


2005

Trinity, Time and Sacrament: Christ's Eucharistic Presence in the Theology of Robert W. Jenson

Jason M. Curtis

University of Edinburgh, j.m.curtis@sms.ed.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/jctr>

 Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Curtis, Jason M. (2005) "Trinity, Time and Sacrament: Christ's Eucharistic Presence in the Theology of Robert W. Jenson," *Journal for Christian Theological Research*: Vol. 10 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/jctr/vol10/iss2005/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal for Christian Theological Research by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. For more information, please contact akeck001@luthersem.edu.

Trinity, Time, and Sacrament: Christ's Eucharistic Presence in the Theology of Robert W. Jenson

Jason M. Curtis
University of Edinburgh

In recent years the doctrine of God has undergone significant discussion and revision. Emerging from this phenomenon as a concept inextricably linked with Trinity is the question of time. That is, given the incarnation and the biblical evidence that God not only transcends creaturely limitations but also enters into the created order, how are we to envision God's relation to time? Broadly speaking, excepting the latest developments in this field, the Christian options for divine temporality have been either timelessness or some version of divine process where God limits himself in ways similar to humans.¹ Robert W. Jenson has joined a growing community of theologians (such as Barth and Pannenberg) seeking a third way that affirms divine temporality without abandoning many of the traditional divine perfections.² Yet, as will become obvious below, since divine temporality is so foundational it brings with it consequences that may prove problematical for other theological doctrines.

So it is with the question of Christ's presence to the world—a matter united with Trinity and time, as well as Eucharist; hence its theological import should immediately seize us. Jenson offers an intriguing model of divine temporality that is not without its advantages, yet it pushes in directions regarding Eucharist where even he may not wish

¹ I am aware that there is debate as to whether the fathers and medievalists actually meant what we today understand as timelessness, but the fact remains that the present state of affairs leaves us with these options. Therefore, for the purposes of this article, I will avoid that question.

² Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2: *The Works of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Hereafter referred to as *ST* followed by volume and page number.

to go. This essay attempts to demonstrate Jenson's connection between his trinitarian ontology and the Eucharist, to identify any shortcomings, and offer a modest proposal that, in concert with Jenson, may improve theology's chances of ridding itself of what he has identified as its arch nemesis—divine timelessness.

Trinity and Time

Theology's role in the gospel proclamation must inevitably address pressing questions concerning the historical event of Jesus Christ, and Jenson understands the gospel's identity of the God who raised Jesus from the dead as "an initial and determining theme of theology" (ST I, 42). Therefore, he approaches this theme by asking how and in what contexts God is identified, and for Jenson the only legitimate path to such a discovery is within scripture. Both testaments give an answer that is contextual and temporally conditioned, yet not contradictory. Jenson demonstrates that, for Israel, God was whoever rescued them from Egypt, and in the New Testament God is "whoever raised Jesus from the dead" (ST I, 44). "Israel's and the church's God is thus identified by specific temporal actions and is known within certain temporal communities by personal names and identifying descriptions thereby provided" (ST I, 46). Therefore, the God of Israel and the church can be identified only by contingent events. But Jenson presses us further.

Because God had made certain promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, namely, that there would be an Israel, Israel existed in them prior to the Exodus. While Exodus remains the answer to the question of God's identity, this point demonstrates that he is *identifiable* based on the reality of his temporal promises that came to fruition in historical contingencies. God is "identified by certain temporal events but is apprehended as himself temporally *identifiable*" (ST I, 49). The indisputable evidence of this identity, for Jenson, is the death of Jesus. That is, his death does not render the Trinity as a "binity" during Friday and Sunday morning, nor does it obliterate the incarnation. The only answer is to say that the Trinity is always the Trinity and those *temporal events* must somehow belong to his deity (ST I, 49). Thus, God is not only identified *by* the events of Exodus and Resurrection, but is identified *with* those temporal events (ST I, 59). If God was only identifiable *by* the events, then we might

conclude that God is wearing a mask of some sort and is ontologically different than he appears in time and space, i.e., the incarnation and resurrection.

