THE PROMISE & PROSPECT OF RETRIEVAL

EDITED BY MICHAEL ALLEN & SCOTT SWAIN

Contributors Include: Michael Allen, Scott Swain, Fred Sanders, Wesley Hill, J. Todd Billings, Oliver Crisp, John Webster, & Thomas Joseph White, O.P.
Alexander Solzhenitsyn characterized modern literary and artistic culture as exhibiting “a stubborn tendency to grow not higher but to the side.” The same judgment might be made about much modern theology. There is growth, to be sure, and developments in all manner of technical facets and interdisciplinary conversations. One would have to be a curmudgeon of a particular order not to appreciate the many blessings of life this side of the modern phase of Christian theology.

**Has Theology Seen Better Days?**

And yet, in many ways, this growth exhibits a sideways drift, not an upward progression. In its attempts to move beyond traditional modes of reflection upon God and the works of God and beyond traditional patterns of biblical commentary and interpretation in order to engage new methods, disciplines, and philosophical approaches to the study of the Bible and religion, theology has in many cases failed to move forward.

We often find ourselves in the position of the elders who witnessed the rebuilding of the temple after the exile (Ezra 3:10-13; Hag 2:3): what is for many a cause of celebration in theology is for us a cause of lament. One need not buy into a “golden age” theory of historical progress or decline to observe: theology has seen more glorious days.

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Moving Forward

The path toward theological renewal, we suggest, lies in moving from “a less profound to a more profound tradition; a discovery of the most profound resources.” We do not wish to impose parochial narrowness upon theologians, but we do believe that if engagement with wider cultural and methodological conversations is to be Christianly principled and profitable, it must follow rigorous catechesis in the theological reasoning of the classical Christian tradition and draw upon the deep roots of the biblical writings, as well as the literature of the patristic, medieval, and reformational eras.

In our judgment, the time seems ripe for ressourcement and retrieval, for reacquainting ourselves with the questions and approaches of earlier Christians who sought to read their Bibles and to let it shape their moral and spiritual imaginations. If we hope to have genuine and fruitful conversation between Christian theology and various eclectic inquiries, then we need to develop a spiritual-intellectual backbone formed by biblical reasoning and doctrinal discipline.

“Common Places”

The title of this regular column, Common Places, intends to elicit at least three senses related to the kind of systematic theology that we hope to practice and promote herein. First, Christian theologians around the globe and through the centuries have noted that careful study of various portions or “places” of Holy Scripture must be paired with attentive consideration of the grand themes of the Bible taken as a whole. These “common places” (loci communes) were the headings under which dogmatic or doctrinal theology proceeded forth from biblical commentary. Accordingly, we intend to follow the examples of those patristic, medieval, reformational, and post-reformation era theologians who not only developed doctrinal topics out of sedes doctrinae (“seats of doctrine” or pertinent portions of God’s Word relating to any given issue) but also sought to regulate their understandings of those topics by considering the influence of the wider span of the biblical canon.

Second, the common places of Christian theology, drawn out of the Scriptures and organized in a manner suitable to their exposition in the church and the academy, have functioned historically as common points of reference for theological discussion and debate. Indeed, when the Protestant theologian William Perkins dubbed himself a “reformed catholic,” he was indicating that he did not wish to wipe the theological table clean of the church’s traditional common places but to revisit and reform them in light of what he deemed to be more faithful biblical exegesis. This column, then, will focus upon the classical topics or loci of systematic theology, not as occasions for revision, but as opportunities for entering into the ongoing conversation that is Christian systematic theology.

Third, this column will feature the work of a number of theologians: with contributions from present-day authors representing a wide spectrum of the catholic Christian tradition and studies of influential figures from the Christian past. In that sense, it is a common place as well, a lived demonstration of the corporate sphere of theological work in the communion of the saints. The gospel not only brings illumination, but is also delivers community; more often than not, a healthy pursuit of the one involves that of the other.

What to Expect from “Common Places”

We invite you to join and dialog with us on the first and third Thursdays of every month. Future posts will seek to introduce and survey key figures, texts, and concepts from the classical tradition, to engage with significant works of contemporary theology regarding perennial questions, to assess the present state of the discipline in light of its historic roots, and to reflect upon the significance of Christian doctrine for the life of the church, its members, and its society.

Our first series will seek to think deeply about ways in which doctrinal theology has in fact flourished in the last quarter century by focusing on a number of areas in which, for various reasons, Christian dogmatics seems
to be experiencing growth and development in ways about which we wish to be informed and for which we want to be thankful.

**About the Authors**


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**Recent Developments in Trinitarian Theology**

*Fred Sanders*

About twenty years ago when I applied from seminary to graduate school, I sent along as my writing sample a seminar paper on current trends in trinitarian theology. Specifically, I submitted a paper critiquing Augustine’s *De Trinitate* in light of these more recent insights, and I have to tell you candidly that I was pretty rough on old Augustine. In my judgment, he was insufficiently trinitarian: fixated on divine oneness, captive to platonizing presuppositions, inattentive to the real distinctions among the three persons, unable to do straightforward exegesis, artfully dodging the implications of the economy of salvation, and incapable of showing how the doctrine of God’s triunity had any bearing on Christian life and experience, except by indulging in that disastrous quest for analogies that was his chief legacy.

Reader, I harried him.

