

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

CALVIN ON DIVINE ATTRIBUTES: A QUESTION OF TERMINOLOGY AND METHOD

RICHARD A. MULLER

Calvin's approach to the issue of the divine essence and attributes has been subject to two rather divergent interpretations. On one hand, he has been viewed as holding to a fairly traditional approach, while on the other hand he has been seen as taking an alternative, anti-speculative approach. One recent study has even claimed for Calvin a rather unique anti-speculative methodology that presents the divine attributes as "powers" exerted *ad extra*. This article looks closely at Calvin's vocabulary of the divine attributes, examining his usage both in the *Institutes* and in his exegetical works, with attention to early modern lexicography, and concludes that although Calvin does not engage in such scholastic niceties as those concerning the distinction of attributes in the simple divine essence, he is in accord with the older tradition in assuming that the divine attributes are intrinsic to the divine essence. This conclusion does not deny that Calvin's emphasis was on the divine attributes in their *ad extra* acts and relations or that he often emphasized the relationship between the knowledge of divine attributes and Christian piety. Rather it argues that Calvin's understanding of the divine essence and attributes, including the way in which they relate to soteriology and piety, was quite traditional and that to interpret Calvin's reading of divine attributes as *ad extra* acts associated with his soteriology rather than as properties or perfections belonging absolutely or essentially to God as the foundation of all his acts, including but not limited to the work of salvation, is a significant error.

I. *Calvin on the Divine Essence and Attributes: Varied Readings*

There are two rather divergent readings of Calvin's understanding of the divine attributes. One reading, exemplified by Benjamin Warfield's lengthy study, views Calvin as standing largely in accord with traditional

Richard A. Muller is P. J. Zondervan Professor of Historical Theology, Emeritus, and Senior Fellow of the Junius Institute for Digital Reformation Research at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI.

views of the divine attributes as intrinsic to the divine essence, albeit with a certain level of distaste for highly speculative argumentation.¹ In this reading, Calvin consistently grounded his approach on his understanding of Scripture and took an *a posteriori* approach to the knowledge of God.² Warfield explicitly argues that the absence of a full treatment of the divine essence and attributes in the *Institutes* was neither the result of “any peculiarity of [Calvin’s] dogmatic standpoint or even of his theological method,” but rather a matter of literary genre.³ Another reading has looked often quite restrictively to the *Institutes* and, on the basis of the movement of Calvin’s argument from Scripture to the doctrine of the Trinity by way of a very brief comment on the spirituality, immensity, and incomprehensibility of the divine essence, has concluded that Calvin avoided discussion of the divine essence and attributes.⁴

A recent essay by Forrest Buckner draws on this second line of argument and raises the issue that—against a more or less traditional reading of Calvin’s doctrine—Calvin’s preference for referring to the divine attributes as *virtutes* (which Buckner translates as “powers”) implies “those acts of God by which we may positively know God, not God’s absolute attributes,”⁵ contests the assumption “that Calvin considers all the attributes of God as belonging to the simple divine essence” and concludes that “Calvin is not speaking about metaphysical, essential attributes of God but about the positive knowledge we can have of the one true God.”⁶ Buckner also quite directly opposes Warfield’s basic thesis

¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of God,” in *Princeton Theological Review* 7 (1909): 381–436. My thanks to Alden McCray for stimulating discussion.

² Cf. Émile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin, les hommes et les choses de son temps*, 7 vols. (Lausanne: G. Bridel, 1899–1927), 4:88–90, 119–31; Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of God,” 387–91, and passim; Richard Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence dans le prédication de Calvin* (Bern; Frankfurt: Lang, 1978), 105–50; Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11–34; J. Todd Billings, “The Catholic Calvin,” in *ProEcl* 20, no. 2 (2011): 120–34, here 128–29; with Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 3:205–8.

³ Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of God,” 383.

⁴ Cf. Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 103–4; with Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth, 1956), 54; Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008), 66–67.

⁵ Forrest Buckner, “Calvin’s Non-Speculative Methodology: A Corrective to Billings and Muller on Calvin’s Divine Attributes,” in *Calvinus Pastor Ecclesiae: Papers of the Eleventh International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. Herman Selderhius (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 241–42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 242. Note that Buckner’s denial of metaphysical issues in Calvin’s expositions is rather indeterminate and unqualified, in contrast to Warfield’s careful statement. Warfield (“Calvin’s Doctrine of God,” 387) indicates that Calvin’s approach did not make “the attributes of God, metaphysically determined, the starting-point of a body of teaching deduced from them by quasi-mathematical reasoning” and did not follow an *a priori* approach. In a most basic sense, however, any identification of the essence of an infinite, spiritual being will necessarily be metaphysical—and essence, to which Calvin frequently refers and consistently explains in terms of various divine attributes, is itself not a “speculative” issue in the negative sense of the word. The “essence” question is about *quidditas* and asks, quite simply, “what is it?”

arguing that Calvin's approach to the attributes arose from a highly distinctive "non-speculative method."⁷

Buckner's argument raises two basic issues: first, how ought Calvin's typical reference to divine attributes as *virtutes* to be translated and second, regardless of the term employed in translation, how should it be understood? Much of Buckner's analysis is commendable, notably his analysis of the piety of Calvin's exposition of texts related to the doctrine of God, but there is also a series of problems that can be noted in his argumentation that undermine his stated conclusions. On one hand, he does not properly represent the arguments that he critiques. On the other hand, he bases his critique largely on a particular and somewhat disputable reading of Calvin's usages of the term *virtus* as his preferred reference to divine attributes, he ignores Calvin's references to attributes that would not typically be identified as *virtutes*, and he largely disregards the actual character of Calvin's often fairly extended comments on the divine essence.

First, then, Buckner notes that Calvin is not concerned with "the logical relations or ordering of attributes,"⁸ but neither of the essays that he critiques made that claim—in fact both indicated that Calvin did not engage in this sort of exercise.⁹ Similarly, he argues that Calvin's commentaries do not "incorporate extensive speculation regarding God's absolute properties,"¹⁰ but neither was this claimed by the essays that he critiques. His underlying point is that Calvin emphasized relational attributes as elicited from his exegesis of the biblical text, also not a point at issue—in fact a point emphasized by the essays with which he disagrees. Buckner also objects to the statement that the compilation of a theology out of Calvin's commentaries would potentially include "a rather vast discussion of divine attributes"¹¹ with the comment that Calvin's commentaries and lectures "do not include vast discussions of God's attributes, nor do they incorporate speculation regarding God's absolute perfections"—despite the fact that the statements to which he objects made neither of these claims. It is not that the commentaries were said to contain vast discussions of attributes—rather that a vast discussion could be compiled out of the commentaries (and, we add, lectures and sermons), where Calvin provided "a considerable mass of materials for the biblical discussion of divine attributes."¹²

Second, there is the issue of understanding Calvin's meaning. Much of Buckner's argumentation rests on his observation that the standard translation of Calvin's comment on Rom 1:20 problematically rendered *virtutes* as "attributes." *Virtutes*, as used in the early modern era, can be rendered by such

⁷ Buckner, "Calvin's Non-Speculative Methodology," 237, 242.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁹ Cf. Billings, "Catholic Calvin," 128–29, with Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:207.

¹⁰ Buckner, "Calvin's Non-Speculative Methodology," 237.

¹¹ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:207.

¹² Cf. *ibid.* with Billings, "Catholic Calvin," 129.

terms as powers, strengths, potencies, excellencies, or perfections. Various of Calvin's translators followed the option of "perfections," a standard reference to divine attributes and, in some cases simply chose to render *virtutes* as "attributes." Buckner argues that *virtutes* ought to be rendered differently—and he, like Battles, elected "powers" as the proper translation.¹³ This reading leads him to contest the recent scholarship on one particular point, namely, that in regarding Calvin as holding a traditional conception of the divine attributes, despite all of the stated qualifiers noted above, the scholarship fails to do justice to Calvin's "non-speculative method" according to which "powers" are to be understood as "those acts of God by which we may positively know God," or as "relative, personal attributes of God," and not as "metaphysical, essential attributes."¹⁴ Whereas Buckner's rendering of *virtutes* as "powers" represents an arguable translation of Calvin's term, his further interpretation of powers is quite misleading. In what follows, I propose to show that Buckner's interpretation falls short and that a proper understanding of Calvin's usage of *virtutes* remains within the traditional readings of divine attributes as essential (and accordingly metaphysical) properties, as argued in an *a posteriori* manner and in a somewhat imprecise relationship to the standard categories of absolute and relative attributes or primary attributes and attributes respecting operations of intellect and will.

1. Calvin's Terminology and Enumeration of Attributes

When Calvin wrote of the divine attributes, he most frequently identified them as *virtutes*,¹⁵ but also sometimes *propria*,¹⁶ and *epitheta*.¹⁷ Similarly, in French he employed the terms *vertus*, *tiltrez*, *qualitez*, and *proprietez*, with *vertus* as his most frequent usage. Calvin also used the verb "to attribute" with reference to the predication of divine qualities: in the French of his Deuteronomy sermons, he asks how we ought to conceive of God beyond the word "God" and

¹³ Ford Lewis Battles, "Virtutes Dei: Theatrum Mundi," in Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, ed. Robert Benedetto (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 223–33.

¹⁴ Buckner, "Calvin's Non-Speculative Methodology," 234, 241–42. Note that the proper distinction is between absolute and relative attributes, not between essential and relative, given that all of God's attributes are essential. In addition, Buckner incorrectly identifies personal with relative attributes: whereas relative attributes are attributes of egress, the "personal" attributes refer to Trinitarian properties.

¹⁵ E.g., Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiam prophetam*, Isa 43:21, in *Joannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, 59 vols. (Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1863–1900), vol. 37, col. 97 (hereafter *CO*); Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielis prophetam*, Ezek 11:18, in *CO* 40, col. 241. I have consulted *Commentaries of John Calvin*, 46 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844–1855), but have emended or re-translated as necessary to reflect Calvin's original Latin.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiam prophetam*, Isa 44:15–17, in *CO* 37, col. 116; cf. *ibid.*, Isa 38:13, in *CO* 36, col. 657.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Isa 9:6, in *CO* 36, col. 197; Calvin, *Commentarius in epistolam ad Timotheum I*, 1 Tim 1:17, in *CO* 52, col. 261.

indicates that “we attribute to him his qualities [*luy attribuer ses qualitez*],” in this case that he is “mighty and terrifying.”¹⁸ Similarly, he comments that everyone should “attribute” the “title” of “all-powerful” to God.¹⁹

At the beginning of the chapters on God found in his *Institutes*, Calvin comments, “What is taught in the Scriptures concerning the immense and spiritual essence of God [*immensa et spirituali Dei essentia*], should serve not only to overthrow the foolish notions of the vulgar, but also to refute the subtleties of profane philosophy.”²⁰ In the same section, Calvin adds incomprehensibility and unity to his short list of divine attributes. In his commentary on Rom 1:21, Calvin lists eternity, power, wisdom, goodness, truth, righteousness, and mercy, adding a bit further on immutability and glory.²¹ Elsewhere Calvin references the “life, wisdom, power ... righteousness, goodness, mercy” of God;²² comments on God’s “eternity and self existence ... his *virtutes* ... clemency, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment, truth”;²³ writes of “the immeasurableness of wisdom, justice, goodness, and power” to be contemplated in creation;²⁴ describes God as “beyond all place ... exalted above corruption or mutation ... of infinite magnitude or sublimity, incomprehensible essence, irresistible power, eternal immortality”;²⁵ and as having “glory ... holiness ... [and] his *virtutes*, power, goodness, wisdom, righteousness, mercy, truth”;²⁶ and he indicates that God is eternal, spiritual, infinite, incomprehensible, simple, is characterized by power

¹⁸ Calvin, *Sermons sur le Deuteronomie*, Sermon 56, on Deut 7:19–24, in *CO* 26, col. 567: “Et quel est-il? O il ne nous faut pas seulement concevoir ce mot de Dieu: mais luy attribuer ses qualitez: Qu’il est puissant, et terrible.”

¹⁹ Calvin, *Sermons sur livre de Job*, Sermon 7, on Job 1:20–22, in *CO* 33, col. 101: “L’ay dit que ceci emporte plus, d’autant qu’encores quelqu’un pourroit attribuer à Dieu toute puissance souveraine...”; cf. *ibid.*, in *CO* 33, col. 587: “tout-puissant. Quand l’Ecriture attribue ce tiltre à Dieu, ce n’est pas qu’il puisse faire s’il vouloit, et qu’il ne face rien, qu’il se repose au ciel: mais elle entend la puissance de Dieu avec l’effect.”

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutio christianae religionis, in libris quatuor nunc primum digesta, certisque distincta capitibus, ad aptissimam methodum: aucta etiam tam magna accessione ut propemodum opus novum haberi possit* (Geneva: Robertus Stephanus, 1559), 1.13.1, here following the English of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3 vols., trans. John Allen, intro. by Benjamin B. Warfield (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1909), with emendation as necessary. Note that Battles here mistranslates *immensitas* as “infinity”: see Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.5.10.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, Rom 1:21, in *CO* 49, col. 24: “Concipi Deus non potest sine sua aeternitate, potentia, sapientia, bonitate, veritate, iustitia, misericordia.”

²² Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.5.10: “vitam, sapientiam, virtutem ... justitiam, bonitatem, clementiam.” On immutability in the sermons, see Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence*, 107–8.

²³ Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.10.2: “ejus aeternitatem καὶ ἀπουσίαν ... ejus virtutes ... clementiam, bonitatem, misericordiam, justitiam, judicium, veritatem.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.14.21: “immensas sapientiae, justitiae, bonitatis, potentiae.”

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.20.40: “extra omnem locum ... supra omnem aut corruptionis aut mutationis ... infinitae magnitudinis aut sublimitatis, incomprehensibilis essentiae, immensae potentiae, aeternae immortalitatis.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.20.41: “gloriam ... sanctitas ... eius virtutes, potentia, bonitas, sapientia, justitia, misericordia, veritas.”

(*vertu*), wisdom and incomprehensible goodness, and rules by his will.²⁷ Calvin also assumed divine impassibility.²⁸

It is worth observing at this stage that Calvin's frequent references to the incomprehensibility of the divine essence, contrary to Buckner's reading, do not simply indicate that human beings cannot understand the divine essence and, accordingly, ought not to speculate about it, they also indicate one of the traditional absolute attributes of God, namely, incomprehensibility. Nor does the characterization of the divine essence as incomprehensible imply that it is entirely unknowable and ought not to be discussed; rather it indicates that the divine essence cannot be fully or adequately grasped by human beings—an issue of major doctrinal and pastoral importance to Calvin.²⁹ Thus, Calvin characterizes various of the divine attributes as incomprehensible, but also as revealed in Scripture—such as divine majesty,³⁰ goodness,³¹ power,³² and glory.³³ Beyond this, again quite to the contrary of Buckner's thesis, Calvin's interest on incomprehensibility as an essential attribute of God—and one, by the way, that has no *ad extra* egress and cannot be described as a “power” or as an “act”—has a profoundly practical and pastoral application.³⁴

In each of the lists of attributes in the *Institutes* (1.5.10, 1.10.2, 1.14.21, 3.20.40, and 3.20.41) as well as in the commentary on Rom 1:20 prior to the list that Calvin offers in the comment on v. 21, the terms *virtutes* and *virtus* appear in relation to divine attributes, which Ford Lewis Battles renders “power” or “powers” in all cases, noting that *virtutes* is a term for divine attributes,³⁵ and that both medieval and Reformed orthodox theologies offer expositions of attributes—something not found in Calvin's *Institutes*.

Thus, there are places where *virtutes* clearly references attributes that involve divine relationality, as in the following statement where eternity and self-existence are set first and the *virtutes* follow:

²⁷ Calvin, *Confession de foy faite d'un commun accord par les eglises qui sont dispersee en France*, §2–4, in *CO* 9, col. 741: “nous croyons en un seul Dieu, eternal, d'une essence spirituelle, infinie, incomprehensible et simple.... Nous croyons aussi que dieu, par sa vertu, sagesse, et bonté incomprehensible, a crée toutes choses.... Nous croyons que le mesme Dieu gouverne toutes ses creatures, et dispose et ordonne selon sa volunté tout se qui advient.”

²⁸ Calvin, *Sermons sur le Deuteronomie*, in *CO* 29, col. 709: “Voila donc pourquoy Dieu se nomme ialoux, non point qu'il soit sujet à nulles passions: mais c'est pour monstrier que son honneur luy est precieux.” Cf. Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence*, 106–7.

²⁹ See Derek Thomas, *Calvin's Teaching on Job: Proclaiming the Incomprehensible God* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2004), 115–224; note esp. 154, 157.

³⁰ Calvin, *Sermons sur livre de Job*, Sermon 33, on Job 9:1–6, in *CO* 33, col. 409.

³¹ Calvin, *Confession de foy*, §4, in *CO* 9, col. 741.

³² Calvin, *Praelectionum in Ieremiam prophetam*, Jer 25:8–9, in *CO* 38, col. 478.

³³ Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiaem prophetam*, Isa 40:22, in *CO* 37, col. 22.

³⁴ Thomas, *Calvin's Sermons on Job*, 175–76, and *passim*.

³⁵ See further his rationale for this translation in Battles, “*Virtutes Dei: Theatrum Mundi*,” 223–33.

We may observe [first] the assertion of his eternity and self existence, in the repetition of that magnificent name; and then, the celebration of his *virtutes*, by which he represents to us, not of what he is in himself, but of what he is to us; that our knowledge of him may consist rather in a lively perception, than in vain and airy speculation. Here we find an enumeration of the same *virtutes* which, as we have remarked, are displayed both in heaven and on earth; clemency, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment, and truth. For *virtus* and *potentia* are comprehended under the name Elohim.³⁶

The French translation of 1560 renders both references to *virtutes* as *vertus*, but condenses the reference to *virtus et potentia* to *puissance*.³⁷ Calvin goes on to indicate that God is identified by the same titles (Latin: *epitheta*; French: *tiltres*) by the prophets when they explain his “holy name” and then, rather than list multiple passages, “for the present let one Psalm satisfy us, which offers a precise summary of his *virtutes*, that nothing appears to be omitted.” What is more, all of these *virtutes* or *epitheta* may be “contemplated in the creatures.”³⁸

Several observations can be made concerning the passage. In the first place, Calvin uses *virtutes* synonymously with *epitheta*, *vertus* with *tiltres*. This usage points away from the identification of *virtutes* as “acts.” Even so, the comment that the divine *virtutes* are all to be contemplated in the creatures, while it does, certainly, stand against an *a priori* rational speculation concerning what the divine essence is in itself, it in no way implies that the *virtutes* or *epitheta* are not to be understood as essential attributes. In fact, Calvin’s language is quite in accord with his previous statements concerning the revelation of God in the created order, where he indicates,

Moreover those potencies [*virtutes*] are most clearly portrayed: but we consider their most important meaning, their use, and the goal of our consideration of them, when we descend into ourselves, and consider by what means God displays [*exserat*] in us his life, wisdom, *virtus* and exercises [*exerceat*] toward us his righteousness, goodness, and mercy.³⁹

Here, all of the attributes listed—life, wisdom, *virtus*, righteousness, goodness, and mercy—are identified as *virtutes*, but the former three are displayed and only the latter three are exercised.⁴⁰ Particularly telling against Buckner’s reading is

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.10.2.

³⁷ Jean Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrestienne* (Geneva: Jean Crespin, 1560), 1.10.3 (note that the sections of the 1560 French do not always correspond with the sections of the 1559 Latin).

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.10.2: “Iisdem etiam epithetis illum insigniunt prophetae, quum ad plenum volunt sanctum ejus nomen illustrare. Ne multa congere cogamur, in praesentia nobis Psalmus unus sufficiat, in quo tum exacte summa omnium ejus virtutem recensetur, ut nihil omissum videri queat. Et nihil tamen illic ponitur quod non liceat in creaturis contemplari.” Cf. *Institution* (1560), 1.10.3.

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.5.10: “Porro lucidissimae quum illic appareant: quorsum tamen potissimum spectent, quid valeant, quem in finem a nobis sint reputandae, tum demum assequimur dum in nos ipsos descendimus, ac consideramus quibus modis suam in nobis vitam, sapientiam, virtutem Dominus exserat, suam iustitiam, bonitatem, clementiam erga nos exercent.”

⁴⁰ Cf. Calvin, *Institution* (1560), 1.5.10: “Or combien que les vertus de Dieu sont anisi pourtraites ... Dieu desploye en nous as vie, sagesse & vertu, & eserce envers nous sa iustice, bonté & clemence.”

that *virtus*, power or potency, is one of the *virtutes* that, together with life and wisdom, is “displayed,” not “exercised.” The discovery of the attributes is clearly *a posteriori*, in their manifestation, so that, again, Calvin’s interest is not in a speculative exercise concerning the divine essence in itself, but *virtutes* are not merely acts or exercises *ad extra*: they are indicators of what *divinitas* is.

Further, concerning the meaning and translation of this particular passage, it would be oddly redundant for Calvin to identify a series of God’s attributes as “powers” and then identify one attribute among others as “power.” The problem also occurs in the lectures on Malachi. Calvin references “power, justice, and other virtues, which are evident before our eyes,” where “power” renders *potentia* and “virtues” renders *virtutes*: to render the phrase “power, justice, and other powers” would be problematic.⁴¹ A similar issue arises in *Inst.* 1.10.2:

the celebration of his *virtutes* ... an enumeration of the same *virtutes* ... clemency, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment, and truth. For *virtus* and *potentia* are comprehended under the name Elohim.⁴²

Battles saw no particular problem here and rendered all three references to *virtus* as “power,” in the last reference reversing the words and rendering *virtus et potentia* as “power and might,” despite the typical translation of *potentia* as “power.” The other three translators recognized the difficulty: Norton rendered the two references to *virtutes* as “vertues” and then rendered *virtus et potentia* as “might and power.” Allen renders the first usage of *virtutes* as “attributes,” the second as “perfections,” and then removes the contrast of *virtus et potentia* by simply indicating “power,” perhaps because he consulted Calvin’s 1560 French text. Beveridge renders the first two usages of *virtutes* as “perfections” and offers “power and energy” for *virtus et potentia*.

Similarly, in *Inst.* 3.20.41, where Calvin referenced “the glory of God ... the holiness of God’s name ... [and] his *virtutes*, power, goodness, wisdom, righteousness, mercy, truth,”⁴³ it would be rather misleading to translate *virtutes* as “powers” and then go on to render *potentia* as “power,” not only because it creates a redundancy in the English, but also and primarily because all of these predications are viewed by Calvin as intrinsic to the essence of God. Norton rendered *virtutes* as “strength” and *potentia* as “power.” Allen and Beveridge chose “perfections” as the translation of *virtus* and also rendered *potentia* as “power.” Battles departs from his own rule and renders *virtutes* as “might,” *potentia* as “power.”

⁴¹ Calvin, *Praelectionum in duodecim prophetas minores*, Mal 4:2, in *CO* 44, cols. 491–92: “potentiae, iustitiae, et aliarum virtutem quae oculis nostris obiicit.”

⁴² Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.10.2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.20.41: “Dei gloriam ... nominis Dei sanctitas ... fieri non potest quin se proferent ejus virtutes, potentia, bonitas, sapientia, justitia, misericordia, veritas”; cf. *Institutio* (1560), 3.20.41: “la gloire de Dieu ... la sainteté du Nom de Dieu ... il est impossible que ses vertus ne viennent en avant: assavoir puissance, bonté, sagesse, iustice, misericorde, verité.”

The question of how to translate *virtutes* also arises in Calvin's commentary on Rom 1:20: "When we arrive at this point, the divinity becomes known to us, which cannot be sustained unless with all the *virtutes* of God, since they are all included under it [i.e., under the divinity]."⁴⁴ The sixteenth-century translators of the passage rendered *virtutes* as its cognate: "vertus" in the French;⁴⁵ "vertues" in the English.⁴⁶ Calvin's nineteenth-century translators rendered *virtutes* as "attributes."⁴⁷

T. H. L. Parker noted the difficulty of assigning meaning to Calvin's use of *virtutes* and sought to resolve the issue by analyzing how Calvin translated the word into French, often as *proprietez* but also associated with *oeuvres*. Thus, the divine *virtutes* that Calvin references from Ps 145 in his comments on attributes in *Inst.* 1.10.2 are identified as *proprietez* in his French version.⁴⁸ In *Inst.* 1.5.9, *virtutes* is rendered *oeuvres* in the earlier French editions, but as *vertus* in 1560.⁴⁹ Parker concluded that the usage indicated "the exercise towards mankind of the attributes of the nature of God."⁵⁰

2. Understanding and Translating Virtus: Calvin's Language in Early Modern Context

In addition to his decision to translate *virtutes* nearly uniformly as "powers," Battles also recognized that, in several places, Calvin used *virtus Dei* as a synonym for *potentia Dei*,⁵¹ but rather than work through the lexical issues posed by this usage, he went on to offer a somewhat fanciful explanation of Calvin's preference for the term, arguing that it arose via a rather oblique reference to angels as God's *virtutes* in *Inst.* 1.14.5, in tandem with usages in the Latin New Testament that identify "praiseworthy human qualities"—and therefore supply descriptions of "every aspect of the divine-human relationship": accordingly, the *virtus Dei*, Battles claims, is also "the working of the Holy Spirit."⁵² *Virtutes*, Battles concludes, is the term for divine attributes that

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, Rom 1:20, in CO 49, col. 24: "Ubi si ventum est, iam se profert divinitas: quae nisi singulis Dei virtutes nequit consistere, quando sub ea omnes continentur."

