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Communing with the Triune God: Petrus van Mastricht, Ecumenism, and the Nicene Roots of Communion with God

Daniel Lee Hill¹ 

¹ George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University

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The recent development of receptive ecumenism has renewed the ecumenical movement and provided a way forward in which ecclesial communities receive and give gifts to one another. This essay attempts to offer an account of receptive ecumenism in a distinctively Reformed key, centered around Nicene notions of communion with God. In light of how previous grammatical approaches to ecumenism have terminated in the mere elucidation of difference, this essay builds upon Petrus van Mastricht's account of communion with God as a resource for understanding and conceiving of ecumenism as premised on mutual communication and sharing of meanings.

Introduction

The Nicene Creed serves as something of a landmark moment in Christian doctrine, "a great irreversible event in the life of the church" (Torrance 2016, 13–14). While its immediate reception was somewhat contested, the judgments and logics pertaining thereto have been subsequently received, passed on, and embraced by large swaths of the Christian community, ranging across geographic, ethnic, and ecclesial lines. The heart of this famed document, of course, is the nature of the relationship between the God of Israel and the theanthropic person, Jesus of Nazareth (Yeago 1994, 153). The question at issue was that of unity and plurality with respect to the living God. Of particular import is the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, where, as Lewis Ayres has noted, pro-Nicene theologians sought to employ language that underscored the unity of the Godhead on the one hand and the personal and real distinctions that pertain to the Father and the Son on the other (Ayres 2004, 295). Such considerations would later be expanded more clearly to include the person of the Holy Spirit since, as Basil of Caesarea comments, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was only "laid down cursorily [at Nicaea], not being considered as necessary of elaboration, because at that time this question had not yet been agitated" (Basil of Caesarea, *Ep.* 125).

In recent years, Christian churches have seemed to view Nicene dogma as a ripe source for pursuing Christian unity and understanding across denominational lines. Nicene dogma is, after all, the church's shared inheritance and is often understood as the basis upon which ecumenical work can proceed. And so it seems apropos that nineteenth-century attempts

to foster Christian unity centered their attention on its judgments and found within it a resource for gathering together as one people of God (see Seitz 2001). These ventures are often referred to as the modern ecumenical movement, here defined as the organized attempt of Christian communions around the globe to achieve Christian unity. This movement emerged in the early nineteenth century and continues to this day (Hietamäki 2023; Nelson and Raith 2017, 11). While different traditions understand the ecumenical task in disparate ways, it principally unfolds as a dialogue between and among Christian traditions, often over our common reception of our faith, which first lived in our ancestors and now lives in us today (2 Tim. 2:5), and our divergent expressions of it. Yet much of the energy for ecumenism seems to have waned in what has been termed “the great ecumenical winter,” wherein the energy and verve of previous generations have become a distant memory (Murray 2008, 9). Recognizing that no amount of descriptive clarity of theological differences can overcome the real differences that exist between Christian communions, a new movement termed “receptive ecumenism” has emerged in order to renew the church’s attempts at spiritual unity (Murray 2014, 3). At its base, receptive ecumenism shifts the lens of ecumenical dialogue internally, asking with humility, What goods can I receive from other Christian traditions in ways faithful to the communion I call home? Instead of attempting to move another communion closer to one’s own or to clarify one’s tradition in order to increase the other’s understanding of the differences, receptive ecumenism prioritizes a positive attitude toward the ecclesial other in hopes of learning from them and an introspective discernment of the “specific dysfunctions in one’s own tradition or ecclesial community” that seeks “transformative ecumenical learning in order to effect ecclesial change” (Ryan 2021, 10). As Paul Murray puts it, receptive ecumenism is “aimed less at asking what it is that another tradition needs to understand better about one’s own tradition and [is] aimed instead at asking what it is that one’s own tradition has to learn and needs to learn from other traditions” (Murray 2008, 11).

