

WTJ 80 (2018): 219–36

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

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

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

I. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

II. *Emic and Etic Defined*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A: Hello!

B: How are you?

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

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

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

III. *Immanent and Economic Trinity*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 489.

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹³ Pike, *Language in Relation*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

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

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

¹⁷ Pike, *Language in Relation*, 40.

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

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

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 308.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 311.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁵ Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 420.

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

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

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

²⁹ Hibbs, “Imaging Communion.”

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

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

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

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

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

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.2.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁰ Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 420.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Etic, and emic.

Emic, and deeper emic.

Deeper emic, and etically perceived behavior.

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

Etic, and emic.

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

VI. *Conclusion*

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