I’m glad the paper was never published, and I would not defend it today, but there was something more afoot in that writing sample than just the cocky dudgeon of a student eager to impress by showing himself radical and novel. The arguments, after all, were not my own, but were condensed out of the theological atmosphere of the time. In retrospect, what is striking is the way that so many of the most stimulating thinkers working on the doctrine of the Trinity twenty to twenty-five years ago positioned themselves in opposition to a major historical figure, or even to the central tradition of Christian theology itself. In some ways, the task of trinitarian theology in the past quarter of a century has been to disentangle the remarkable sense of the trinitarian project on the one hand from its counter-traditional articulations on the other.
Two influential examples may suffice. Colin Gunton’s *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* was published in 1991, opening with the programmatic essay “Trinitarian Theology Today” wherein he declared, “the unfortunate fact is… that the shape of the Western tradition has not always enabled believers to rejoice in the triune being of God.” Before the paragraph is over, he has blamed Augustine for the ills that beset the spiritual history of the West. At this distance, it is not hard to refute Gunton’s historical arguments: Michel Rene Barnes had already begun dismantling them historiographically in 1995,1 and Brad Green has more recently explored Gunton’s wider interests in Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine: The Theology of Colin Gunton in Light of Augustine. But even so, it is hard to take up that essay without catching a palpable sense of the sheer excitement that a master of constructive theology like Gunton brought to the task. Line after line of the book jumps out with the energy of a manifesto: “Because God is triune, we must respond to him in a particular way, or set of ways, corresponding to the richness of his being… In turn that means that everything looks—and, indeed, is—different in the light of the Trinity” (p. 4).

In Roman Catholic theology, Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s 1993 *God For Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* cut a very similar profile. The sense of energy and project was there: “The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for the Christian life. That is the thesis of this book” (p. 1). But so was the insistence that something had gone awry at the core of the traditional doctrine, and the present generation had to set it right. Whereas Gunton characteristically saw the West as the region of error and the East as the reservoir of the needed resources for trinitarianism, LaCugna found the problem more ecumenical (the Cappadocian legacy was equally fraught) and longer standing (Aquinas did not untie these knotty problems). And the ultimate problem was that the doctrine of the Trinity had become a “nonsoteriological doctrine of God,” a mere cognitive puzzle about deity. LaCugna countered that “the doctrine of the Trinity is not ultimately a teaching about ‘God’ but a teaching about God’s life with us and our life with each other” (p. 228). Even though she struck an utterly non-traditional posture in her lamentable polemic against the idea of God-in-himself, of the immanent Trinity, LaCugna’s work gave many younger theologians a vision of the difference a “joined-up” trinitarianism might make for theology, worship, and church.

I hope these two examples show why the last two decades have been marked by progress in teasing apart the Harnackian ring and the theological vivacity that emerged together at about the time that Gunton and LaCugna were making their marks. It is especially poignant that both authors passed away at unexpectedly young ages, so that we can only guess how they would have responded to the shift in tone since the works mentioned here.

Because such a shift of tone is undeniable. Augustine, Nicaea, and Aquinas have found able defenders who have done remarkable work in putting these ancient figures into dynamic dialogue with contemporary systematic theology. As the disciplinary wall between historical and systematic theology has been lowered, the voices of the older authors have been heard more and more clearly. Perhaps sensing that new dialogue is becoming possible, practitioners from biblical studies and philosophical theology have also found a greater welcome in the doctrine of the Trinity, which was once the sole province of systematicians.

Twenty years ago there was a lot of noise and hype about the doctrine of the Trinity, along with a lot of confused and indefensible generalizations. As the historical errors were corrected and the misplaced enthusiasms were inevitably stamped out, there was ample reason to fear that the excitement, the theological elaboration of trinitarian insights, and the vision of a more organically connected doctrinal core might also suffer loss. That has not been the case. The renewal of interest has eventuated in a steady refocusing of attention onto the doctrine, and important work continues. Gunton signaled the need for his project by lamenting that “there is a suspicion that the whole thing is a bore, a matter of mathematical conundrums and illogical attempts to square the circle.” The suspicion of boredom is dispelled, and has now been replaced by the conviction that we are joining the apostolic, patristic, and Reformation church in one of the most worthwhile conversations in all dogmatics.

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Recent Developments in Trinitarian Theology

About the Author

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Recent Developments in Theological Exegesis

Wesley Hill

Many of the most interesting developments that have taken place in the fields of biblical studies and systematic theology in the last twenty years can be charted under the heading of “theological interpretation of Scripture.” Even more specifically, narrowing the focus a bit more, it seems that many of these developments may be described with the word retrieval. Biblical scholars and dogmatic theologians are reaching back to eras of the Christian past before the rise of modern ways of reading in order to rediscover and reimagine older habits of biblical interpretation.

Giants of eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century biblical scholarship, such as J. P. Gabler and William Wrede, had argued that study of the biblical texts should be a purely historical discipline. Our goal as readers should not be to itemize the abstract “doctrines” that the “canonical apostles” believed. Instead, Wrede and others thought we should limit ourselves to studying the religious life of early Christian communities, “orthodox” and “heretical.” What theologians later chose to do with these historical findings was their own business, not the historians.

But in contrast to this “historical critical” approach, many Christian biblical scholars today are recognizing that that kind of method isn’t theologically satisfying. The texts of Paul, James, John, and others are not simply “early Christian texts” that can serve as windows onto some human experience. They are, rather, for the Church, “words of the Word, human words uttered as a repetition of the divine Word, existing in the sphere of the divine Word’s authority, effectiveness, and promise” (as John Webster has put it). And as
such, they need to be studied in the context of the Church’s life, under the Lordship of the Triune God. The doctrines of the faith—above all, the doctrine of God—and the creeds, confessions, and liturgies of the Church are the arena within which to understand the task of biblical interpretation.