In what follows I want to propose that the Reformed articulations of communion with God, as encapsulated in the reflections of seventeenth-century Reformed scholastic Petrus van Mastricht, offer something of a pattern for how we might think of ecumenism as delighting in our common inheritance, the fount from which we spring, and committing to the communication of goods between ecclesial communities—a pattern for ecumenism that is not entirely dissimilar from the recent work in receptive ecumenism. Using this logic, which is founded on Nicene commitments to the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, van Mastricht unpacks the nature of the Christian’s communion with God. In so doing, he provides an illustration of ecumenical dialogue around orthodox commitments that extends beyond the grammatical approaches that terminate on the articulation of the lexical and syntactical meanings of a particular Christian tradition. For, on van Mastricht’s account, communion with God and the

communion of the saints are fundamentally about communication, the giving and receiving of goods. In what follows I will briefly canvass what I view as some of the limits of the grammatical approach to ecumenical dialogue as typified in the work of the great Lutheran ecumenist George Lindbeck. From there, I will exposit the Nicene underpinnings of van Maastricht's account of communion with God, demonstrating the manner in which he strives to receive the greater tradition and allow it to nourish his own. In the paper's final section, I will draw some tentative parallels and conclusions with respect to ecumenical dialogue.

The Limits of Grammatical Ecumenism

The modern ecumenical movement as we know it today began in the early twentieth century. The formulation of organizations such as the World Council of Churches and the Young Men's Christian Association, as well as the convening of the World Mission Conference, were all aimed at pursuing Christian unity in one form or another, often along either missional or theological lines. While the forms and ends of ecumenical dialogue differ from one communion to another, part of the goal seems consistently to have been to foster community, understanding, friendship, and trust across ecclesial lines. Pivotal documents such as the "Orthodox-Reformed Agreed Statement on the Holy Trinity" (1992), the "Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East" (1994), and the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (1999), to name but a few, have all emerged as a result of the continued efforts of theologians and church leaders to move beyond divisive polemics and toward communion. But such communion can hardly be achieved without cultivating a proper understanding of each tradition's doctrinal distinctives and the cluster of commitments that render these distinctives intelligible.

Perhaps not unrelatedly, the close of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of a grammatical turn in theological inquiry, indebted perhaps in no small part to those following the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. This approach has seemed to hold great promise for ecumenical efforts across and between the various strands of the Christian tradition and is perhaps best encapsulated in George Lindbeck's landmark text, *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984). Lindbeck argues that Christianity is best understood along the lines of cultural linguistics. Recognizing that Christian doctrine is typically understood either as fundamentally propositional and cognitive, or as experiential and expressive, or as some hybrid model of the two, Lindbeck worries that none of these approaches is able to account for a religious tradition's continuity or change across time. For the cognitive-propositionist, on Lindbeck's reading, doctrine is reducible to believing the correct set of propositions, while the experiential-expressivist reduces doctrine to a series of nondiscursive symbols. But Lindbeck is concerned that both approaches render reconciliation across different faith communities impossible, as the former views it as tantamount to a capitulation in one form or the other and the latter lacks any way to

articulate what is in fact being preserved (or lost) diachronically (Lindbeck 1984, 16, 78). So, to take but one example, if the Eucharist is merely a memorial service that enables us to remember the work of God in Christ, then any movement toward an account of “real presence” seems to be a nonstarter. Alternatively, if the Eucharist is merely a symbol that represents our experience of New Being or God-consciousness in the gathering of a faith community, then any attempt to preserve its meaning diachronically is nonsensical. Instead, Lindbeck proposes that religion functions as a kind of language enmeshed within a particular culture (or cultures) in what he refers to as a “cultural linguistic” approach to doctrine. On this account, “the function of church doctrines that becomes most prominent . . . is their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action” (Lindbeck 1984, 18).

On Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach, the Christian religion (or any religion) is a framework and interpretive medium supplied by the biblical narratives which are interrelated in particular ways in order to provide a practitioner with the capacity to interpret and experience the world and oneself in accordance with its terms (Lindbeck 1984, 34, 80). Similar to a culture or language, any religion is comprised of a lexicon and syntactical rules that govern and order the use of that lexicon within a particular community. As far as the Christian tradition is concerned, the lexical core of Christianity is provided primarily by Holy Scripture, with some additions arising from postbiblical tradition. Church doctrine for this or that particular community helps “instantiate syntactical rules that guide the use of this material in construing the world, community, and self, and still others provide semantic reference” (Lindbeck 1984, 81). As Lindbeck notes, and here he is worth quoting at length,

A religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought. ... It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (though it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (although these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed. Lastly, just as a language (or “language game,” to use Wittgenstein’s phrase) is

correlated with a form of life, and just as a culture has both cognitive and behavioral dimensions, so it is also in the case of a religious tradition. (Lindbeck 1984, 33)

For Lindbeck, the cultural-linguistic framework does not preclude the necessity of either experiences that are represented through symbols or propositions that are to be believed but relegates such features of the Christian life to a secondary or tertiary level, as the focus is on making “intrasyntactical rather than ontological truth claims” (Lindbeck 1984, 80).

