

THE STATE OF THE EVANGELICAL TRINITARIAN RESURGENCE

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I. INTRODUCTION

In a pivotal essay published in the spring of 2005, Fred Sanders made an acute assessment of the state of the doctrine of the Trinity within evangelicalism: namely, the trinitarian resurgence had taken place while evangelicals stood idly by. In his journalistic account, he declared it impossible to report on any major trinitarian work by an established evangelical thinker because there simply were none.¹ However contestable this claim might be, the situation, at least in the North American setting, was for the most part as Sanders described.² But this is not the case today. Now everyone acknowledges that there has been a trinitarian resurgence, even within evangelical theology.

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¹ Fred Sanders, "The State of the Doctrine of the Trinity in Evangelical Theology," *SWJT* 47 (2005) 153–54.

² While Sanders relegated the work of evangelicals to the category of "accessible introductions and summaries" ("The State of the Doctrine of the Trinity" 154, n. 3), this is not uncontested. E.g. Millard Erickson, *God in Three Persons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) was described as a "constructive work in the area of the Trinity," "a landmark" of evangelical trinitarian theology (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* [Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2007] 215–16), "a major monograph" (James L. Garrett, Jr., "Review of God in Three Persons," *SWJT* 40 [1998] 78), and as already having "corrected" the lack of major scale evangelical works on the Trinity (Glenn R. Kreider, "Review of God in Three Persons," *BSac* 153 [1996] 486). Yet in December 2004, one month after he first presented his research at the 56th Annual Meeting of the *ETS* (November 18, 2004), Sanders's own significant contribution to trinitarian studies appeared as *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner's Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005; although having a 2005 printed publication date, it was available earlier), as did Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), marking a significant wave of evangelical trinitarian effort. A flurry of works was also published around this time by British evangelicals: Roger Forster, *Trinity: Song and Dance God* (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic, 2004); Tim Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity: Why Father, Son and Spirit are Good News* (Oxford, UK: Monarch, 2005); Tom Smail, *Like Father, Like Son: The Trinity Imaged in Our Humanity* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005); cf. his earlier *The Forgotten Father* (London: Hodder and Stoughton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) and *The Giving Gift: Holy Spirit in Person* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994); and Robin Parry, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005).

Matters related to its cause or end could be explored.³ But these issues are beyond the scope of this paper and are much more adequately explored in other recent and forthcoming works.⁴ For the present task, the resurgence is understood as having taken place, and now the Trinity's presence is ubiquitous, often appearing in places it should hardly be. For evangelicals, being trinitarian today is quite fashionable.

In seeking to address the topic of the current state of the evangelical trinitarian resurgence, this paper will inevitably leave things out. Some omissions are intentional, not because the issues lack merit, but because they do not seem to be the most significant features operating within the present evangelical situation and therefore are not tension points begging for recognition.⁵ As such, they might even have a better life avoiding the scrutiny of a selective internal auditor. This essay, then, while making no claims of exhausting all features within selected schools of thought, intends to be a diagnostic check providing a glimpse into the state of the evangelical trinitarian resurgence, and not particularly critical of earlier assessments which would have been a much easier task five years ago, but which nonetheless have their own merit. Like them, this assessment, too, will pass away as tax records after five years, while hoping still to give an accurate account of the present situation.

Before the investigation begins, however, other matters require clarification. This paper is not interested in comparing evangelicals with their non-evangelical counterparts and colleagues, perhaps a fruitful exercise for another time. It concerns the trinitarian resurgence within evangelicalism, which begs an important question intimately related to this paper's topic: Who is an evangelical? Does this include so-called post-conservatives who do not affirm historic positions on Scripture's authority, or else those from mainline seminaries publishing books with historically evangelical publishing houses, often with token evangelicals contributing essays to collaborative volumes? These questions are central to this paper's agenda, for they begin to tell the story of what is happening. Evangelicals have "come of age."⁶ They are thus

³ A meager attempt at exploring some of its cause has been made in Jason S. Sexton, "Stanley Grenz's Relatedness and Relevancy to British Evangelicalism," *SBET* 28 (2010) 63–73. Alternatively, see Declan Marmion and Van Nieuwehove, *An Introduction to the Trinity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), which contests the notion of any trinitarian recovery.

⁴ E.g. Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010); J. Scott Horrell, *The Center of Everything* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, forthcoming 2011); and Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity, Christian Doctrine in Historical Perspective* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, forthcoming 2011).

⁵ E.g. dialogue about the doctrine of the Trinity with non-Christian theologians, a theology of religions' account of theology proper, and work being done on significant historical theologians like Hermann Bavinck.

⁶ This is no longer an issue of evangelicals getting the Ph.D. in major non-evangelical institutions, as in the early days of the evangelical movement. Countless examples are now available of evangelicals consistently publishing in major university presses, holding posts at major non-evangelical academic institutions, and conducting research related to themes that are acutely connected to evangelical emphases. Beyond this, not only have evangelicals started their own academic institutions, which presently flourish, but at the 2009 Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference (Rutherford House, Edinburgh, August 27, 2009) Bruce McCormack of mainline institution Princeton Seminary mentioned how evangelical students from traditional evangelical undergraduate institutions are consistently surpassing their non-evangelical counterparts in national test rankings and overall performance.

increasingly unconcerned with impressing non-evangelical scholars.⁷ Bringing a freshness and rigorous approach to their task, self-consciously evangelical theologians are concerned with conducting research that seeks to honor God and build up God's people for the sake of the church's task in the world and for the good of all humanity. Again, what is an evangelical? When approaching the question in light of this paper's topic, the lines begin to blur. This does not necessarily seem to be a bad thing and has probably helped create the synergism now part of the warp and weft of the evangelical trinitarian resurgence. But for the sake of this paper, the survey is limited to self-identifying evangelicals publishing with traditional evangelical publishers who have attended, are teaching or have taught in traditional evangelical institutions in North America, and who are directly affiliated with particular evangelical organizations. Evangelicals included here need not be situated in all of these categories, but should be found in most.

II. RESURGENT FEATURES

In considering the recent work by evangelical theologians, this paper attempts to highlight critically eight features that provide a glimpse into the current state of the resurgence, often with degrees of overlap. While providing unapologetic *ad hoc* evaluations throughout, the final section will conclude with some overall assessment about how these features may fare for the future of evangelical theology.

1. *Patristic attunement.* The first significant feature relates to how closely evangelicals have begun to read patristic sources on the matter. While the Fathers and early creedal sources have not been absent from evangelical scholarship in the last few decades,⁸ the recovery of their texts for theology proper is on the rise. The Fathers are currently not so robustly consulted by evangelicals for other areas of systematic inquiry, often giving preferences to Reformation and post-Reformation sources, although this may change in due course.⁹ At the 2010 ETS meeting the "Models of God" consultation considered "The Trinity in the Fathers," with essays on Tertullian, Hippolytus, Hilary, and

⁷ See the illuminating stories of Edward J. Carnell in Rudolph Nelson, *The Making and Unmaking of an Evangelical Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and George Ladd in John A. D'Elia, *A Place at the Table: George Eldon Ladd and the Rehabilitation of Evangelical Scholarship in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), each representing an earlier era of evangelical identity.

⁸ E.g. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); D. Jeffrey Bingham, *Irenaeus' Use of Matthew's Gospel in Adversus Haereses* (Traditio Exegetica Graeca; Leuven: Peeters, 1997); and the earlier essay by Gerald Bray, "Can We Dispense with Chalcedon?" *Them* 3 (1978) 2–9.

