

Embracing Christian Personhood in Stone-Campbell Churches:
Appropriating the Relational Theologies of William Robinson and John Zizioulas

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Stone-Campbell Journal Conference Parallel Session

April 12, 2024

What constitutes a *person*? When we consider what it means for a human be a person, that is one thing. However, when we consider what it means for God to be a person – that is something else entirely. Do we see our personhood in light of God’s person? Or is the fact that we are made in God’s image reason enough to reverse engineer ourselves to understand divinity? Finally, what do we make of community of persons, of fellowship?

These may seem like purely speculative questions, but they are actually some of the most important questions to ask. In the best theology, all of the disciplines work together symphonically to present something that inspires both meaning and worship. Thinking theologically about personhood is not just one more item to add to the “thinking” list. The person is the context in which we make meaning and do things; persons live life. And nothing seems more important for a Christian than to have something to show for all the prayer, discipline, and theological reflection – a lived life!

In this essay, I will explore personhood theologically in hopes to inspire Christian persons to make communion – life together – the primary locus of theology and worship. Moreover this exploration will look through the eyes of two specific theologians: William Robinson and John Zizioulas. I have chosen them because Robinson and Zizioulas have surprisingly similar journeys reflecting theological personhood; however, they sometimes arrive at different places. They both carry out their theological tasks assuming an indelible connection between ontology and ethics. However, if we picture this continuity as a spectrum, Zizioulas would operate further on the ontological pole with Robinson more on the ethical one.

Finally, when it comes to audience, who better to tailor this essay to than my own ecclesial family: Christians from the Stone-Campbell movement. This essay will have been

successful if it encourages Stone-Campbell Christians to find creative ways to embody Christian personhood in worship, reflection, and in working for visible unity in the church.

I. The Thought of Personhood in the Movement: A Brief History

Before we begin, I want to provide a brief introduction to how Stone-Campbell Christians think about and have historically thought about personhood. In general, anthropological stances in the early days of the Movement were more assumed than expressly espoused.¹ Stone and the Campbells would have been influenced by the enlightenment sensibilities of Locke and of the Scottish Common-Sense School.² Therefore, their idea of the personhood of humanity was that each person is “autonomous and self-reflecting transcendental self.”³ Humanity is rational but, epistemically, a *tabula rasa*.

In terms of a more theological anthropology, again, much of what was believed about humanity was inherited and really existed in the background. However, we can collect some main ideas from Alexander Campbell, Walter Scott, and the younger Robert Milligan.⁴ In general much of these ideas were a reaction to Calvinism or Roman Catholicism, both of which were held in some contempt on the American frontier.⁵ ...When it came to the personhood of God, the founders were very wary of making metaphysical inferences from express words in scripture

¹ Paul M. Blowers and William Kooi, “Anthropology,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Churches/Churches of Christ/Churches of Christ*, ed. Douglas A. Foster et al. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004), 29.

² Ibid, 30.

³ Ibid, 29.

⁴ Ibid, 30.

⁵ Ron Highfield, “Theological Anthropology in the Restoration Movement,” *Leaven* 8, no. 3 (June 28, 2012): 1, <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol8/iss3/9>.

authoritative in any way. Barton Stone was famously not a Trinitarian. The Campbells were Trinitarians through and through but were careful not to make too big a point of it. The traditional restoration plea calls for such speculative questions to recede into the realm of individual opinion and stay out of the arena of public faith and worship.

However, in terms of actually approaching God relationally, early leaders in the movement were very active. They paid great attention to the personality of Jesus as it related to the Christian's personal response. Their faith concerns were ultimately practical. Throughout the history of the Movement, intellectual assent to creeds was to be traded in for a personal, experiential allegiance to and relationship with the person of Jesus. "No creed but Christ," as the adage goes. This personal aspect of faith extended to the church as well. Communion was a vital ideal – one that related greatly to unity. This stress on communion with God and one another in unity became the basis for much of best Stone-Campbell ecclesiology.