Much of the freshest and richest biblical scholarship today is, accordingly, oriented to this ecclesial context of biblical interpretation. I think, for instance, of Markus Bockmuehl’s recent work on the apostle Peter, which locates the significance of the New Testament witness on a trajectory that includes consideration of the Bishop of Rome. Or I think of Walter Moberly’s new *Old Testament Theology*, whose readings of select Old Testament passages would have been impossible without the history of Christian spirituality and prayer, even as they serve to root that history more firmly on biblical terrain. Or I think of C. Kavin Rowe’s work on the Gospel of Luke, which highlights the continuity between Luke’s portrayal of Jesus as the “Lord,” the *kyrios*, and the later Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. Or I think of a forthcoming volume on “Reformation readings of Paul,” which lets biblical scholars engage Pauline texts with interpreters such as Luther, Calvin, and Cranmer, demonstrating along the way how deep a conversation is possible when we assume that the “theologians” of an earlier time weren’t simply imposing their own assumptions and convictions on biblical texts but were, like us, trying to grasp the text’s subject matter and state it afresh in their own day. Conversely, I am heartened by recent dogmatic and historical theology that sees biblical exegesis as integral to its task, too. Thirty or forty years ago it would have been much harder to find the kind of detailed engagements with the exegesis of *Aquinas, Calvin,* and *Barth* that is so plentiful today. Furthermore, it is now beginning to seem normal again—as it would have been in previous chapters of the Church’s life—to find vast tracts of biblical exegesis in a dogmatics volume on *the Trinity* or *justification by faith* or *political theology*.

Retrieving the past, of course, doesn’t—or shouldn’t—equal a naïve desire to forget the intervening centuries. We need voices like Wrede’s in our ears, keeping us honest about the need for rigorous historical study. But the practice of retrieval is a way of confessing anew the third article of the creed. As biblical scholars and theologians, we believe that the Holy Spirit was alive and well before the dawn of modernity, and reading Scripture well *today* means taking seriously what happened *then*.

**About the Author**


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Recent Developments in Protestant Scholasticism

J. Todd Billings

Many people who think that they despise the theology of John Calvin change their mind once they actually take time to read his writings. I’ve seen it again and again in the classroom—both as a student, and as a teacher.

When this has happened, however, I’ve often heard a warning: Calvin may be biblical, dynamic, and Christ-centered, but steer clear of those seventeenth century “Calvinists.” Rather than going straight to the Bible, they got distracted by the medieval scholastics; rather than being pastoral and Christ-centered, the Reformed Scholastics were rationalists whose writings don’t edify the church.

Twenty years after hearing these warnings in college, I can say that they reveal more about those giving the warnings than the Protestant Scholastics themselves.

There has been a sea change in scholarship on Protestant Scholasticism, and its implications reach far beyond those whose confessions hail from Westminster or Augsburg. On the whole, this movement in scholarship has not been generated by systematic theologians trying to defend or counter Protestant Scholasticism. It has come from historians, giving contextual assessments of both the continuities and discontinuities within movements of medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation theology. Particularly significant has been the work of David Steinmetz, the meticulous historical work of his former doctoral students (including Richard Muller, John L. Thompson, and Timothy Wengert) as well as the scholarship of Willem Van Asselt and Carl Trueman. Probably the most influential works are by Muller, with his magisterial four-volume work on Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, and his books and articles that dismantle the “Calvin versus the Calvinist” thesis.

The fruit of this historical work is just starting to be harvested by theologians, and it has implications across the theological spectrum: whether Reformed or Arminian, Protestant or Roman Catholic, etc. Here are two characteristics of this scholarship that are particularly important for contemporary theologians to recognize:

1.) Recent scholarship has a renewed appreciation of the catholicity of the Reformation—the way in which the Reformers and the Protestant Scholastics both drew critically upon the early patristic and medieval catholic tradition in method and practice. In other words, sola scriptura did not involve spurning the church’s exegetical and doctrinal traditions, but reassessing them in light of scriptural exegesis. This Reformation-era catholicity stands in contrast to contemporary trends such as some “new Calvinists” who want to define the Reformed tradition by the TULIP. But it is also in contrast to scholars operating with a Barthian historiography, downplaying areas of continuity between the Reformation traditions and earlier catholic notions, such as general revelation and natural theology.

2.) Recent scholarship re-emphasizes the centrality of scripture and biblical exegesis, not only for the Reformers but for Protestant Scholasticism as well. Neither the Reformers nor the Protestant Scholastics started with a central doctrine (such as providence or election or justification by faith), and then deduced their other doctrines from that starting point. Instead, each topic of doctrine was exegetically derived from scripture and gathered into topics as common places (loci communes) of the Christian tradition. Contemporary systematic theologians have tended to
(mis)interpret these earlier theologies as deductive systems, and have unduly neglected the significance of biblical commentaries for Reformation and post-Reformation theologians.

It is important to note that the change in historical scholarship is a descriptive one, not a prescriptive one. Muller, Steinmetz, and others have made contextual and textual arguments that historians have found persuasive regardless of their own confessional affiliation. The question is: what implications does this innovative historical work have for theologians today?

Elsewhere I present a possible vision of how this scholarship can help to enliven contemporary Reformed theology. But here are a few brief suggestions for theologians in general:

1.) Rediscover the Centrality of Biblical Exegesis—The *loci communes* approach to theology models a compelling way to make scriptural exegesis a central task for the theologian. In addition, the Reformation and Post-Reformation theologians offer examples of scriptural exegesis that illuminate both in their debates and in their areas of agreement.