⁹ Incidentally, some indication of this shift might be seen in the variety of papers at the 2010 ETS meeting considering the doctrine of justification in the Epistle to Diognetus, Cyprian's Letter to Donatus, the Apostolic Fathers, Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Augustine. See also the collaborative ETS volume, *The Contemporary Church and the Early Church: Case Studies in Ressourcement* (ed. Paul A. Hartog; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010) and the essays on "Redemption" by James D. Ernest and "Community and Worship" by Everett Ferguson in part three of *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought* (ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham; New York: Routledge, 2010), which includes other essays by multiple evangelical patristic scholars.

Augustine. Of particular note are recent essays by Mark Husbands engaging Gregory of Nyssa, Keith Johnson on Augustine, and the recent volumes by Doug Kelly and Donald Fairbairn.¹⁰ Husbands and Johnson use late patristic sources in responding to abuses and neglected areas in contemporary trinitarian theology. The patristic interest is surely not just the whiplash response to dodgy banalities brought about by recent employments of social trinitarianism. Kelly's effort emerges from the desire to recover the rich early Christian heritage lost in the Enlightenment, while Donald Fairbairn seeks to show patristic relevance for an understanding of Christian theology that, instead of asserting its authority, prioritizes the sharing of a relationship that characterizes the divine life from eternity. Both are traveling down the same road, with Kelly distinctly echoing Thomas Torrance, while Fairbairn takes Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria for the major strand of patristic thought he develops.¹¹

With each embodying different emphases while heavily imbibing from the same large patristic well, what might be made of this? It is clearly no innovation of evangelicals. Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance, for instance, was far ahead of the game, as have been other mainline theologians.¹² Western evangelicals, then, have some decisions to make about how to read early eastern constructions. For instance, with particular application to free-church and Pentecostal theology, does the Eastern tradition possess a more viable option for evangelical interest in vibrant spirituality and the Spirit's shared epistemological primacy with Christ?¹³ What is more, on what grounds is the *filioque* clause to be addressed? And how should evangelicals relate to the ecumenical

¹⁰ Mark Husbands, "The Trinity is Not Our Social Program: Volf, Gregory of Nyssa and Barth," in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship* (ed. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009) 120–41; Keith E. Johnson, "Augustine's 'Trinitarian' Reading of John 5: A Model for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture?" *JETS* 52 (2009) 799–810; idem, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011); Douglas F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology, Volume One: Grounded in Holy Scripture and Understood in Light of the Church (The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity)* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2008); and Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009). See also Fairbairn, "The One Person who is Jesus Christ: The Patristic Perspective," in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology* (ed. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler; Nashville: B & H, 2007) 80–113, for an account of early patristic Christological developments.

¹¹ Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity* 130.

¹² See Kathryn Tanner's heavy dependence on patristic sources in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) and especially *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹³ For a recent development in this direction, see Myk Habets, *The Anointed Son: A Trinitarian Spirit Christology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010). See also his earlier work on an integration of the Greek notion of theōsis into a reformed soteriology in his "Reforming Theōsis," in *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology* (ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006) 146–67 and the debate that ensued in Gannon Murphy, "Reformed Theosis," *TToday* 65 (2008) 191–212; and Myk Habets, "Reformed Theosis?" *TToday* 65 (2009) 489–98. This is consistent with Gerald Bray's call that "Reformed trinitarian theology must be integrative of different theological traditions," about which he makes particular mention of the Eastern approach ("The Trinity: Where Do We Go From Here?" in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology* [ed. A. T. B. McGowan; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006] 38–39).

creeds in light of their precursory architects, particularly the controversial features that have divided East and West?¹⁴ Are the later Palamite conception and its implications for reading eastern patristic texts more compatible with evangelical sensibilities (about impassibility or immutability) than the Western received tradition? How can this be done while avoiding anachronism? There are definite noble ecumenical possibilities and deep challenges here, as well as something to be said for the Spirit's present leading within evangelicals' contemporary received tradition(s). But evangelical trinitarian theology is much more than the mere restatement of tradition, however ancient.

2. *Residual social trinitarianism.* Attempts to utilize the patristic tradition (especially from the East) and Scripture have yielded various forms of social trinitarian schemes within evangelicalism. Rather than revisiting the term's origin,¹⁵ descriptive factors of the wide range of social trinitarianism,¹⁶ and causes of its fashionability, and while not wishing to trace other ground for conspicuous carnage,¹⁷ of notable consideration among evangelicals has been their own unique developments. Miroslav Volf has worked out his social scheme into a theology of generous giving as a model of *imitatio trinitatis*, derived from the immanent life of the Trinity for the human situation.¹⁸ Using the model of a relational, social character within the eternal triune community, characterized by "giving, receiving and sharing of love," John Franke develops God's eternal missional character as "a reflection of the expansive love of God."¹⁹ Roderick Leupp sees the social analogy filling out Augustine's psychological model, although he employs other analogous

¹⁴ This could be earlier ecumenical creeds like Chalcedon in both its Christological formulation or in the controversy resultant from the addition of the filioque clause.

¹⁵ It seems to be first found in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM, 1981) 157, and later picked up by analytic philosophers like Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. in "Gregory of Nyssa and the Social Analogy of the Trinity," *Thomist* 50 (1986) 325–52 and then in "Images of God," in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View* (ed. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 51–67; and his "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays* (ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 21–47. See also Sanders's account of analytic philosophy's social trinitarian development ("State of the Doctrine of the Trinity" 167–70).

¹⁶ Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *NewBlackfr* 81 (2000) 432–45.

¹⁷ E.g. Stephen R. Holmes, "Three Versus One? Some Problems of Social Trinitarianism," *JRT* 3 (2009) 77–89; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 139–77; Husbands, "The Trinity is Not Our Social Program" 120–41; and Keith Wesley Goad, "Trinitarian Grammars: A Comparison of Gregory of Nazianzus and Some Contemporary Models" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010).

¹⁸ "Being as God Is: Trinity and Generosity," in *God's Life in Trinity* (ed. Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) 3–12. Volf nuances his social trinitarianism from the East/West dichotomy often employed and works instead with a model truly concerned with the human societal situations. See this theme of giving further developed in his *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

¹⁹ John R. Franke, "God is Love: The Social Trinity and the Mission of God," in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church* 105–19 and *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009) 53–61.

metaphors as well, before moving the doctrine of the Trinity into the ethical enterprise.²⁰

Finnish evangelical Kärkkäinen has given his critical assessment of trinitarian theology in a globalized setting. After canvassing the historical and present trinitarian constructs in different ecumenical settings, flowing with the current tide he sketches his own brief social trinitarian agenda which encourages self-criticism of particular traditions and social locations while also being integrative regarding new ways of addressing and referring to the triune God.²¹ Similarly, Scott Horrell has argued for a transcultural trinitarian worldview suggesting that “new culturally sensitive constructions of Trinitarian doctrine should be welcomed as believers worldwide seek to articulate more deeply the Christian doctrine of God and its meaning for their lives.”²² This, he admits, would be distinct from his own presuppositions about the doctrine of the Trinity’s biblical basis and patristic development expressed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.²³ Nothing indicates a modification of his earlier definition of a social model: “*the one divine Being eternally exists as three distinct centers of consciousness, wholly equal in nature, genuinely personal in relationships, and each mutually indwelling the other,*” which further sees perpetual distinction of roles within the immanent Godhead.²⁴ He elsewhere asserted that the Christian tradition “has repeatedly formed analogies of trinitarian relations with immanent implications,” which Scripture testifies to repeatedly, and by which the Godhead has disclosed itself. “In other words,” he says, “nearly everything confirms trinitarian order and nothing appreciably suggests otherwise.”²⁵

Horrell’s large forthcoming project appears to continue his work, which might be the most interesting to evangelicals for a variety of reasons, not least for his exegetically-grounded intentions, more or less working with a biblical theology in view. But in light of its relative newness on the theological scene, what is to be made of the social model/s of the Trinity, especially in light of devastating critiques on offer? And what can be made of the three centers of consciousness, dangerously resembling trithesism particularly when interdisciplinary notions of “person” from the social-sciences and elsewhere are employed? Of particular note is that in some of his final publications the leading evangelical social trinitarian Stanley Grenz began withdrawal from heavy investment in the social Trinity, declaring that something even beyond

²⁰ Roderick T. Leupp, *The Renewal of Trinitarian Theology: Themes, Patterns and Explorations* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008) 106–9, 145–97.