If doctrine is fundamentally about grammatical and linguistic rules within religious and intra-religious communities, then the ecumenical force of Lindbeck’s project rises to the surface. Instead of attempting to convince the other community of this or that doctrine, on Lindbeck’s model we ought to see doctrines as interrelated patterns of speech that orient different Christian communities to historical novelties and controversies in particular ways. While Lindbeck recognizes that many contemporary ecumenical movements struggle to find a way to account for how changes that emerge from, say, the “Joint Declaration on Justification,” can be faithful to a given Christian community’s historic understanding of the doctrine or why some doctrinal differences are grounds for division while other are not, Lindbeck believes that his cultural-linguistic approach provides a way to give a coherent account for “doctrinal reconciliation without capitulation” (Lindbeck 1984, 7, 18, 91). Two of the primary goods to which Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model are ordered are providing a way to account for faithfulness in the midst of change, on the one hand, and a model for communicating the role a particular doctrine plays for a faith community on the other. Indeed, as Lindbeck makes clear in his foreword, and as one long committed to ecumenical dialogue, this is one of the motivating factors of his project (Lindbeck 1984, 8).

The merits of Lindbeck’s proposal and his contributions to the larger work of ecumenism between Christian communities are almost too extensive to list. Still, it is worth pausing to take note of two of its limitations as it relates to ecumenical dialogue. On the one hand, it is difficult to escape the notion that Lindbeck’s account of doctrine emphasizes the distance that exists between varying branches of the church of Christ. While Lindbeck notes the shared heritage and points of continuity that are present within, say, Anglicans and the Dutch Reformed on issues of salvation, the Trinity, and the deity of Christ, their areas of disagreement or divergence from one another are only intelligible within each community’s separate and supervening grammatical structure. But it is not immediately obvious to me why should we conceive of intra-Christian dialogue as paralleling intra-religious dialogue. Is the relationship between, say, Catholics and Anglicans closer to that between Mandarin and Aramaic speakers or Buddhists and Muslims? Such an account seems to render the differences almost

insurmountable and incommunicable (Lindbeck 1984, 129). Ecumenical dialogue becomes beleaguered with recounting lexicons or syntactical structures, but is this reconciliation? Is it the pursuit of the eschatological communion of the saints in hope (Barth 2017, 270)? The result may in fact be that traditions are ossified in such distance, “simply reinforcing each sponsoring church within its own current logic. ... [leaving] the respective churches continuing on their separate ways, relatively unchanged apart from enjoying better terms and greater mutual understanding than before” (Murray 2008, 14). Second, and relatedly, it seems difficult to ascertain how one Christian community could contribute to or build up another, receiving or giving gifts “for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). Perhaps such interchange is not needed. But if it is a positive good, Lindbeck’s account leaves me wondering how to conceive of ways that I could contribute to or inhabit traditions that differ from mine. I am and remain an outsider, peering at something foreign to me. Now of course, there are goods to be appreciated in recognizing the distinctiveness of another tradition and in refusing to interpret the world on its behalf or to sublimate its doctrines into my own schemas and wonder at their incoherence. But it seems to me that Lindbeck’s proposal, while providing an account of how a tradition might develop over time, leaves unaddressed the question of how we might bear witness to the full realization of the eschatological communion of the saints, one that exists *de jure* if not quite *de facto*, in ecumenical dialogue and how Nicaea itself, and its reception, provides the *fundamentum* for doing so.

Petrus van Mastricht’s Nicene Account of Communion with God

In order to gesture toward an alternative framework for understanding orthodox, ecumenical dialogue this side of Nicaea, we now turn to the work of the seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian Petrus van Mastricht and his account of communion with God. In what follows I will argue that van Mastricht’s account of communion with God hangs on Nicene logics with respect to the unity and plurality of the Godhead. He constructively receives this account from the broader Christian tradition, which he then employs for the sake of distinctively Reformed theological concerns.