2.) Rediscover Catholicity—Read the Reformers and the Protestant Scholastics together with the patristic and medieval writers who influenced them (e.g., the influence of Thomas Aquinas upon John Owen). This provides an opportunity for a doctrinal feast that is deeply traditional, philosophically nuanced, and widely ecumenical.

3.) Deepen and Widen Traditions—Explore the breadth and diversity of Protestant traditions which are often narrowed, caricatured, and constricted in their contemporary forms. The Reformed Scholastics, for example, had surprising things to say about the freedom of the will; a contextual account of Melanchthon defies stereotypes about Lutherans and the three uses of the law; and surprisingly, variations of seventeenth-century “hypothetical universalism” are actually part of the broad Reformed tradition, if one takes the Synod of Dort as exemplative.
Recent Developments in the Divine Attributes

Michael Allen

What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? For several decades in the twentieth century, the answer seemed to be overwhelmingly: “Too much!” The influence of Greek philosophy upon Christian faith and practice was viewed as excessive and uncritical. A century ago Adolf von Harnack proposed the “Hellenization thesis,” the argument that the early church swallowed a bunch of Hellenistic fat that makes their theological approach difficult to digest today. Harnack proposed a radical revision to the faith whereby we seek to cut the fat out and get back to the message of Jesus himself, a proclamation unencumbered by the metaphysics of Greece and the dogmas of the later fathers. The influence of this model of history has been and continues to be remarkably widespread, accepted not only in more revisionist circles (e.g., Jürgen Moltmann) but also by those who wish to affirm orthodox theology (e.g., the late Colin Gunton). Its most deleterious application regards the character of God, that is, the doctrine of divine attributes. Numerous attributes were viewed as Greek accretions that ran not only away from, but directly against the grain of biblical teaching and Christ-centered theology.

Life After the Hellenization Thesis

In the last two to three decades, however, the Hellenization thesis has taken a beating and then some. First in patristic studies that sought to locate Christian intellectual work amidst the variegated world of late antiquity, and then in careful study of later theological developments that drew upon or even critiqued that early Christian period, historical theologians have re-shaped the discipline such that Harnack’s approach no longer carries weight.

Paul Gavrilyuk has examined perhaps the most maligned divine attribute—God’s impassibility. He has returned to the scene of the supposed crime: the early church’s adoption of the terminology of *apatheia*. He has shown that the mainstream of Christological reflection honored both God’s impassibility and God’s genuine engagement of human history in the economy of salvation. By fixing his sights on Cyril of Alexandria, Gavrilyuk shows the exegetical roots of impassibility as well as its function within Christological and Trinitarian discourse, noting that the orthodox faith (with Cyril) committed itself to language about the “suffering of the impassible God.”

Similarly, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz has considered another divine attribute, simplicity, and noted how its philosophical pedigree and genealogy has often been misunderstood. By comparing simplicity in Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa’s debates with Eunomius of Cyzicus against a background of usage that goes back to Ptolemy, he shows the exegetical transformation of simplicity and its distinctively Christian meaning and function in affirming God’s faithfulness (against Marcionites or later *contra* modalists).

Now, with other studies on early church fathers, medieval scholastics, the reformers (and their supposed revision of the catholic faith), and early modern theologians on various divine attributes, Robert Louis Wilken can summarize matters this way: “The notion that the development of early Christian thought represented a Hellenization of Christianity has outlived its usefulness … a more apt expression would be the Christianization of Hellenism, though that phrase does not capture the originality of Christian thought nor the debt owed to Jewish ways of thinking and to the Jewish Bible.”


The Prospects for Dogmatics Today

In what ways has this historical reassessment helped situate our current dogmatic work?

First, theologians now have resources to help us think through the necessary relationship between scripture and metaphysics. Indeed, one of the most significant theological works of recent years goes by that very title: Matthew Levering's *Scripture and Metaphysics*. Scripture does not teach a metaphysics per se, but it does require us to make revisions to whatever ontological commitments we bring to the table. And classical theism in the early Christian church was a powerful instance of this sort of intellectual *ascesis*, whereby exegetical work led to casting out some idolatrous presuppositions while also trying to plunder the philosophical tools of the Greeks.

Second, some of the best recent reappraisals of divine attributes have shown they nestle together with other doctrines. For example, Janet Soskice has offered comparative analysis of various pagan and Christian reflections on creation (*ex nihilo* or otherwise) and how this informs our understanding of God’s aseity or self-sufficiency/self-existence: her argument that creation *ex nihilo* radically recasts one’s metaphysics is a thing of beauty and truly illuminating. In light of her analysis, one cannot help but appreciate the way in which this divine attribute will somehow need to be addressed in talking about the topic of creation in the divine economy. The doctrine of God is not just important; it is a hub to which all other doctrines relate.

Third, the Reformers did not intend to recast catholic theology but to reform how catholic theology affected Christian salvation, sacramental practice, and church polity. With respect to the doctrine of the divine attributes, however, the Reformers appreciated the classical attributes and noted their pastoral/spiritual function. For example, while Calvin is oftentimes taken to be either uninterested in or possibly suspicious of the classical attributes, a recent study of his lectures on the Psalms shows how fundamental they were to his treatment of that significant canonical witness and the systemic role they played in shaping the spirituality of the Christian life through the Psalter.