²¹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2007) 383–99.

²² J. Scott Horrell, “In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Toward a Trinitarian Worldview,” *BSac* 166 (2009) 146.

²³ *Ibid.* 132. Unfortunately, Horrell often lacks important nuance in this essay’s trinitarian descriptions, creating some problems with his conflicting readings which he attempts to resolve by declaring that God is ultimately incomprehensible (e.g. pp. 134, 145).

²⁴ J. Scott Horrell, “Toward a Biblical Model of the Social Trinity: Avoiding Equivocation of Nature and Order,” *JETS* 47 (2004) 399 (emphasis original).

²⁵ J. Scott Horrell, “The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity,” in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective* 67.

“a thoroughly eschatological and communal” ontology was needed to develop an ontology adequate to facilitate the most helpful conceptualization of the relationship between God-in-eternity and God-for-us.²⁶ For him, it appears that the social model of the Trinity could not provide major impetus for the rest of systematic theology, coherently conceived, and its necessary corollary, theological ethics. Dead-end social models have also been incoherently employed by Millard Erickson, whose own model, robustly conceived, simply had no bearing on his later work.²⁷ Inherent to social approaches is an assumption that *Deus ad intra* will have direct bearing on all reality, although social trinitarians have little to show for any such comprehensive systematic and ethical projects.²⁸ The burden seems to be that for social trinitarians wanting to begin with societal issues, or with preconceived conceptions about persons in order to ascertain a remedy for specific social ills, the easy access of a direct connection to the internal divine life is too audacious. Employing the doctrine of God to immediately resource the Christian life and all of society’s ills needs a mediating step. For the model to work, it needs the incarnation, an *imago dei*, or something else to serve as the fulcrum that maintains Creator/creature distinction²⁹ while not forcing a human (societal) agenda into the ineffability of the divine life.

3. *Subordination moratorium?* Evangelical interest in the subordination debate has not gone away, although it still might. This unfortunate debate concerns the issue of the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father and its relationship to women’s ministry and domestic roles. As a follow-up treatment to his earlier volume, in 2006 Australian Anglican Kevin Giles essentially made a plea to those arguing for the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father in function and authority.³⁰ Giles affirms that one of this book’s basic arguments says that the affirmation of the Son’s eternal subordination “in function and authority by necessity implies ontological subordinationism.”³¹ The best response given to this book has been the one by Michael F. Bird and Robert Shillaker who present theological and biblical ground for maintaining the Son’s

²⁶ Stanley J. Grenz labels the prevailing, thoroughly eschatological and communal ontology as “provisional” in *Rediscovering the Triune God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 222. See also the argument in Jason S. Sexton, “Social or Simple? The Motion of Grenz’s Trinity” (unpublished paper presented at the Christian Doctrine Study Group of the Tyndale Fellowship, Tyndale House, Cambridge, England, July 1, 2010).

²⁷ See this point made in Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 216–17 with reference to God in Three Persons (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) and *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). It remains to be seen whether this will have any bearing on the next edition of his classic text, *Christian Theology*.

²⁸ One exception might be F. LeRon Shults, although this remains to be seen as it seems difficult to tell what may be providing the major methodological impetus in his heretofore and future work.

²⁹ Husbands presents the basic rule that any properly trinitarian theology “must preserve an ontological distinction between God and humanity in order to maintain an order consistent with their distinct natures” (“The Trinity is Not Our Social Program” 121).

³⁰ *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) followed his earlier *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002).

³¹ Giles, *Jesus and the Father* 30.

eternal subordination to the Father, and then ultimately call for “a moratorium on using Trinitarian arguments in support of any view related to the women-in-ministry debate.”³² Giles gives a rejoinder, eliciting a surrejoinder from Bird and Shillaker.³³ And as the heat did rise, the light did minimize—so much for the moratorium! The debate still has potential to generate both unnecessary heat and fruitful light, although with the moratorium option open amidst increased convolution and the inability to access one another’s positions, which may only be slightly abetted by the optimistic further attempts.³⁴ Hence the moratorium seems to accord more with the way of wisdom than otherwise.

Millard Erickson described the positions in this debate as the gradational-authority and the equivalent-authority views. Supporting the latter position in the book, Erickson helpfully proposes criteria by which the options can be evaluated.³⁵ Concurring with these criteria, Graham Cole notes that Erickson’s framing was more helpful than casting the debate in terms of a complementarian versus an egalitarian view, especially since some egalitarians affirm the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father while some complementarians deny eternal subordination.³⁶ After providing his own engagement and agreeing that the moratorium is “sage advice especially given the New Testament’s consistent appeal to the imitation of Christ as paradigmatic for our social relations and not the imitation of the eternal inner life of the Trinity,” Cole argues that the NT’s very genius is “its accent on the imitation of Christ in relation to us.” He asserts that NT ethics are “overwhelmingly evangelical because our behavior is to be informed by the evangel or gospel,” and alternatively, the model of working from “the eternal inner life of the Trinity” risks minimizing or leaving out the gospel altogether since it does not go through the narrative of Christ.³⁷ This is also the conclusion of McCall and Yandell who, in their final assessment of the issues related to their 2008 debate with Grudem and Ware, declare that “[t]he subordination of Jesus Christ is this: it is his freely chosen submission ‘for us and our salvation.’”³⁸

³² “Subordination in the Trinity and Gender Roles: A Response to Recent Discussions,” *TrinJ* 29 NS (2008) 82.

³³ Kevin Giles, “Response to Michael Bird and Robert Shillaker: The Son is Not Eternally Subordinated in Authority to the Father,” *TrinJ* 30 NS (2009) 237–56; and Michael F. Bird and Robert Shillaker, “The Son Really, Really is the Son: A Response to Kevin Giles,” *TrinJ* 30 NS (2009) 257–68.

³⁴ See the collaborative volume, *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son* (ed. Dennis W. Jowers; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, forthcoming), including essays advocating either comprehensive equality between persons or eternal submission.

³⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009) 83–107.

³⁶ Graham A. Cole, “Imitating the Trinity and Women’s Ministry: A Response to the Eternal Subordination of the Son Debate” (unpublished) 12. This paper was delivered in a workshop at the Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) Conference, June 12, 2010 as “The Trinity Without Tiers,” available at <http://bit.ly/ceNVbU> or the mp3 can be found at <http://bit.ly/agTDLd> (accessed November 10, 2010).

³⁷ *Ibid.* 11–12. See also Erickson’s understanding of implications for the gradationists’ eternal functional subordination (*Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* 247–59).