Since Jenson believes that God is really identifiable by and with the Exodus and Resurrection, then it naturally follows to ask what *sort* of being he is, and his answer is that God's hypostatic being is constituted in *dramatic coherence* (ST I, 63). He finds no problem (unlike Aristotle) in saying that God's identification with historical contingency is an "ontological perfection," not a deficit. God is identical with himself in and because of the "eventful actuality," i.e. his identity with history (ST I, 64). The striking feature of dramatic coherence (or, life within history) is that it must be complete before one can truly identify the personal. Since God is united with the history of his creatures, he too "can have no identity except as he meets the temporal end toward which creatures live" (ST I, 65). To put it another way, God's very being and identity are united to history in such a way that it is not merely established in eternity past who he will be and continually persists in that decision,³ *but rather his eternal identity is only seen or anticipated from the end of the story.*

If the triune God is identified *by* and *with* temporality and particular temporal events (Exodus and Resurrection) *in* the biblical narrative, then how do God and time relate? In Jenson's terminology, "the chief diagnostic question about religion," is "What eternity does it posit?" (ST I, 55). According to Jenson, the Greeks, in an effort toward security of existence over against time's fleetingness, defined eternity in terms of timelessness.⁴ Since humanity cannot embrace our past, present, and future giving us the coherence of life that we naturally desire, the ancient Greeks projected that ability onto God and therefore defined deity in terms of persistence or immutability. Jenson asserts that while the early church did not simply assimilate Hellenism into its theology, it nonetheless failed to rid itself of certain debilitating features, the pinnacle of which is the notion of divine timelessness.

Augustine, who is for Jenson the prime example of the Christian failure in this regard, rejected this "eventful" or "narrative" differentiation in God due to his superior commitment to Platonic theology, that is, God must be simple. Temporal distinctions,

³ For a fuller discussion on this see, Robert Jenson, *God After God: The God of the Past and the God of the Future, Seen in the Work of Karl Barth* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), 8-23. Hereafter referred to as GAG, followed by page number.

⁴ On this see his, *Triune Identity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 57-64; ST I, 95-104; GAG, 10-13.

in Augustine's view, are impossible (*ST I*, 111), and Jenson believes Augustine is forced to say that there is no difference at all among the agencies of the persons, because God is simple and cannot have temporal differentiation. By stripping away the connection between self-differentiation of the Trinity and God's work within time he is saying that what we read about in the biblical narrative about self-differentiation in created time does not in reality apply to God. Jenson summarizes Augustine: "the three identities not only *equally* possess the one *ousia* but identically possess it, so that the differentiating relations between them are irrelevant to their being God" (*ST I*, 112). Effectively, Augustine is rejecting a God that can be "contaminated" by temporality.⁵

Over against this Jenson judges the Cappadocian trinitarian formula as summarized by Gregory of Nyssa to be superior: "All action that impacts the creature from God...begins with the Father and is actual through the Son and is perfected in the Holy Spirit" (Quoted in *ST I*, 110). This is to say that any action of the triune God toward his creation is not divided among modes or actors in the Godhead, but is attributed directly to "a perfect *mutuality* of the agencies of Father, Son, and Spirit" (*ST I*, 110). Yet, according to Jenson, it is impossible to uphold the Cappadocian formula while one works within a timeless model that prohibits such eventful differentiation, and a consequence of rejecting his proposed correction is that it does not give a clear picture as to our history, but rather disconnects God from our history. Our history is dependent upon the life of God with his people precisely because our history is a result of the Father's originating, the Spirit's perfecting, and the Son's mediation of the two (*ST I*, 114).

It is this formula—the mediation of the Son—that is of central concern for Jenson's trinitarian ontology. If his project is an establishment and explication of a truly Christian doctrine of God as the starting and ending point of all Christian theology, the key to such a doctrine is Christology. He states: "A truly Christian doctrine of God is a description of Jesus Christ. It says that this man shall come and

⁵ I must emphasize that this is Jenson's exposition of Augustine and it is not without controversy. For our purposes, whatever it is that Augustine *intended* to say, a) Jenson reads him this way and I am interested in what Jenson believes to be the case, and b) contemporary defenders of atemporality appeal to Augustine, Boethius, and others. Therefore, timelessness in the modern sense remains the antagonist, whether or not one can legitimately appeal to them.

every knee shall bow. It says that he is the one who has hidden behind the mask of the absent 'God.'"⁶

Primally, Jenson firmly rejects a *Logos asarkos*—a sort of god behind God that bears little ontological resemblance to the human Jesus. Based on Jesus' words in John 8:58 that "Before Abraham was, I am," Jenson believes that he eliminates the possibility of some sort of divine entity in his preexistence that is not identical with the Jesus of the Gospels. Hence, Jesus the Son is not a *Logos asarkos* in his preexistence, but is precisely Jesus the Son even prior to birth. Nevertheless, he is born at a point in time, so we must account for his eternal state prior to that event. Jenson says that the narrative pattern for Jesus' life is that of "*being going to be born.*" Prior to Bethlehem there is not an unincarnate state, but a pattern of movement within the incarnation event and the triune life of God (*ST I*, 141).