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Commentaires sur toutes les epistres de l'apostre S. Paul, et aussi sur l'epistre aux Hebreux: item, sur les epistres canoniques de S. Pierre, S. Iehan, S. Iaques, et S. Iude* (Geneva: Conrad Badius, 1561), Rom 1:20 (p. 10).

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Commentarie upon the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romanes*, trans. Christopher Rosdell (London: For John Harison and George Bishop, 1583), Rom 1:20 (p. 13).

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 70.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institution* (1560), 1.10.3: "toute la somme de ses proprietiez est si diligemment recitee, qu'il n'y a rien laissé derriere." Cf. Parker, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 53.

⁴⁹ Parker, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 53; cf. *Institutio* (1559), 1.5.9: "A suis enim virtutibus manifestatur Dominus"; and *Institution* (1560), 1.5.9: "Car Dieu nous est manifesté par ses vertus."

⁵⁰ T. H. L. Parker, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Study in the Theology of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 53–54.

⁵¹ Battles, "Virtutes Dei: Theatrum Mundi," 223–24.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 224.

best reflects “the dynamic, personal scriptural teaching whose consummation is in Christ himself.”⁵³

Examination of early modern lexica offers a more substantial ground for explaining Calvin’s meaning as well as an explanation for all of the translations. A glance at Francis Gouldman’s definitions of *potentia* reveals not only “might, puissance, force, ability, power, sway,” and “authority,” but also “possibility,” understood as “power to do or suffer,” and “ability.”⁵⁴ The overlapping of meaning is seen in the definition of *virtus* as “vertue, strength, swiftness, puissance, manliness, power, help, perfection, merit, desert, authority.”⁵⁵ Under “vertue,” we find *virtus, probitas, praestantia, rectum,* with “vertue or strength” defined as *facultas, efficacitas, natura.*⁵⁶ Rider, for example, gives Latin equivalents for “power” understood as “ability or force,” offering *potestas, potentia, pollentia, valentia, factio,* and *opes* in a first set of words, *vis, vires, virtus, copia,* and *connatus,* among other possibilities, under a second set. Under “Power to do or speak,” he offers *facultas* and *habentia.*⁵⁷ Similar results arise from examining English equivalents to the French *propriété* and *vertu*. *Vertu* can be rendered as “vertue, goodness, honestie, sinceretie, integritie; worth, perfection, desert, merit; also, valour, prowess, manhood; also, energie, efficacie, force, power, might; also, a good part or propertie, a commendable qualitie.”⁵⁸ *Propriété* is defined as “a propertie; propriete; ... also the nature, qualitie, inclination, or disposition of.”⁵⁹ The one term used by various translators to render *virtutes* that is not found in the lexica is “attribute,” but its equivalents “perfection” and “property” are consistently attested.

These definitions offer some insight into the meanings of *virtus* that account for Norton’s rationale for translating the term as either “vertue” or “power.” In the case of spiritual beings, *virtus* can mean power, which is but one “propertie” or “commendable qualitie” that such a being might possess, and it can be used as a general term to indicate any of the various *virtutes animae* or “powers” of soul understood as properties, perfections, abilities, faculties, or habits. Norton typically renders the plural *virtutes* as “vertues” when it references multiple properties and the singular as “power” when it references one property in distinction from others—leading toward the conclusion that Norton did not understand the plural form to be rightly rendered as “powers,” at least not when contrasted with “power” in the singular, and perhaps not when used as a reference to divine attributes in general.⁶⁰

⁵³ Contra *ibid.*, 224–25.

⁵⁴ Francis Gouldman, *Dictionarium etymologicum* (Cambridge: Joannes Field, 1669), s.v. “Potentia.”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, s.v. “Virtus.”

⁵⁶ John Rider, *Bibliotheca scholastica* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1589), s.v. “Vertue” and “Vertue or strength”; cf. the same definition in Gouldman, *Dictionarium etymologicum*.

⁵⁷ Rider, *Bibliotheca scholastica*, s.v. “Power, ability or force” and “Power to do or speak.”

⁵⁸ Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London: Adam Islip, 1611), s.v. “Vertu.”

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, s.v. “Proprieté.”

⁶⁰ Cf. Calvin, *Praelectionum in Ieremiam prophetam*, Jer 23:23–24, in *CO* 38, col. 438.

A further way of narrowing the usages of *virtus* to a theologically applicable range of meaning is to look to the definitions in specifically theological or philosophical dictionaries of the era. Altenstaig's *Lexicon* indicates that *virtus* as used in Scripture can indicate "corporeal strength" or an "exterior act or operation" but it also can mean "an inherent principle of operation" and when understood as a moral virtue, assumes "something in the soul" present as a *habitus*.⁶¹ Altenstaig also identifies the intellectual *virtutes* as the five Aristotelian ways of knowing: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, prudence, and art.⁶² Further, following Aristotle, the intellectual and moral virtues were understood as habits or dispositions (*habitus*) and, accordingly, as "powers of the soul," *virtutes animae* or *potentiae animae*.⁶³ Power in this sense, however, is not an outward act, rather it is a resident potency in the soul.⁶⁴ This sense of *virtus* is present in the several lexica that we have already examined and it is set forth in some detail in the massive work of Matthias Martinius, who offered, among other definitions of *virtus*, "perfection" or "capacity [*habitus*]" in human beings by which they are able to act or work well. Further, he noted that *virtus* can indicate moral perfection, strength or fortitude of the soul, and, in the case of God, "divine perfection."

In plural form, moreover, *virtutes* referenced properties or potencies of the soul, with *virtutes animae* functioning as a synonym of *potentiae animae*, and indicating capacities or *habitus* such as understanding, knowledge, wisdom, justice, fortitude, magnanimity, truth, and so forth. As Martinius's lexicon defined the term, a *virtus* is a perfection or capacity (*habitus*) by which a person is capable of working or acting: quite specifically, it is not the act or work, but the inherent capacity to act or work.⁶⁵ *Potentia* could also have much the same meaning, namely, a capacity (*habitus*), power (*vis*) or faculty that is capable of acting.⁶⁶ Calvin, of course, followed the generally accepted faculty psychology of the era,⁶⁷ and, as Battles pointed out, used *virtutes* and *potentiae* synonymously. Given the fairly typical analogy made between the soul, its life, and its faculties of intellect and will in discussions of God as well as the correspondence between the *virtutes*

⁶¹ Johannes Altenstaig, *Lexicon theologicum* (Antwerp: Petrus Bellerus, 1576), s.v. "Virtus." (The first edition of this work, titled *Vocabularius theologie*, was published in Hagenau in 1517.)

⁶² Altenstaig, *Lexicon theologicum*, s.v. "Virtus intellectualis."

⁶³ Cf. Joël Biard, "Diversité des fonctions et unité de l'âme dans la psychologie péripatéticienne (XIVe-XVIIe siècle)," in *Vivarium* 46 (2008): 342–67, here 344–48, 359; with Sacha Salatowsky, *De Anima: Die Rezeption der aristotelischen Psychologie im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner, 2006), 192–93, 360; and Sander W. de Boer, *The Science of the Soul: The Commentary Tradition on Aristotle's De anima, c. 1260–c. 1360* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013), 147, 227–52.

⁶⁴ Leon Baudry, *Lexique philosophique de Guillaume d'Ockham: Étude des notions fondamentales* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1958), s.v. "Virtus moralis": "Virtus non est alia res, sed passiones debite moderatae."

⁶⁵ Matthias Martinius, *Lexicon philologicum praecipue etymologicum et sacrum*, editio altera (Frankfurt: Thomas Matthias Goetzen, 1655), s.v. "Virtus."

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, s.v. "Potentia."

⁶⁷ Cf. Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Formation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 164–70.

animae and the divine attributes revealed in Scripture, we may conclude that Calvin preferred the term *virtutes* as an analogically suitable term of reference.⁶⁸

This usage, however, for all of its obvious advantages, also entailed several problems. Aquinas posed the question, "In what sense can it be posited that there are virtues in God?" and responded "divine goodness must comprehend in itself after a certain manner all *virtutes*, but none of these are predicated as a habit, as they are in us. For it is not suitable for God to be good by anything superadded to him, but by his essence, which is absolutely simple ... virtue is not therefore in God as a habit, but as his essence."⁶⁹ And further, "a habit is an imperfect actuality, as between potentiality and actuality: hence those who have habits are compared to persons asleep, but in God actuality is most perfect, and therefore the actuality in him is not like a habit or a science, but like a contemplation, which is the ultimate and perfect actuality."⁷⁰ In short, because God is essentially simple (a point on which Calvin most certainly agreed) *virtutes* can be predicated of God, indicating properties that are essential to God but also correspond analogically with the exemplifications of goodness in human beings. The divine *virtutes*, then, are relative divine attributes or attributes of divine egress.

There are two places in the *Institutes* where Calvin appears to pose a distinction between *virtutes* understood as relative or operative attributes and absolute attributes of primary actuality. Thus, in *Inst.* 1.10.2, he notes eternity and self existence and then goes on to identify clemency, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment, truth as *virtutes*. In *Inst.* 3.20.41, he first mentions glory and holiness and then identifies power, goodness, wisdom, righteousness, mercy, and truth as *virtutes*. Both places support the thesis that Calvin's usage draws by analogy on the standard conception of *virtutes animae*. By contrast, *Inst.* 1.5.10 appears to identify "life, wisdom, power (*virtus*) ... righteousness, goodness, mercy" as *virtutes*. Whereas wisdom, righteousness, goodness, and mercy would typically be viewed as *virtutes animae*, life and probably power would not. So also in the commentary on Isa 41:1, Calvin refers to "the power, goodness, and wisdom of God, and other of his *virtutes*."⁷¹ The listing in Rom 1:21, which includes eternity, potentially offers a further exception inasmuch as Calvin subsequently references divine attributes as *virtutes*, by implication identifying *aeternitas* as

⁶⁸ Cf. Randall Zachman, "Calvin as Analogical Theologian," in *SJT* 51 (1998): 162–87.

⁶⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 1.92: "Quomodo in Deo ponatur esse virtutes? ... oportet ergo bonitatem divinam omnes virtutes suo modo continere, unde nulls earum seivuncum habitum in Deo dicitur, sicut in nobis. Deo enim non convenit bonum esse per aliquid aliud ei superadditum, sed per essentiam suam, cum sit omnino simplex ... non est igitur virtus in Deo aliquis habitus, sed sua essentia."

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*: "habitus imperfectus actus est quasi medius inter potentiam et actum; unde et habentes habitus dormientibus comparantur, in Deo autem est actus perfectissimus, actus igitur in eo non est sicut habitus et scientia, sed sicut considerare, quod est actus ultimus et perfectus."

⁷¹ Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiam prophetam*, Isa 41:1, in *CO* 37, col. 33: "Dei potentia, bonitate, sapientia, aliisque eius virtutibus."

a divine *virtus*.⁷² The preponderance of attributes identified as *virtutes* corresponds with the capacities typically identified as *virtutes animae*, confirming the hypothesis that Calvin drew his usage from the contemporary language of faculty psychology on the assumption that, analogically, God could be described as a being with capacities of intellect and will.

Once the probable reason for Calvin's usage is recognized, it needs also to be noted that eternity, immutability, self-existence, impassibility, infinity, immensity, magnitude, sublimity, incomprehensibility, immortality, life, glory, and holiness are not *virtutes animae*—and reference to them does appear in characterizations of the divine essence found in Calvin's commentaries, lectures, and sermons. Calvin clearly did not confine his referencing of divine attributes to those that are relative or operative. He also, on occasion, identified as *virtutes* attributes that would not have been defined as powers or potencies, namely, life,⁷³ eternity,⁷⁴ glory,⁷⁵ and probably magnitude.⁷⁶ He also used *epitheta* to reference divine attributes in the commentary on 1 Tim 1:17, where God is identified as eternal, invisible, and alone wise—one of which, wisdom, would normally be identified as one of the *virtutes* if Calvin had applied his terminology strictly and consistently.⁷⁷

One of Calvin's frequently repeated statements concerning the divine attributes is that the Scriptures do not speak "merely of the divine essence" but of various divine attributes, often for the sake of indicating God's relationship to human beings. His point is clearly not to refrain from mention of the divine essence and simply refer to works of God *ad extra*: rather Calvin's point is consistently to note that various attributes—*virtutes*—belonging to the divine essence are also operative and, as operative, are to be recognized as defining God in contexts of human worship, obedience, and so forth. In other words, as Calvin argues in the comment on Isa 41:4, the issue is not merely divine essence nor merely *ad extra* exercise or relationality—rather what God is essentially is also the basis of his relationship to creation and creatures.⁷⁸ As Calvin explicitly states in the comment on Isa 46:4, God is always the same "not only in his essence, but with respect to us."⁷⁹ So also, his comment on Isa 45:18, "When he repeats that he is God, this is not intended merely to assert his essence, but to distinguish him from all idols ... nor is this concerned only with God's eternal essence, as some think, but of all the works which belong to him alone, that no part of them may be conveyed to creatures."⁸⁰ Calvin does, therefore, write

⁷² Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, Rom 1:21, in CO 49, col. 24.

