

EVANGELICAL TRINITARIANISM AND THE UNITY OF THE THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES

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Abstract: *This is a summons to deeper commitment to a Trinitarianism shaped by the gospel, with an explanation of how such a distinctively evangelical Trinitarianism should be located and arranged. Such a Trinitarianism is characterized by a prominent role for the temporal missions and eternal processions of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Father, and by a “two-handed,” or Christological and pneumatological, character. Special attention is given to the doctrine’s placement in systematic theology, its shaping effect on every Christian doctrine, and the disposition of the elements that make it up. The conclusion argues that the various theological disciplines themselves require Trinitarian commitment as a basis for their unity and coherence.*

Key Words: *Trinity, gospel, soteriology, evangelicalism, Christology, pneumatology, Nicene Creed, theological disciplines*

The Trinity is big. The doctrine of the Trinity is a big deal. Just how big of a deal it is, is what I want to explore in the following remarks. In doing so, I am inviting readers to join in an intellectual and academic act of worship, an act in which our rational souls magnify the triune Lord, because our spirits rejoice in God our savior (Luke 1:46). If the poor bedraggled word “evangelical” still means anything—and it does—it picks out a person whose spirit knows to rejoice in God the Savior. But how can a soul—a little part of God’s creation—magnify, enlarge, expand on, or embiggen, its Lord? Following the guidance of the Magnificat, as we have begun to do here, we can answer: When the Lord does magnificent things, the lowly can magnify the Lord. In Mary’s Magnificat, it is because the mighty one has done *megala*, great things, that the handmaid’s soul responds with *megaluno*, making him great in the sense of declaring him great in her speech (Luke 1:49).

Here is the secret of praise: The Lord moves mightily, the creature responds verbally, magnifying not just the deeds of the Lord, but the Lord of the deeds. This is the secret of praise, and praise is the secret of Trinitarian theology. Helmut Thielicke said that the doctrine of the Trinity is a doxology using the means of thought.¹ In the incarnation of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, God does the biggest thing he ever did outside the happy land of the Trinity, and the redeemed of the Lord say so. They say so by speaking of divinity; by speaking in orthodox dox-

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¹ Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 2.174.

ology of Trinitarian divinity. Trinitarianism is a response to God's self-revelation in the Father's sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit. So it is big. And so, let the praise of the triune God be continually in our mouths: "Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together" (Psalm 34:3).

I. PERSUASION FOR DEEPER COMMITMENT

In commending evangelical Trinitarianism to an audience such as this, I am commending something you already value. If I am a Trinity salesman (and I can think of worse job descriptions, as long as "salesman" doesn't connote "pitchman" or "huckster"), then I may seem to be peddling my wares to an unpromising audience of prospects: customers already well stocked with Trinitarian fare. But I am undeterred. I want you to take what you already have, and already value, and induce you to hold it more dearly and value it more highly. I hope it is possible to make you want an even greater Trinitarianism, and to possess an even more evangelical Trinitarianism.

The kind of rhetoric appropriate to this task is epideictic rhetoric. Epideictic rhetoric is a type of persuasion that intends "to bring about a deepening and reaffirmation of values already held in the present," as Colin Kruse says.² In the present: That is, it is not like judicial rhetoric which looks back on an event and seeks to persuade the jury to make a determination about its justice, either prosecuting or defending. Nor is it like deliberative rhetoric, which looks forward to a course of action and urges an audience to undertake it or debates how to undertake it. Unlike these, epideictic or demonstrative rhetoric is about our current status. It is not engaged in judicially determining if the Trinity is right, nor deliberatively deciding how to perform or carry out something related to the Trinity. It is demonstratively deepening our commitment to, and appreciation of, the doctrine of the Trinity. If it sounds familiar, it is because you know this kind of rhetoric from the pages of the NT. As Colin Kruse says of the rhetoric of 1 John, "the author is not seeking to defend himself or persuade his hearers to take some course of action; rather, he is trying to increase their adherence to the traditional truths of the community."³ And the main technique in the toolkit of epideictic rhetoric is amplification: the act of magnification. By techniques of repetition, augmentation, comparison, accumulation, itemization, and so on, amplification seeks to make the truth loom larger, and to let believers dwell deeper in it.

We do not seek to magnify the Trinity because it is measly and in need of magnification; rather we seek to magnify it because it is big. Precisely because it is big, the soul wants to magnify it. But Trinitarian praise is an art, and there are many right ways and many wrong ways to do it. I have seen, and may have occasionally been guilty of, many of the wrong ways of seeking to make much of the Trinity. I would like to point out a few of the false moves that are sometimes made, if you will bear with these confessions of a Trinity salesman.

² Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 29–33.