For van Mastricht the terminus of Christ’s salvific work is the glorified “state of life,” one that centers on union with God in the beatific vision and communion with God in the life everlasting, both of which animate the person so she might “act blessedly” in the world without end (1.1.1 §XLI).¹ Union with God, on van Mastricht’s account, amounts to both the permeation of the intellect “with the purest spiritual light, so that it can see God in all his most glorious properties,” and the bestowal of the volition with “the most perfect inclination towards God, and every spiritual good,”

¹ All van Mastricht references are to his *Theoretico-practica theologia* (1698). Translations are mine.

thus enabling the redeemed to “possess God, that God himself may be ours,” which is indeed “the foundation of blessedness for all” (1.8.4 §X). Here his indebtedness to, and adaptation of, such figures as Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure is evident, a point that van Mastricht readily admits. This union with God, the ultimate good, is achieved for the saints on account of their union with Christ, which serves as its foundation (1.6.5 §III). United to Christ through the double bond of the Holy Spirit and faith, the Christian has a real, personal, and substantial union that preserves the distinction between God and the redeemed. And because Christ is true light from true light, in being united to the whole person of Christ, we are also brought into union with God (1.6.5 §XI).

But for van Mastricht, the concept of communion with God provides a necessary supplement for expositing the Christian’s eschatological beatitude as, on his reading, union with God on its own does not render the Christian eternally blessed. Rather, intellectual and volitional union with God *along with* communion enable the blessed life. This latter concept, communion with God, on van Mastricht’s reading, entails the mutual “interchange” or “communication” between God and the human creature (2.2.12 §I). For his part, the Lord God gives himself fully to the faithful to be their God, pouring out his attributes upon the redeemed for their blessedness and beatification and committing to communicating “all those things that flow from those attributes” (2.2.12 §I; cf. 1.2.23 §XIV). The redeemed in return, as it were, offer all they have back to God, body and soul, in a life of worship and obedience (2.2.12 §I; cf. 1.2.24 §XXV). And in this communion “consists all our excellence and blessedness (1 John 1:2–3). For what thing more excellent for man could be desired than communion and fellowship with the most blessed Trinity” (1.2.24, §XXV).

What is pressing for our purposes is the manner in which Nicene judgments about the consubstantiality of the Father and Son provide the “structure of meaning” that renders van Mastricht’s account of communion with God intelligible. Here we must center our attention on the theanthropic person, for basic to van Mastricht’s account is the judgment that “we have union and communion with God in Christ” (2.2.12 §III). Of note is the fact that communion with the triune Lord is only ever realized on account of our union with the theanthropic person, the one who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven. Naturally, one might be inclined to ask, What about Christ and our union with him renders him fit to serve as the grounds for our mutual interchange with God? Here, van Mastricht explicitly employs Nicene logics to work toward an answer. On account of sin’s incursion into the cosmos and our primordial parents’ violation of the covenant of works, humanity is ignorant of God and separated and alienated from him. This means we cannot have communion with God unless some mediator works to establish it on our behalf. For van Mastricht, it is precisely because the divine Son is consubstantial with the Father that our union with the former

affords us a union with the latter. The divine Son is “not only true God (1 John 5:20) and eternal God (Isa. 9:10)—eternal not only on a posterior part (as they say) but also on the anterior part (Mic. 5:2; Heb. 7:3)—but also indeed also *ὁμοούσιος*, consubstantial with the Father ... and thus through it he is equal to the Father” (1.2.26 §VIII). It is this one, the eternally begotten Son of God, who persons, as it were, a human nature in the incarnation, having “become flesh, not by mutation, but by assumption, so that, namely, with that flesh he might constitute one person” (1.5.4 §III). Importantly, it is only because the Mediator is “God consubstantial with the Father” that he is able to obtain “an infinite good, the union, communion, and enjoyment of the highest and infinite good ... and consequently apply the acquired infinite good” to the redeemed (1.5.4 §IV). Union with Christ is union with this *person* and, on account of it, union with the living God. So, while the Spirit “unites us with God” (2.2.12 §V), this is in virtue of the Spirit’s work of uniting the redeemed with Christ (see 1.6.5). In other words, we might say that the foundation for our communion with God is our union with Christ, the theanthropic person, who reunites those alienated and separated from God with Godself (2.2.12 §V). So, as we come to know this one, the divine Son, through the Holy Spirit, we are able to come to know, love, and commune with God the Father. Accordingly, in virtue of their union with the one who is consubstantial with the Father, the redeemed are able to have communion with “the true God, that is, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who constitute the one and only God” (2.2.12 §I).