Herein one discovers a clear and longstanding divergence between the Reformed and Lutheran traditions—Jenson siding with the latter. Jenson sees the strong Creator/creature distinction in Reformed teaching (which, applied to Christology, is the "one person *in two natures*" formula) as pushing toward the timeless entity devoid of Jesus' history that is characteristic of "religion." Alternatively, Jenson is so keen to relate the one hypostasis of the Son with the Father that Gunton claims he is guilty of downplaying "the necessary otherness of Jesus and the Father by overstressing their identity."⁷ When this takes place Gunton believes that Jenson runs the risk of subsuming Jesus' humanity under divinity (Gunton, 85), which is a problem that persists in Jenson's theology, as I hope to demonstrate in the discussion on Eucharist. That is, Jesus' humanity may indeed be subsumed under Eucharist. Nevertheless, Jenson's aim in this rejection of the *Logos asarkos* is to be able to state unequivocally that God is as he reveals himself to be in Jesus Christ; therefore, that God is present within our history. This is not to say that the Reformed tradition wants anything less, and Gunton is clear in his critique of Jenson that he does not want a sharp division between

⁶ Jenson, "Proclamation without Metaphysics," *Dialog* 1 (1962): 22-29; quoted in David S. Yeago, "Catholicity, Nihilism, and the God of the Gospel: Reflections on the Theology of Robert W. Jenson," *Dialog* 31 (1992): 18.

⁷ Colin Gunton, "Creation and Mediation in the Theology of Robert W. Jenson," in Colin E. Gunton, ed., *Trinity, Time, and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert W. Jenson* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 85.

his humanity and deity, spawning a regression to the fifth century error of identifying some of Jesus' acts as divine and others as human. Likewise, Gunton does not wish to extract God from history so that one easily slips into deism. But a doctrine rejecting the *Logos asarkos* must answer the inevitable complexities that arise with it,⁸ and one such difficulty is the manner in which God can be temporal yet overcome time's contingencies. Unquestionably for Jenson, Jesus suffers all the evils perpetrated against him, dies on Golgotha, and the Father raises him from the dead by the power of the Spirit, thus "impassibility" is not a serious option.

So and not otherwise the Father triumphs over suffering...The Father and the Spirit take the suffering of the creature who the Son is into the triune life and bring from it the final good of that creature, all other creatures, and of God. So and not otherwise the true God transcends suffering—whatever unknowably might have been (*ST I*, 144).

Jesus' action, i.e. suffering, is unequivocally God's action, but this does not subject Trinity to created time's contingencies *because of God's victory over that suffering* in the resurrection by the power of the Spirit. How can this be so? Jenson's answer seems to be nothing more than, "That is what God does—he overcomes." He states:

[O]nce it is clear that there truly is only one individual person who is the Christ, who lives as one of the Trinity and one of us, and that he is personal precisely as one of us, then to say that he as creature is our savior—or that he as creature exercises any divine power—is simply to say that he plays his role in the triune life and does not need to abstract from his human actuality to do so (*ST I*, 144-45).

In sum, Jenson perceives a timeless Trinity as the roadblock to identifying God as he is and how he interacts with the world. I agree with Jenson's effort in this regard and believe that the contemporary discussion of divine temporality must take on a more

⁸ For a critique of Jenson's position on the *Logos asarkos* see, Paul D. Molnar, *Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: T&T Clark Ltd., 2002), 70-75; Gunton, *TTC*, pp. 86-93.

central role in the doctrine of God. But if the chief diagnostic question about religion is, "What eternity does it posit?" and Jenson believes God's being is constituted in dramatic coherence without being overcome by time's contingencies, then exactly how is God's eternity related to time, and what does Jenson refer to when he talks of time?

To get at what it means to say "God's being," Jenson follows Gregory of Nyssa and expands upon Aquinas (ST I, 212-14). First, Gregory does not believe "God" and *ousia* are equivalent. If this were the case, says Gregory, when one asserts three instances of the divine *ousia*, then one quickly slides into tritheism. Therefore, when we say God the term "refers to the mutual *action* of the identities' divine 'energies,' to the perichoretic triune *life*" (ST I, 214). "God," then, is never a reference to a form in and of itself, but is a life-in-action, "a *going-on*, a sequentially palpable event, like a kiss or a train wreck" (ST I, 214).

Second, the persons of the Godhead live this divine life, "other than and prior to the fact that God is" (ST I, 215). That is, to say that "God has being" means we do not look for something behind the mutual, active life of the Father, Son, and Spirit. The communal life of the three persons precedes (in a logical sense) any notion of being.