One of the most pervasive, perennially alluring missteps in teaching on the Trinity is the one that pretends to make much of the Trinity while in fact making much of the Trinitarian theologian. It is an error as insidious as it is subtle. Let me share a concrete example. A well-meaning interviewer once asked D. A. Carson the following question: “What elements of the doctrine of the Trinity are largely overlooked in substantial swaths of today’s evangelicalism? And what are the practical implications of such neglect?” On the face of it, it is a fine question, a prompt for the professor to display his insight, to level a critique, and to point a way forward. But Carson seems to have heard the hiss of the serpent in the sibilant syllables of the interviewer, because his curt reply was, “The question is a bit cheeky.” That is a great response. Carson is not just being pedantic or contrary. I don’t picture him removing his glasses and rubbing his weary professorial eyes as he leans back in his chair and sighs, “Your question, young man, is so ill conceived and badly formulated that no possible answer could approximate verity. Class dismissed.”

No, in this case Carson hears an invitation to criticize the church from a superior position, and declines because the wrong answer might magnify the mighty theologian alongside the almighty God, and to give that answer would be to shirk his duty. Even the rebuke is mild: “The question is a bit cheeky.” Well, it takes one to know one, because that answer is a bit cheeky. And so, cheek to cheek with his interlocutor, Carson gives a full answer:

The question is a bit cheeky, of course, since it assumes that much is wrong. All of us know fine evangelical churches that are carefully trying to teach the whole counsel of God. While majoring on biblical exposition, they are also enthusiastic about teaching sufficient historical and systematic theology to give their members a sense of the historical continuity and of the doctrinal heritage of the people of God.⁴

Here is a recognition that good churches are out there getting the work done. The people of God are gathering to worship the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are hearing the word of God about Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. They are praying to the Father by the mediation of the Son and the intercession of the Spirit. Trinitarian things are happening; evangelical Trinitarianism is thriving. Can these churches do better? Of course. Can a theologian help them? Yes. But not by crouching in a cave and joining in Elijah’s lament: “I have been very jealous for the Lord, for the people have forsaken your covenant and torn down your altars and killed your prophets, and I, even only I, am left—and they seek my life, to take it away.” How did the Lord reply to this lament? By telling Elijah to go to Damascus and give his mantle to a younger prophet. He has seven thousand faithful followers in reserve who have not bowed the knee to the sub-trinitarian Baal.

Could evangelical churches go on to a better understanding of what they are doing, and of what it has to do with God being the Trinity? They could and they should. And they may be summoned to that better understanding by the kind of

⁴ “The *SBT* Forum: The Relevance of the Trinity,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10 (Spring 2006): 92.

preaching, teaching, and theologizing that has the character of filling in the gaps, strengthening the things that remain, and drawing out latent resources that are already familiar, connecting the dots that are already in place. Evangelical theologians ought to join the church in praising the Trinity. They say: "Magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together." Otherwise, we theologians run the risk of compromising the health that is already in the members of the body. We ought to take a kind of theological equivalent of the old Hippocratic oath: First, do no harm. The fancy name for a disease you catch in the hospital, from the doctors and nurses, is iatrogenetic. I fear there is a lot of theological iatrogenesis abroad these days. Too often when a theologian thinks he can fix what ails the church, he does so not because he is impressed by the bigness of the Trinity, but impressed with himself or with the superiority of academic discourse to ecclesial. Many theological critiques of the church seem to presuppose that what the church's culture needs is an infusion of health from academic culture. But academic culture, even among Christian academics, is not self-evidently healthy, nor are its ways routinely appropriate to God's church. Consider this danger of self-magnification we've been thinking about. Have you ever reflected on the cultural implications of the fact that every academic, as a condition of entering the guild, has carried out an extensive review of literature with the goal of demonstrating to the gatekeepers that nobody else has ever said what they are going to say? Dissertations and journal articles ought to be rigorously original, of course, or why bother writing them? A well-informed review of literature is useful tool for identifying where meaningful work is to be done. But just picture the consequences of requiring everyone in the club to be a certified original. An outsider might have cause to be skeptical of their claims to be bringing a new and unheard-of word. I am well aware that academic life also provides ample invitations to humility: to admire the work of others, to confront your own limits and stupidity every time you sit down to write or stand up to speak. There is no need to be embarrassed of academic work, which can be good, honest labor and a chance to walk in the ways of the Lord. But profsplaining to the saints as if they were not immersed in Trinitarian life is not the way forward. Of course we ought to have even more reason for self-doubt if we have a book to sell, which has all the answers in it.⁵

II. ON THE SCOPE AND PLACE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

So let us speak of divinity. The Trinity is so big that the size and significance of Trinitarian doctrine is difficult to estimate. Where should such a doctrine even go in the table of contents of a Systematic Theology? Should it go right at the beginning, as the full statement of the identity of the God whom theology is about? Yes. And yet, you cannot say very much about the doctrine of the Trinity until you have met Christ and the Spirit, and have handled a great deal of material in the vast fields of Christology and pneumatology; at least their persons if not their work. And once you have brought up the incarnate Son and the outpoured Holy Spirit,