Currently, the theories of self and conceptions of theological anthropology are all over the map. Many in the Church of Christ still adhere to the original ways of thinking about persons, following in the footsteps of Walk. Disciples have generally adopted the view of the person as an intersection of a great many identities – making the self very complex. Sin is equated more with injustice, often systemic, rather than located in the will of the person.⁶ Among the Independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, it would seem that much theological anthropology is commensurate with what is popular amongst the broader evangelical population.

Studying the thought of personhood in the Movement is an enterprise that certainly could use more attention. Nevertheless, it is sufficient to say that the thought has become widely varied to the point that a distinctive identifying thought pattern is all but indistinguishable. Introducing

⁶ Blowers and Kooi, "The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement," 32.

a new, more robust conception of personhood would likely be met by each of these particular streams of current thought with some difficulty. Therefore, we should keep these particularities in mind as we think about personhood together.

II. Main Argument: Being is Communion

My main argument for this paper is that Christian personhood – Christian being – is essentially communion or fellowship. In the opening pages of *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church*, William Robinson, speaking on the personal nature of God’s relationship with the church, establishes the utmost importance of personality, fellowship, and the connection between the two. “Personality,” he writes, “is the real miracle of the universe... For beyond personality is suprapersonality, which is fellowship, the most potent thing in the world – the interpenetration of personality.” Furthermore, Robinson comments, “that the whole meaning of creation and redemption is to be found in God’s bid for fellowship; for *fellowship is the hidden structure of reality.*”⁷

This last profound and rather enigmatic statement highlights what John Zizioulas puts in another way, that “there is no true being without communion. Nothing exists as an “individual,” conceivable in itself. *Communion is an ontological category.*”⁸ What these two thinkers ultimately propose is that personhood, for both God and humanity is not solitary but relational. Furthermore, they suggest that Christian personhood, as a mode of existence, is deeply bound to fellowship with God, humanity, and the world.⁹ Let us discuss each of these items one at a time.

⁷ William Robinson, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church* (St Louis, MO: The Bethany Press, 1948), 18.

⁸ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St Valdimir’s Press, 1985), 18.

The Personhood of God

God's being is the primary personhood in the universe. All personhood in some way subsists in the being of God. But what sort of person is God? For Robinson, fellowship or "interpenetration of personality" is the sharing of personality without its loss.¹⁰ For the individual person, suprapersonality places her in-between rugged individualism and pantheistic mysticism. "The solitary person," says Robinson, "who is out of fellowship...is regarded as a defective personality."¹¹ This most certainly applies to all humanity. However, the principle applies to God as well; for he goes on to say that "All this, in the end, means that God is not unitary but manifold, a truth which is adequately safeguarded in the Christian doctrine of the Sacred Trinity."¹² This gives added meaning to the notion of fellowship as the hidden structure of reality. It is embedded in the very personhood of God.

If the manifold being of God is interpenetration of personality, then this is a sharing of personality without loss of personhood in the community of Godself. This would mean that personhood both requires distinctiveness and unity at once. How do we conceptualize this? This is where Zizioulas' neopatristic synthesis on the Holy Trinity proves very useful. Here we see him move out of tandem with Robinson, who is content to admit that the plurality of God is "not completely defined" by the doctrine of the Trinity.¹³ Zizioulas, in contrast, dives deep into resourcing a Athanasian and Cappadocian perspective to answer questions about the metaphysics

⁹ Robinson, *Biblical Doctrine*, 18; Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 15.

¹⁰ Robinson, *Biblical Doctrine*, 17.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 17.

¹² *Ibid*, 18.