Third, Gregory, according to Jenson, believes the only way to characterize divine being is "infinite" or "limitlessness." Jenson understands Gregory to express in a profoundly anti-Greek fashion that God is not infinite in the sense that he "extends indefinitely, but because no temporal activity can keep up with the activity that he is" (ST I, 216). In the same manner as we earlier described God's passibility, it is not that boundaries do not exist for God, but that he *overcomes* the boundaries. Hence, Jenson declares God's being should be described as *temporal infinity*. This term, in Jenson's understanding, demonstrates God's self-liberation from temporal contingencies, without extracting him from history. Therefore, while one might believe that divine temporality necessarily leads one to a god in process or one lacking sovereign lordship, Jenson believes that it is precisely this "overcoming" of boundaries that demonstrates God is Lord, a concept that is not unlike the sinlessness of Jesus.

To some extent, Jenson is building upon Barth's understanding of divine eternity as "pure duration." That is, God does not lose aspects of his life into the past, nor does God not yet have parts of his existence that lie in the future. "Any eternity is some transcendence of temporal limits, but the biblical God's eternity is not the simple contradiction of time. What he transcends is not the having of beginnings and goals

and reconciliations, but any personal limitation in having them" (ST I, 217). Yet Jenson claims to go beyond Barth by explicitly emphasizing the temporal aspect of God's being just in the Father and Spirit. According to him, we might look at the Father as the origin of the divine life ("whence"), the Spirit as the goal ("whither"), and the Son as the present. If origin and goal (past and present) hold together in the divine life so that God does not lose any "time" or duration, then they must be "asymmetrical," and this fact preserves a collapse into timelessness. Furthermore, Father and Spirit (source and goal) unite in the Son. "Thus the way in which the whence and whither of the divine life are one, the way in which the triune God is eternal, is by the events of Jesus' death and resurrection" (ST I, 219). Yet, we must ask exactly what it means to say that the relationship between Father and Spirit is *asymmetrical*, especially if they coinhere in the Son's present? Clearly Jenson is reaching for some way to avoid timelessness yet maintain perichoresis, but one consequence of this is an overemphasis on the temporal location of the Son. It is an overemphasis in the sense that what becomes crucial for theology is to *locate* Jesus, not the Spirit of Jesus, but the male Jew who walked the earth. Or, to say it another way, the "asymmetry" of Jenson's trinitarian ontology pushes toward an "isolated present" of the Son, to the unintended exclusion of Father and Spirit. And this is precisely the tendency in Jenson's version of Eucharist. Even so, the perichoretic side of the ontology is manifested at various points.

According to Jenson, the Spirit brings the future Kingdom which Jesus came to establish. The Spirit so rests on Jesus that God's infinity is apprehended in the "inexhaustibility" of Jesus' work that continues undeterred. In spite of the boundedness of Jesus' life the Kingdom possibilities are not so constrained because the Spirit takes up Jesus' work and brings them from the goal of fulfilled Kingdom. As to the Father he "intends himself in the Son," and this loving consciousness on the part of the Father demonstrates his infinity. That is, as creatures our consciousness can only identify itself within a finite object, hence it is finite. The Father identifies himself in the Son, who in turn identifies himself, not only with the Father, but with those outside the Godhead (ST I, 220). Therefore, Jenson believes, "the temporal infinity that opens before us and so embraces us as the triune God's eternity is the inexhaustibility of one event. That event is the appropriation of all other events by the love actual as Jesus of Nazareth" (ST I, 221). Therefore, the Son's identity as "present with us" is the fulcrum of the divine temporality, even though within that temporality he demonstrates its

infinity, or its overcoming. Because of the emphasis laid on the Spirit's continuation of Christ's work this may appear to mitigate the asymmetrical aspect of Trinity; however, it does not alleviate the pressure of Jesus' temporal location since, as we will see, Jenson does not carry this line of thought through to Eucharist, and because it is still unclear how he might say the Spirit is both "future" and "present." The asymmetry of the divine identities and the stress on the temporal location of the Son also suggests Jenson must emphasize sacrament over Word and Spirit. How can Christ's presence in the sacrament in any way be real apart from the empowerment of Word and Spirit? Jenson has admitted that the work of Jesus is "inexhaustible" because of the *Spirit*, thus, why not sacrament, as well? At least part of his answer seems to lie in the temporal arrangement of the divine identities.

What does Jenson assert concerning the nature of time? According to Jenson, one version bequeathed to the West was from Augustine who created a paradox for himself when he determined that if *our* present always remained so, it would be eternity. Hence, even the present must lack temporality and can only function as a geometrical point in the transition from past to future. This leads to time as "nothingness," but since he is a Christian, Augustine cannot accept this. Thus, the soul becomes the place where past, present and future are there for humans, yet not in the same fashion as it is for God. That is, the past and future simply cannot exist for the finite soul, while they do for God. But Augustine does not want to be pressed into this solution, so he identifies memory and expectation as the places where they are real as a *distentio* of the soul. Jenson calls this Augustinian version of time "the inner horizon of human experience" (*ST II*, 30-31). Augustine seems to view time as a stretched-out line within the creature.