⁷³ Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.5.10.

⁷⁴ Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, Rom 1:21, in CO 49, col. 24.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielis prophetae*, Ezek 11:18, in CO 40, col. 241.

⁷⁶ Calvin, *Commentarii in librum psalmsorum*, Ps 145:4, in CO 32, col. 413.

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Commentarius in epistolam ad Timotheum I*, 1 Tim 1:17, in CO 52, col. 261.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiaem prophetam*, Isa. 41:4, in CO 37, col. 37.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Isa 46:4, in CO 37, col. 156.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Isa 45:18, in CO 37, col. 144: "Quod repetit se Deum esse, non tantum asserendam essentiam spectat, sed ut se discernat ab omnibus idolis ... nec enim tantum hic agitur de seterna

both of relative and of absolute, communicable and incommunicable attributes of God.

3. *Calvin on the Divine Essence and Essential Attributes*

Buckner attempts to drive a wedge between Calvin's teaching and a traditional doctrine of the attributes by contrasting Calvin's highly negative usage of the notion of speculation with the positive usage of Aquinas—but the attempt at contrast falls rather short when Buckner rightly defines Aquinas's understanding of "speculative knowledge" as a knowledge that "relates to divine revelation and helps lead humanity toward its end in the beatific vision," and then describes Calvin's view of speculation as an attempt to penetrate "God's incomprehensible essence" that "ignores God's gracious self-witness in Scripture and in his works."⁸¹ Quite apparently Aquinas and Calvin not only used the term utterly differently, but Aquinas's view of speculative knowledge as resting on revelation and guiding humanity has a significant affinity with Calvin's understanding of the biblical revelation and the theological task. Even so, as Stauffer pointed out, Calvin's approach to the *vertus* and *propriétés* of God, despite their different forms of expression, "echoed" that of Aquinas who consistently indicated that no one in this life can see the divine essence and that God is known through his effects.⁸²

Although Calvin declaims against the subtlety of scholastic discussion concerning God's essence,⁸³ he offers considerable discussion of the divine essence in his commentaries inasmuch as the holy name, "Jehovah," expresses "the eternity and primary essence of God"⁸⁴ or, similarly, "the eternal essence and majesty of God."⁸⁵ Calvin frequently references the essence as one and simple in relation to his understandings both of the Trinity and of the divine attributes. For example, in the Ezekiel commentary, Calvin attacks the antitrinitarians of his day in an extended section of discussion of Jehovah, arguing that when "God" is mentioned, the Trinity is to be assumed inasmuch as "where God alone is mentioned, the whole essence is understood."⁸⁶ Accordingly, when Paul (1 Tim 3:16) states that "God was manifest in the flesh," it must be inferred that "the essence of God is one" and that "therefore the entire deity was manifest in the flesh."⁸⁷ Or, further, in the next verse, "and the essence may not be

essentia Dei, ut nonnulli putant, sed de offisiis omnibus quae ad ipsum solum pertinent, ne ulla ex parte ad creaturas transferantur."

⁸¹ Buckner, "Calvin's Non-Speculative Methodology," 234.

⁸² Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence*, 105.

⁸³ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielis prophetae*, Ezek 1:25–26, in *CO* 40, col. 57.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, in *CO* 40, col. 53: "Dei aeternitas et prima essentia."

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiam prophetam*, Isa 1:24, in *CO* 36, col. 51: "aeterna Dei essentia et maiestas."

⁸⁶ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielis prophetae*, Ezek 1:25–26, in *CO* 40, col. 55: "ubi simplex sit Dei mentio, intelligi totam essentiam."

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, in *CO* 40, col. 56: "Una est enim essentia Dei. Ergo tota deitas manifesta fuit in carne."

divided without impiety, but there must be distinction among the persons.”⁸⁸ Similar extended discussion of the unity of the divine essence occurs in Calvin’s *Congrégation* on John 1:1–5. Calvin indicates that “Word” is not in God in the way that a “counsel” is in the human mind, given that God is immutable and that, echoing a scholastic maxim, “there is no proportion” between God and humanity.⁸⁹ Calvin goes on to indicate that when the gospel makes a “distinction” between God and the Word that is with God, this is “in no way a distinction of essence” because there “is only one simple essence in [God].”⁹⁰ Calvin next examines the doctrinal term “persons,” which he notes is used to express “properties such as are in the essence of God.”⁹¹ Arguably this exposition does not correspond with Buckner’s description of a revelation “in Scripture, and ultimately in Christ” that “reveals God’s unchanging nature without disclosing God’s unknowable essence or the intra-trinitarian relations, about which ... humans need not know or speculate.”⁹² There appears to be a confusion on Buckner’s part of incomprehensibility with unknowability—in contrast to Calvin’s rather subtle point that we do not comprehend the things of God in the way that we “comprehend the things of this world,” given, among other things, the absence of proportion between infinite God and his creation.⁹³

As to the essence of God, apart from the issue of Trinity, it is also clear from the frequent remarks concerning the divine essence found in Calvin’s commentaries that, far from regarding the subject as problematically speculative, his concern was to combat a theological and religious tendency to render God distant—a “naked essence”—whether by denying God entirely, by ignoring the divine power and work, or by engaging in excessive speculation concerning the essence. The intent of his arguments is to indicate that the *ad extra* manifestation of God is a revelation of his essence—as in his comments on Exod 3:14, where Calvin indicates that the words, “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be” are an assertion of the divine glory that belongs only to God, inasmuch as God is revealed as existing *a se ipso* and eternally.⁹⁴ He concludes that it would be unprofitable simply to contemplate God’s “secret essence”—rather the understanding ought to be directed toward the “omnipotence” of God,

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Ezek 1:28, in *CO* 40, col. 60: “neque essentia nisi impie discernitur, quamvis sit distinctio inter personae.”

⁸⁹ Calvin, *Congrégation sur la divinité de Jésus-Christ*, in *CO* 47, cols. 471–72.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, in *CO* 47, cols. 472–73.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, in *CO* 47, col. 473. Note also that Calvin goes to considerable lengths to argue the aseity of the Son as second person of the Trinity—also a matter of divine essence that comports well with traditional expositions of the doctrine of God: on which, see Brannon Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹² Buckner, “Calvin’s Non-Speculative Methodology,” 239.

⁹³ Calvin, *Congrégation sur la divinité de Jésus-Christ*, in *CO* 47, col. 470: “les secrets qui sont yci contenus, ne sont point declarez si ouverement que nous les puissions comprendre, comme nous comprenons les choses de ce monde.”

⁹⁴ Calvin, *Mosis reliqui libri quatuor in formam harmoniae*, Exod 3:14, in *CO* 24, col. 43: “Hoc quidem satis liquet, Deum sibi uni asserere divinitatis gloriam, quia sit as se ipso ideoque aeternus.”

specifically toward “his immeasurable potency,” that is, not a naked essence but an essence made known in revelation.⁹⁵ This pattern of speaking of the essence of God, indicating that it is in itself incomprehensible and then stating how God has been revealed, can be found in numerous places in Calvin’s commentaries, lectures, and sermons. Buckner’s comment about the passage is misleading: it is true that Calvin draws out implications for belief and piety—in this instance using Moses as an example—but his intention, well illustrated by the length of his exposition, is not to move quickly away from the notion of divine essence; rather it is to link his traditional understanding of divine essence and attributes to the needs of faith. Specifically Calvin not only discusses how the passage presents the divine essence, he adds a critique of Plato, who rightly identified God as τὸ ὄν, ultimate Being, but who failed to make clear against polytheism that “the one sole God gathers in all imaginable essences.”⁹⁶ One might even read Calvin’s comment as referencing the Thomistic view that divine essence contains the exemplars of all individual things.⁹⁷

One further example may suffice. In his exposition of Jeremiah’s polemic against idolatry, Calvin points out that idols of wood and stone misrepresent God inasmuch as they evidence no similarity to God’s “immeasurable power” or “incomprehensible essence and majesty.”⁹⁸ After his denunciation of the idols, Jeremiah turns to praise of the true God. Calvin indicates that the prophet “extolls the glory of God,” states that “Jehovah is God,” and that God sets aside “the errors of all the nations” with the “brightness” of his “majesty.” Further, Jeremiah states that “the eternal God is truth,” “content” or “satisfied in himself,” having “in [his] essence ... true and complete glory.” The prophet then adds that “God is life” since, although “God is per se incomprehensible,” he nonetheless provides us “not only with signs of his glory” but with other sensible evidences.⁹⁹ Calvin’s argument here hardly corresponds with Buckner’s assertion that Calvin did not dwell on God’s essential attributes or absolute perfections—particularly inasmuch as Calvin continues his interpretation with the comment, “Now therefore the prophet, after having spoken of the essence of God, descends to its praxis.”¹⁰⁰ Characteristic of Calvin’s approach to the

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, in *CO* 24, col. 44: “Et quid profuisset Mosi arcanam Dei essentiam quasi coelo inclusam speculari nisi de eius omnipotentia factus certior clypeum fiduciae sibi inde fecisset? Docet ergo Deus se unum esse sacrosancto nomine dignum, quod perperam ad alios translatum profanatur: deinde immensam suam virtutem commendat.”

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*: “unicum esse Dei absorbeat quascunque imaginamur essentiae.”

⁹⁷ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a, q. 44, a. 3; cf. Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 1.54.

⁹⁸ Calvin, *Praelectionum in Ieremiam prophetam*, Jer 10:8, in *CO* 38, col. 69: “Quid enim simile est ligno aut lapidi cum immensa Dei potentia? cum incomprehensibili essentia et maiestate?”

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, Jer. 10:10, in *CO* 38, col. 71: “extollit Dei gloriam ... dicit, *Atqui Iehovah est Deus ... sibi sufficere ad omnes gentium errores ... prodierit eius maiestas, quia tantus sit eius fulgor ... Deus est veritas ... contentus est in se ipso ... Desu sit vita ... per se est incomprehensibilis: tamen non tantum signa gloriae suae nobis ponit ante oculos, sed quodammodo praebet se palpandum.*”

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, in *CO* 38, col. 72: “Nunc ergo propheta, postquam loquutus est de essentia Dei, descendit ad praxin ipsam.”

divine attributes is to indicate both that they are intrinsic to the divine essence and that they are revealed in Scripture and in the created order.

Calvin does, of course, argue against what he regarded as excessive speculation concerning the divine essence in itself: when Scripture tells us that God fills heaven and earth, it does testify that “it is true that the essence of God extends throughout the heaven and the earth, since it is infinite.”¹⁰¹ This truth, however, ought not to become the basis of “frivolous or unfruitful cogitations,” inasmuch as Scripture intends to focus on the providence and power (*potentia*) of God in order to promote true religion.¹⁰² Still, the anti-speculative comment is not a denial that the attribute, in this case infinity, is not essential, only that one ought not to speculate about this truth instead of attending to the meaning of the biblical text: Calvin’s point is not that one need not discuss or inquire concerning the divine essence but “we ought not to investigate the divine essence beyond what is appropriate.”¹⁰³ Thus, commenting on Isa 46:4, “I am the same,” Calvin indicates that “it means that God is always the same and like himself, not only in his essence, but with respect to us, so that we will perceive that he is the same.”¹⁰⁴ These texts do not point to Buckner’s all too easy thesis that Calvin adopted a unique “non-speculative methodology” that referenced divine “powers” as “acts” and argued against the discussion of “essential attributes.” Calvin clearly argued that God’s revelation, whether by display or exercise, indicated what God is, namely, God’s essence—and that theology, following the teaching of Scripture, would present both essence and attributes. Like various of his contemporaries and successors,¹⁰⁵ Calvin emphasized the connection between traditional doctrine and the life of faith. When we attempt to comprehend God, we should look to his works,¹⁰⁶ but God’s revelation in his works, as Parker reminds us, reveals him as he is in himself.¹⁰⁷

Buckner also objects to reading Calvin’s statement about the divine *virtutes* or perfections in the commentary on Rom 1:20 as “a general metaphysical

¹⁰¹ Ibid., in *CO* 38, col. 438: “Verum quidem est, extendi essential Dei per coelum et terram, ut est infinita.”

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., Jer 51:19, in *CO* 39, col. 459: “nempe non investigemus Dei essential supra quam par est.”

¹⁰⁴ Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiam prophetam*, Isa 46:4, in *CO* 37, col. 156: “sed eundem, ac sui similem perpetuo Deum esse significat, non tentum in essentia sua, sed respectu nostri, ut eundem ipsi sentiamus.”

¹⁰⁵ Buckner implies a major methodological contrast, but note Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci communes sacrae theologiae* (Basel: Johannes Hervagius, 1563), 41–51 (pp. 697–800), where each, admittedly lengthy, discussion of a divine attribute rests directly on Scripture and balances the traditional doctrine with practical meditation. Among the later Reformed, note, e.g., William Perkins on divine omnipotence in his *Exposition of the Symbole or Creede of the Apostles* in *The Works of that Famous and Worthie Minister of Christ, in the Universitie of Cambridge, M. W. Perkins* (Cambridge: John Legat, 1603), 150–52, where, again, discussion of the essential attribute is balanced with practical application.