Fourth, the divine attributes radically shape Christian spirituality. Classical attributes like divine simplicity, aseity, immutability, and impassibility will shape the way in which one relates to the triune God. David Bentley Hart has sketched many of the ways in which the reality of God cannot be removed from what we take to be vital religious experience. Others—whether by way of Aquinas or Owen—have suggested the same with regard to specifically Trinitarian attributes of God.

In these ways, theologians must adjust to life after the Hellenization thesis. We needn’t be compelled to dig back to an earlier theology before the failures of the fathers, but we should feel the freedom (as did those before Harnack’s thesis) to do our theology alongside, with, and beyond the scriptural revisions to theological metaphysics as exemplified by so many of our patristic, medieval, and Reformational forebears.

Recent Developments in Divine Attributes

**About the Author**

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5 John Webster has furthered this project immensely in recent years by focusing upon the systemic effects of thinking about the full scope and sequence of the economy of God always with respect to the aseity of God. See, e.g., “The Aseity of God,” in *God Without Measure: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (London: T & T Clark, forthcoming).
Recent Developments in Divine Attributes

Recent Developments in Divine Attributes


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Recent Developments in Analytic Theology

Oliver Crisp

Analytic theology has its roots in the development of the analytic philosophy of religion in the second half of the twentieth century. In the early 1980s, a number of those working in the philosophy of religion began to turn their attention to topics in philosophical theology. If questions in the philosophy of religion are about generic philosophical issues raised by religious belief (e.g. the problem of evil, the justification of religious belief, and so on), philosophical theology concerns concrete matters pertaining to the theology of a particular religious tradition.

Literary Developments

The literature in philosophical theology gradually became more theologically informed, more sophisticated, and diversified to include a range of theological topics including central matters like the Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement, sin, eschatology, the nature of faith, and the like. It developed largely independently of contemporary systematic theology, however, a matter that has been noted and lamented by people like R. R. Reno, who has written of the “blindness” of modern theology to the analytic literature and of “theology’s continental captivity” referring to the way in which theologians happily engage major continental philosophers as dialogue partners while ignoring analytics.

However, as this philosophical-theological literature matured into the 1990s, it became increasingly difficult for those outside the conversation to ignore. To all intents and purposes this was theology being done
by Christian philosophers independent of the theological schools and seminaries. By the early 2000s some rapprochement between the two sides was beginning to happen. Analytic theology was, as William Abraham has put it in conversation, “an accident waiting to happen.” But what was new about it? In one respect, not very much. According to some pundits it was merely philosophical theology rebranded. Yet there were some important differences: theologians as well as philosophers were now working on theological topics using the sensibilities and literature of analytic philosophy to ask dogmatic questions. Inevitably, this led to systematic theology done in the mode of analytic theology, as other theologians worked in the mode of Postliberalism, or Radical Orthodoxy. Once there were practicing theologians on board it became difficult to marginalize the movement within the study of religion as the preserve of a few Christian philosophical trespassers.

**Future Prospects of Analytic Theology**

As the work of analytic theology has flourished since 2009, more collaboration has brought significant steps forward. In addition to a new journal, a book series, an annual conference at Notre Dame, and initiatives in Europe and elsewhere, there is a literature that really engages with the theological tradition, with ancient and modern theologians, and with questions of theological method as well as constructive theology. Examples include Tom McCall’s work on the Trinity, Marc Cortez’s work on theological anthropology, Kevin Hector and William Abraham who have both written on theological method, Marilyn Adams’ work on medieval Christology, Mike Rea and Hud Hudson who have worked on original sin, and so on. The fact that analytic theology can now be found represented at the annual Evangelical Theological Society conferences, at the American Academy of Religion annual meetings, at major regional theology conferences such as those at Wheaton and in Los Angeles, and in top-tier peer-reviewed theological organs as well as philosophical ones, is evidence of the “normalization” of analytic theology in the wider guild.

In many ways, analytic theology is a return to more classical analytical sensibilities that have governed Christian theology for much of its history in scholasticism, as well as the work of key thinkers from St. Augustine and St. Anselm of Canterbury to Jonathan Edwards. Yet it is not just this; there is a real concern to engage in wider theological and religious discussion, and to foster dialogue between the Abrahamic faiths, as can be seen in the recent symposium on Yoram Hazony’s work in the Journal of Analytic Theology.

There is also the beginnings of an awareness of the limits of analytic theology, and of worries it must take more seriously if it is to continue to flourish. These include concerns about ontotheology (roughly, the notion that the god of analytic theology is an idol), criticisms from feminist theology, the place of metaphor and tropes in religious language, and the relationship to other theological methodologies as well as allied disciplines such as biblical studies. There is much work to be done. But the fact that analytic theology has already made such headway indicates that it is meeting a theological need, and making a significant constructive contribution to twenty-first-century Christian theology.

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Recent Developments in Dogmatics

John Webster

When I was a graduate student in Cambridge in the late 1970s, dogmatics was a minority discipline, and the word itself almost never mentioned unless with reference to Barth's magnum opus. It still enjoyed prestige in the German faculties, but was rarely a component of theological curricula in England (in Scotland the picture was, and remains, somewhat different). Interest in the inner content and overall structure of Christian teaching was edged out by other preoccupations: theological method, the dialogue of the religions, critical doctrinal history, analytical philosophy, the social science of religion. Exceptions to the prevailing lack of interest in systematic theological work, such as John Macquarrie's Principles of Christian Theology, were just that: exceptions.