For Jenson, another version of time handed down in Western thought is Aristotelian: "time is the metric of external physical movement provided by a standard of such movement." That is, time is something external to us built into the fabric of the universe. Yet, according to Jenson, this model does not do justice to the experiential question that we have in relation to time, that is, how it is we are "transcendentally" shaped by it (*ST II*, 32). So, what contemporary interpretations exist of our time? *Classic relativity theory* describes the world in which we live and move, in which there are causes and effects. Jenson proposes that we might understand this theory as "real time," so to speak, since it relates to the external world and is irreducibly tensed.

Quantum mechanics supposes that there is an “imaginary time” that is detached from our experience of time. “Two moments of this time...are like points on a map, so that, which way the arrow points depends on from which side the two moments are viewed; this time is indeed a ‘fourth *dimension*’ indistinguishable from the other three” (*ST II*, 33). As Jenson mentions in a footnote, these two categories might roughly correspond to A and B-theories of time (i.e. the dynamic [A] and stasis [B] theories).⁹ While not entering into the philosophical debate as to their merits Jenson does offer a judgment for theology’s role here: theology must side with A-theorists.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to how Jenson reconciles “real” and “imaginary” time. He states:

Surely our primal intuition of time is that it must possess the characters of *both* Augustine’s “time” and Aristotle’s “time,” of both “real” time and “imaginary” time. Time is precisely the *horizon of experience*, with both nouns demanding full weight. A resolution suggests itself: that time is indeed, a la Augustine, the “distention” of a personal reality, and that just *so* it provides creatures with an external metric of created events. That is: the “stretching out” that makes time is an extension not of finite consciousness but of an infinite enveloping consciousness (*ST II*, 34).

For Jenson, creation is that act of taking time or “making room” for us. Hence, creation provides the matrix of our living in him and in this sense time is external to us. Yet, as we move within creation we are participating and experiencing this matrix in a sense that is more integral to our being—as Augustine would say (*ST II*, 34). We experience time in the way we do because God created us to experience *him*, hence time must be his being and experience, as it is ours (thus, the priority of A-theory). Jenson believes Augustine’s understanding of divine simplicity blinded him to God’s complexity as a being of temporal infinity, but instead he projected those complexities onto the human soul. Against this, Jenson asserts, we should understand God as a “life among persons. And therefore creation’s temporality is not awkwardly related to God’s eternity, and its sequentiality imposes no strain on its participation in being” (*ST II*, 35).

⁹ The references could be many, but for a good analysis of the theories see, Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

The effect, according to Jenson, is that we must affirm a “past and future” in God’s very being, *which is identical to the self-differentiated Father and Spirit*. Still, nothing in the divine being is subject to time’s fleetingness and God does not gain from the future something that he does not already have. Indeed, the Spirit is the future, hence what or who could give to the Godhead? Further, this triune structure to past, present, and future is prior to our time and holds it together. “It indeed better suits the gospel’s God to speak of ‘God’s time’ and ‘created time,’ taking ‘time’ as an analogous concept, than to think of God as not having time and then resort to such circumlocutions as Barth’s ‘sheer duration’” (*ST II*, 35).

This last quote is confusing. It seems that at the very end of an argument whose aim is to free theology from a timeless God, Jenson casts us right back into the throws of ambiguity by positing an analogous concept of time between God and humanity. He seems to have labored to demonstrate that earthly, real, A-series time is within God’s being, who enables such time to exist, yet by referring to God’s time and our time as “analogous” does he not undercut what he has just stated? Further, it is this very point for which Jenson criticized Barth, asserting that he has not truly avoided timelessness because of his use of analogy (*GAG*, 154). On this scheme God is not tainted by the vicissitudes of created temporality if he exists in his own time, but that is precisely the idea that Jenson’s entire project attempts to zealously avoid—escaping created time to find the God of eternity. At the end of the day, I wonder whether Jenson’s model of divine asymmetry/perichoresis is really that different from Barth.

In sum, Jenson argues that God’s being is temporal and the ground for our temporality, and his participation within it is not only fact, but is necessary. However, for Jenson, God remains Lord over created time in two ways: the self-differentiated persons of the Trinity embrace envelope time and history—Father as past, Spirit as future, and the Son as historical present; and God overcomes the limitations of time, principally demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But how is the Son the “present” in this time if he is not here? Jenson has already established that there is no *Logos asarkos*, hence talking about the “Son as historical present” is referring to the human, historical Jesus. Therefore, in order for Jenson’s view of Trinity and time to hold together, Jesus must be present in a sense that enables us to locate him temporally.