³⁸ Thomas McCall and Keith E. Yandell, “On Trinitarian Subordinationism,” *PhC* 11 (2009) 358. The Trinity Debate, sponsored by the Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding, was held at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, October 9, 2008, with Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem debating Tom McCall and Keith Yandell on the question, “Do Relations of Authority and

With themes as invested in the development of trinitarian doctrine as any have ever been—that is, both a healthy of doctrine of God and of salvation—one of the least things that each participant can offer is the needed clarification of distinct tools being employed for each one’s accession of the doctrine of the Trinity. Another matter of clarification might be to identify that what is being employed are *doctrines* of the Trinity, while nobody claims to be sketching up in the palm of our hands or in the publications we write the very Being of God himself. Some refuse to nuance the issues and are thereby unfortunately bound to a particular hermeneutic for accessing the doctrine of the Trinity that the Bible has not prescribed.³⁹ They think they have either reached into the heart of the divine life and can now use it for their purposes or else have found the heuristic within the divine life that can make everything right in the world. But human persons simply are not persons in the same way that divine persons are. Moreover, human persons are not in any way the same as divine persons. If they were, it would mean that human relationships are no different than inter-trinitarian relationships, positing true division and space into the divine life, which is a viable option for non-evangelical trinitarian theologians. Or else the assertion must be that within the conception of person (and relationship, for that matter) exists is a necessary component within the Being of God, which not only summons Feuerbach but either invites more Hegel than evangelicals should be comfortable with, or else brings us into the conversation with debates over Barthian actualism, especially as it relates to the evangelical desire to maintain a Christ-centered view of reality. And yet evangelicals want to get there without any mediatory steps, whether a robust *imago Dei* theology or something else. With such models, related issues of creaturely union and participation in God have completely betrayed the access to the immanent Trinity that may be found via Christology, and instead of seeing God in Christ reconciling the world, there seems now the idea of proper male-female relationships reconciling the world to God. Wiser evangelical theologians have refrained from this debate, and wisely so since if trinitarian doctrine were decided on purely anthropological grounds, God’s self-revelation in Christ is scandalously subverted, undercutting proper trinitarian theology. What is more, if it cares more about a contemporary debate than the tradition of Christian doctrine, the position is suspended in perpetual motion away from the life of God, and bound for heterodoxy. Other areas of interdisciplinary exploration are far more fruitful for trinitarian theology.

4. *Philosophical interdisciplinarity.* Engagement being conducted by analytic philosophers bears encouraging marks for evangelical trinitarian studies. Fred Sanders gave a stern plea for the conversation between philosophers and theologians when he warned that “[i]f serious interdisciplinary work is

Submission Exist Eternally Among the Persons of the Godhead?” (see <http://bit.ly/dd1d4i>, accessed November 11, 2010).

³⁹ On one hand, this refers particularly to those whose doctrine of the Trinity seems to be fueled by an agenda driven by social issues that yield the irresponsible question, ‘how can God not be like us?’ without doing the hard work to specify how this is even intellectually plausible; on the other hand, this refers to those who set forth proof-text Scripture passages without any recourse to hermeneutical, historical, or theological matters related to their exegetical findings.

not undertaken soon, the two traditions will harden into separate tracks and set the stage for great conflicts later.”⁴⁰ One unfortunate answer to this call was the aforementioned debate between Grudem/Ware and McCall/Yandell who, with differing methodological approaches and the absence of mutual understanding of an explicit self-awareness in each side’s approach to the question about eternal relations of authority and submission in the Godhead, simply seemed to talk past each other.⁴¹ As an example of whatever positions one might hold, having the discussion is always going to be difficult when philosophical theologians and theologians with agendas who were trained in biblical studies come together. Agreed-upon definitions could have significantly helped, especially regarding particular metaphysical referents (e.g. substance, property, nature, persons, etc.), whether from biblical readings or in reference to historical descriptions or contemporary implications.⁴² It was simply uncanny that this debate gave little to no evidence of being self-consciously interdisciplinary, although it definitely was. Also unclear was how unified in discipline Grudem and Ware actually were, having approached the issue(s) as a team which at the end of the day asserted the same conclusion surprisingly on the exact same ground.⁴³ As has been already highlighted, agenda-fueled pursuits may be more harmful than evangelicals realize, blinding the light of Scripture’s revelation that might more faithfully guide subsequent helpful constructions. Evangelical theologians affirm that God’s self-revelation is something entirely different than what we would have ever posited to God. The diagnoses and descriptions of issues addressed in divine revelation are also utterly different from what we would have thought. Bringing questions from our debates to the table is not a bad thing, but bring them to the table thinking that not only does the Bible give explicit one-to-one correspondent answers but also does such with the interjection of the very inner life of God onto the questions is not just peculiar but is a frightening thought. And the

⁴⁰ Sanders, “State of the Doctrine of the Trinity” 170. See also the case for systematic theology’s attunement to the deployment of the analytic skills by William J. Abraham, “Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 54–69. And see the other essays in this volume for an example of what analytic theology contributes to theology.

⁴¹ On one hand, see Grudem and Ware’s constant reference to “the entire testimony Scripture” and “the clear testimony of Scripture . . . [of] . . . the relationship of the Father and the Son . . . an eternal role differentiation,” along with the testimony of the church fathers. Compare this to McCall’s appeal to the church tradition until the 20th century and an alternate reading of Scripture that does not imply Arianism, as well as Yandell’s appeal to a “plain line” reading of Scripture and his response to what makes trinitarian members distinct: “the issue is really one that is philosophical; it’s about what the fundamental, metaphysical identity a condition can be” (quotes taken from The Trinity Debate).

⁴² One recent example of this kind of clarification is offered by Gerrett J. DeWeese before he argues for a contemporary incarnational metaphysics in “One Person, Two Natures: Two Metaphysical Models of the Incarnation,” in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective* 114–53.

⁴³ I.e. the entire biblical testimony. See n. 42. Additionally, some significant methodological steps were missing in Ware and Grudem’s reasoning. This was highlighted repeatedly by Yandell who critiqued Ware’s book (*Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2005]) on the grounds of having a contradiction in their (i.e. Ware and Grudem’s) corporate argument when Ware asserted that while the Spirit is necessarily subordinate to the Son, the Son also submits to the Spirit during the incarnation, in a reciprocal way. See this reiterated in McCall and Yandell, “On Trinitarian Subordinationism” 345–46, esp. nn. 18–20.

notion that any new or old metaphysical category can aid a deeper ascent into the divine life completely undermines the gospel.⁴⁴

While not wanting to overlook or minimize recent attempts of Open Theists in the interdisciplinary endeavor, especially with their engagement of science,⁴⁵ analytic theologians have provided the most robust fruit with their understanding of and sensitivity to cross-disciplinary issues.⁴⁶ McCall, in particular, seems to have an interdisciplinary disposition and agenda competent to bear much forthcoming fruit,⁴⁷ especially having picked up the now allied conversation begun by Sanders, but with additional nuances that will resonate well with most evangelical theologians.⁴⁸ And yet while contemporary philosophical developments might be able to create new categories for lumping people into heterodoxy,⁴⁹ will these anachronistic tendencies coupled with select amnesia be all that they will have to offer, or can they do better in offering their fine-tuned descriptions for faithful nuances that will help articulate the gospel into the contemporary culture?⁵⁰ With this propitious invitation, it nonetheless seems doubtful that philosophy will ever be able to establish a comprehensive ontology for the wider culture the likes of which were established features indicative of earlier trinitarian controversies.

5. *Trinitarian biblical theology.* The next area of consideration involves the trinitarian strides recently made within biblical theology. While every evangelical wants to be “biblical” and “trinitarian,” as already noted, some

⁴⁴ On this note, see the important thesis on trinitarian theologians being clear about the place of “mystery” in their formulations in Thomas H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 227–29.

⁴⁵ *Creation Made Free: Open Theology Engaging Science* (ed. Thomas Jay Oord; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009); and Thomas Jay Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2010); and *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010).

⁴⁶ See the essays in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology as well as those in Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity* (ed. Thomas McCall and Michael C. Rea; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) which includes many recycled essays but contains new contributions for half of its contents.