While it is indeed the case that we can experience a “common communion” with the Lord God or a “specific communion” with the singular divine persons of the Trinity (1.2.24 §XXV; cf. 2.2.12 §II), this again is conditioned upon the mediating work of Christ and his consubstantiality with the Father according to his divine nature, for again “we have union and communion with God in Christ” (2.2.12 §III). Van Mastricht is quick to point out that our “specific communion” with the Father is always mediated through the theanthropic person, so much so that we can have specific communion with the Holy Spirit alone and a specific communion with the Son alone, but, when speaking of our communion with the first person of the Trinity, it is always ever a communion “with the Father and the Son” (1.2.24 §XXV). To put the matter another way, because the redeemed have been united to Christ and Christ is, according to his divine nature, God of God, true God of true God, they are able to have communion with God through Christ and in Christ, offering up their worship and obedience to a God who promises to give them every possible blessing for their eternal felicity.

None of these insights on the theanthropic person’s centrality in our relationship to and with God is particularly novel or unique to van Mastricht, although nuances in his Christology do abound, as Richard Cross has pointed out (Cross 2022, 151). But van Mastricht’s relative lack of novelty is precisely the point. His insights, however, are illustrative of at least two things

worth pausing to consider. First, van Mastricht's articulation of communion with God serves as an example of the retrieval of Nicene Trinitarianism and its deployment to provide a structure to the Christian life. So, we can say, on the one hand, that van Mastricht is doing what Khaled Anatolios has described as aspiring "to interpret the entirety of Christian experience in light of the oneness of being of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," receiving the insights of the previous generation and applying them constructively to interpret the Christian life (Anatolios 2011, 281). Van Mastricht is adamant that theology is not merely theoretical or analytic but "preeminently practical" since "all of its contents, by their own nature, demand activity with respect to the object known" (1.1.1 §XLVIII). So, what kind of activity is demanded from the truth of the Nicene creed? We must pursue communion with God in Christ through obedience and worship (2.2.12 §I). Furthermore, if the retrieval does involve both "a receptive and an active constructive posture," as Anatolios has proposed, we see in van Mastricht an example of how the reception of fourth-century Trinitarian judgments provides the framework for the construction of Reformed orthodox understandings of the Christian life in the seventeenth century and, ostensibly, today as well (Anatolios 2011, 281).

Second, and relatedly, we see in van Mastricht's Trinitarian exposition of communion with God a kind of receptive ecumenism, one that sees within the broader Christian tradition gifts that can be received for the nourishment of one's own faith community. Examples here are almost too numerous to count, as van Mastricht undoubtedly benefits from the conditions that life in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century afforded (Neele 2009, 60–61). Utrecht was relatively stable politically and offered Reformed Protestants the opportunity to formulate their theological instincts in an environment free from religious persecution. Additionally, the rediscovery of patristic texts during the Renaissance era gave scholars like van Mastricht access to great swaths of manuscripts written by prominent figures of the Christian tradition. So we might note that van Mastricht's conception of the personal properties of the divine persons, the eternal generation of the Son, and the disparate types of union (substantial, numerical, hypostatic, and mystical) are all indebted to his engagement with ideas and figures from the broader Christian tradition, some of which he cites and others he does not. As Neele notes, "Mastricht cites no less than 150 authors and their works [in his *Theoretico-practica theologia*], showing for the most part a continuity of the catholicity of Christian theology throughout the ages, including the patristic fathers, medieval sources, and past and present Lutheran and Reformed theologians," not to mention his dependency on the works of Augustine of Hippo and Bernard of Clairvaux in other works (Neele 2011, 150). Thomas Aquinas proves helpful, for example, in expositing the nature of union with God and in explaining the divine name, where van Mastricht quotes him verbatim before expanding upon the Angelic Doctor's insights, while Abraham Colvius's criticisms of Socinianism and neo-Arianism are viewed as so valuable that van Mastricht directs his readers to them. John