Eucharist

“Christ is personally the second identity of God, and the *totus Christus* is Christ with the church; therefore the church is not in the same way an *opus ad extra* as is the creation, even when it is perfected in God” (ST II, 167). And again, “the church is the body of Christ for the world and for her members, in that she is constituted a community by the verbal and ‘visible’ presence to her of that same body of Christ. The body of Christ is at once his sacramental presence within the church’s assembly, to make that assembly a community, and is the church-community herself for the world and her members” (ST II, 168). Hence, for Jenson, Christ’s presence on this earth is *the objective reality of the church around the bread and the wine*, to which Christ himself has pointed and said, “This is my body.” And it is not a presence of simile or metaphor, but is ontologically so, though not in a biological sense (ST II, 212). Thus, just as the Father turns to the Son for his self-identification, the Son now turns to the church and Eucharist in like manner for his self-identification.¹⁰ The Supper must be objectively Christ’s body, the same one that hung on the tree and was born of Mary, and must be more than a simple movement toward “inward awareness of the risen Christ and to a deeper feeling of communion with him...” (ST II, 214). Jenson arrives at this conclusion by means of several arguments relating to body and temporality. We will ask: 1) What is sacramental embodiment and why is embodiment necessary? 2) How does Jenson unite temporality with embodiment?

Embodiment is defined by *availability* to other persons. The church is the body of Christ in the sense that “she is the object in the world, an available something as which Christ is there to be addressed and grasped” (ST II, 213). The Eucharist is truly communion because it is such between Christ and us; thus, in celebrating the Eucharist, the church is realizing what it truly is—a communion in Christ. And such a communion is nothing less than the gospel proclaimed with visible words. Words are communion of persons, or the presence of persons with each other. That is the essence of the sacraments: the self-communication of Christ in an address between persons.¹¹

¹⁰ Robert W. Jenson, “The Body of God’s Presence: A Trinitarian Theory,” in Richard W. A. McKinney, ed., *Creation, Christ and Culture: Studies in Honor of T. F. Torrance* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), 90.

¹¹ Robert W. Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 19. Hereafter referred to as VW, followed by page number.

Therefore, Jenson contends, in order for there to be an objective communication between persons there must be embodiment, for without it, “such a presence—and it is our salvation that it never quite occurs—would be ‘pure’ spirit, the nightmare dream of philosophers and the religious. Such a presence would be *disembodied* spirit...” (VW, 21). Relying on an argument from subject-object distinction, Jenson asserts that in any encounter one must not only be object, but also subject, else the one who is object is enslaved by the subject. Dynamic relation or reciprocity hangs on the possibility of response as a subject and not merely an object. A disembodied presence would exclude me from being subject because there would not be availability of the other as object. Thus, that disembodied presence would signal my bondage, and if we insert God into the equation, it would mean destruction. Jenson states:

Were Christ not embodied in his community, were his presence there merely to and in thought and feeling, he would be the community’s destruction, however fond the thoughts and feelings; and were he not embodied for the world in his community, his presence in the world would be the world’s damnation.

Further, Jenson claims that this sacramental communication demands embodiment because if one is present only by language and not objective embodiment, then the words are open to change, being governed only by the rules of grammar. However, if the words are embodied and objective, then they are irreplaceable “in their givenness as objects in the world” (VW, 23). Therefore, the (visible) words of the conversation of the Supper are thrown into disrepute if the elements are not objectively body, for as such they would be replaceable.

All of this underscores for Jenson that for one to be present and available to another there must be embodiment; else that person and that communication are both unidentifiable and enslaving. So, if the Christian community is going to address God and others, especially in terms of gospel proclamation, there must be embodiment of all participants. “The word in which God...communicates himself must be an embodied word, a word ‘with’ some visible reality, a grant of divine objectivity. We must be able to see and touch what we are to apprehend from God; religion cannot do without sacrament” (VW, 28). And this “seeing” and “touching” of God’s body is the church partaking the elements of bread and wine in the Supper. For this to be the case, yet

remain a non-biological reality, it is only necessary, according to Jenson, that Christ understand himself in this way, thus determining its reality (*ST II*, 214). As established in the previous section of this essay God identifies himself within the temporal reality that is Jesus, but now that Jesus is resurrected and not walking this earth, Jenson believes that God turns to himself in the bread and wine, for that is precisely the place where Jesus places his identity. Hence, one perceives the gravity of the doctrine for Jenson: "If the gospel is indeed gospel, its speaking is Jesus' presence as *himself*: in the same body that Mary bore. Therefore, we must assert: the body Pilate hanged, and the embodiment of gospel-speaking among us, the ensemble of the gospel's sacramental reality, *are one thing*" (*VW*, 44). But the question is, *how*? The answer is unclear. What is clear, at least to me, is that Jenson's view of divine ontology pushes toward a biological presence of Christ, which elevates sacrament and is, in effect, detracting from the priority of the Word and the actualizing power of the Spirit.