⁴⁷ In particular, note the final chapter, “Moving Forward: Theses on the Future of Trinitarian Theology,” in McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?* 219–53 as well as the sensitive and thoughtful exegesis (while integrating philosophical and theological concerns) of 1 Corinthians 15 by McCall and Yandell (“On Trinitarian Subordinationism” 342–44) and McCall’s exegesis of Philipians 2 in the Trinity debate.

⁴⁸ See Thomas McCall, “Theologians, Philosophers, and the Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity* 336–49.

⁴⁹ See Michael C. Rea, “The Trinity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 709 for a critique of J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig’s inability to affirm the Son’s homoousios, essence or nature with the Father in *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003) 575–95. See also William Lane Craig’s response to some of the criticism’s of his model, which he claims as “theologically unobjectionable and open to various mereological construals, leaving it up to the metaphysician to choose that construal which accords best with his views” (“Trinity and Monotheism Once More: A Response to Daniel Howard-Snyder,” *PhC* 8 [2006] 113).

⁵⁰ This assumes that Gospel-articulation, Christian proclamation and mission are on the academic agendas of the analytic theologians advocating the social, Latin, constitutional, or mysterian models.

have set out to discern and develop key trinitarian themes in Scripture.⁵¹ The premier example is given in the recent collaborative project between a NT scholar and a systematic theologian. Therein, Köstenberger and Swain sought to provide “a fresh examination of John’s trinitarian vision,”⁵² and masterfully did just that. Evangelical biblical theologians, however, don’t have a good track record of this kind of reading. It is granted that this might be exceptionally difficult for sections of biblical literature outwith the Johannine writings, explaining perhaps why some of the best biblical theologians have simply chosen not to develop the trinitarian theme in their work.⁵³ In addition, most of the major confusion within recent evangelical work in trinitarian studies appears to have been primarily generated by those trained in the fields of biblical scholarship who, having entered various debates, have imprudently formulated conclusions based on hasty exegetical decisions.

A passage like 1 Cor 11:3 stands as an example of one that has been used in making careless conclusions regarding correspondent relations between human and divine persons. With literalists especially wanting to draw univocal parallels, it is worth noting that in light of a terminologically acute reading of the text coupled with attention to grammar (i.e. the anarthrous/articular relationship between terms), there is no one-to-one correspondence between the parallel relationships designated in the text. After citing a number of the passages used by Arians to assert Jesus as a lesser being than the Father (e.g. John 14:28; 1 Cor 3:21–23; 11:3; 15:20–28) and highlighting exegetes in church history who saw these passages as referring to the Messianic Son in his earthly ministry (e.g. Augustine, Chrysostom, Calvin, and Charles Hodge) or else to the *communicatio idiomatum*, Graham Cole argues that God’s revelation is (1) accommodated; (2) true to God’s nature by providence; and (3) is Father, Son, and Spirit, so that God cannot be said to be gendered. In addition, he notes that references to Father “in heaven” denote “a qualitative difference between humans and divine persons.”⁵⁴

Scripture discloses God to us, and this *pro nobis*, within the economy of salvation history. This does not mean readings of Scripture when designating the divine references are invalid or somehow convoluted. But the methodological issues are not unimportant. This also does not mean that the infamous

⁵¹ E.g. see “John’s Trinitarian Mission Theology” in Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God* (BTNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) 539–46.

⁵² Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John’s Gospel* (NSBT; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008) 22.

⁵³ E.g. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), although Wright’s subsequent contributions might supplement this shortcoming: *Knowing the Holy Spirit Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006); and *Knowing God the Father Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), follow-up volumes to his *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995). A much better approach might be R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity* (2 vols.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, forthcoming), which sets out to consider “the name of the Trinity, the form of words that Christians use to signify the eternal object of their worship.”

⁵⁴ Cole, “The Trinity Without Tiers,” CBE audio workshop.

proof-texting method is invalid either when conducting biblical theology. But it becomes most beneficial when the methodological issues are heeded, complete with an understanding of an approach's warrant and weaknesses that lend to the accompanying "comprehensive patterns of thought" in which trinitarian doctrine thrives.⁵⁵

Of course, the Bible cannot be read apart from reader presuppositions, some which should be consciously repented of, while others humbly yet loosely employed cognitively, and still others as guiding lights. But establishing how to read the text is near as important as reading the biblical text itself. Throughout church history, trinitarian theology has never been simply the repetition of what the Bible says, and has operated in addition to (although never exclusive of) biblical interpretation.⁵⁶ It has worked with epistemologies and dominant ontologies, sought to articulate truth amidst heresy, and all this with soterialogical implications in focus. Biblical theologians then will do well to continue working on the hermeneutical issues while continuing the interdisciplinary conversation, which has taken sanguine shape in the next feature of the trinitarian resurgence.

6. *Trinitarian theological interpretation of Scripture.* Distinct from biblical theology is the theological interpretation of Scripture school.⁵⁷ It has become one of the fastest-growing movements within Christian academia and includes some important evangelical players in the venture.⁵⁸ The question repeatedly asked in a variety of ways by those engaging this (re)new(ed) discipline concerns the precise nature of the discipline. What is theological interpretation of Scripture?⁵⁹ One of this movement's leading figures argued that the best general hermeneutics is a trinitarian one, yielding interpretation "that we derive and establish from trinitarian theology." This is further derived from an understanding that all meaning is deeply theological, and the Trinity

⁵⁵ See Fred Sanders, "Trinitarian Theology's Exegetical Basis: A Dogmatic Survey," *MwJT* 8/9 (2010) 88–90.

⁵⁶ However, Köstenberger and Swain offer an alternative position: "Before the modern era, the history of theology simply is the history of biblical interpretation" (*Father, Son, and Spirit* 21 n. 15, emphasis original).

⁵⁷ Daniel J. Treier, "Biblical Theology and/or Theological Interpretation of Scripture? Defining the Relationship," *SJT* 61 (2008) 16–31.

⁵⁸ Shown forth in recent works such as *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); the recent periodical series inaugurated Spring 2007, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* (ed. Joel B. Green). Academic journals like *Ex Auditu* and *Pro Ecclesia* are also committed to theological interpretation as are the Two Horizons Commentary Series (Eerdmans) and the *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. *IJST* 12/2 (April 2010) and *SBJT* 14/2 (Summer 2010) were also devoted to the topic.

⁵⁹ E.g. Daniel J. Treier, "What is Theological Interpretation? An Ecclesiological Reduction," *IJST* 12 (2010) 144–61; Mark Alan Bowald, "The Character of Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *IJST* 12 (2010) 162–83; Darren Sarisky, "What is Theological Interpretation? The Example of Robert W. Jenson," *IJST* 12 (2010) 201–16; R. W. L. Moberly, "What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?" *JTI* 3 (2009) 161–78; Gregg R. Allison, "Theological Interpretation of Scripture: An Introduction and Preliminary Evaluation," *SBJT* 14 (2010) 28–36; and see some criticisms of the "movement" by Markus Bockmuehl, "Bible Versus Theology: Is 'Theological Interpretation' the Answer?" *NV* 9 (2011) forthcoming.

therefore is the transcendental basis by which “the experience of meaningful communication” can be explained.⁶⁰ This is later echoed in the “Introduction” to the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* when, having established that interpretation always includes presuppositions about God, Vanhoozer states that “the ultimate aim of theological interpretation of the Bible” is “to know the triune God by participating in the triune life, in the triune mission to creation.”⁶¹

Daniel Treier suggests that, contra the process of biblical or systematic theology, theological interpretation explores issues

not only on historical and literary grounds, but also by asking questions of the biblical text in terms of the history of Christian anthropology (with issues such as freedom, nature and grace surfacing); relevant aspects of scientific theories; philosophical interests regarding agency and selfhood; as well as contemporary concerns regarding bioethics, technology, social justice, environmental stewardship and the like.⁶²