⁵ Fred Sanders, *The Trinite God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

you are doing soteriology. So you could insert the doctrine of the Trinity into the middle of a system, but that is awkward. Yet the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be put off until the denouement of salvation history for fear that for the duration of the theological system there will be nothing but discussion of a divinity that has not yet been specified or identified until the end. But if you start the system with all the specifications of the divinity as the Father who sends the Son and Spirit, you have to presuppose on page one that the reader is already more or less in on the whole story. You would already have to be in on the story to get in on the story. So the beginning won't work, the middle won't work, and the end won't work. A theological system could handle the doctrine three different times, insisting that these three are one; or a system could simply resolve to elaborate the doctrine of the Trinity at each point along the way. This last option may sound enticing for readers who simply cannot get enough Trinitarian theology, or cannot get theology to be Trinitarian enough. But the virtue of conciseness would be utterly lost. Incessantly expounding Trinitarianism in a system would make the point so elaborately that it would obscure the point.

And the point to be made is that the Trinity is big. The doctrine of the Trinity is the Christian doctrine of God developed on the basis of God's actions in salvation history. It is the Christian answer to the question "Who is God?" developed by reference to God's mighty acts, and chiefly the Father's sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity takes up the entire unified, coherent economy of salvation, and considers it against the background of God's own eternal being. It correlates God's identity with his free and gracious self-giving in the history of salvation. It refuses to treat salvation history as a series of discreet episodes of intervention, instead insisting that it is a comprehensive economy, carried out by God in all wisdom and insight, to save us by being himself for us, by being among us and for our salvation what he is in himself (and would have been without us), and to make himself known in the Father's sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit because the one God is, from eternity to eternity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It takes the whole Bible to make this point. In fact, you can picture the rise of the church's confession of Trinitarian doctrine as the result of reading the full canon of Scripture left to right, OT to NT, and then pursuing the question, "If these promises, and this gospel, go together and are true, what must we say about who the one God is?" If we say he is the God of the Bible's gospel, we have to say he is the one God who gave his Son because he has a Son—there is no Sonless God. He sent his Spirit because he has a Spirit—there is no Spiritless God. Commitment to the gospel of the Bible's God leads to praise of the God of the Bible's gospel.

We could go around that Bible-gospel-God circle many more times by way of amplification and magnification. Rehearsing the mutual entanglement of the canonical, the evangelical, and the theological is worthwhile work. But we have said enough to show that the doctrine of the Trinity is not just any doctrine. It is the doctrine of doctrines, a uniquely holistic and comprehensive confession. But to estimate the scope of the doctrine of the Trinity aright, and to locate it properly, we must find a way to describe it in a less external manner. Our musings about where

to locate the doctrine in a Systematic Theology have a strangely extrinsic, and formal sound to them, and the doctrine of the Trinity has a size and significance difficult to estimate from the outside. But there is a precise sense in which we are never quite speaking about the persons of the Trinity from the outside. Discourse about the Trinitarian persons is necessarily always discourse about God's internal self-relatedness. Here is what I mean. We are speaking of divinity, and can do so only because Scripture speaks of divinity. Augustine helpfully points out that in Scripture, "not everything that is said of [God] is said substance-wise. Some things are said [relation-wise], with reference to something else, like 'Father' with reference to 'Son' and 'Son' with reference to 'Father.'"⁶ Note that by "relation-wise," Augustine is not pointing to God's relation to the world of creatures. That is because God's relation to things outside himself is never a symmetrical or equally reciprocal relation. It has to be what scholastics called a "mixed" relation, since the creature could not possibly exist without reference to that relation, but God, on the contrary, could exist and be fully himself without that relation. So the kind of relation Augustine is pointing out is an unmixed, eternal, internal relation. If we speak of those, we are truly speaking of divinity relation-wise, which is to say that we are speaking of the Trinity.

This is precisely how the doctrine of the Trinity was handled in Systematic Theology in the days of Protestant scholasticism. Seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian Johannes Quenstedt taught that:

The consideration of God is twofold, one absolute, another relative. The former is occupied with God considered essentially, without respect to the three persons of the Godhead; the latter, with God considered personally. The former explains both the essence and the essential attributes of God; the latter describes the persons of the holy Trinity.⁷

Meanwhile, in the same century, Reformed theologian Francis Turretin said that "the absolute consideration of God (as to his nature and attributes) begets the relative (as to persons)."⁸ For Turretin and company, the turn from absolute to relative simply is the turn from the doctrine of the one God to the doctrine of the triune God.

Those scholastics bring an appropriate coolness and abstraction to the difficult task of Trinitarian theology. They specify rather surgically the sense in which our statements about the persons are statements about an insideness of God. But we could approach the insight from a more soteriological angle, and phrase it in a more evangelical idiom. In an essay entitled "Out of the Box: The Christian Experience of God in Trinity," Anglican theologian Gerald Bray says that knowledge of the Trinity is "inside knowledge." "Christians," he says, "have been admitted to the inner life of God ... the God who appears as one to those who view him on the

⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate* V.6.