of Damascus's insights on the different types of union are foundational, and Robert Bellarmine's objections to Reformed articulations of the Son's aseity provide a necessary reorientation to how the Reformed should conceive of and articulate that doctrine. Indeed, van Mastricht is explicit that while the theologian's primary task is to engage with the exegesis of Holy Scripture, good theology will always be executed in dialogue with the ancient creeds, patristic voices, medieval theologians, and one's contemporaries (1.1.3; Fesko 2012, 156). Accordingly, it is unsurprising that van Mastricht's own account of communion with God emerges from a dialogue with and reception of the insights of other Christian figures. This is not to suggest that van Mastricht blindly adheres to the Christian tradition or that he fails to adopt a critical disposition toward some of its insights that he finds less than salutary. To take but a few examples, he is especially critical of Gregory of Nazianzus's "imprudent" use of language vis-à-vis deification (1.6.5 §IV), perhaps in no small part due to how Johannes Tauler and Valetine Weigel had appropriated such terminology in their respective corpora, and van Mastricht's polemical engagement with Lutherans such as Johann Gerhard over the *communicatio idiomatum* are particularly pointed. And there can be no denying his prominent criticisms of Roman Catholics, ranging from polemical engagement with the work of Jesuits to his rejection of various approaches to the veneration of icons within Catholic and Protestant circles alike. Still, it is worth noting that his Reformed construction of doctrine is one that prioritizes the reception and appropriation of the broader tradition. Van Mastricht himself notes that the writings of scholastics, ranging from Duns Scotus to Bellarmine, are indeed useful for building up the faithful concerning revealed truth, refuting the arguments of "pagans and atheists," and navigating the relationship between philosophy and theology (1.1.1 §XXV). Indeed, one might argue that his construction of Christian doctrine in a Reformed key is dependent upon engagement with the scholastic tradition and its predecessors in the early church in order to develop and articulate Reformed distinctives.

Communication, Hospitality, and Ecumenical Actions

Van Mastricht's account of communion with God and, perhaps more importantly, the manner in which he articulates his account as an expression of the Nicene faith, provides us with a scaffolding to build toward some ecumenical considerations, and it highlights the way that Nicene commitments to the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son provide a framework for understanding the Christian life. But perhaps more important for our purposes is the fact that it operates on the assumption that communication between Christian traditions is possible. Here the work of Oliver O'Donovan is particularly helpful in articulating the problem that besets the grammatical approach to ecumenical dialogue. From O'Donovan's perspective, communication is an inherently social activity, one that can only take place within the context of the mutual relations that constitute

a community. He writes, “A community is not simply a set of relations with a common term, but a relation of relations, a reflexive relation among participants in common relations. ... It is a form of attention to a double object of interest: the good shared, on the one hand, and the good of its *being* shared, on the other” (O’Donovan 2017, 47, original emphasis). For communication is undergirded by a particular logic that renders it coherent and possible:

The logic of communication is summed up in the phrase: “what is ‘mine’ is ‘ours.’” Not “what is ‘mine’ is ‘yours,’” which is the logic of bestowal, nor “this ‘mine’ is yours, and this ‘yours’ is mine,” which is the logic of exchange; both have a place within the logic of communication, but are subordinate to it. And certainly not “this ‘mine’ must cease to be mine and become ours,” which would be a denial of particular interest that could have no place in the logic of communication and would have no credibility. (O’Donovan 2017, 48)

O’Donovan proposes that “to communicate is to embrace a structure of meaning in which the particular is located within the common—not abandoning its particular fulfillments, but finding them in, and not apart from, the fulfillments of others” (O’Donovan 2017, 48). He therefore highlights the mutuality that is inherent to communication as a practice and the community that emerges from those members who are disposed to communicate. For it is communities that communicate, and in communication they exchange meanings and goods with one another. While O’Donovan’s focus is, ostensibly, on political theology, ethics, and the pursuit of the common good—that is, the social practices of communication—it seems his insights can be applied to the context of ecumenical dialogue insofar as ecumenism in many ways is about the struggle to form a common life for pilgrims as a community of the Nicene faith, anticipating the full realization of the communion of the saints in the kingdom of God and his Son.

To put the matter somewhat pointedly: What is the common project we are engaging in, especially in light of the increasing fragmentation that seems to characterize theological science as a discipline? What are actions that constitute this project? What ends are those actions directed toward, in both the longer and the shorter term? If it is to be pursuant of “community” and “communion,” then there cannot be *merely* the exchange or presentation of meanings so that, say, justification for Lutherans means X, sanctification for Baptists means Y, and a Thomist understanding of Christ’s human knowledge means Z, because stopping at such translation presupposes and strives to maintain a distance, not just difference, that renders communion and communication impossible. This is not to suggest that differences must be obfuscated or altogether overcome. Nor is it to suggest that the clarification of such meanings is unimportant. As John Zizioulas has