Treier’s book-length investigation into the recovery of theological interpretation begins to exhibit the re-adherence to the Rule of Faith, which he calls “a trinitarian summary of the structure of the Bible’s story . . . reflected in creeds such as the Apostle’s and the Nicene.” He reasserts this commitment because “trinitarian creedal commitment” fell out of cahoots with modern, critical post-Enlightenment sensibilities.⁶³ Following Francis Watson, Augustine, and others, Treier’s reoccurring case study throughout the book comes from the markedly trinitarian *imago Dei* concept, although not as robustly conceived theologically as what is found in Grenz’s theology.⁶⁴ Keith Johnson has also lifted Augustine’s trinitarian “ruled” approach to Scripture, highlighting that his reading denoted (1) the Son as servant and as God; (2) that one person is *from* but not *less than* another; and (3) the inseparability of trinitarian action. After citing Köstenberger and Swain as a model of theological appropriators of the “ruled” approach, Johnson suggests that the same model has been and should be used by evangelicals, who already employ similar kinds of readings.⁶⁵ But it seems that evangelical trinitarian theology can still do better. It not only provides helpful tools for accessing Scripture, but also provides conceptual tools for doxological, pastoral, and missional reflection. But in order to see this sort of trinitarian theology take flight, theologians are going to have to build structures that can bear the weight of all this.⁶⁶ In

⁶⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988; repr. 1998) 456.

⁶¹ *DTIB* 21, 24.

⁶² Treier, “Biblical Theology and/or Theological Interpretation of Scripture?” 30.

⁶³ Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* 34.

⁶⁴ See this account in Jason S. Sexton, “The Imago Dei Once Again: Stanley Grenz’s Journey Toward a Theological Interpretation of Gen 1:26–27,” *JTI* 4 (2010) 187–206.

⁶⁵ Johnson, “Augustine’s ‘Trinitarian’ Reading of John 5” 805–10.

⁶⁶ See notable examples of attempts to do this: (1) the work that was beginning to blossom in Stanley Grenz’s explorative *The Matrix of Christian Theology* series (Westminster John Knox); (2) Fred Sanders’s argument that “the economic Trinity is the image of the immanent Trinity” (*The Image of the Immanent Trinity*, ix) which he recently argued more forcefully albeit more popularly in *The Deep Things of God*; and (3) Kevin J. Vanhoozer, who sets forth “a communicative ontology

reciprocal relationship with the systematic categories, scriptural interpretation, ethical concerns, and increasing engagement with all reality under the lordship of Jesus Christ, trinitarian theological structures are needed that can give to and draw from the heaviest matters in the universe. Trinitarian theology, then, is more than stating what faithfully interpreted Scripture and tradition have already said, although it is nothing short of this.

7. *Ecclesial trinitarianism.* Concrete attempts to develop a trinitarian theology entailing an emphasis on Christian praxis might be dubbed, “ecclesial trinitarianism,” or the doctrine of the Trinity for the church. While some have warned of the dangers of adopting a trinitarian fad, others have developed robust and responsible explorations with intention of accomplishing much good in and for the church. These have been displayed keenly in developments situated under the subheadings of worship, pastoral theology, and mission.

a. *Worship.* Jason Vickers explores how the earliest Christian invocation of God as “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” in worship and transformation, preceding epistemological and metaphysical speculation, was lost amid the Unitarian challenge that seventeenth-century English Protestants were not able to meet on methodological grounds. Yet the Trinity continued to enable worship, knowledge of and love for God and for the saving works of Father, Son, and Spirit in the salvation economy through the ministry of John Wesley in the eighteenth-century.⁶⁷ Fred Sanders has argued along similar lines when saying that evangelicals do not need to be talked into a trinitarian theory, but simply shown that they are already immersed in a tacit trinitarian reality. This long-needed approach to the doctrine of the Trinity “takes its stand on the experienced reality of the Trinity, and only then moves forward to the task of verbal and conceptual clarification.”⁶⁸ Of further relevance to the contemporary evangelical scene is Robin Parry’s account of how a robust articulation and understanding of the Trinity’s working in the world contributes to good worship in the local church, with particular application to local church musicians and church leaders.⁶⁹

John Jefferson Davis offers what he calls the ontological framework of “trinitarian theism” for his study on local church worship which exults in God-centered doxology, Christ’s real presence at the Lord’s Table, and the frequent (weekly) administration of Communion.⁷⁰ In their recent book on ecclesiology, Metzger and Harper consider the experiential act of worship as the church’s primary task and highest end, being where it communally “proclaims and

... and ... a theodramatic metaphysics” (*Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010]). See also Paul Louis Metzger, “The Relational Dynamic of Revelation: A Trinitarian Perspective,” in *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (ed. Paul Louis Metzger; New York: T & T Clark, 2005) 21–33.

⁶⁷ Jason E. Vickers, *Invocation and Assent: the Making and Remaking of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁶⁸ Sanders, *Deep Things of God* 34–35.

⁶⁹ Parry, *Worshipping Trinity* 185–91.

⁷⁰ John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010).

celebrates God's person and redemptive work through participation in his trinitarian community."⁷¹ And in the series of essays from the 2008 Wheaton Conference, the Lord's Supper and baptism are said to be where the church experiences and embodies the encounter with the triune God, while preaching is also seen as a trinitarian event best accounting for preaching's human and divine aspects to be "theologically articulated and coordinated in the context of corporate worship." In other words, "*by the Spirit, God's Word in Jesus Christ can characteristically assume and transfigure our human words, as the Scriptures are faithfully proclaimed in the context of the gathered community of worship.*"⁷²

b. *Pastoral theology.* C. J. Mahaney recently gave a pastoral account of trinitarian theology, providing an exposition of the text commonly referred to in liturgical traditions as "the words of the grace," yet found in 2 Cor 13:15: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Mahaney offers this "trinitarian benediction" as a reminder of what he says has always been true: "the character and work of the triune God define and inform the heart of pastoral ministry." Mahaney highlights how the grace of Jesus (saving us from our sin by his atoning cross-work), the love of God the Father (in the cross and generosity of adoption), and the fellowship of the Spirit (affirmed in Scripture's authority, the Spirit's variegated work, especially in revealing the Savior and the gospel) ubiquitously shape and structure the very essence of pastoral ministry.⁷³

Vickers also briefly develops a pastoral role of the trinitarian theologian, primarily in evangelism, catechesis, and worship which, through the process of reflection on what is unknown about God *in se* can show disciples that "when approached rightly, theological reflection on the immanent Trinity really is like theological reflection on the economic Trinity. Both end in doxology," all of which happens because "knowledge of the triune God is first and foremost a gift of the Holy Spirit; . . . it occurs in the Holy Spirit and by the Holy Spirit."⁷⁴ Further developing the concept of gift in a replete trinitarian manner, written from a deeply pastoral thrust, Kelly Kapic presents his trinitarian understanding of the gospel under the rubric of divine generosity. It is this immense generosity that amounts to the participation of unquenchable delight experienced by those who have entered into the movement of divine grace which in turn sets them free to live in grace, hope, and love while yet further participating in the proclamation and expansion of the good news of God's generosity.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009) 85.

⁷² In *Trinitarian Theology for the Church*, see Gordon T. Smith, "The Sacraments and the Embodiment of Our Trinitarian Faith" 185–203 and Philip W. Butin, "Preaching as a Trinitarian Event" 219 (emphasis original).

⁷³ C. J. Mahaney, "The Pastor and the Trinity," in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper* (ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010) 386–404.