Moving to North America in the mid-80s, I found myself in a theological setting where dogmatics counted for more and attracted able practitioners. In part this was because of a well-established tradition of church theology and of church theological institutions outside the universities, Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic. Yet, a few exceptions aside, this culture did not generate an enduring dogmatic literature, largely restricting itself to textbooks and to translations of works such as Weber's Foundations of Dogmatics or Thielicke's The Evangelical Faith. Alongside this was another approach, often located in university divinity schools, which articulated doctrinal themes in negotiation with dominant philosophical or cultural norms; Hodgson's Winds of the Spirit or Kaufman's In Face of Mystery are among the most distinguished examples.

Returning to the UK a decade later, the theological culture of at least some faculties had shifted somewhat, and systematians appeared guardedly optimistic. There were prolific writers in the field: Colin Gunton, then at the height of his powers, and T. F. Torrance, who produced a steady flow of doctrinal works in his retirement. Barth and other dogmaticians were read with respect and written about with intelligence; doctoral programmes in dogmatics attracted gifted candidates. Over the last twenty years, those elements have continued to establish themselves, and systematic theology enjoys better circumstances than it has for some time. A substantial systematic theology is beginning to appear from the Cambridge theologian Sarah Coakley, the first volume of which, God, Sexuality and the Self, sets out a fresh approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, and others are planned; there are successful monograph series in the field, and a widely respected journal, the International Journal of Systematic Theology. In North America, similarly, the period has seen much serious doctrinal writing, whether on the grand scale of Jensen's Systematic Theology or in monographs from Kathryn Tanner, Michael Horton, Thomas Weinandy, Kevin Vanhoozer, and many others.

Why the change? Interest in dogmatics is an element in the presence of an intelligent, articulate ecclesially-minded culture which draws extensively on the church's internal resources—biblical, theological, spiritual—in order to nourish its life and witness. This, in turn, prompts theologians to living conversation with the church's heritage, looking to it for instruction, absorbing and inhabiting it as a complex body of texts, ideas and habits of mind which can relativize and sometimes subvert seemingly hegemonic modern conventions. In this connection, one thinks not only of those associated with Radical Orthodoxy, but of quieter trends in theological work, such as the recovery of the dogmatics and spirituality of Reformed orthodoxy in the work of Richard Muller and a host of other American and Dutch scholars, or loving attention to the speculative and exegetical works of the mediaeval schoolmen paid by interpreters such as Jean-Pierre Torrell or Gilles Emery. Again, shifts in the practice of other fields of theology have encouraged dogmatics to pursue its tasks. In biblical and early Christian studies, the historical-naturalist assumptions on which much inquiry is often predicated no longer command universal assent, and “theological” reading of Scripture and the fathers of the church is no longer self-evidently
eccentric or complacent: students can now turn to a number of distinguished series of biblical commentaries which draw out the theological and spiritual import of the text, and to revisionist patristic scholarship such as that of Lewis Ayres or Michel Rene Barnes. In philosophical and moral theology, similarly, unease about the religiously generic leads to greater attentiveness to doctrinal specificity. One thinks of the work of the Roman Catholic philosopher Robert Sokolowski, or of moral theologians like Gerald McKenny and Oliver O’Donovan.

For these and other reasons, the prospects look more secure than they did a quarter-century ago. One would do well to temper confidence with caution: much energy is still directed to fields of theology where dogmatics has little honour, such as public theology or historical-literary examination of the biblical writings. Moreover, the flourishing of dogmatics depends in some measure on an understanding of theology as a unified science embracing exegetical, historical, practical, and speculative arts, and such an understanding of theology is still rare. But, such cautions aside, late-career systematicians may still look with some hope to the work of a future generation of intellectually acute, historically and ecumenically generous, and spiritually alert dogmatic theologians. May their tribe increase.

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Broadly speaking, Catholic theology in the past twenty years has been characterized by three distinctive tendencies. The first is the decline of influence of the Rahnerianism of the post-Vatican II period. The second is the rise of influence of theologians associated with the Communio movement. The third is the return of interest in classical theological sources, marked particularly by the renaissance of Thomistic studies. I will consider each of these points briefly in turn.

The Decline of Rahnerianism

The theology of the twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner was marked by an insistence of the use of modern philosophical anthropology to interpret the contemporary relevance of the gospel for modern human beings. Rahner sought to find profound points of contact between the thought of Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant, while also welcoming insights from contemporary phenomenology. He paid special attention to
the dogmatic pronouncements of Catholic tradition (often citing Denzinger on key points of doctrine) while simultaneously seeking to recast Catholic teaching in a distinctively modern idiom, so that traditional teachings might seem relevant to an increasingly secularized European culture. At the same time, Rahner’s theory of grace envisaged the work of God as being most present in “ordinary” conditions of life (secular political movements, other religious traditions, existential questioning, the trial of human death). This method produced an influential theology of “correlation” in which the questions of modernity are seen as the principal locus that shapes theological reflection. Rahner’s theology was often employed by progressivist Catholics in order to argue for the ongoing adaptation or alteration of classical Catholic teachings in the face of new modern situations.

The demise of Rahnerianism occurred because the influence of the Kantian philosophy that it presupposed as normative was eroded away by the rise in the modern university of post-modern theory as well as analytic philosophy. Furthermore, Rahner’s disciples have found it difficult to transmit integrally the traditional faith of the Catholic Church, due to the reductive metaphysical framework in which they sought to articulate basic Christian beliefs. The project has been plagued by intrinsic incoherence at various levels. The teaching pontificates of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI did not promote the methodology of this theology, but frequently reiterated traditional teachings of Catholicism at which Rahnerians chaffed.