proposed, difference, or “otherness” in his parlance, is the condition that renders communion possible (Zizioulas 1985, 106). But I believe, as I have noted above, that in Petrus van Mastricht’s account of communion with God we do indeed have an alternative, or at least elements that must supplement some forms of ecumenical dialogue that terminate in clarification (Avis 2012, 233–34). On the one hand, we see in van Mastricht, as I have already suggested, a constructive receptivity toward the greater Christian tradition and a kind of catholicity that is basic to the constructive project. This in many ways could be charitably viewed as a work similar to the current field of receptive ecumenism, which, as Paul Murray explains, “is concerned to place at the forefront of the Christian ecumenical agenda the self-critical question, ‘What, in any given situation, can one’s own tradition appropriately learn with integrity from other traditions?’ and, moreover, to ask this question without insisting, although certainly hoping, that these other traditions are also asking themselves the same question” (Murray 2008, 12). Receptive ecumenism, as Gregory Ryan helpfully explains, is focused internally, on one’s own faith tradition and the shortcomings pertaining thereto and present therein (Ryan 2021, 8). It is ordered around a set of “critical-constructive interactions” that seek to discover what “new ways of growing together might become possible, even where apparently insurmountable obstacles presently exist” (Ryan 2021, 8). Ryan and Murray are cognizant that such work can only be undergone within the context of “increased mutual understanding and doctrinal clarification,” the very kind that Lindbeck’s proposal seeks to make possible (Murray 2008, 13). Still, receptive ecumenism attempts “to bring to the fore the prior necessary disposition to receptive transformational learning”—a disposition that eschews the need for mutuality or bilateral transformation, although that does remain a hope (Murray 2008, 14).

On the other hand, however, ecumenism requires the continual pursuit of *community* around the confession of the church’s faith in the triune Lord made known to us in Jesus Christ and attested in Holy Scripture as a foretaste of the great communion of the saints. And the triune Lord, the Nicene faith that confesses his triunity, and its implications and extensions into other areas of Christian doctrine are neither “mine” nor “yours,” neither the property, strictly speaking, of American Baptists or Orthodox Presbyterians, but “ours,” especially insofar as the triune Lord has chosen to give himself to *us* as *our* God. Indeed, van Mastricht’s particular account of communion with God is only intelligible in light of the “shared structure of meaning” that is the great inheritance of the faith handed down to him from his ancestors. So, perhaps the common project is the joint activity of exploring the depths of the Nicene faith, how this faith animates the broader contours of the Christian life, and how it ought to inform the distinctive commitments of various Christian communities. If this is the case, then there seems to be shared ground for mutual communication and information. For, as van Mastricht himself proposes, “the most blessed unity of the three persons, the

unanimity and mutual love, invites us to imitation, namely, that we who, by the bond of the one Spirit, by the one faith, with the same Son of God and through him, are united with the same Father, should strive to keep inviolate the same body of Christ and the unity of the Spirit” (1.2.24 §XXVIII).

The imitation of this unity, or, in parlance I prefer, the distant creaturely echo of it, can only be realized through social practices of hospitality that anticipate and bear witness to the realization of the communion of the saints in the world without end. As Luke Bretherton notes in his comments on hospitality as a social practice, “Christian hospitality is inaugurated at Pentecost and bears witness to the eschaton and corresponds to the tension at the heart of the eschaton, whereby it is established but not yet fully manifest. As an eschatological social practice, Christian hospitality is inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit, who enables the church to host the life of its neighbors without the church being assimilated to, colonized by, or having to withdraw from its neighbors” (Bretherton 2010, 143). Bretherton notes that the practice of hospitality, one encouraged throughout the canon of Holy Scripture, provides a framework for understanding how different communities might relate to one another without obfuscating their respective differences (cf. Rom. 12:13). “Inherent within the Christocentric performance of hospitality is the call to welcome the stranger: that is, within the Christian practice of hospitality there is the imperative to enter into relationship with, and accommodate, those who are different” (Bretherton 2010, 148). Bretherton’s focus, of course, is on how Christians and non-Christians can participate in the same moral communities without compromising the holiness of the church or superimposing the church’s norms on outsiders. Still, while ecumenism is many things, it is certainly not less than a form of politics, of trying to pursue a common life with others (Bretherton 2019, 2, 6). Hospitality in pursuit of forming a common life, and whatever concrete actions contribute to that ethos, might play a role in what Rowan Williams describes as “part of the properly receptive practice is to *listen to the listening* of the Christian stranger and neighbor” (Williams 2022, vii). Here we can invite other Christian traditions to offer insights for what it might mean to help us build out the Nicene implications to other areas of Christian doctrine. For if it is indeed the case that the Christian faith writ large is *Nicene*, and that theological anthropology, soteriology, eschatology, and the like hang on the framework this *credo* establishes, then there is room to invite other Christian traditions to indwell our own spaces, as Daniel Hardy has suggested, in the belief that they themselves have gifts worth receiving (Hardy 2008, 439).