¹³ *Ibid*, 18.

of God's being as communion.¹⁴ In contradistinction to the Western fathers, the Greeks saw the Holy Trinity as a primordial ontological concept where the ontological principle – the cause of being – is not God's substance or nature but is the free hypostasis of God the Father, of the Person.¹⁵ Even personhood itself must not supersede the free hypostasis as its *causa sui*. The particularity of God the Father is the starting point on the discourse of divine being. However, it is not the end of said discourse.¹⁶

Where Zizioulas truly shines in helping us flesh out Robinson's concept of interpenetration, is his assertion that a free hypostasis is also characterized by the movement away from the Self towards the Other.¹⁷ Zizioulas calls this movement *ekstasis*.¹⁸ So, God the Father, the original hypostasis, out of freedom and love begets the Son and gives procession to the Spirit. Always distinct yet moving towards one another, these three hypostases exist in the perichoretic bond of unity and love with one another as one God. In God, personhood becomes both the distinctive and unitive principle as well as the ontological principle of God's own being. This is how we can understand Robinson's interpenetration: Divine personhood is communion – ecstatic movement among free hypostases.

¹⁴ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 40.

¹⁷ Robert D Turner, "Foundations for John Zizioulas' Approach to Ecclesial Communion: *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 78, no. 4 (December 2002): 441.

¹⁸ John D. Zizioulas, "'Human Capacity and Human Incapacity: A Theological Exploration of Personhood,'" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28, no. 5 (1975): 417.

The Image of God in the Human Person

The perfect personhood of God is always free, always love, always communion. And while Christians may also participate in this perfect personhood in an eschatological way – as we will see later – human personhood, as it exists subjected to human nature, is not synonymous with divine personhood but is only like it. The difference is due to that created nature. On the other hand, the likeness is due to a gift embedded in that same created nature that we call the *imago dei* – the image of God. Robinson has this to say about the image of God:

That (the human) was, of all creatures, made in the image of God means first that he was a being capable of fellowship with God; second, he had the capacity to choose good and reject evil, and thirdly he had the ability to become a 'son of God.' But all these he had and has by God's grace or God's condescension.¹⁹

Thus, for the British churchman, the *imago dei* is a gift of original grace that imbues our nature with the capability to fellowship, to make moral decisions, and even to actuate the possibility of becoming something more than what we are in a rather mysterious way. This conception of God's image in us blurs the nature/grace distinction and suggests that even fallen humanity subsists in the personhood of God in an indirect way, although actuating that potential is up to the human person, to an extent.

Fallenness, for Robinson, is not so much an introduction of corruption into the nature as much as it is an activation of a potential for sin embedded in that nature – in the essence creatureliness itself. The very gift of rationality that allows humanity the privilege of imaging and relating to God is the same moral sense that makes sin possible.²⁰ For sin is impossible

¹⁹ William Robinson, "Completing the Reformation," *The College of the Bible Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (July 1955): 36.

²⁰ William Robinson, *Essays on Christian Unity* (London: James Clarke & Co, 1923), 231.

without an ethical compass and moral agency.²¹ Therefore, both fallenness and Godlikeness are not competing states but are two possibilities necessarily tied to the image of God we bear.

Robinson's view of the human person assumes a freedom of will that the theologian does not necessarily qualify. Zizioulas can help us define and understand the nature of this freedom better. Like Robinson, he agrees that fallenness is natural and that it reveals potential. Siding again with the Greek Fathers, he holds that the fall is not the inbreaking of a new creative power of evil stripping humanity of grace, but that it is the revelation and actualization of the potential inherent in creaturehood already.²²

Just like with Robinson, Zizioulas' understanding of fallenness comes with the package of creatureliness. However, there is one very crucial difference: fallenness isn't related to sin as much as it is related to mortality. Death is the natural end of biological life. And is thus the natural development of the biological hypostasis.²³ As much freedom as a human may have, she is not free from her nature, whose end is certainly death.²⁴ So Zizioulas conceives of a more profound difference in the analogy of being between God and humans. Fallenness, the result of simply being a creature, precludes the human from being a free hypostasis, limiting love and by extension the ecstatic move towards the Other.²⁵ In order to have any hope of true personhood – true freedom, love, and communion – one must be saved from fallenness. Therefore, for

²¹ Robinson, *Essays* 209.

²² Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 102.

²³ *Ibid*, 51.

²⁴ Turner, "Foundations for John Zizioulas' Approach to Ecclesial Communion," 439.

²⁵ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 19.

Zizioulas, the discussion of personhood must become soteriological if we are to address Christian, or ecclesial persons.