**The “Communio” Movement**

The theological movement that takes its name from the theological journal Communio is associated especially with theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger, and Henri de Lubac. This theology came to prominence in recent decades in large part as a creative reaction to the crisis in theology of the 1970s, and in self-conscious opposition to the aforementioned theological paradigm. Taken as a school of thought, it can be broadly characterized by the following features:

1.) It emphasizes a Christocentric and biblical approach to theology, in which the Church’s traditional ontological and soteriological teachings about the person of Jesus Christ are foundational, and in which profound harmony is sought between modern biblical studies and classical patristic interpretations of scripture.

2.) The movement has sought consistently to offer an alternative to modern scholasticism (“neo-Thomism”), by advancing a form of theology that is more symbolic and intuitive, one that engages with and adopts insights from modern philosophers, and which is marked by influences from Neoplatonism more so than from Aristotle.

3.) Against Rahner’s theories of grace, this movement has stressed the idea of De Lubac that natural human desire finds ultimate fulfillment only in the supernatural life of grace. Consequently, the Church is seen as the visible “sacrament” (or sign and instrument) of all human fulfillment in Christ, so that confessional Catholic identity is understood to matter greatly for the potential salvation of the world.

4.) This movement has consistently sought to defend traditional Catholic views that are controversial (the moral teachings on sexuality, the reservation of the priesthood to men) by making arguments that are distinctively Christological and sacramental in kind.

**The Renaissance of Thomistic Studies**

Thomism was often regarded after the Second Vatican Council as an outmoded system of thought that made use of a pre-modern philosophical metaphysics and that employed syllogistic reasoning in theology in an excessively rationalistic, and non-biblical way. This viewpoint (which is a caricature) has eroded significantly in recent decades for two reasons.

1.) Modern historical studies by Thomists like Jean-Pierre Torrell, Servais Pinckaers, Gilles Emery, and Matthew Levering have demonstrated the deeply scriptural and patristic roots of Aquinas’ thought, as well as the intrinsically spiritual and...
mystical aspirations of his theology. They have also shown how the philosophical reasoning of Aquinas is habitually employed in the service of distinctively theological ends, in view of a deeper contemplative consideration of the mystery of God.

2.) In the post-modern era, theologians have been more disposed to acknowledge the importance of seeking philosophical first principles, even within theology, and theologians like Steven A. Long and Reinhard Huetter have sought to make manifest the intellectual viability, coherence, and insight of Thomist metaphysics even in the midst of the modern world.

What was deemed a liability in the epoch just after the Second Vatican Council is seen as a strength in an era that is increasingly marked by philosophical disorientation and theoretical fragmentation. Thomist studies in Catholic theology continue to proliferate in domains that are historical, philosophical, and dogmatic, often engaging contemporary theology in ways that were not typical in the pre-Conciliar era.

Conclusion

If we compare these three movements briefly, we can note that each has something in common with one of the others. Rahnerians and Communio theologians, while opposed in many respects, both see the age of modern theology as requiring a kind of break with pre-modern scholastic methods of theological reasoning. Communio theologians and Thomists both typically wish to emphasize that theology is a science of revelation, to which all philosophical systems are subordinate, and both seek to maintain an integral commitment to traditional Catholic teachings, maintained within the context of a Christ-centered spirituality. Both Thomists and Rahnerians strongly emphasize the unavoidability of a distinctively philosophical “moment” of reflection within theology, and the importance of a philosophical engagement with modernity. They differ of course on the principles and methods of the philosophy employed.

Based on this necessarily superficial characterization of dominant paradigms, what might one expect for the future of Catholic theology in the next twenty years? The only viable pattern of Catholic thought that can adjust to the challenges of secular modernity will be one that engages with modern science in a learned and philosophically informed way, one that attempts to interpret the Bible in a way that is coherent with both Catholic tradition and modern scientific and historical consciousness, and one that promotes the Church’s traditional moral teachings within the context of Catholic liturgical life, but also by recourse to arguments that are both Christ-centered and philosophically coherent. In an age of increased spiritual disorientation, the only theology that will be successful in evangelization is one that addresses human rationality in depth, but which is also mystical, sacramental, and centered on the person of Christ.

About the Author

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Recent Developments in Eschatology

Michael Allen

Surveys of Christian doctrine regularly note that the themes of eschatology have attained a certain prestige in the late nineteenth and then twentieth centuries that exceeds their fate in previous times. What do we make of this new emphasis? What benefits have been gained? And what dangers might we need to be alert to? I want to focus briefly upon one new emphasis, its potential and frequent cost, and a way in which theological retrieval helps us move toward a more biblical eschatology for the contemporary church.

Heaven Is a Place on Earth

Surely the most marked shift in twentieth century eschatology was its earthiness. Perhaps no tradition has so emphasized the created and material character of our blessed hope as that of the Dutch Reformed theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck). Bavinck’s magisterial *Reformed Dogmatics* illustrates this cosmic turn of modern eschatology in the attention to detail, organizational structure, and rhetorical emphasis that it places upon the “renewal of creation” as ingredient to biblical hope.

Theologians and exegetes regularly and rightly lambast any notion of Christian hope as otherworldly or non-earthly (likened regularly in the literature to the naïve expectations of someday playing harps in the clouds). Thus, no one wishes to shift to an eschatology that is ethereal or disembodied.