¹⁰⁶ Calvin, *Praelectionum in Ieremiam prophetam*, Jer 51:19, in *CO* 39, col. 459.

¹⁰⁷ Parker, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 54.

assertion ... that God's essential attributes somehow co-adhere in God's simple essence" on the ground that "Calvin is predominantly concerned with God's powers as known through his acts."¹⁰⁸ Leaving aside Buckner's rather unusual term "co-adhere," he is apparently objecting to a rather differently stated claim, namely, that Calvin held a "traditional view of the attributes as indivisibly and irreducibly belonging to the divine essence."¹⁰⁹ We remind ourselves of Calvin's argument: "When we arrive at this point, divinity [*divinitas*] becomes known to us, which cannot be sustained unless with all the *virtutibus* of God, since they are all included under it [i.e., under the divinity]."¹¹⁰ As if Calvin were not arguing that we have positive knowledge, gained from Scripture and the nature of God's essential attributes! Calvin is not here making a distinction among divine attributes as if some were essential and others not, nor is he speaking merely about *ad extra* exercise of attributes. Prior to this comment about *virtutes*, Calvin references *aeternitas*, *potentia*, and *gloria*, adding that God is *sine initio* and *a se ipso*; later he references the divine *aeternitas*, *sapientia*, *bonitas*, *veritas*, *iustitia*, and *miser cordia*. Presumably Calvin assumed that God possesses all of these attributes essentially and that they are not simply revealed as "acts" *ad extra*. In this particular verse, moreover, Calvin is arguing that the notion of God's divinity includes recognition that all of his *virtutes* are "included" or "contained" in *divinitas*—and the clear implication, contra Buckner, is divine simplicity, indeed, simplicity in relation not only to the understanding of absolute but also, here, particularly, the relative attributes. Calvin, after all did speak of the "one and simple divine essence,"¹¹¹ he did assume that God possesses his attributes unchangeably and perpetually,¹¹² and as Buckner admits, did include simplicity in the list of attributes in his 1559 draft of a confession for the French Reformed.¹¹³ Calvin makes similar comments elsewhere: "there is nothing more proper to God than his goodness"; Calvin wrote that without goodness, God would not be God—"all goodness is in him."¹¹⁴ The divine name Elohim indicates "power [*potentia*]" that is "included in [God's] eternal essence."¹¹⁵ So too the act of creation out of nothing points toward the eternity of God's

¹⁰⁸ Buckner, "Calvin's Non-Speculative Methodology," 242n17.

¹⁰⁹ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:207.

¹¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, Rom 1:20, in *CO* 49, col. 24.

¹¹¹ Calvin, *Commentarius in evangelium Iohannis*, John 5:18, in *CO* 47, col. 112: "una et simpliciter Dei essentia."

¹¹² Calvin, *Commentarius in epistolam ad Timotheum I*, 1 Tim 1:17, in *CO* 52, col. 261: "Epitheta, quae hic tribuit Deo, tametsi perpetua sunt, tamen proprie conveniunt loci circumstantiae. Vocat regem aeternum vel saeculorum, in quem nulla cadit mutatio: invisibilem ... solum sapientem."

¹¹³ Calvin, *Confession de foy*, §2–4, in *CO* 9, col. 741: "nous croyons en un seul Dieu, eternel, d'une essence spirituelle, infinite, incomprehensible et simple.... Nous croyons aussi que dieu, par sa vertu, sagesse, et bonté incomprehensible, a crée toutes choses.... Nous croyons que le mesme Dieu gouverne toutes ses creatures, et dispose et ordonne selon sa volenté tout se qui advient."

¹¹⁴ Calvin, *Sermons sur le Deuteronomie*, Sermon 55, on Deut 7:16–19, in *CO* 26, col. 548; also cited and discussed in Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence*, 110.

¹¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentarius in Genesis*, Gen 1:1, in *CO* 23, col. 15.

essence.¹¹⁶ In characterizing God's counsel and wisdom as eternal, Calvin comments that God is unlike human beings inasmuch as he is immutable and, by implication, simple: "whatever is in him is of his essence and eternity."¹¹⁷ Moreover, inasmuch as in this particular place, as in the other places already noted, *virtutes* references various divine properties that are neither powers being exerted nor acts, "potencies" would appear to be the most suitable translation.

The divine essence is rendered knowable in a manner appropriate to human beings by the revelation of attributes: thus, "When Moses asserts that God is one, this is restricted not solely to his essence, which is incomprehensible, but must be also understood of his power and glory, which were manifested to the people."¹¹⁸ Similarly, "having formerly been incomprehensible in his essence, he then became openly known by the effect of his power."¹¹⁹ Or, again, "we have explained what is meant by God descending, namely, the demonstration of his power; since his essence, which fills heaven and earth, is not moved from its place."¹²⁰ This is an *a posteriori* approach to God by way of the revelation of various attributes and not a unique "non-speculative method." Far from setting aside the assumption that these attributes belong to the divine essence, Calvin reinforces the essential nature of the attributes and builds an understanding of the essence based on an understanding that divine attributes, including those denominated *virtutes*, are intrinsic to the one, simple divine essence.

II. Some Conclusions

Buckner's insistence that there is not enough comment on the divine essence and attributes in Calvin's commentaries, lectures, and sermons to elicit and construct a locus on the doctrine of God was refuted long before Buckner set pen to paper by Richard Stauffer's magnificent *Dieu, la création et la providence dans le prédication de Calvin*. And Stauffer's conclusion is clearly reinforced by the discussion of Calvin's views on the divine essence presented here. Buckner's denials of consideration of metaphysical and essential attributes in Calvin arises, most probably, from a somewhat ill-defined understanding of the meaning of "essence" and of the implications of "metaphysical." Finally, the translation of *virtus* is what leads Buckner into his mistaken interpretation:

¹¹⁶ Ibid., in *CO* 23, col. 16.

¹¹⁷ Calvin, *Congrégation sur la divinité de Jésus-Christ*, in *CO* 47, col. 471: "ce qui est en luy, est de son essence et éternité."

¹¹⁸ Calvin, *Mosis reliqui libri quatuor in formam harmoniae*, Deut 6:4, in *CO* 24, col. 263: "Quod Moses Deum unum esse asserit, non solum ad eius essentiam, quae incomprehensibilis est restringitur, sed intelligi etiam debet de virtute et gloria quae populo innotuerat."

¹¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentarius in evangelium Ioannis*, John 1:3, in *CO* 47, col. 4: "Nam quum in sua essentia prius esset incomprehensibilis, tunc eius vis effectum palam fuit cognita."

¹²⁰ Calvin, *Mosis reliqui libri quatuor in formam harmoniae*, Exod 19:12, in *CO* 24, col. 192: "Quid significet descens Dei paulo ante exposuimus, nempe demonstrationem virtutis: quoniam eius essentia quae coelum et terram implet loco non movetur."

“power” understood as *virtus* or *potentia* does not necessarily or even primarily indicate an exercise or operation and even when it does, it consistently assumes a resident capacity, in the case of God, an essential attribute or perfection. Revelation of a divine attribute or *virtus* by its display or exercise, therefore, points back to the essential attribute or *virtus* in God.

These conclusions bring us to the other focus of our study: Calvin’s understanding of divine attributes as *virtutes* and how the term ought to be understood and translated. That Calvin used the term and, indeed, favored it was not in dispute. Parker long ago established the point. What was in dispute was the meaning of the term, particularly with reference to its singular and plural usages and, by extension, with reference to the way in which the usages reflect Calvin’s approach to divine attributes in general. Here, contra Buckner (and Battles), we have noted both that the context of usage is what determines meaning and translation and that the singular and plural forms often need to be translated differently, particularly when they are juxtaposed. Translation of the plural form *virtutes* as “powers” is what led Buckner into his mistaken interpretation of *virtutes* primarily, perhaps exclusively, as *ad extra* acts of God: the primary sense of *virtus* or *potentia* is a resident capacity, in the case of God, an essential attribute or perfection, specifically one that can be exercised or displayed *ad extra*. Buckner’s misinterpretation severs the link between the *ad intra* essential attribute and the *ad extra* exercise. Given the confusion caused by “powers” we are left with three translations of *virtutes* that have merit, all three resting on early modern lexical considerations: “virtues,” “potencies,” and “perfections.” “Attributes” remains usable, albeit less desirable.

Buckner characterizes Calvin’s method of presenting and expositing the divine essence and attributes as non-speculative, soteriological, and “skeletal.” That Calvin disapproved of excessive speculation is hardly debatable. But, contrary to Buckner’s view, we have seen that Calvin’s refusal to speculate concerning the divine essence did not entail either refusal to discuss the divine essence or to refrain from concluding that the revealed attributes, perfections, or potencies of God are intrinsic to and revelations of the divine essence. What Calvin does not do is engage in *a priori* discussion of the divine essence or raise the issue of how the attributes are distinct given the assumption of divine simplicity. It is also not accurate to reduce Calvin’s reading of the divine attributes to soteriology or to describe it as offering only a “skeletal,” bare-bones framework. Calvin offers many reflections on the attributes that do not relate directly to the work of salvation but are explanatory, hortatory, and doxological. Nor does Calvin simply mention the divine essence and list attributes in the manner of offering a framework: he devotes a significant amount of space to discussing their meaning and implication. Warfield’s explanation of the difference between Calvin’s approach to the divine attributes and the approach found in some traditional theological systems as more a matter of literary genre than of substantive or methodological difference continues to ring true.

THE EMIC AND ETIC, IMMANENT AND ECONOMIC: PERSPECTIVES ON THEOLOGY FROM LANGUAGE THEORY

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

The relationship between language theory and theology proper suggests that we can learn much about both from taking the perspective of the one to view the other. That is, we can learn much about God from studying language, and much about language from studying the nature of God. In this article, the author draws on the linguistic theory of Kenneth Pike to explore how the terminology of *emic* and *etic* might shed light on the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity. He argues that the immanent Trinity (*emic*) grounds the economic Trinity (*etic*). In other words, who God is in himself reflects who he is and what he has done in relation to his creatures. Applying the *emic/etic* distinction to the Trinity and to us highlights the communicative nature of God and our movement from *etic* to *emic*, from creatures separated from God to creatures brought into divine communion with the God who is a linguistic community unto himself.

I. Introduction

There is an ancient relationship between theology proper and language theory—between what we think about the triune God and what we postulate about the nature of human communication. Ultimately, this is because the Trinity is profoundly linguistic and language is profoundly Trinitarian.¹ The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have eternally communed with one

Pierce Taylor Hibbs is Associate Director for Theological Curriculum and Instruction in the Theological English Department at Westminster Theological Seminary. He writes regularly at wordsfortheologians.org.

¹ There is much literature on the Trinitarian nature of communication, spanning the Catholic and Protestant traditions, but one might begin with Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009). His approach, built upon the thought of Kenneth Pike, is the most methodologically Trinitarian approach I have come across. I address this in the opening chapter of *The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior: A Reformed Exposition of the Language Theory of Kenneth L. Pike*, *Reformed Academic Dissertations* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2018); and in Hibbs, “Closing the Gaps: Perichoresis and the Nature of Language,” *WTJ* 78 (2016): 299–322.

another in mutual expressions of love and glory.² Human image bearers of the Trinity, by analogy, use language to foster communion in a similar way on the creaturely level.³ Thus, when we learn anything about God, we simultaneously learn something about language, and vice versa.

In light of the resurgence of Trinitarian theology over the last few decades, I have found it helpful to resurrect and reapply a somewhat dated set of linguistic concepts from the language theory of Kenneth L. Pike (1912–2000): *emic* and *etic*. While Pike himself never saw the potential application of these terms to Trinitarian theology, I have found them to be quite useful in drawing attention to the communicative nature of God. The aim of this article, then, is to draw on Pike's language theory to show how the emic-etic distinction can deepen our understanding of the immanent-economic categories in Trinitarian theology. In that sense, this article is continuing an informal series of articles I have written on Pike's language theory and its bearing on theology.

II. *Emic and Etic Defined*

Kenneth Pike coined the terms *emic* and *etic* several decades ago, and these terms have been widely used in the fields of linguistics and anthropology ever since, even though many who have used them are either clueless or mistaken about their origin.⁴ While the terms have a broad semantic range, it is helpful to think of *emic* as *insider* and *etic* as *outsider*.⁵ In this sense, the terms represent two perspectives on our communicative behavior.⁶

The emic view is oriented to the linguistic community from the inside. Meaningful behaviors—both verbal and nonverbal—are interpreted according to participant responses and community-driven functions. For example, consider an emic view of the following exchange:

² John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013), 480–81.

³ See Pierce Taylor Hibbs, "Imaging Communion: An Argument for God's Existence Based on Speech," *WTJ* 77 (2015): 35–51; Hibbs, "Words for Communion," *Modern Reformation* 25, no. 4 (August 2016): 5–8.