As a result of salvation, the *imago dei* becomes two tiered for Zizioulas. In typical fashion, he appropriates from the Greeks two “modes of being:” the hypostasis of biological existence and the hypostasis of ecclesial existence. Biological existence is bearing the image – that limited and analogous reflection of God’s own being in us. Ecclesial existence is a completely new mode of being that lifts the person to become a true hypostasis by participating in the very hypostases of God– a process the Fathers called theosis.²⁶ Robinson posited the same sort potential when discussion becoming “sons of God.” Therefore, both thinkers conceive of a higher form of being, made possible by salvation and characterized by real fellowship with God and the other. We turn our attention now to this mode of existence.

The Christian Person

We have seen that to be biological persons is to bear the image of God, albeit in an indirect and analogous way. However, to be a Christian person, a member of the church, is to take on a new ontological mode of existence. We literally do not exist in the same way as we did before. Before, we existed according to our nature, trapped by necessity. We were unable to free ourselves. Now, as ecclesial persons we take on God’s very own way of being. This is not a moral attainment that is accomplished by the by the individual, but it is an ecclesial way of relationship with God and the world, made possible by the gift of a new hypostasis. This new personhood is communion – the ability to freely move toward the other in love.

²⁶ Zizioulas *Being as Communion*, 50.

Zizioulas combines patristic Christology and Ecclesiology to express how this new birth occurs. Christologically speaking, the new Christian takes on the hypostasis of Christ who subsists as the hypostasis of the Son. For this to be effective, perfect God and perfect humanity must be hypostasized in Christ. In this way, through baptism, the human being is reborn and adopted by God and is allowed to subsist in God's personal being.

Ecclesiologically, the new birth occurs into the new family: the church. The new life must be realized in history as the eschatological reality of the new identity slowly brings about transcendence of the old biological hypostasis.²⁷ The family of the Church is the arena where the old realities are transcended in real time and space, especially in the Eucharistic gathering. "The new birth from the womb of the Church has made the new Christian part of a network of relationships which transcends every exclusiveness."²⁸ She avoids the fall into individualism and is empowered to become a catholic person through the catholic community of the church.

Again, this now-not yet tension of ecclesial personhood is brought to a point in the Eucharist, where a person sacramentally participates in the historical instantiation of real but yet to be fully realized eschatological realities. Zizioulas articulates a theological vision of the redeemed person who receives a new personhood in Christ, only to participate in that eschatological reality historically in the bosom of the church.

²⁷ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 57.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 58.

Christian Persons in Fellowship

If fellowship is the hidden reality of the universe, then the church is the means by which the secret is made manifest. Zizioulas remarks that the very identity of the church is relational.²⁹ There is no church that stands by itself. Every almost every instance of *ekklesia* in the New Testament is followed by either the genitive of God/Christ or by the genitive of a certain place.³⁰ This means the very essence of the church is its relationship to God, other Christians, and the world.

The church is first and foremost in fellowship with God. This fellowship is expressed through the vehicle of Revelation – the movement of the Word of God.³¹ This unfolding is not simply a condescension down into history from God to the church; nor is it only the upward lift from concreteness from us to God. It is the bi-directional, double move where the Word is paradoxically anagogically lifting in transcendence and personally, concretely meeting us in immanence.³² The church, the second historical instantiation of the Word is the location of this activity.

This vision of Robinson's supplements well the abstract ecclesial theologizing of Zizioulas regarding the new Christian person. Putting Zizioulas ideas in Robinson's words: The church is the site of the double-movement of God's fellowship. It's being and activity in history – baptizing and celebrating the eucharist, worshiping, proclaiming and serving – realizes the now-not yet eschatological reality of our new personhood in a *sacramental* way. In other words,

²⁹ Jean Metr Zizioulas, "The Church as Communion: St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1994): 7.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 7.

³¹ Robinson, *Biblical Doctrine*, 18.

³² *Ibid*, 20.

the church is the impossible meeting place of the dialectical extremes of immanence/transcendence, eschata/history, divinity/humanity, etcetera. All of its activity is sacramental, not just the two traditional acts of baptism and communion.