Interestingly enough, van Mastricht, for his part, views communion with God as setting the standard for communion among the saints, and Nicene trinitarianism in particular provides the condition for the possibility of communion among the saints. He writes, “We cannot have communion with the sacred Trinity apart from this communion with the saints: ‘that they may

be one *in us*' (John 17:21)" (1.2.24 §XXVIII). Similarly, when discussing communion with God, he notes that this is only ever experienced within the household of faith (2.2.12 §4). There is a logical priority of the many over the one, but not in such a way as to obfuscate the individual saint's repose and delight in the living God. For both van Mastricht and others like John Owen, even God himself deigns to receive the gifts of obedience and worship that we offer to him (2.2.12 §I). So the communion among the saints, then, will invariably involve the mutual exchange and reception of goods, gathering as a community in which we ask one another to inhabit our modes of thought, pointing out our own discrepancies and inconsistencies, and striving to more faithfully express and respond to God's self-revelation as triune. Of course, we must not be naive here. Many of the problems and areas of disagreement across Christian traditions seem to be and remain intractable, especially in the realms of soteriology and, perhaps especially, ecclesiology.

The challenge, then, for twenty-first-century ecumenical engagement is whether churches from varying traditions will create the conditions that enable actual communication to take place. It seems to me that there is, even in the time after Christendom, a reticence to open ourselves up to receive correction from outside of our walls and a hesitancy to indwell one another's traditions as outsiders so as to observe the manner in which Nicene judgments animate doctrinal considerations, learn and receive from that tradition, and offer, as a guest, charitable contributions for the upbuilding of that community. But insofar as there is no interchange—no exchanging of goods between basic particulars—one wonders what kind of communication or communion is actually taking place. Hospitality as an ecumenical social practice (perhaps typified in the current work of receptive ecumenism) that strives to receive gifts and meanings from other branches of the Christian family tree provides a concrete expression of hospitable practice. And a supervening structure of Nicene theology on which our doctrines hang, mercifully, may provide us a framework that guides and unifies our action as a common project.

Conclusion

The burden of this article has been twofold and somewhat modest. On the one hand, I have sought to demonstrate that the "bones" of Reformed retrieval will involve a kind of receptive ecumenism insofar as it attempts to build out and upon the Nicene structure of our faith, on which the church rests in dialogue with the great Christian tradition. What some have referred to as "Reformed Catholicity" takes the form of receiving insights from the broader Christian tradition and bringing them to bear on concerns intrinsic to one's own community of faith—all in the attempt to better perceive the manner in which the church's confession of its triune God provides a framework for understanding and interpreting the breadth of the Christian life. With respect to Protestant dogmatics, and Reformed theology more specifically, adherence to the magisterial confessions of faith

and standards of unity must be maintained with an eye to their deeper roots in the ecumenical councils and the richness of the Nicene faith. And this must be done with an ear toward hearing how these roots can be watered and nourished through constructive engagement with the entirety of Christ's body. As Rowan Williams avers, "The very idea of the Body of Christ declares that any Christian individual and every particular Christian assembly exists in and only in a condition of interdependence" (Williams 2022, vii). Or, in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), explaining the meaning of the creedal confession about the communion of the saints, "Believers one and all, as members of Christ the Lord, have communion with him and share in all his treasures and gifts ... [and] each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and joyfully for the service and enrichment of the other members" (Q&A 55; Van Dixhoorn 2022, 306). There are, of course, some similarities to Lindbeck's own proposal here, especially with respect to the manner in which a doctrine provides an interpretive framework for understanding one's self, the world, and the Lord's works (Lindbeck 1984, 80). Nevertheless, taking communion with God as a test case, I have sought to demonstrate how van Mastricht's account is animated by Nicene concerns and the reception of insights from the broader Christian tradition and how this may provide a model of imagining the nature of ecumenical engagement as a form of communication sustained by practices of hospitality. In this model of engagement, we take the time to inhabit another tradition even as we strive to make space for others in our own, and we give and receive from one another, especially as it pertains to developing and unfolding the implications of our common inheritance to other areas of our distinct confessions and contexts. And it is worth noting that if, as van Mastricht proposes, even the triune Lord, who needs and lacks nothing, eagerly receives the gifts we offer to him in communion, we members of Christ's body very well might have something to offer one another.

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