Assessment

Jenson's stress on divine temporality and its manifestation in the bread and wine (and the church) is an example of a tendency to stretch the comfort zone of Western theology, yet also to pull back just at the point of no return. For this reason it is easy to wonder exactly what it is that Jenson intends; thus it is not surprising that capable, proven scholars often come to opposite conclusions regarding his work (not unlike his theological forerunner, Barth!). I believe that this is the situation meeting us here. It may very well be that Jenson's theological impulse is one long overdue and we must carefully listen and heed his voice. Although, as I am certain he would admit, in listening we must identify the potential impediments and be willing to redirect that impulse when necessary. As far as the reality of Christ's presence in the Supper, we are not at odds. Yet, I am also convinced that his trinitarian ontology, combined with more explicit language of bodily presence lends itself strongly to a biological presence, and may only be a small step away. Still, there is much in Jenson to commend itself to us.

Jenson has helpfully documented weaknesses in a theological tradition that relies so heavily upon the religion of Mediterranean antiquity, not the least of which is divine timelessness. Yet, the genius of Jenson's project is his recognition of the reasons behind the tradition's doctrine, in combination with an ability to free it from such predicaments without subjecting God to time's contingencies, in particular, overcoming death and the

future. Certainly his commitment to the biblical narrative as the place where God's identifiability is illuminated has much to do with the success of his program.

Further, one cannot help but be impressed by the straightforward simplicity of Jenson's assertion that given the humanity and embodiment of Jesus Christ, and given his identification of the second person of the Trinity, Christian theology must give an account of God's embodiment and temporality. Most theologians are also unsatisfied with merely positing the God-Man in all his temporal humanity while simultaneously affirming God as Spirit, untainted by temporality, but Jenson is correct that this is essentially the state of affairs, at least among popular theology ("The Body of God's Presence," 87). If we are to affirm Christian trinitarianism, then we must affirm divine temporality—at least in some form. Jenson's stress upon the necessity of God's embodiment is equally important for many reasons, but particularly in light of normal religion's quest for the god behind time and matter.

Clearly, for Jenson, true time must involve embodied availability. Trinity embraces time not as an eternal present for which God never has temporal movement, but rather in that the Father is past, the Spirit future, and both find their unity in the Son who is present. Thus, Jesus must be temporally present and must be bodily so in order for his presence to be objectively real. To be temporally present, Jesus must bodily occupy our space, else he is not available to us, and if he is not present, then he is not God ("The Body of God's Presence," 82). Therefore, Jenson's doctrine of Eucharist is directly dependent upon Trinity, who envelopes time—*our* time.

However, we have hinted that by equating past, present, and future with Father, Son, and Spirit, Jenson presses Eucharist in an unhelpful direction. First, Jenson does not clearly demonstrate *that* and *how* Trinity is united with time as we know it—A-series time. He unceasingly creates the impression that such an arrangement is the only alternative to timelessness. Yet, precisely at the point where we would expect an explicit articulation on how Trinity and A-series time come together, he equivocates and asserts some analogical version of "God's time" and "our time."¹²

Second, by pressing toward this temporal arrangement, Jenson implies a biological presence, despite a desire to avoid such a conclusion. It is the gendered Jew that is bodily present in the Eucharist, according to Jenson, and to be bodily present

¹² Jenson's response might be to explicate his version of divine futurity; yet I remain unconvinced that that solves the analogical dilemma with which he charges Barth.

within our time seems to imply the biological body of Jesus. This is the natural reading of Jenson's position, and if he intends some sort of spiritual presence he does so without resorting to such language.

Third, the temporal distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit endangers the possibility of action for each divine identity in the other temporal sphere, conflating all talk of divine action into the Son. So, in our particular case, does the Spirit play any role in the Eucharistic meal if the only requirement is that *Jesus* declares himself to be bodily present?¹³

In my estimation what is lacking in Jenson is a strong pneumatological activity in the Eucharist meal. If the Spirit is indeed future, is it not possible to say that in addition to bringing in God's eschatological kingdom, he also brings to our present the eschatological presence of Christ? He has already given assent in this direction by speaking of the inexhaustibility of Jesus' work since it is taken up by the Spirit who brings it from the future. Why not the reality of his presence in the bread and wine, as well?