⁷ Cited in Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1889), 134.

⁸ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 1.254.

outside, reveals himself as a Trinity of persons, once his inner life is opened up to our experience. The Christian doctrine that has resulted from this is nothing more nor less than a description of what that experience of God's inner life is like."⁹ To follow Scripture in speaking of divinity substance-wise is to speak from the outside, "absolutely considered." To follow Scripture in speaking of divinity relation-wise is to bring personal distinctions into our view, to speak from the inside, "relatively considered."

Seventeenth-century theologians saw this distinction as one that was implicit in a wide range of Scripture's own expressions. To take one concise example, John Davenant reads Col 1:3, "We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," in this way: "He is described as well by his absolute name, that is, God; as by his relative title, that, the Father of Christ. The apostle employs both with the best design."¹⁰ The same distinction, which theologians learned from Scripture, is one of the things at work in John 1:3, where the Word was with God and was God: one way to parse the Word's simultaneous witness and wasness, his being-with and his being, his distinction and identity, is as a case of essential and relative predication. The word in terms of relation was with; in terms of essence, or described absolutely, the word was.

I hope that in this project of Trinitarian salesmanship, I have not made the doctrine seem cheap. It is no good to offer discounts on a doctrine so vast and comprehensive. On the contrary, I am commending it as the treasure buried in the field of salvation history, and passing along an insider tip that you would be wise to sell all your hermeneutical belongings in order to lay hold of this great treasure. It is not just another doctrine, but the one that sums up the economy of salvation, the whole counsel of God, and the identity of the God of the gospel. How could it be cheap if it runs through the whole economy? It truly is "too big to fail."

III. EVANGELICAL TRINITARIANISM: MINISTRY WITHIN THE TRINITY

A good salesperson, even the kind of epideictic rhetorician I have been commending as the best practitioner of Trinitarian catechesis, knows that the best way to make the sale is to show your audience that the thing you want them to take hold of is directly connected to something they already deeply value and are already keenly aware of their commitment to. So in the task of propagating and encouraging evangelical Trinitarianism, it is wise to emphasize the close relationship of the Trinity to the gospel. Evangelicals are gospel people (it's in the name), so that means evangelical Trinitarianism will be characteristically gospel Trinitarianism. First a word of caution: We do not want evangelical Trinitarianism to be so distinc-

⁹ Gerald Bray, "Out of the Box: The Christian Experience of God in Trinity," in *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice* (ed. Timothy George; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 45-46.

¹⁰ John Davenant, *An Exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians* (London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1832), 55.

tive from “mere trinitarianism” that it is a different thing after all. I am reminded of a Lutheran theologian who said, “There is, thank God, no specific Lutheran doctrine on the Trinity.”¹¹ And I could concur: there is, thank God, no specific evangelical doctrine on the Trinity, one that would be distinguished as a different doctrine than the normal Christian doctrine. But we may speak that shared doctrine with a characteristic accent, or walk its path with a telling limp. Certainly we want it to be truly ours, cultivated in our churches rather than shipped in from across town; really appropriated, and if not homemade than at least own-made.

To that end, it is always worthwhile to trace some of the many links between the Trinity and the ministry of the gospel. Just as we have seen that the revelation of God’s triunity comes to us from God’s side, that is, the inside, and that our speech about the Trinity is a reference to internal relations, we want to speak of divinity by pursuing this theme: that the gospel is God the Trinity opening up his life of fellowship to share it with us, so we come to an internal approach to gospel ministry.

Authentic gospel ministry is never without the Trinity; it is always within the Trinity. Every element of gospel ministry can be fruitfully analyzed to show its Trinitarian depth. The crucial analytical question to ask is never simply, “Where can I find the number three in this?” The crucial analytical question is always, “What are the Son and the Holy Spirit doing in this ministry?” Trinitarian analysis of gospel ministry is more a matter of counting to two than to three. Because the Son and the Spirit are the sent persons, whose sending constitutes the economy of salvation and revelation, they are the persons to watch. The sending Father is available to us, active toward us, and engaged with us, in the twofold mission of the Son and Spirit. We do not look to the sky to wait for the coming of the Father; he always sends and is never sent. Irenaeus of Lyons used a homey illustration of this twofold sending: He talked about the Father’s two hands. When Gnostics said God was too high to touch the world, delegating it rather to angelic intermediaries, Irenaeus replied, “God the Father is never without his two hands, the Son and the Spirit.”¹² The image should of course not be taken literally. As Didymus the Blind said, “Be careful not to descend to lowly things, forget what we are discussing, and thereby depict in your mind a variety of bodily limbs and begin to imagine to yourselves their sizes, their inequalities, and other body parts.”¹³ By hand, Irenaeus means agency, personal presence, and effective power. By calling the Son and Holy Spirit the Father’s two hands, Irenaeus draws our attention to the differentiated unity of God’s work. In doctrinal terms, this Irenaean two-handedness can be described as the constant correlation to Christology and pneumatology. It is remarkable how much the NT vision of ministry opens up to our understanding when we direct careful attention to the distinguishable and coordinated work of the Son and the Holy Spirit. And it is equally remarkable how much the Father’s presence and pow-

¹¹ Hermann Sasse, cited in Carl L. Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity: Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics* (Ft. Wayne: Luther Academy, 2016), 3.xi.