⁴ See Thomas N. Headland's introductory comments on this in Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike, and Marvin Harris, eds., *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate*, *Frontiers of Anthropology* 7 (London: Sage, 1990).

⁵ Pierce Taylor Hibbs, "Where Person Meets Word, Part I: Personalism in the Language Theory of Kenneth L. Pike," *WTJ* 77 (2015): 371–74.

⁶ Viola Waterhouse summarizes the emic and etic approaches as follows: "The etic view has to do with universals, with typology, with observation from outside a system, as well as with the nature of initial field data, and with variant forms of an emic unit. The emic view is concerned with the contrastive, patterned system of a specific language or culture or universe of discourse, with the way a participant in a system sees that system, as well as with distinctions between contrastive units" (Viola G. Waterhouse, *The History and Development of Tagmemics* [The Hague: Mouton, 1974], 6). See also Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 150–52.

A: Hello!

B: How are you?

A: [*No response—the two persons continue walking past one another.*]

Emically, this simple exchange might be viewed as a mutual greeting. In many places where English is commonly spoken, the question “How are you?” is used not to obtain information but to extend a nicety of social interaction (though conservative-minded English speakers protest this trend). Etically, however, this exchange appears not to be mutual. The non-native English speaker, for example, might interpret person A as offering a greeting and person B as attempting to open a conversation. After all, person B is clearly asking a question, and the words he uses differ from those of person A. The outside observer of a given linguistic community might interpret these two language units as semantically different, even while many native participants of the language view them as emically the same (i.e., serving the same function, reflecting semantic equivalence, and eliciting the same responses from native participants).

Of course, these concepts are far more complex than this example suggests.⁷ However, the example does reveal something basic to the emic-etic distinction: the emic approach to language reflects *immanence* for a particular language community, while the etic approach reflects the *economy* of language—its external appearance—for the outsider. Applying this phenomenon to theology with care and circumspection can yield some fascinating and spiritually encouraging results.

III. *Immanent and Economic Trinity*

The immanent-economic distinction for the Trinity has long been recognized, inspected, and analyzed by theologians in our day.⁸ It is sufficient here only to remind the reader of the largely accepted definitions.

Put simply, “The *ontological* Trinity (sometimes called *immanent* Trinity) is the Trinity as it exists necessarily and eternally, apart from creation. It is, like God’s attributes, what God necessarily *is*. The *economic* Trinity is the Trinity in its relation to creation, including the specific roles played by the Trinitarian persons

⁷ For details, see Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 37–72.

⁸ See, for example, Fred Sanders, *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner’s Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, Issues in Systematic Theology 12 (New York: International Academic Publishers, 2004). For a shorter exposition of one of his central points, see “Entangled in the Trinity: Economic and Immanent Trinity in Recent Theology,” *Dialog* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 175–82. Recently, Sanders has also noted the abuse and misunderstandings that have resulted from a careless use of these categories. See Fred Sanders, *The Triune God*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 144–53. On the purpose of these categories in highlighting the relationship between the temporal relations of the Trinity to creation and the eternal processions of the divine persons in God, see pp. 112–19.

through the history of creation, providence, and redemption.⁹ This is not to say, of course, that the immanent-economic distinction has been embraced uncritically by all theologians. There are important questions regarding the nature and relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity, questions that lead to drastically different theological positions concerning God's identity and freedom.¹⁰ In fact, as Emery and Levering point out, within theological circles "the majority of studies ... pay attention to the problematic of the unity and distinction between the 'economic Trinity' and the 'immanent Trinity' (or, if one prefers, between the Trinity in its work of creation and grace, and the Trinity in its inner life). The question of the relationships between the Trinity and *history* is often found at the centre of contemporary writing on the Trinity."¹¹

Yet, leaving aside for now the specifics of these "relationships," we can in general say that the immanent Trinity is the Trinity as it appears from the *inside*: who God is in the intratrinitarian relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The economic Trinity would then be God as he appears to us from the *outside*: in his providential and redemptive work. This is not to say that there is discord between the two. Rather, these concepts help us to express basic human perspectives on who God is—the former being derived or inferred from God's revelation, helping us glimpse into eternity, and the latter being derived both from revelation and from our witness of God's work in history, offering clarity on the meaning and purpose of our temporal world.

IV. *Applying the Emic-Etic Distinction to Trinitarian Theology*

As noted in the introduction and foreshadowed in the previous section, there is a fascinating correspondence between the emic-etic viewpoints in Pike's language theory and the immanent-economic categories in Trinitarian theology. This correspondence may have implications for our understanding of God and for our spiritual formation. Let us first examine the emic-etic distinction in Pike's theory more deeply before moving on to explore its potential theological application.

As stated earlier, *emic* can be replaced with the word *insider*, and *etic* with *outsider*. In the context of Pike's language theory, the emic viewpoint sees a given language from the inside, based on the use and responses of native participants.¹²

⁹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 489.

¹⁰ Peter Phan introduces some of these questions in Peter C. Phan, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 16–18.

¹¹ Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering, introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

¹² In the late 1980s, Pike also noted the following defining features of emic units: (1) native participants label the unit as appropriate in a given context, (2) emic units can be complex (containing many smaller emic "sub-units"), (3) an emic unit may be referenced with a specific name by native participants, (4) each emic unit must be different from another as judged by the perception or usage of native participants, (5) the emic unit occurs in a relevant place in a hierarchically structured

Emic descriptions of language “represent to us the view of one familiar with the system and [one] who knows how to function within it himself.”¹³ Pike notes that the value of the emic is that it (1) helps us understand how a language or culture is constructed as a whole, (2) enables us to understand the personal actors in that culture, and (3) establishes a homogeneous behavioral basis upon which we can predict future behaviors.¹⁴ In contrast, an etic description of language “has to do with universals, with typology, with observation from outside a system, as well as with the nature of initial field data.”¹⁵ The etic has value in (1) training us to see a broad spectrum of behavior occurring around the world, (2) allowing us to “obtain a technique and symbolism ... for recording the events of a culture,”¹⁶ (3) reminding us that *all* linguists studying a foreign language begin by making only etic observations, many of which will then be adapted to fit the emic patterns of the culture in question, and (4) helping us to focus on smaller areas of emic study while drawing on more widespread etic patterns for comparison.¹⁷ After all, we cannot study everything emically at the same time. We rely on larger etic patterns to inform us as we focus on a particular area of emic behavior.¹⁸

Now, consider the emic in relation to the immanent (or ontological) Trinity. Traditionally, the immanent Trinity is discussed regarding the relations between the divine persons in eternity. The first person of the Trinity is distinguished by his fatherhood and unbegottenness.¹⁹ “The special qualification of the second person in the Trinity is filiation. In Scripture he bears several names that denote this relation to the Father, such as word, wisdom, logos, son, the first-born, only-begotten and only son.”²⁰ The Spirit’s “personal property is ‘procession’ (*ekporusis*) or ‘spiration’ (*pnoae*).”²¹ These incommunicable properties of the divine persons reveal who God is *in himself*, apart from creation.²²

pattern, (6) each emic unit has a relevant occurrence within the total cultural pattern of an individual or society (Pike, “On the Emics and Etics of Pike and Harris,” 28–29).

¹³ Pike, *Language in Relation*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

¹⁵ Waterhouse, *History and Development of Tagmemics*, 6.

¹⁶ It is important to know that Pike is coming from a unique context of Bible translation in which linguists were sent into foreign communities with no written alphabet. Thus, using foreign observations to begin building a symbolism was part and parcel of his work in the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL).

¹⁷ Pike, *Language in Relation*, 40.

¹⁸ Pike noted frequently that all people work with a theory that is *directional*; that is, every theory views the world from a particular angle and is selective. We must focus, since we cannot account for all data at the same time (Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982], 5–7). Only God himself can do that. To God, the entire world is one giant, enormously complex emic unit.

¹⁹ Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Friend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 306.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 308.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 311.

²² See also J. van Genderen and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. Gerrit Bilkes and Ed M. van der Maas (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 154–58.

Another way of understanding the ontological Trinity is to consider it as the *emic* Trinity, that is, the Trinity as the ultimate insider community.²³ Only God knows himself—his eternal tripersonal “culture,” if you will—exhaustively. God has communicated with himself for all eternity. He is his own linguistic community.²⁴ What we find in God’s speech at creation is a temporal manifestation of an eternal reality. In this sense, at creation we witness “a twofold communication of God—one within and the other outside the divine being; one to the Son who was in the beginning with God and was himself God, and another to creatures who originated in time.”²⁵ The communication “within” God is the eternal generation of the Son, the Word of the Father.²⁶ This communication (generation) is done in the “hearing” of the Spirit. We can draw the latter truth from the New Testament, especially from John’s Gospel. Reflecting on John 16:13–15, Poythress writes,

The principal role of the Holy Spirit in these verses is to speak to the disciples of Christ. But we need to notice the basis for that speaking: “Whatever he hears he will speak.” The Spirit is first a hearer. And whom does he hear? The subsequent explanation brings in both the Father and the Son. The Spirit hears the Father, and hears about “what is mine,” that is, what is the Son’s.²⁷

This is an example of how we can take an etic observation (looking at what God is doing in history) and infer an emic truth (who God is in eternity). That the Father eternally utters (generates) the Son in the hearing of the Spirit is what makes intratrinitarian behavior emic. The ultimate purposive language system is the eternal language of the Trinity, for, as Douglas Kelly reminds us, “there is—and has been from all eternity—talk, sharing and communication in the innermost life of God.”²⁸ Certainly, we cannot say much about the details of this language, aside from what Scripture reveals. At the least, Scripture indicates that God has communicated with himself eternally in interpersonal expressions of love and glory. Love and glory constitute the emic language of the Trinity.

Understanding the immanent Trinity as emic brings the communicative nature of God to the fore, and, by extension, shines a light on the basis of all coherent creaturely communication. God in himself, as a being who eternally “speaks,” is the ground for all coherent communication outside of himself.²⁹

²³ We must be careful with our understanding of terms here, since “community” should not be taken in an ordinary sense, as if God were just like three human persons who have fellowship with one another. The persons share the divine essence, so by “community” we mean the intricate relations of the distinct persons of the Godhead, each of whom shares equally in the divine essence.

²⁴ Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 18.

²⁵ Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 420.

²⁶ “By generation, from all eternity, the full image of God is communicated to the Son” (ibid.).

²⁷ Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 18.

²⁸ Douglas Kelly, *The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology: Grounded in Holy Scripture and Understood in Light of the Church* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2008), 487.

²⁹ Hibbs, “Imaging Communion.”

Of course, the Trinity is also *etic*. That is, the actions and behavior of the triune God are observable to those outside of the eternal and holy insider community of Father, Son, and Spirit. This is typically referred to as the economic Trinity—God in his relationship to creation. Within the etic Trinity, as with the emic, there is both unity and distinction. While it is true that “the unity of God is manifested by the fact that the three divine persons are inextricably interconnected in their actions,” they are also distinguishable.³⁰ They each have roles to play in creation and redemption. The Father is the speaker who delivers his creative Word in the life-giving breath of the Spirit. It is the Son, not the Father or the Spirit, who submits himself to the Father’s will and dies on a cross. There are distinct personal roles played by each member of the Trinity, even as they are one in knowledge, will, and consciousness.³¹

This etic Trinity is observable to outsiders—to creatures—before and after the fall. However, after the fall, they do not understand God as they should. Romans 1 reminds us that all people know God and have some knowledge of his “eternal power and divine nature” (Rom 1:20). This God of whom all people know *is* the Trinity. However, Protestants and Catholics alike have always held that knowledge of the Trinity is strictly revealed in Scripture. So, what non-Christians know of the etic God is not rightly understood by them emically; that is, they do not recognize God as the three-in-one, self-contained God of love and glory, for that is only revealed to us in Scripture by the verbal behavior of the Trinity (special revelation). Instead, they might perceive God as a monolithic, non-communicative, abstract entity. God, in other words, must not be perceived only etically, from the outside. He must be perceived *as Trinity*, as the emic three-in-one, communicative, and relational God. As Calvin said, “[God] so proclaims himself the sole God as to offer himself to be contemplated clearly in three persons. Unless we grasp these, only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God.”³²

Given the climate of Trinitarian theology in the modern and contemporary eras, we should pause to make a critical point about this emic and etic Trinity. *The emic must undergird the etic*, and, by extension, *the immanent (ontological) must undergird the economic*. Cornelius Van Til frequently wrote of the “ontological Trinity” as the Christian’s grounding presupposition.³³ Why, some readers may

³⁰ Van Genderen and Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, 158.

³¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 1:461. See, however, Tipton’s helpful understanding of this teaching in Van Til’s thought: Lane G. Tipton, “The Function of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility,” *WTJ* 64 (2002): 289–306.

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.2.

