideration of trinitarian *perichoresis* and human analogies. Lossky's text appears in Volf's bibliography though he is not cited and does not appear in the index.

⁷² *After our likeness*, 209

⁷³ *After our likeness*, 209

simultaneously through each person, the Trinity cannot be conceived in such a way that the persons are seen to be acting independently. Sabellianism is a heretical example of this trinitarian modalism.

Volf derives two insights from this trinitarian relationship. The first relates to catholicity. Jesus' statement "The Father is in me and I am in him" (John 10:38) is perfectly consistent with "whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9-10) Indeed, each person is only themselves insofar as the other persons indwell completely. "In a certain sense, each divine person *is* the other persons, though in its own way, which is why rather than ceasing to be a unique person, in its very uniqueness it is a completely *catholic* divine person."⁷⁴ When Volf turns to a consideration of catholicity, he will measure catholicity of the individual in analogy to trinitarian perichoresis:

In this mutual giving and receiving [in the local church], we give to others not only something, but also a piece of ourselves, something of that which we have made of ourselves in communion with others; and from others we take not only something, but also a piece of them. Each person gives of himself or herself to others, and each person in a unique way takes up others into himself or herself. This is the process of the mutual internalization of personal characteristics occurring in the church through the Holy Spirit indwelling Christians. The Spirit opens them to one another and allows them to become *catholic persons* in their uniqueness... Every person is a catholic person insofar as that person reflects in himself or herself in a unique way the entire, complex reality in which the person lives.⁷⁵

This process of "mutual internalization" sounds suspiciously like what social scientists call "socialisation." The catholicity of local churches is similar to that of individuals. "By opening up to one another both diachronically and synchronically, local churches should enrich one another, thereby increasingly becoming catholic churches."⁷⁶ While Volf seems ready to admit to progressive catholicity, he does say that a church that is not open to all other churches is not a church at all. Catholicity is the "*interecclesial minimum*."⁷⁷

The second insight is more complex. Based upon his earlier argument that the trinitarian analogy has limits, he draws a negative analogy from the notion that the indwelling of trinitarian persons involves a reciprocally conditioned subjectivity. "Another human self cannot be internal to my own self as subject of action. Human persons are always external to one another as *subjects*."⁷⁸ Returning to

⁷⁴ *After our likeness*, 209-210

⁷⁵ *After our likeness*, 211-212

⁷⁶ *After our likeness*, 213

⁷⁷ *After our likeness*, 157

⁷⁸ *After our likeness*, 210-211

the Johannine text, John 17:21 continues the perichoretic reference: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you.” However, as Volf points out, if the trinitarian analogy were strictly followed, the verse would continue: “may they also be *in one another*.” The actual conclusion, “may they also be *in us*,” is taken by Volf to imply that:

Human beings can be in the triune God only insofar as the Son is in them... Because the Son indwells human beings through the Spirit, however, *the unity of the church is grounded in the interiority of the Spirit — and with the Spirit also the interiority of the other divine persons — in Christians.*⁷⁹

As such, Volf’s insight is that it is the indwelling of the Spirit that makes the church a communion corresponding to the Trinity.

Volf has once again touched on the Orthodox concept of *theosis* without naming it as such. The experience earlier described figuratively as “participating in the divine life” is analogous to the perichoretic relationship described by Volf. *Koinonia* is a Greek word translated as fellowship, communion or participation. Theosis is therefore communion with God. As Volf has pointed out, so the Orthodox will also insist: the perichoretic analogy applies to the relationship between Christians and God, not between individual Christians. Zizioulas has cautioned that attempts to define the relationship between Christians without reference to God lead to re-assertion of the biological hypostasis.

III. Conclusion

At the end of his long third chapter, considering the ecclesiality of the church, Volf offers a summary of the main points in that chapter:

In summary, the ecclesiality of the church can be defined as follows. Every congregation that assembles around the one Jesus Christ as *Savior* and Lord in order to profess faith in him publicly in pluriform fashion, including through baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and which is open to all churches of God and to all human beings, is a church in the full sense of the word, since Christ promised to be present in it through his Spirit as the first fruits of the gathering of the whole people of God in the eschatological reign of God. Such a congregation is a holy, catholic, and apostolic church. One may rightly expect such a congregation to grow in unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity, but one may not deny to it these characterizing features of the church, since it possesses these on the constitutive presence of Christ.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *After our likeness*, 212-213

⁸⁰ *After our likeness*, 158

In subsequent chapters, Volf considers trinitarian perspectives that provide some nuance and clarification to this summary. It should be noted that in considering the ecclesiality of the church, Volf turns to the economic Trinity when he considers the Trinity at all. It is only when he moves to a consideration of relations within the local church and between local churches that he turns to an analogy of the immanent Trinity.

Volf describes his ecclesiology as a Free Church model. However, the central role of the believer's baptism paradigm suggests that it might as likely be called believers' church ecclesiology. Although the two models generally correspond to one another, "free church" is a sociological definition while "believers' church" is a theological definition. Volf's concerns for an egalitarian and non-hierarchical church appear to be sociological concerns, but he would argue that his starting point — the gathered assembly of believers — is both theological and anthropological. It seems to beg the question, however, why the ecclesiality of the church is not derived from the same trinitarian analogy as the relations within and between the churches. By bracketing ecclesiality away from the trinitarian analogy, he develops a christological and pneumatological ecclesiology that serves his Free Church needs. For this reason, Volf can be criticised for allowing his pre-conceptions to direct his theological articulation.

Volf's starting point differs from both Ratzinger and Zizioulas. Ratzinger's ecclesiology can be described as christological. Although he is at pains to highlight his trinitarian roots, he refers only to the economic Trinity. Zizioulas, on the other hand, offers a thoroughly trinitarian perspective based on his own form of personalism. The movement between economic and immanent Trinity follows the expected *theosis* paradigm of Orthodoxy. Volf's ecclesiology might be called pneumatological, on account of his assertion that it is the Spirit that gathers the community, that calls forth the confession of faith, and that gives the community charismata. There is certainly an eschatological character to his ecclesiology as well. An alternative and critical reading of Volf might describe his ecclesiology as anthropological, and perhaps even anthropocentric. Ecclesiology naturally describes the Christian community and thus will have anthropological insights. However, Volf's notion of trinitarian ecclesiology may involve too much projection of Volf's own notion of ideal human relationships. As

James Reimer, a Mennonite theologian, has pointed out: Volf “presumes to know too much about the inner workings of God and ... draws much too tight an analogy between the divine life and human relationships.”⁸¹ From Reimer’s Free Church perspective, Volf’s willingness to consider an analogy to the immanent Trinity is problematic. From a Catholic or Orthodox perspective, establishing the ecclesiality of the church on an economic trinitarian analogy, while discussing intra-ecclesial and inter-ecclesial relations on an immanent trinitarian analogy, seems problematic. Without consideration of trinitarian analogies, Volf’s ecclesiology would share the same faults that he set out to address: excessive individualism and the understanding of faith as a commodity.

The primary purpose of this essay was to explore the melody of Volf’s ecclesiology with an attentive ear to the Free Church harmony and the evangelical descant. My broader purpose was to identify particular evangelical concerns that would bear further study as I proceed in my further studies towards a dissertation. The close relationship between Free Church and believers’ church models, particularly as demonstrated in Volf, sparks an interest in exploring the relationship between believer’s baptism, its underlying soteriology and the understandings of Christian community that are expressed in believers’ churches.

⁸¹ Reimer, “Miroslav Volf,” 18

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