¹² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV, 20:1.

¹³ Didymus the Blind, *On the Holy Spirit* (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 171.

er are discernible in the work of his two emissaries, because to be in the grip of Christ and the Spirit is to belong to God the Father.

The history of salvation and the order of salvation are, as we have already described, centered on the work of Christ and the Spirit. Galatians 4:4-6 says, "In the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem us from the curse of the law. And he sent the Spirit of his Son into our heart, crying 'Abba, Father.'" Turning his attention from the history of salvation to its application in an order of salvation, and even to the personal experience that flows from these objective realities, John Wesley sketched a Trinitarian soteriology by saying that "justification implies what God does for us through his Son, sanctification what he works in us by his Spirit."¹⁴ A Trinitarian soteriology would be a two-handed doctrine of salvation that attended to the pervasive presence of the Son and the Holy Spirit across this whole span from the *historia salutis*, through the *ordo salutis*, to the shape of a Christian life that follows from them. Though much has been written on the implications of Trinitarian soteriology, it continues to be a rich field for exploration.

But look at the two-handedness, the Son-and-Spirit reciprocity, of mission and evangelism. The great Protestant missions movement, especially in its evangelical phase, made much of the great commission, which is the risen Christ's command to go into all the world and make disciples. Jesus commanded his disciples to go and make disciples. And in Matthew's theology, that commission is based on the fact that Jesus, God with us, has been given all authority and is with us to the end. But for most of Christian history, the church's proclamation of the gospel, even across cultural boundaries, was not footnoted to Matthew 28 but to Acts 2. At most times and places, Pentecost drove missions, and if asked why they were going out to testify, Christians would answer that they were equipped by the Spirit to bear witness.¹⁵ Just as Luke and Matthew are both canonical Gospels, both rationales for mission are valid. A two-handed, Trinitarian approach to mission draws its power from the Spirit poured out on all flesh, who was not given until Christ ascended. The Son and the Spirit are not competing missions agencies; you cannot have one without the other, nor the Father without them both, nor them without the Father.¹⁶ For this reason, Christ, who is with us to the end of the age (so Matthew) is present precisely by the agency of the Spirit (so Luke). No wonder, then, that he commanded us to baptize disciples in the one name of the three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Christian discipleship, unsurprisingly, also bears this Son-Spirit character. When Jesus called disciples, they literally followed him down the road, one foot after another. They went where he went. After the ascension, that kind of following is no longer the order of the day: "where I go you cannot go." Since Jesus went up

¹⁴ John Wesley, "Justification by Faith" (Sermon 5), in *John Wesley's Standard Sermons* (Salem, OR: Schmul), 45.

¹⁵ Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961).

¹⁶ See Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), for a Trinitarian arrangement of the theology of missions.

and the Spirit came down, to be led by the Spirit is to follow the Son of God, indeed, so closely as to be conformed to the image of the Son. Tracing this transition between following Jesus before and after the ascension/Pentecost juncture, Allen Coppedge has called Christians “disciples of the Trinity.”¹⁷

This sketch of a two-handed grasp of salvation, mission, and discipleship already gives us the broad outlines of a Trinitarian ecclesiology. There is more to say about the being of the church as the body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit, and therefore the people of God. Two voluminous conversations in the twentieth century treated ecclesiology under the headings of communion ecclesiology and *missio Dei* ecclesiology. They are not irreconcilable, nor mutually exclusive. A Trinitarian theology that emphasizes the missions of Son and Spirit may tend more obviously toward an ecclesiology that views the church as a creature or instrument of those missions, caught up and carried along by God’s own movement in the world. But communion ecclesiology is of course not without its organic connections to the Christological and pneumatological missions. The key point is that both of these major modern ecclesiological motifs are thickly Trinitarian, and both require an elaborate account of Son-Spirit reciprocity as the divine work underlying them.