⁷⁴ Vickers, *Invocation and Assent* 193–97.

⁷⁵ Kelly M. Kapic, *God So Loved, He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity, with Justin Borger* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) 212.

c. *Mission*. The missional thrust of trinitarian theology has also garnered attention from evangelicals, even more than pastoral theology. Timothy Tennent's recent work has aimed to provide a trinitarian missiology about which Horrell notes that in this book "the doctrine of the Trinity is neither clearly defined nor particularly explored."⁷⁶ Horrell has developed his own model of a "transcultural trinitarian worldview," utilizing the social trinitarian model he has been working with. John Franke offers an approach similar to Horrell's, using the social Trinity to move directly to the *missio Dei*,⁷⁷ and Metzger and Harper derive their understanding of the church's missional nature from a trinitarian understanding of the Spirit having sent the Son into the world. This same Spirit who unites us to Christ, sends us into the world to bear witness to Christ in word and deed.⁷⁸ Robert Lang'at casts the mission endeavor against the priority of trinitarian theology today, arguing that the earliest trinitarian formulations came about in the context of mission, a matter holding promise in the present context as well.⁷⁹ In contrast from most of the other models enlisted for the support of a trinitarian mission(al) theology, based on his reading of Augustine and Barth, Stephen Holmes has argued that "missionary" belongs in the category of God's eternal attributes, with all the implications that this entails.⁸⁰ Holmes's argument is convincing, and itself brings one exception to the features highlighted within what is being called ecclesial trinitarianism, namely, that trinitarian theology when properly conceived is meant to nurture the ecclesial features mentioned, not be driven by them.

8. *Christ-centeredness*. Christology is the basis for particular ecclesial features built upon a solid doctrine of God. What should be driving trinitarian theology, then, is a profound vision of Jesus Christ. In contemporary trinitarian theology, if social-trinitarianism is the shadow of Hegel, the various manifestations of Christocentric-trinitarianism are the shadow of Barth. Not all have been happy to acknowledge this recent Christological emphasis. Richard Muller has argued that the term is simply imprudent and should be abolished from use, especially in Reformation studies. He nuances views of a "prototypical christocentrism" (Irenaeus), the logical priority of Christ over Adam (various Franciscans), or the "principal christocentrism" (twentieth-century neo-orthodox) as reductions and specified uses of the term. For him,

⁷⁶ J. Scott Horrell, "Review of Timothy C. Tennent. *Invitation to World Missions*," *Them* 35 (2010) 373. Tennent's book is titled, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010). Horrell's point may be misguided since this book never states the desire to present a particular model of the Trinity, although it seeks to develop a trinitarian missiology using an outline to provide a lens for the Trinity's work in missions as viewed through the rubric of Father, Son, and Spirit. To his credit, Tennent ceaselessly develops this trinitarian framework through the outline of the book after establishing the basis for this early on.

⁷⁷ Franke, "God is Love" 117–19. See the theme more thoroughly developed in his *Manifold Witness*.

⁷⁸ Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology* 237–73.

⁷⁹ Robert K. Lang'at, "Trinity and Missions: Theological Priority in Missionary Nomenclature," in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church* 161–81.

⁸⁰ Stephen R. Holmes, "Trinitarian Missiology: Towards a Theology of God as Missionary," *IJST* 8 (2006) 72–90.

Barthian Christocentrism, “that the event of Jesus Christ is the revelation of God and therefore the ground through which all points of doctrine must be understood,” is an unwelcome innovation offered over against the larger theological tradition.⁸¹ Marc Cortez responds to Barth’s critics on this point by asking, “if the incarnation is a reality, if the sovereign God of the universe has in fact become incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, can theology be anything but christocentric?”⁸² While clarifying what should be meant about Barth’s “christocentric” emphasis, Cortez highlights how for Barth,

knowledge of the centre can only be provided through the revelatory *event* and cannot be *possessed* by conceptual knowledge. Barth’s christocentrism thus involves ‘a particular understanding of God’s self-revelation’ that reveals the centre of theology to be the relationship between God and man revealed in Jesus Christ through his concrete existence.⁸³

Dane Ortlund has also argued for the appropriateness of the renewed Christocentric emphasis as it relates to sound trinitarian theology, especially within evangelicalism. He affirms its happy union with trinitarian theology primarily because it is only through Christ that the Trinity is known, and the Trinity itself is Christ-centered. On the first point, the incarnate Son is said to be “the epistemological channel by which we come to know of God’s triune existence.” And on the second, the Bible speaks of Father and Spirit directing attention to the Son, spotlighting “the Son as the member of the Triune God sent forth—visibly, historically, conspicuously—to accomplish humanity’s redemption, a spotlighting freely affirmed by the Father.” Contra the improper Christomonist focus, this Christocentrism comes with a much deeper understanding of the Father and the Spirit.⁸⁴

Accordingly, the trend within evangelical trinitarian theology continues to reserve an important place for the priority of Christ-centeredness. Alan Coppedge begins unpacking his “triune theism” by acknowledging that “Jesus is our way into this expanded understanding of God.”⁸⁵ Fred Sanders asserts that we are to watch Jesus as the center of salvation history, and with Christ in visual range, we are to think “Trinity,” since Jesus was sent by the Father and does everything in company with the Holy Spirit.⁸⁶ In his sacramental sketch, Gordon Smith says that “to be trinitarian, we are radically Christocentric,” before showing that the pivotal point of our communion with God is Christ’s person and work.⁸⁷ The late Stanley Grenz moved increasingly toward

⁸¹ Richard A. Muller, “A Note on ‘Christocentrism’ and the Imprudent Use of Such Terminology,” *WTJ* 68 (2006) 253–60.

⁸² Marc Cortez, “What Does it Mean to Call Karl Barth a ‘Christocentric’ Theologian?” *SJT* 60 (2007) 143. Cortez qualifies Barth’s unique brand of Christocentrism by noting that it always involved: (1) both a veiling and unveiling of knowledge in Christ; (2) a methodological orientation; (3) a particular Christology; (4) a trinitarian focus; and (5) an affirmation of creaturely reality.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 137.

⁸⁴ Dane C. Ortlund, “Christocentrism: An Asymmetrical Trinitarianism?” *Them* 34 (2009) 315–18.

⁸⁵ Allan Coppedge, *The God Who is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007) 23.

⁸⁶ Sanders, *Deep Things of God* 133–36.

⁸⁷ Smith, “Sacraments and the Embodiment of Our Trinitarian Faith” 196–98.

a vision of the cosmic Christ for his approach to the theological task,⁸⁸ while Kevin Vanhoozer's recent account of the *analogia dramatis* sees Jesus' incarnate life as "the keystone in the system of projection that is God's before it enters ours." It is therefore "the ground that gives the terms we apply to God their definitive sense," and further means that "being itself comes into view as a category consequent, and thus subservient to christology."⁸⁹ The strong pulse of Christocentrism still leaves a number of issues on the table for discussion concerning matters related to the nature of union with Christ and communion with the triune God. One robust account of how all these things can be held together is the pneumatological Christology on offer by New Zealand evangelical Myk Habets.⁹⁰ But while this handles intimately related soteriological issues, of concern to evangelical trinitarian theology should perhaps still be the thing that has not been emphasized as much as it perhaps should be, and for which evangelicals are keenly known for. In a word, how does this related to distinctly trinitarian *proclamation*?