When mediating on the nature of the church, Robinson doesn't neglect to consider the personality of Jesus. In the coming of the Word made flesh, we see the clearest bid for fellowship. Jesus taught by fellowship, by the intimate sharing of his personality.³³ Jesus' teaching grounds the ontological reality of our nature with how we live – person to person. Therefore, we have a right conception of God, not by knowing the right creed, but by partaking in personal fellowship and abstaining from idols.³⁴

Through Christ, God is in a personal relationship with the church, so the church is personally directed and inspired. Acts of grace and merit cannot be weighed out in a legal or transactional sense. It must be done so in a personal sense.³⁵ Robinson ingeniously asks, "How can Paul speak of sharing in his sufferings and the sufferings of Christ in any real sense unless he does so from a deep experiential knowledge of fellowship as interpenetration of personality which is the hidden secret of reality?"³⁶

Zizioulas also deeply understands how the church shares in the life of God. As we saw in the previous section, the Christian person must reflect in her very being the way that God is – in communion. The assembly of Christian persons then should most certainly do the same. When we say that the church is fellowship, that fellowship is none other than the personal communion

³³ Robinson *Biblical Doctrine*, 42.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 28.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 121.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 100.

between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.³⁷ Both Robinson and Zizioulas understand the church as communion with God. Where Zizioulas challenges us to rise to the occasion and think deeply with him about ontology, Robinson gets down on his knee and tells us a story about personality. This is what I mean when I say that Robinson and Zizioulas tackle the same issues from opposite ends – it’s a match made in heaven!

In addition to being in communion with God, being the church binds us to communion with one another. Our relation to God sets us up for communion with other people who are also in that communion. We are members of Christ’s body, so we are also members of one another (Rom 12:5). Carl Ketcherside said it best when he said, “Where God has a son or daughter, there I have a brother or sister.”³⁸ This isn’t a simply an ethical ideal, but it is also an ontological reality.

In “Communion and the Otherness,” Zizioulas talks about how salvation transcends difference. Difference, between the self and the other naturally leads to distance.³⁹ We fear the other because the other is not us. But the truth is that we need the other. Remember that being as communion involves ecstasis, the movement to love and affirm the other. The other is crucial to our own being. He invokes 1 Cor 12, saying “all members are needed but not all are the same; they are needed precisely because they are different.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Zizioulas, “The Church as Communion,” 8.

³⁸ “The Best Test of Doctrine,” Substack newsletter, *Daniel Rogers - EFPG* (blog), October 4, 2022, 1, <https://danielcrogers.substack.com/p/the-best-test-of-doctrine>.

³⁹ Nonna Verna Harrison, “Zizioulas on Communion and Otherness: St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 42, no. 3–4 (1998): 350.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 9.

“This is what fellowship means,” says Robinson, “not the gathering together of a group of like-minded uninteresting people calculated to bore anyone other than themselves, but the nonexplosive interlocking of those rich differences of personality which, if left to themselves or organized on a class basis, would lead to endless strife.” (43). Unity-in-diversity is not just an ideal, it’s part of that hidden structure of fellowship. It is the chosen instrument of the Spirit to empower and enliven the church with different charismata.

Finally, being as communion brings Christian persons into fellowship with the world. God loves the world; God created and lovingly sustains it. Communion with God means going about God’s business and God’s mission. While the world hates Christ and his Church, Christian persons are still clearly called into ministry and mission to the world. There is, for Robinson, a clear link between fellowship and mission. This can help us to think more dynamically about the *missio dei*. When discussing the Pauline picture of the church he writes:

There could be no escaping this corporeity, this togetherness, however the members might differ in individual gifts and graces. It was *koinonia*, the essential nature of the church, because it was the hidden structure of reality, which the church was to manifest to the world.⁴¹

Many picture mission as central to the church and that fellowship is a bonus. Like we are all going ride to the baseball game, the point is getting to the game, but we are going to make the best of the 45-minute car ride and talk to one another. But this is backwards to Robinson. Fellowship is the secret ingredient – the x factor of the cosmos. Robinson clearly sees that our agenda is God’s agenda: to engage the world in fellowship. Think about that. Fellowship is essentially open in nature; it gives and receives and has no agenda. When friendships form, there is no expected result or product from the relationship that defines its purpose and activity. No,

⁴¹ Robinson, *Biblical Doctrine*, 74.

relationality is its own end. Mission, while having all the directness that fellowship does not, is not an end in itself but a means to engage the world in communion.