We are describing authentic gospel ministry as never without, but always within, the Trinity by accounting for the two hands of God, and feeling ourselves surrounded by the Trinity. We are only looking at a few key doctrines that make that conspicuous while hinting that every doctrine repays two-handed analysis. One more doctrine will show us to be fully and truly surrounded, completely held in the Father’s two hands. That doctrine is eschatology. The angle of approach should once again be salvation-historical, by way of reflection on the presence of Christ and the Spirit. In the days of Christ’s earthly ministry, the Spirit was on him fully, but was not yet given out, that is, was not yet poured out on all flesh in fulfillment of Joel 2, on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ. The Spirit of Pentecost is the unchanging third person of the Trinity, but his coming at Pentecost was an incursion of Trinitarian action into the course of salvation history as unique, personal, and time-stamped as the incarnation of the second person. Just as we mark time BC and AD, we could mark it on a pneumatological calendar as before and after Pentecost. The Spirit, who Christ referred to as “another helper,” did not come until Christ ascended and sat at the Father’s right hand. That is, he did not come until Jesus “went away,” in John’s idiom. In terms of their epochal personal presences, Christ was personally present first before the Spirit came. Then after Christ went away, the Spirit came. In this age, Christ is present to us precisely by the Spirit. The Spirit is not his replacement; their reciprocal absences cannot be explained on any sort of modalistic conversion of one into the other (of the sort that would account for Clark Kent and Superman’s coordinated absences). What is at work here is a two-handed Trinitarian back-and-forth of inaugurated eschatology: the punctuated finality of the Messiah’s realized eschatological coming is being

¹⁷ Allan Coppedge, *The God Who is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 36-52.

superintended by the indwelling Pentecostal Spirit who is an earnest of our future inheritance, groaning within us on the way to future eschatology. As Lord of the inaugurated kingdom, the Holy Spirit is the life-giver to our spirits now and to our bodies then, in the consummation. But when Christ returns, he will not “trade places” with the Spirit again. The Helper and the other Helper will both be with us in their properly personal presences. The fulfillment of God’s presence in the eschaton will be characterized by a double presence for which the coordinated single presences have prepared us. As Basil of Caesarea said, “Any intelligent man realizes that the work of the Holy Spirit will not cease, as some imagine, when the Lord makes his long-awaited return from heaven. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit will be present with Him on the day of His revelation, when He will judge the universe in righteousness as its only Ruler.”¹⁸ With characteristic attention to the theological significance of prepositions, Basil affirmed that Christ rules *by* the Spirit now, but will rule *with* the Spirit then. Basil did not say much more about this, and neither should we. This is not the kind of eschatology that fits well on a chart, or that is subject to detailed narration. But a glorious Trinitarian future awaits us, and we would not expect to be able to picture it.

IV. THE DISPOSITION OF EVANGELICAL TRINITARIANISM

I hope the vigor and promise of evangelical Trinitarianism, marked by a two-handedness in its integration of Christology and pneumatology, is evident from this brief sketch. I would like to draw out two implications for theological education. The second will concern how the various theological disciplines relate to each other. The first has to do with the arrangement of the material that makes up the biblical doctrine of the Trinity itself. For lack of a better term, I call this the doctrine’s disposition, meaning thereby to indicate how the material is disposed or arranged (which is what classical rhetoric called an argument’s *dispositio*).

In brief presentations of the doctrine of the Trinity, we can observe two different dispositions of the material. On the one hand the main terms can be laid out in a kind of genetic or developmental way, introducing the three persons in a salvation-historical framework which leads with the Father, then adds the Son, and finally (after a brief historical account of the work of the Son) introduces the Holy Spirit. In order to meet all three persons and grasp their unity, the student has to follow the whole exposition. We could call this disposition the Nicene style because its classic formulation is the Nicene Creed of 381 (though the Apostles’ Creed also follows this format). On the other hand, the material is sometimes laid out with a kind of static or equilateral disposition, one which offers the word “Trinity” as an advance organizer and then introduces the three persons all in the same line: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We could call this style the *Quicumque* style, after the so-called Athanasian so-called creed (whose famous opening words are *quicumque vult*, “whoever will”). There is no question of the two dispositions contradicting each other. They are different dispositions of the same doctrine, not two distinct doctrines.

¹⁸ Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 16:40.

The Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed do not disagree on the trinity of God. Each delivers the same material, but they pursue different strategies of presentation. The Nicene Style is more narrative, the *Quicumque* more schematic. And each has its own advantages and disadvantages.

The Nicene style has the advantage of drawing out the natural connections between the persons of the Trinity, which means it jumps off of the history of salvation and then leads with the material content of the relations of origin. "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," it begins, as if that were the whole story. Then it introduces this other character and tells you he has been there the whole time: "One Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made." To understand this, the reader must mentally return to the beginning and re-think what it meant for God the Father to be the maker of heaven and earth. Apparently, God the Father neither made everything by himself nor existed by himself. "Father" must have always implied "Son," as it turns out, though the Nicene style's strategy is not to say so up front. Once it introduces the Son, however, it gives him the lion's share of attention. The center of the creed is a thumbnail sketch of the gospel story, the life of Christ. Finally, we meet a third character, the Holy Spirit, who is not only "the Lord" but is also the "Giver of Life," is to be worshiped, and who "proceeds from the Father." The Nicene style demands that you follow the discursive line of exposition to see what emerges, and then mentally go back and insert the conclusion as the presupposition that was silently there all along. Because of this structure, the Nicene style underwrites long-form expositions that are great for re-reading. The creed itself (like the Apostles' Creed) functions especially well in liturgical repetition because it benefits from a synchronic-diachronic dialectic that is best experienced repeatedly. But above all, the Nicene style rehearses biblical history in a way that draws the eternal implications for God's being. That is, it arranges itself around the temporal missions and the eternal processions that ground them.