³³ For example, see the following works by Van Til: *Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007), 59, 73, 124, 197, 198, 353, 364; *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 29–30, 39, 43, 128; *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphant, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 37, 38, 100–101, 227, 229, 236, 241, 395–96, 397–98. These page references are taken from the indexes of the respective works.

wonder, did he throw in the word “ontological”? Why not just say “Trinity”? The decision was, no doubt, intentional for Van Til. Many theologians of his era and ours collapse the ontological or immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity.³⁴ Doing so not only makes God dependent on creation; it also means that God simply is what he does, and that is a very dangerous ontology, for it destabilizes the being of God and suggests that God does not *have* an identity; rather, he *makes* one, and that can (and should) lead Christians to feel that they are serving a somewhat capricious God.³⁵

Rather than leave himself open to this possibility, Van Til repeatedly stresses the necessity of the *ontological* Trinity. This stress makes perfect sense when we consider the emic-etic distinction we have introduced to Trinitarian theology. There would be no etic—no observable reality to outsiders—if there were no emic. There can be no outsider if there is not first an insider. Thus, that the emic Trinity (God in himself) exists necessarily in independence from all else is what allows for our apprehension of the etic Trinity in creation and redemption. *To create and redeem, God goes outside of himself*; he goes to outsiders with the offer first of life and then of forgiveness and reconciliation, which alone can enable fallen creatures to be united with the tri-personal God. In salvation, sinful outsiders become righteous insiders—righteous, mind you, because they are clothed in the righteousness of one of the members of the divine emic community: Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God (Rom 13:14).³⁶ All of this, however, is possible because of the emic Trinity. We could not be adopted as sons of God apart from the divine Son. As reflected in the title of David Garner’s recent work, we are only “sons in the Son.”³⁷ We are reconciled with

³⁴ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 489–90. See also Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 83. Fred Sanders has stated the problem concisely: “To tie economic and immanent Trinity together too closely is to collapse the divine being into the world process, to make God’s freedom indiscernible, and to saddle the created world with the burden of God’s self-actualization. There is only one Trinity, and that Trinity is truly present in salvation history, in the missions of the Son and Spirit. But that single economic and immanent Trinity is God, and God’s freedom must be duly recognized by theological formulations” (Sanders, “Entangled in the Trinity,” 181).

³⁵ For background on this issue in Barth’s theology, see James J. Cassidy, “Election and Trinity,” *WTJ* 71 (2009): 53–81.

³⁶ By using the term “community” with reference to the triune God, I am not aligning myself with social Trinitarianism. There are certainly strands of truth within social Trinitarianism, but there are significant problems as well, namely, that the advocates of this position attempt to rationalize the being of God in a manner analogous to that of traditional Thomistic Trinitarian theology. The latter emphasizes God’s unity; the former, his trinity. Reformed theology, as mentioned earlier, holds to the equally ultimate, mysterious, and incomprehensible relationship of oneness and threeness in God. Nevertheless, as Hodge notes, we have clear biblical grounds in affirming that “The Father, Son, and Spirit are severally subject and object. They act and are acted upon, or are the objects of action. Nothing is added to these facts when it is said that the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct persons; for a person is an intelligent subject who can say I, who can be addressed as Thou, and who can act and can be the object of action” (Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:444).

³⁷ David B. Garner, *Sons in the Son: The Riches and Reach of Adoption in Christ* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2016).

the emic Trinity because of the work of the etic Trinity, but the work of the etic Trinity always and everywhere presupposes the emic Trinity. Thus, we can and must say with Van Til that “if we are to have *coherence* in our experience, there must be a correspondence of our experience to the eternally coherent experience of God. Human knowledge ultimately rests upon the internal coherence within the Godhead; our knowledge rests upon the *ontological* Trinity as its presupposition.”³⁸

There are still other benefits to viewing the Trinity as emic and etic. Some of these can be drawn out of Pike’s original statements about the value of each viewpoint. Let us deal with the emic first, and then the etic.

We noted earlier three ways in which the emic is valuable for us: it (1) helps us understand how a language or culture is constructed as a whole, (2) enables us to understand the personal actors in that culture, and (3) establishes a homogeneous behavioral basis upon which we can predict future behaviors. We can apply these values analogically to the emic Trinity.

First, the notion of the emic Trinity helps us to understand God’s identity as communicative and tri-personal; that is, as a whole, God is to be understood as *his own linguistic community*, independent from creation. Some contemporary theologians may balk at this because they feel it distances God from his creatures. But actually the opposite is the case. If God is inherently communicative and personal—if he is, as Van Til puts it, “absolute personality”—then we relate to him on a level far deeper than we often recognize. What’s more, we not only gain insight into the nature of God as communicative and personal; we also gain insight into the nature of creation as relational. By that we mean *creation is fundamentally personal and relational*. In the words of Van Til, “Our surroundings are shot through with personality because all things are related to the infinitely personal God.”³⁹ Every element of creation is related to every other element by the all-controlling plan of a personal God. To God, the entire cosmos is one complex emic unit, known intimately and exhaustively only to him. To put it negatively, there is nothing that exists by itself. Within the created realm, “autonomy” is illusory. Everything is interdependent and related, and everything is dependent on the personal God of Scripture.

Second, just as the emic view of language enables us to understand the personal actors in a given culture, so the concept of the emic Trinity helps us to understand the etic actions of God. I am here doing little more than expanding Herman Bavinck’s discussion on the necessity that the Creator God be triune. For Bavinck, “If, in an absolute sense, God could not communicate himself to the Son, he would be even less able, in a relative sense, to communicate himself

³⁸ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 59; emphasis added.

³⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, vol. 2 of *In Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 78. For the development of this idea in a counseling context, see Hibbs, “Panic and the Personal God,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 29, no. 3 (2015): 36–41.

to his creature. If God were not triune, creation would not be possible.”⁴⁰ Part of what Bavinck is expressing here is the truth that what we see in the actions of the etic Trinity is grounded somehow in the nature of the emic Trinity. In the words of Gerald Bray, “What God does in time reflects who and what he is in eternity.”⁴¹ We have before us, then, a paradigm for more deeply understanding the actions of God in time. Why did God use speech to create the cosmos (etic)? Because he is a personal, communicative being (emic). Why did God adopt us as his children in Christ (etic)? Because the Father has always gloried in the eternal Son (emic) and longs to commune with and glory in his created sons and daughters in eternity future. Why is the Spirit the bond of union for all believers in Christ (etic)? Because the Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son (emic).⁴² In sum, the concept of the emic Trinity helps us better understand and appreciate all that God has done to create and redeem. It does this by showing how the emic is the ground for the etic.

Third, as the emic establishes a homogeneous behavioral basis upon which we can predict future behaviors, the notion of the emic Trinity gives us confidence in God’s promises being fulfilled in the future. God does not change (Jas 1:17). The emic Trinity—who God is in himself—gives us utter surety that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Heb 13:8). Moreover, because God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), we trust that what he has revealed about himself and his desires—all of which is grounded in the emic Trinity—is trustworthy and true. Christians, however, do not even have to “predict future behaviors” for God, because he has revealed his future behaviors to us in his word. Nonetheless, we can have firm faith in the truth that God’s “homogenous behavior” of love, grace, mercy, and justice will be the basis on which his future actions stand.

Let us now deal with the statements Pike made about the value of the etic viewpoint. Pike wrote that the etic has value in (1) training linguists to see a broad spectrum of behavior occurring around the world, (2) allowing linguists to “obtain a technique and symbolism ... for recording the events of a culture,” (3) reminding us that all linguists studying a foreign language begin by making only etic observations, many of which will then be adapted to fit the emic patterns of the culture in question, and (4) helping us to focus on smaller areas of emic study while we draw on more widespread etic patterns for comparison. We can examine each of these analogically with reference to the etic Trinity.

First, the etic Trinity—God in his external work—helps us to see a broad spectrum of holy behaviors that are imitated on a finite scale by God’s creatures. Van Til once wrote, “All of man’s acts must be representational of the acts of God. Even the persons of the Trinity are mutually representational. They are

⁴⁰ Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 420.

⁴¹ Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 29.

⁴² See Matthew Levering, “The Holy Spirit in the Trinitarian Communion: ‘Love’ and ‘Gift’?,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 2 (2014): 126–42.

exhaustively representational of one another.”⁴³ There is much to unpack here, but at the very least we find in these words a critical implication for us. If all of our behaviors are to be representative of God, then any behavior that can be labeled with the adjective “good”—anything selfless, sacrificial, coherent, graceful, beautiful, loving, kind, or wise—is representative on a finite scale of what is properly (directly or indirectly) rooted in the emic Trinity and worked out in the etic Trinity.⁴⁴

Everywhere, we can observe God’s common and special grace manifested in the behaviors of creatures. Sometimes it is easy to relate these behaviors to the etic Trinity, and other times it is not. Studying the expression of God outside himself, however, exposes us to a pattern of behaviors according to which we might judge (or at least begin inspecting) the allegedly good behaviors of creatures. For example, consider an office worker who, despite the criticism of his colleagues, submits to the will of his boss in carrying out a business proposal. What his co-workers view as thoughtless submission or even cowardice is, in fact, vaguely reflective of Christ’s voluntary submission to God the Father during his time on earth (Luke 22:42)—a behavior of the etic Trinity. This is not to say that the office worker is a type of Christ, or even that his decision to submit to his boss is essentially holy. On the contrary, he may grumble and wince at the idea of submission! It does, however, tell us that *if* there is anything good in the man’s decision to submit, that goodness is ultimately possible and meaningful because of what God has done in creation and redemption. This is but one example of how observing behaviors of the etic Trinity can help us interpret the (supposedly representational) behaviors of God’s creatures. Thus, studying the broad spectrum of behaviors in the etic Trinity helps us to inspect and assess the array of mimetic creaturely behaviors in time and space.

Second, we noted that studying the etic allows linguists to “obtain a technique and symbolism . . . for recording the events of a culture.” What is the purpose of this symbolism? Symbolization is an attempt to graphically systematize communication. The benefit of this systematizing is that it presents language users with a perceptual organization of the language in focus. The perceptual organization of language then helps language users to make sense of the world around them, since that world is inevitably filtered through that language. Consider a simple example. A man at a gas station watches a teenager grab the purse of an older woman and then flee the scene. As the man fills out a police report, he writes down what he saw. Perceptually, he witnessed one human being lay hold of

⁴³ Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 78.

⁴⁴ We must be careful here, since there are some behaviors of the etic Trinity that are *not* necessary to God (i.e., required by the emic Trinity). For example, suffering is a behavior of the second person of the Trinity (the etic Trinity), but that does not mean that the emic Trinity—God in himself—is a “suffering God.” Rather, God’s ability to suffer is what Oliphint might consider a covenantal property, a property that God voluntarily takes on with regards to creation but which is not necessary to his being. See K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 40.

an object that was attached to another human being and then run away with it. This is interpreted by the man to be *theft*, and he expresses this with his language, perhaps a sentence such as, “The boy stole the woman’s purse and then tried to escape.” His language has graphically organized his perception. What’s more, it has solidified his understanding of what constitutes theft. In other words, the symbolization of written language reinforces his interpretation of reality.

Now, what is true of this smaller incident is true for all of us with every experience we have. The symbolism of language—which for Pike is initially constructed from etic observations—helps reinforce our interpretation of the world and its events. A very similar phenomenon happens on a spiritual plane when we consider the etic Trinity as the symbolization of God’s redemption in history. God’s work in the world gives us a spiritual, perceptual grid through which we interpret all that goes on around us. Take the same experience we just described—the man who witnesses a teenager stealing a woman’s purse. We can (and should) interpret that action with reference to the legal system, but on a deeper level we process the event with *categories of redemption*. That is to say, the boy’s theft is not simply a free-will decision by a human agent, a decision which violates the codes of conduct for a given country. The boy’s theft is a mark of *sin*. For Christians, his action is a reverberation of Adam’s sin of disobedience in the Garden of Eden. The remedy for that sin cannot be merely external—a punishment meted out by a judge in a juvenile court. The remedy must in the end be internal renewal, spiritual rebirth, a heart of stone divinely replaced with a heart of flesh (Ezek 36:26).⁴⁵ How do Christians know this? Because of the etic Trinity! What the Father, Son, and Spirit have done in creation and redemption—the long and glorious history of heavenly intervention—lays out our spiritual grid of perception. We understand the world through the symbolism (the historical manifestation of God’s work, now inerrantly preserved in Scripture) of the etic Trinity. True, that symbolism is somewhat abstract when compared to a physically represented symbolization of a human language. But the principle still holds. Observing and studying what the etic Trinity has done in creating and redeeming humanity helps us to “obtain a technique and symbolism ... for recording the events of a culture.” The nuance is that we are now considering this symbolism not as a written language but as a revealed system of interpretation for spiritual realities.

In essence, I am saying that the etic Trinity has “written” reality—both creation and redemption—with the pen of revelation.⁴⁶ We use those revelatory

⁴⁵ Notice here the link between the etic and emic Trinity and the etic and emic spiritual behaviors of creatures. God’s creatures are ever striving to have their etic (external behaviors) conform to the Christ-like emic. Christians are in a constant struggle to move from the etic (who they are currently, in the process of sanctification) to the emic (who they truly are in Christ, in intimate fellowship with the emic Trinity). God is the only one whose etic behavior perfectly and exhaustively corresponds to his emic identity.