Together, Robinson and Zizioulas have demonstrated how personhood is both an ontological category and an ethical participation. As humans, we bear the image of God, who is the ultimate community of persons. However, it is only through the activity of the Triune God that saves us from death. Our new existence is an ecclesial one where we live and love in a sacramental society of other Christian persons as the Body of Christ. In the section that follows, I will reflect on this discussion and its possible fruitfulness and generativity for Stone-Campbell churches.

Conclusion: A Pastoral Response for Stone-Campbell Kingdom Workers

As a pastor, the heart behind this project has been, from the very beginning, to encourage and edify church people from within my own Christian movement. Elders, pastors, musicians, and lay leaders all can benefit from thinking critically about ecclesial personhood. The drain on our persons is at an all-time high right now, and in our variegated existences, holistic thinking becomes more and more difficult. So here I will offer some of my thoughts on how the ontological and ethical realities of ecclesial personhood apply to two different areas of ministry: Preaching and Worship Planning.

Preaching

The most distinctive characteristic of historically Stone-Campbell preaching is the idea of witness. As explained by Alexander Campbell, fact inspires testimony which leads to faith. Preaching is witness to the facts of the Gospel. This may not be on your mind at all when you preach, maybe that doesn't click with your Stone-Campbell identity...but perhaps it could be helpful if reinterpreted. Preaching as testimony has the potential to involve the whole person of

the preacher and the whole community of the congregation. If we maintain a dry and reductionary vision of witness, this may not be too helpful. But if we articulate a testimony of your person – your lived experience that you and only you bring to the text, practicing testimony could really blossom.

Additionally, because personhood is communion, you don't do this alone. Everyone bears witness to the text. Everyone interprets it. There has never been much spiritual elitism in our movement and there is no reason to start now. The text is replete with meaning and polyvalent words that are just waiting to bounce around against differing interpretations. Remember Zizioulas and don't be afraid of the Other! Consider the community as you witness, not as the expert, but as the one with the microphone. Fact, faith, and testimony might acquire some new life if you try it this way.

Worship Planning

As a worship leader, worship planning is dear to my heart and part of my everyday life. I was personally greatly inspired by this study. My main thought has to do with sacrament and liturgy. The ecstatic nature of moving towards God in worship is an ontological event for the ages. It ought to be comforting to know that you can't screw it up. Now, let us be realistic, you can do a great deal to distract from or hinder the liturgical progression, but you cannot stop it.

When we gather at the Lord's Table, God is moving towards us. When we show up and participate, we move towards God. The whole church all over the world and in heaven are engaging. The eschatological reality of the Total Christ existing in unity is being realized in your church no matter if you have hymnals and a \$75 a year budget or whether you have all the latest and greatest accoutrements.

So, with this knowledge, we ought to do two things: relax and facilitate. Relaxing should speak for itself. In our movement, we have historically and nearly ubiquitously participated in the Supper every Sunday. Traditionally, the eucharistic service has been simple, allowing for varying interpretations. And this is good because, as we learned, you can't stop what God is doing in the Eucharist. You can resist, or not participate but the divine liturgy is inviting us all to join and be fed. This is a reason to relax. But it could also be a reason to facilitate. The words we pray matter. Just because a service isn't liturgical doesn't mean you don't have a liturgy. This is home cooking. This is your family. We subsist in God together and so why not make it as meaningful as you can? What a privilege it is to facilitate and participate in the sacramental worship that has been going on thousands of years before and that will continue on just fine without me.

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