The Nicene disposition of the material sometimes draws criticism for being inadequately Trinitarian, because it does not connect the dots or say the word "Trinity." Instead of putting the three persons of the Trinity as close together as possible, it intersperses many other words, entire other doctrines, in between the occurrences of the personal names. Even more astonishingly, the Nicene disposition sometimes invites criticism for being subordinationist, because it leads with the Father and then introduces Son and Spirit in a sub-ordinal sequence (second and third). It is peculiar for anything from Nicaea to be suspected of being too subtle, inadequately Trinitarian, or subordinationist. After all, pro-Nicene theology was and is famously explicit in its Trinitarian commitments and rejection of subordinationism. But even though these concerns about the weaknesses of the Nicene disposition as pedagogical arrangement are misplaced, they do throw into relief the Nicene style's characteristic expositional strategy. Perhaps they also show why a supplemental dispositional strategy, the *Quicumque*, has emerged with its own role to play.

The *Quicumque* style sets the three names as close together as possible and gathers them under the advance organizing title “Trinity,” as in: “We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity ... for there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit.” Having pulled the concepts together tidily, the *Quicumque* style can then work back and forth across a three-one dialectic: “The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal; and yet they are not three eternal but one eternal.” It prompts the reader to seek clarity about what is one (essence) and what is three (persons). In due course, the *Quicumque* style will have to appeal to the relations of origin, without which there is no reason to keep rehearsing the three-one data. In the Athanasian Creed itself, the Son’s begetting and the Spirit’s proceeding are eventually stated in a compact bundle of distinguishing characteristics. Perhaps the relations of origin produce a kind of “Aha!” when they are finally disclosed in the *Quicumque* style. But what is striking is that the *Quicumque* disposition does not formally require the relations of origin to be made explicit. For example, consider what happens when the logical diagram called the Shield of the Trinity is used as a starting point for teaching the doctrine. It maps certain relations between the persons with great clarity: The Father is God, the Son is God, but the Son is not the Father, and so on. How strange it is to complete the sentence, “The Father _____ the Son” with the verb “is not.” Of all the things the Bible affirms about these two persons, and of all the things the Nicene disposition highlights, the bare assertion that these two are not each other seems to be a kind of analytic residue. The shield of the Trinity, with its bare minimum of relational logic, is the diagrammatic distillation of the *Quicumque* disposition of teaching the doctrine of the Trinity. It can support a great deal of solid instructional work. But it does not, in its main outlines, actually require that the relations of origin be made explicit. The title “Trinity,” the rapid juxtaposition of the three names, and the specifying of the kinds of relations (“is” and “is not”) that obtain among them, do all of the work.

The point of distinguishing these two dispositions is not to praise one and condemn the other. They can be blended in a wide variety of ways in full-length expositions of Trinitarian theology. We can even say that both dispositions have biblical warrant. The risen Lord spoke in something of a *Quicumque* idiom when he said to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; but he did so in the twenty-eighth chapter of a gospel story with a Nicene plot. Without condemning the *Quicumque* style altogether, however, we can say that for all it gains in clarity and simplicity, it loses more in sacrificing the drama of Scripture’s own historical unfolding of the Trinity. For my own part, I would press the criticism further. The *Quicumque* disposition of Trinitarianism makes it possible to underemphasize the eternal relations of origin, and to do so precisely because it renders their connection to the temporal missions of the Son and Spirit opaque. This marginalization of the missions-processions structure of Trinitarian theology is unhealthy for evangelical Trinitarianism. The missions and processions, after all, are not so much a matter of mere disposition as a matter of essential content of Trinitarianism. The Athanasian creed does enumerate them, after all; if it did not, it would be inadequately Trinitarian. Any attempted Trinitarianism that fails to take

recourse to the connection between the temporal missions and the eternal processions is by definition bypassing the history of salvation, the evangel. Evangelical Trinitarianism, therefore, ought to cultivate the Nicene disposition as much as possible in its explanation of the Trinity. The more the *Quicumque* disposition dominates in evangelical catechesis and theological training, the greater the danger that evangelicals will lose the plot.