Indeed, it is the Spirit who is the proof that Jesus does not leave his children as orphans, for Jesus' own understanding of his presence with his disciples continued in an unbroken, albeit different form *because of the Spirit* (Luke 24:49). He is really present with us, though not in a way that we can reach out, grasp him, and embrace him in the same manner as the disciples did. Furthermore, his Spirit even took the role of making his presence real for his church to such an extent that this same embodied Jew of the first century could himself claim to be with two or three gathered in his name (Matthew 18:19). In his pre-resurrected state, it is difficult to imagine such a scenario on Jenson's account of embodiment and temporal presence. This consideration brings to the fore the need for a stronger emphasis upon the role of the Spirit in bringing Christ's presence to us. It is not merely Christ who is present to us, and the tendency in Jenson is to read "God with us" as exclusively pertaining to Christ. Clearly, the Spirit is with us, too, and we detract from his person when the Spirit is marginalized in the worship

¹³ Again, I do not fundamentally disagree with Jenson's assertion that Christ really is present in the Eucharist and in the Church, though in the latter there is certainly a gap at the moment because of sin—a gap that will eventually be closed. My disagreement with him is that his trinitarian ontology logically leads us to a biological presence that marginalizes Word and Spirit, *and* he does little to mitigate that inevitability short of merely denying it.

of the Church, particular in the Eucharist. As Gunton writes, "Crucial here is an important distinction: that the presence of Christ is not *as* but *through* the Spirit, who is the mediator of both Christ's presence and his (eschatological) otherness."¹⁴

Additionally, this pneumatological emphasis has the benefit of giving due consideration to Jesus' current eschatological mission as expressed in John 14:1-4, 15-20. It appears as one of the great ironies of Jenson's work that in seeking to affirm bodily presence as Christ's availability to the world, he may actually undermine Jesus' body by not giving proper weight to eschatological time, specifically, Christ's ascension and parousia.¹⁵ The lack of space here prohibits a full discussion of the distinguishing features of eschatological time and our present time, but the overriding issue is that in the discussion of Christ's presence and Eucharist one must not revert to timelessness *or* created time as the location of the presence. Christ is in his own place that is near to us, and this does not entail a falsification of the gospel, but rather takes seriously Christ's own proclamation concerning his bodily departure from our time and his presence in eschatological time.

One final point needs to be made. In Jenson's scheme the question of the Supper always revolves around *where* Jesus is temporally located (and we must omit a discussion on the turn from temporal language toward spatial language), thus emphasizing the transformation of the elements. Indeed, the elements themselves take on a priority that easily militates against the "sign" aspect of the sacrament, i.e., the gospel Word. But if the Spirit is given its proper weight in this discussion, this question fades, for we know that the Spirit can (and I say, does) make Christ present to us, but can also lift the worshippers up into Christ's presence. Hence, whether we understand the Eucharist to be a moment where the Spirit lifts us to Christ or brings him to us, the reality of his presence remains, and there is no need to wonder whether within the elements we have a biological or non-biological presence, for that cannot and does not

¹⁴ Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T&T Clark Ltd, 2003), 230.

¹⁵ Here I am indebted to Douglas Farrow, "Between the Rock and Hard Place: In Support of (something like) a Reformed View of the Eucharist," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (July, 2001), 167-86. Whether this admittedly more Reformed view of Eucharist is a regression to timelessness is an important question, but beyond the scope of this article.

actualize the gospel. Sacrament is real presence, but is only so because of Word and Spirit. Jenson's reversal of this order may indeed follow from his trinitarian ontology.

Jenson's trinitarian ontology and his view of Eucharist when pressed toward its logical end could unintentionally exclude the ascended, coming-again body, and in doing so may fail to grant his humanity its proper place. Hence, eschatological time governed by the Spirit should dictate our ideas of Christ's temporal presence, appreciating that the gospel is real not because we touch the bread and drink the wine among the assembly, but because Jesus has ascended, sent his Spirit as his ongoing presence with us, and promises to return—a promise that makes the Eucharist the powerful reality that it is. As Dalferth has put it:

[The] Christian faith is not a set of beliefs about past events, but faith in a present reality. The prime interest of Christian communication therefore is to help those to whom it is addressed to develop a sense of the presence of God and to discover how God is present and active in their own lives and world. The Christian gospel is not a piece of information about the past, but a pointer to a present reality that can and should be discerned by everyone.¹⁶

We would add to this “pointer to a present reality” a pointer to a present reality that will be *consummated*. It is because of the promise of a bodily return of Jesus that we take seriously his temporal presence, and if the Spirit were not with us, neither Jesus' present nor his future would be available to us.

¹⁶ Ingolf U. Dalferth, “Representing God's Presence,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (2001): 255.