III. THE EVANGELICAL WAY FORWARD

This essay so far has provided a glimpse into the state of the evangelical trinitarian resurgence, and intends now to add some concluding remarks about how this ought to concern the future of evangelical trinitarian theology. While not being a study of particular trinitarian models or trinitarian theologies themselves, perhaps more fruitful as evangelical trinitarianism continues to flourish and mature, it seems that the observed trends for the most part reflect healthy moves. While fortification against heresy should remain on the agenda, it should do so in a way that does not supplant a renewed, coherent, Christ-centered preaching of the gospel, but rather cultivates it. For these reasons, it seems like evangelicals have ontological issues that need to be sorted out, as well as determined components of what to prioritize epistemically.⁹¹

Fred Sanders sketches this better way forward when he suggests that evangelicals are in the best place to continue work on trinitarian theology, and have always been trinitarian at their core. So even if evangelicals in the past have often generated minimalist trinitarian work, they continually found doxological and apologetic relevance in God's triunity, even if implications for this were not always developed.⁹² And yet evangelicals, even those of previous

⁸⁸ See his Christocentrism in Stanley J. Grenz, "Jesus as the Imago Dei: Image-of-God Christology and the Non-Linear Linearity of Theology," *JETS* 47 (2004) 617–28; and see also the brief account of this in light of his other writings (Sexton, "Imago Dei Once Again" 196–97).

⁸⁹ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology* 197.

⁹⁰ Habets, *The Anointed Son*.

⁹¹ See the caution to maintain nuanced ontological descriptions (Husbands, "The Trinity is Not Our Social Program" 121), the clarification of the ontological primacy of the relational dynamic within the triune life (Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God* 222), and the critique of Grenz's supposed lack of clarity (Randal Rauser, "Theology as a Bull Session," in *Analytic Theology* 74–75).

⁹² E.g. Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987–94) scarcely engage the doctrine of the Trinity outside of vol. 1, chap. 7, "God's Unity Includes Three Persons," even though it is said to have major relevance for apologetics and significant areas of life and ministry (1:280–88). See also the single-chapter treatment, "God in

generations, have no shortage of engagement with the very best trinitarian thinkers of their day with degrees of constructive developments all along, and nearly always with a view toward gospel proclamation.⁹³

The doctrine or doctrines of the Trinity can only be the main point⁹⁴ insofar as they provide for and give way to a coherent Christian theology that effectively nurtures flourishing disciples of Jesus Christ who live and walk in fellowship with the triune God and with one another. The main point of evangelical proclamation is not the doctrine of the Trinity *in se*, but for the world, reconciling the world through Christ. Meanwhile, there seems to be quite a bit of latitude for how the relationship of economic to immanent Trinity is nuanced.⁹⁵ For these reasons, it is hoped that there may be more systematic projects flowing from the recent resurgence. The church needs God, as does the world. And systematic theologians who have benefitted from the recent resurgence ought to devote needful time sorting out important methodological issues while taking the doctrine of the Trinity and working it into not just the other systematic *loci* in tests of coherence, and not only through other sub-disciplines of theology that might serve the church (e.g. practical theology, missional theology, etc.), but also through the other disciplines in the broader academic arena. This considers questions about what it means to be a distinctly trinitarian microbiologist, sports-therapist, politician, historian, or social-scientist. Enough abuse has been done here with mishandlings of human-divine analogies, but it seems like there is something that can be done, and that with a more distinctly trinitarian Christology that provides ground to explore these fields over which Jesus stands as Lord. For the great trinitarian theologians, it has not been their doctrines of the Trinity that have served as the major interest in their work, but what the doctrine of the Trinity *does* in theology, ethics, etc. This is also consistent with the best parts of the evangelical trinitarian resurgence. And if the doctrine of the Trinity is wrongly conceived or wrongly approached, the subsequent theology, ethics, etc., will be anemic, wrongheaded, and perverted.

In short, the church needs a trinitarian theology that moves toward a public theology, especially in conversation with other theologians from Muslim, Mormon,⁹⁶ other, or no faith backgrounds, from liberation theologies,

Three Persons: The Trinity," which addresses the question of how God can be three persons, yet one God, in Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 226–61.

⁹³ E.g. Carl Ferdinand Howard Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999) 5:165–213 and Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 177–223.

⁹⁴ Contra the sustained "disclaimer" by Robert W. Jenson, "What is the Point of Trinitarian Theology?" in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act* (ed. Christoph Schwöbel; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995) 31–32.

⁹⁵ See Sanders, *Image of the Immanent Trinity*, 190; and also Julian Smith, "The Problems Involved in Speaking of God as 'Three Persons,'" *Faith and Freedom* 60 (2007) 153–60, which argues a similar point about unchecked or unconstrained trinitarianism, but on completely different grounds than Sanders.

⁹⁶ For a brief account of the adoption of social trinitarianism by contemporary Mormon theologians, see Carl Mosser, "Fully Social Trinitarianism" in *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity* (ed. McCall and Rea) 149–50. In a conversation about the Trinity at the Genesis and Christian Theology Conference, The University of St Andrews, Scotland (July 17, 2009), a Mormon

and others in the pluralist marketplace of ideas. Clarifications of the early church's trinitarian theology came about in conversation with heretical ideas that threatened faithful proclamation of the nature of God that was essential to the faithful articulation of the Christian gospel. It seems like, contra non-evangelical scholars who have led many aspects of the current discussions in trinitarian theology, evangelicals are in a position to now lead in this manner of engagement with other voices that bring us to keen assessment of our articulation of both the nature of God (who the world needs most) and how he comes to bear on all of reality. We need coherent accounts of systematic theology that can provide crucial ethical bases; but we cannot impose divine relations *ad intra* onto the ethical concerns, because even if those relations could be understood, our societies could not bear the weight of that reality. God must bring people into that reality by his working, not by the schematized and forceful impositions of theologians.

In many ways, evangelical theologians appear also to have moved ahead of their non-evangelical counterparts in a number of areas, including (1) their apprehensiveness and overall reticence toward the use of social models of the Trinity; (2) their emphasis on the recovery of tradition; and (3) their emphatic commitment to a biblical exegesis that can speak the language of the contemporary culture. Thus, rather than being on the cutting edge, they have maintained proper emphases and are therefore in a position to both continue to develop and even lead the present and near future explorations in theology proper.⁹⁷ A more interesting question might be whether or not the cause of this is because evangelicals were discerning or simply slow and imperceptive. Either way, it seems that the way forward is in a much more intentional clarification of our methodology, and how it might be distinctly trinitarian,⁹⁸ as well as an emphasis in theology proper that serves the entire range of systematic theology. And whilst caution should be observed when labeling new explorations as heretical,⁹⁹ this does not mean that trinitarian heresy does not exist and cannot emerge. But even if and when that happens, the triune God will continue to do his work in the world.

Ph.D. student also informed me that the Latter Day Saints were “trying to make room for the conversation” about the doctrine of the Trinity with Christian theologians.

⁹⁷ E.g. many recent explorations in Open Theism were led by evangelicals—i.e. ETS evangelicals. See also Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*, for a robust development of themes that Stanley Grenz was already beginning to develop years earlier, although Grenz's agenda boasted an evangelical and much more comprehensive systematic enterprise (e.g. Grenz, “Jesus as the Imago Dei” 617–28).

⁹⁸ According to Ian Taylor, the lack of an explicitly trinitarian methodology was a fault of Wolfhart Pannenberg (*Pannenberg on the Triune God* [London: T & T Clark, 2007] 190).

⁹⁹ E.g. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?* 20, 258. Note also that since historical heretical positions were delineated by the apophatic nuances raised against certain assaults to the Gospel, and because a proper understanding of God at certain points in history seems to have been an exercise wrought by less-understanding of reality (including both the world and Christian doctrine) than is said to be given subsequently, if indeed the Spirit continues to guide the church in truth (John 16:13), we can expect yet further theological refinements to more closely represent the substance of our evangelical faith.