⁴⁶ See Hibbs, “We Who Work with Words: Towards a Theology of Writing,” *Them* 41 (2016): 460–76. I draw on this article for what follows. Because all things are essentially linguistic products

markings to perceive the true nature of human behavior all around us, and that is analogous to the way in which linguists develop a written language for non-literate cultures, helping the language users to organize and process the reality they encounter each day.

Third, the etic has value in reminding us that all linguists studying a foreign language begin by making only etic observations, many of which will then be adapted to fit the emic patterns of the culture in question. Consider this in light of the process that non-Christians go through as they pass from unbelief to Spirit-wrought faith. Because God is omnipresent, non-Christians have no choice but to see God everywhere (Ps 139:7–12). They witness God working in the world (etic Trinity) without being fully aware that it is the triune Christian God who is at work. Right now, non-Christians are making etic observations about reality. They are witnessing acts of kindness, receiving words of grace and compassion, taking in the splendor and breadth of nature. All of these phenomena are rooted in the etic Trinity. They are gifts of common grace meant to call non-Christians into relationship with the God of glory. And when non-Christians are reborn in the power of the Spirit, they have a newfound understanding of such phenomena. Acts of kindness are not merely selfless acts done for another, which is how the world might define “kindness.” Rather, they are actions rooted in the God who loved us *before* we had the

of the Trinitarian God and mark his presence in the world, there is a sense in which God has written himself in everything. In the words of Dorothy Sayers, we might say that in God’s general revelation, he has written his “autobiography,” that is, he has clearly revealed who he is (Rom 1:19–20) (Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* [New York: HarperOne, 1987], 89). There is nothing that exists in the world that does not in some sense testify to who God is, and nothing that is not written into his personal plan for history. Oliphint reminds us that “history can be properly defined only in light of what the second person of the Trinity has descended to do—both in creation generally and for his people more specifically” (K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013], 64). Sayers adds that in the incarnation, God wrote himself into history as the central character (*Mind of the Maker*, 88). Creation and history are steeped in God’s presence because he has written them.

God has also written redemption in his special revelation. The repetition of the Greek word *ἔγραπται*, “it is written,” both in LXX and NT, lends warrant to this conclusion. The term (along with the participial form, *γεγραμμένα*) is often used to express that what God has declared in Scripture must be followed for the redemption of his people (Josh 1:8; 8:31; 23:6; 1 Kgs 2:3; 2 Chr 23:18; Ezra 3:2, 4; Ps 40:7; Matt 2:5; 4:6, 7, 10; 21:13; 26:24, 31; Mark 14:21; and others). Such a usage implies the fixity that we commonly associate with the craft of writing. As Hunt, supported by a great number of others in the Reformed tradition, notes, “the very notion of *divine revelation*, the communication of truth that cannot otherwise be known, demands a method of documentation and preservation that goes beyond orality, pictorial representation, dance, or smoke signals.... [Only writing] possesses the objectivity and permanency needed to tell the old, old story” (Arthur W. Hunt III, *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003], 35). Triune writing in this sense brands an object of reality with its author’s presence (i.e., God himself). And that presence does not evaporate. It holds. God is always present with his words, bringing them to fulfillment.

chance to love him (John 3:16)—indeed, *while* we were yet sinners (Rom 5:8).⁴⁷ Non-Christians, in other words, make etic observations of reality (observations of the work of the etic Trinity, often mediated through human agents) and then adjust them to the emic understanding they acquire when immersed in the “language” of special grace. It is then that they see the etic Trinity as an outworking of the emic Trinity.

Fourth and finally, we saw that the etic has value in helping us to focus on smaller areas of emic study while we draw on more widespread etic patterns for comparison. None of us is a specialist in everything. We each have our unique role in God’s redemptive plan, manifested in the daily work we put ourselves to—as parents, office workers, sales associates, and other occupations. We strive to image Christ in our respective roles, and yet we know that others have roles different from ours. While we aim to move closer in fellowship with the emic Trinity—through the work of the etic Trinity—we make observations about how the etic Trinity is at work in the lives of those who are distant from us. There is a sense here in which another person’s life is a foreign country. As outsiders, we make etic observations of purposive behaviors (though we are not always aware of the purposes). We speculate about possible motives for decisions and reasons why events occur in a person’s life. In doing this, we are developing etic patterns that may be useful to us in our own lives. We are looking at what the etic Trinity might be doing providentially in someone else’s life and using that in our own life to interpret similar events. Of course, we can and often do *misinterpret* what the etic Trinity is doing in a given situation, and there is always an element of mystery that remains. But this does not (and should not) stop us from trying to draw on etic observations to deepen our emic (personal) relationship with the triune God.

Let me offer just one example. I have struggled for over a decade with an anxiety disorder. God has taught me much through it and has drawn me closer to himself in the process. I sometimes wonder what other Christians were observing when I was fighting a particularly rough swell of nerves. On one occasion, a co-worker asked me how I was doing. I responded with something like the following. “I’ve been seeing over and over again that when my life is free of anxiety, I drift away from God and pursue some sort of idol. God always uses the pain of anxiety to draw me to dependence.” The co-worker responded simply: “Hmmm ... I needed to hear that.” I do not know exactly why this person replied in this way, but it was evident that what the triune God was doing in my life was of some help to her in her own life. Her observations of the etic

⁴⁷ Note how different this Christian notion of kindness is from the secular mantra, “The more you give, the more you get.” While I appreciate the sentiment behind such a statement (people cheered for Paul McCartney when he uttered this statement in an episode of *Saturday Night Live* some years ago), it is fundamentally flawed. If I do something for someone else *because* I think that later someone will do the same for me, my motive is still selfish, not selfless. It is only if I know that I will gain *nothing* by doing something for someone else that the act is truly selfless.

Trinity at work in another were then useful in her own spiritual formation. She was drawing on etic observations, in this sense, to help her in her emic relationship with God.

In ending this discussion, I will revisit an earlier point. The emic-etic distinction teaches us much about the Trinity—who God is essentially as communicative and how he has acted to create and redeem the cosmos. Yet, there is also an emic-etic dimension to personal Christian life, and I have hinted at this in the preceding paragraphs. Let me develop this aspect briefly here before concluding the article.

V. *Applying the Emic-Etic Distinction to Creatures*

As creatures living in a fallen world, each of us is on a trajectory. Upon birth, we enter the world as observers of the etic Trinity—a God from whom we are estranged because of the inherited sinful nature we have in Adam. We are responsible to this God even if we claim ignorance of him, for we all truly know him (Rom 1). We are, in this sense, *outsiders* with regards to the divine, redemptive “language” of forgiveness, love, and glory. This redemptive language is built upon the dialect of pure love and glory that is spoken among the persons of the emic Trinity. In faith and by God’s grace, creatures can move from being etic observers of God’s redemptive language to being participants within it—trained in the tongue of reconciliation, beneficiaries of the saving message of Jesus Christ. For Christians, all of life is a movement from the etic to the emic, outside observation to personal participation. That participation climaxes in the indwelling of the persons of the Trinity.

In John 14:23, Jesus says, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” When we receive Christ, we invite the Father and the Son to indwell us. And the Spirit is not left out of this indwelling. Paul asks the Corinthians a simple but profound question, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor 3:16; cf. Rom 8:9). The rhetorical nature of Paul’s question is obvious. Christians are creatures *indwelt* by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The tri-personal God lives *in* us. This is the ultimate transfer from etic to emic—though this transfer is not consummated until we enter into glory.

That this paradigm is in place for every Christian is substantiated by Jesus’ own earthly ministry. Consider Mark 4:1–13, where Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower.

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge. ²He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the

soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.” ⁹Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” ¹⁰When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables ¹²so that, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”” ¹³Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?” (ESV)

Jesus here has formed his own emic community, separate from “those on the outside” (v. 11). The outsiders cannot understand the language that he is speaking; that is, they cannot perceive the meaning of the parable. They are etic observers. However, Jesus’ own disciples cannot understand the parable either! He has told them that they have been given “the secret of the kingdom of God,” but they do not seem to understand what he means. They have not yet learned the tongue of redemption. If they had, they would have understood that Jesus *himself* is the secret of God’s kingdom, for he is the eternal Word, now wrapped in human flesh and calling all people to repent and believe in him. Jesus is himself the promised seed of the woman (Gen 3:15), the word that is sown in the hearts of men (Mark 4:14). His disciples would realize this only later. At the time of the telling of this parable, they were still on the trajectory from etic to emic; they were outside observers of the redemptive language of God, but not yet native participants in that “culture” of redemption.

The need for all true believers to move from etic to emic—from mere observers of the Trinitarian language of grace to active participants within it—is presented strikingly in the story of Nicodemus (John 3). Here, we learn something very important about this creaturely move from etic to emic: *it is an internal rebirth that is solely God’s doing, and it restructures the entire life of the creature.*

Nicodemus came to Jesus after nightfall with the hope of learning more about him. Before he encountered Jesus, the incarnate second person of the etic Trinity, he had carried with him a perceptual grid for reality: a way of understanding the world both physically and spiritually. Everything he perceived and understood was bound together with all the glorious complexity of a Jackson Pollock painting. He knew about fish and finances, death and daylight, sacrifice and sapience. All of what he experienced in his embodied existence was expressed on a single canvas of perception, stretched as tight as the skin around his knuckles when he struck the wood on the door of the Word.

What happened that night? Nicodemus had come to admit Jesus’ divine influence, but then found himself puzzled at this teacher’s claim that he must be born again in order to see and enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5), a kingdom that has its own language of grace. Why could Nicodemus not see the kingdom? In essence, Nicodemus did not have Christ at the center of his perceptual canvas.

“You need a new canvas,” in effect, is what Jesus told Nicodemus.

You will have to abandon your total thought system and begin to build it all over again. You will have to accept my goodness and power as primary data, and start from there. Like a baby coming into the new world, you will have to learn to live with these facts before you can understand their source or reason. You must learn to accept the revolution this makes in your whole spiritual life without being able at the moment to understand its source any more than the sailor understands the source of the wind that moves his sails.⁴⁸

In other words, Nicodemus would need to be reborn and acquire a new native language—the language of the etic Trinity, the language of redemption. This underscores the point that “Christianity is not an accretion; it is not something added. It is a *new* holistic outlook which is satisfied with nothing less than penetration to the farthest corners of the mind and the understanding.”⁴⁹

We know from elsewhere in John’s Gospel that this would not happen by Nicodemus’s efforts. The truth that Nicodemus needed—the truth that all of us need—was given only by the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth. Our transfer from etic to emic happens *internally* by the Spirit of God himself. The Spirit then becomes our language teacher, guiding us through the foreign country of reconciliation and restoration. Thus, Jesus would later tell his disciples,

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13–15)

Only an emic member of the etic Trinity could deliver the truth to Nicodemus ... and to us. The Spirit opens our hearts to receive the saving Word of the Father. So, our movement from sinners to saints, from etic observers to emic participants in God’s triune language of grace, is a work of God in our hearts, and this work restructures all of our life. You might say, then, that when a person becomes a Christian, he learns a new language.

All of this can be summarized in one of Pike’s deceptively simple poems, entitled “Emic Circle.”

See, and know.
 Know, and be.
 Be, and do.
 Do, and see.
 See, and know.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Kenneth L. Pike, “Language and Life 1: A Stereoscopic Window on the World,” *BSac* 114, no. 454 (April 1957): 56.

⁴⁹ Kenneth L. Pike, “Prescription for Intellectuals,” *Eternity* 8 (August 1957): 45.

⁵⁰ Pike, “On the Emics and Etics of Pike and Harris,” 45.

Here is how I interpret this poem in reference to the emic-etic distinction. My rendition is far more clumsy:

Etic, and emic.

Emic, and deeper emic.

Deeper emic, and etically perceived behavior.

Etically perceived behavior, and etic observance of others' behaviors.

Etic, and emic.

As Christians, we move from etic observance of the Trinity in the world around us to emic participation in the Trinitarian language of grace and redemption (See, and know)—a language that is foreign to us. As we are taught that language by the Spirit (John 16:13), who is a native participant in the triune communion of grace, we move closer and closer to communion with the triune God (Know, and be). In that communion, we act as the hands and feet of the body (1 Cor 12:12–31), working under God's governance to bring others into the linguistic community of redemption (Be, and do). As we carry out these actions, we continue to make etic observations (Do, and see). Each new etic observation (either of God's work or of the daily lives of people), then leads to another opportunity for emic deepening (See, and know).

VI. *Conclusion*

In this article, I have argued that the emic-etic distinction draws our attention to the communicative nature of the Trinity and deepens our understanding of the traditional immanent-economic categories. This article is meant to be one example of how language theory can serve as a unique window onto theology proper. As Christians reflect on the communicative nature of God and their own movement from etic to emic, they will be better equipped to see the whole world as moving towards a hearth of communion in the God who is a linguistic community unto himself.