V. THE UNITY OF THE THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES AROUND THE TRINITY

There is one more task a Trinity salesman should carry out. If you were already persuaded before you got here, and you are even more persuaded now that this is a great and costly theological treasure, and you associate the Trinity with the gospel, which makes you value both of them more, and you feel immersed in the Trinity with the promise of deeper immersion, and gripped by the grasp of God's two hands, ready to lay hold of that for which you were laid hold of, then a Trinity salesman just needs to make one more point to close the sale: you cannot live without this.

I don't simply mean that your spiritual life as a Christian depends on the Trinity. That is obvious, I hope, or at least uncontroversial in an Evangelical Theological Society. The life that is at stake, rather, is evangelical educational life, our academic and pedagogical life, our institutional lives. What is at stake, if we can say this without sounding academic in the pejorative sense, is our curricular life. What we are speaking about is Trinitarian theological existence today, and the fate of the various theological disciplines.

We started as far back as possible with an apprehension of the vastness of the Trinity in order to get a perspective from which we could view the theological lay of the land. Christians read the Bible as the book of the Trinity, or we don't read it at all. If the canon of Scripture is not the coherent book of the Trinity, it is not really itself. The two-Testament canon came into being in the church to bear witness that the God of Abraham is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. As B. B. Warfield said, the NT is "the documentation of the religion of the incarnate Son and of the outpoured Spirit, that is to say, of the religion of the Trinity."¹⁹ That is what the NT is, nor does the NT make adequate sense without its profound presuppositions in the OT. Without the steady pressure of OT presupposition, what are we to understand by strange terms like "Christ" or "the Spirit"? The two-Testament canon, in other words, is wrapped around the salvation-historical advent of the Trinity in the Father's sending of the Son and Spirit.

The Trinity is big: In apprehending the Trinity, we apprehend the primal unity from which all of our academic and theological disciplines descend. Let us speak of divinity: the old-fashioned word for theology, the subject we give master's degrees in. It is not self-evident that all these theological disciplines (OT, NT, historical

¹⁹ B. B. Warfield, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 2.35.

theology, systematic theology, practical theology, ethics, apologetics, etc.) do in fact descend or ramify from a real unity. In fact, the turf currently assigned to each discipline in Western academia was dictated around 1800 on a very different set of presuppositions than the Trinitarian set. Our disciplinary boundaries are inherited from a powerful intellectual culture that was culturally Christian but only thinly Trinitarian in its doctrinal contours. So it is no surprise that the territory is criss-crossed by boundaries that do not lend themselves to well-grounded or coherent Trinitarian doctrine. Division of labor is one thing, and academic specialization is necessary if only because life is too short for many people to learn to read Hebrew and Hegel, Aramaic and Aristotle. Nobody can read all the journals. Expertise is a real thing, and it requires focus. But if you want to learn that the boundaries between our disciplines are not mere dispositions of convenience, try crossing one. If your doctrinal ball rolls into the street, see how the neighborhood responds when you chase it. The boundaries are policed, the divides are enforced. They exist for a reason. Francis Watson describes the boundaries this way: “One line of demarcation divides biblical scholars from theologians; a second absolutizes the division of the Christian Bible into Old Testament and New Testament, by assigning these collections to separate interpretive communities.” He goes on,

In reality the second line of demarcation is simply an extension of the first. The notion of a dialectical unity between two bodies of writing, constituted as “old” and “new” by their relation to the foundation event that they together enclose and attest, only makes sense from a theological standpoint. Where theological concerns are marginalized, the two testaments fall part automatically.²⁰

Minus the Trinity, things fall apart. Minus the Trinity, theological faculties have to go begging for a reason to be. In Berlin in 1800, it was a mix of cultural self-confidence, the emerging history of religions, and the need for civil servants in the state church. In the United States during the twentieth century, some of those were inherited, but the absence of a state church was compensated for by Yankee know-how and pragmatism, which added a number of disciplines to the pastors’ professional development.

What is next for the unity of the theological disciplines? I am not a prophet or the son of a prophet; just a prof. But for encouragement I look to these words from the late John Webster, who said:

There is no inevitability about these inherited curricular arrangements and their rationale. They are not a fate; they are simply contingent dispositions of the matter whose momentum derives partly from their establishment in prestigious places of higher learning, partly from the cultural standing of the model of rational activity which undergirds them.²¹

²⁰ Francis Watson, *Text and Truth Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 5-6.

²¹ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 122.

In our current disorder, we can pull toward the Trinity and toward each other. We can work for a little revolution every day against the enforced dissolution of our reason for being. One thing we know for certain as we speak of divinity: The Trinity is big. God's triunity is why there is a gospel of grace. Confession of this triunity is why there is a Bible, why there are theological faculties, why there is an Evangelical Theological Society. The triune God put us together in creation, more wonderfully put us back together when we fell, and broke down the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile so we all have access through Christ by one Spirit to the Father. Commitment to the Trinity is the one thing that will hold theological education together in the coming age.