But the Best Sight Ain’t a City

I do not advocate a return to life prior to the remarkable witness of theologians like Bavinck. His biblical imagination, commitment to the full canonical scope of Scripture, and unswerving determination to let dogmatic eschatology shape Christian ethics are all to be commended and never to be forgotten. And yet it seems to me that one can (and many seem, unintentionally, to) herald something akin to Bavinck’s Augustinian vision without capturing the very center of Augustine’s eschatology (and that of the classical Christian consensus that marked at least the late patristic and medieval eras). There may be something approximating an “Augustinian naturalism” (unintentionally) where the focus and emphasis falls upon the New Jerusalem rather than her chief occupant, forgetting that the best news of Christian bliss is not newness but nearness: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man” (Rev. 21:3). Hence the repetition of the promise: “Behold, I am coming soon” (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20).

While eschatology has moved front and center in twentieth century Protestant theology, the beatific vision appears to have exited stage right.1 Brunner gave it a paragraph; Jenson a sentence; Barth nary a word. The absence is glaring in the face of the substantial place held by the doctrine of the beatific vision in classical faith and practice, where the beatific vision played a role in prolegomena (as the ultimate form of human knowledge of God), in eschatology (as the central hope of the Christian), and in ethics (as the driving force or motivation for ascetic discipline). Attention has fixed upon the environment, the body, and social relations (all of which are facets of a biblical eschatology), but oftentimes such concern has come at a cost and not infrequently with a smirk. The marginalization of the beatific vision from modern Protestant theology proves a remarkable case study and, I suggest,

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marks a fundamental problem with the earthy eschatology of the contemporary church.

A Vision of Retrieval

Fortunately, a number of recent studies have suggested the need to retrieve riches from this ancient and medieval past regarding the special character of our Christian hope. For example, Matthew Levering and Hans Boersma have each presented an argument that recent eschatology and anthropology is too much focused or, perhaps, even restricted to earthly concerns.\(^2\)

Most significant, however, is the portrayal of Augustine’s theology offered by Charles Mathewes in his sadly neglected but dogmatically vital work, *A Theology of Public Life*.\(^3\) In the course of offering a “dogmatics of public life,” Mathewes draws from Augustine of Hippo a critique of our current anxiety about being “otherworldly.” Indeed, Mathewes shows that Augustine’s great concern was not “otherworldliness” as such, but idolatry (which may be ethereal or material). Thus, he rightly ties together a truly spiritual center to our hope with a demand for serious moral engagement now. The book proves so significant precisely because it offers a spiritually centered account of eschatology that, nonetheless, shows how being spiritually minded enables one to be of earthly (ethical and public) good. And it does so in the words and way of Augustine, the patron saint of so much twentieth century Reformed eschatology.

The way forward in dogmatic eschatology should be Augustinian, and it should avoid both spiritualism and naturalism. Our future thinking ought to follow the wisdom of Gregory and Augustine, of Thomas and of later Protestants such as John Owen,\(^4\) however, in showing that the special character of our hope as spiritual communion with God through Jesus Christ provides the means for honoring both heaven and earth in the right way. It must center upon God, but contain within it an expectation of God renewing all things in him. Retrieving the doctrine of the beatific vision—and noting the spiritual communion to which it is meant to alert us—may be a powerful resource for better thinking of our Christian hope in a Christ-centered key. Here, as much as anywhere else, we benefit from a vision for theological retrieval and, thus, from a retrieval of the importance of that blessed hope which is yet to be ours.

About the Author

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\(^4\) Suzanne McDonald has offered an account of the role and character of the beatific vision in the works of the great Puritan divine in her, “Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: John Owen and the 'Reforming' of the Beatific Vision,’ in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology* (ed. Kelly Kapic and Mark Jones; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 141-158.
NEW VOICES FOR THEOLOGY

EDITED BY MICHAEL ALLEN & SCOTT SWAIN

CONTRIBUTORS INCLUDE: MICHAEL ALLEN, SCOTT SWAIN, DANIEL J. TREIER, KEVIN VANHOOZER, FRED SANDERS, GARY ANDERSON, JOHN M. G. BARCLAY
About the Common Places Series

Common Places was a regular column on the Zondervan Academic blog with a focus on systematic theology. The loci communes or “common places” of Christian theology, drawn out of the Scriptures and organized in a manner suitable to their exposition in the church and the academy, have functioned historically as common points of reference for theological discussion and debate. This column focused upon the classical loci of systematic theology, not as occasions for revision, but as opportunities for entering into the ongoing conversation that is Christian systematic theology.

For more about Common Places, read the column introduction.
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Ours is a day of noise, not silence.

The great difficulty in navigating theological study in the English-speaking world is not owing to the absence of resources, but to the profusion of so many significant resources (and, well, maybe a few not so significant ones offering cover). Targeted marketing may guide you to products for your likely demographic, but there’s little guarantee that you’ll find that thought-provoking volume that haunts you for years to come and no surety that the most worthy studies of our times will find the audience that they deserve. Indeed, some of the more substantive theological works have found their audiences years, if not lifetimes, later.

New Voices for Theology seeks to introduce reader-theologians to new publications worthy of their attention. This connection is no small matter, especially for those interested in doing systematic or dogmatic theology, which is by definition a discipline that draws on diverse ancillary fields of study (ranging from biblical literature to historical studies and beyond). The thoughtful and faithful theologian cannot develop a tunnel vision but must embrace a catholic spirit, seeking to appreciate the breadth or totality of God’s truth. For finite thinkers such as ourselves, this means that the theologian must learn to depend upon and celebrate the wisdom of those working in various doctrines and related fields.

The following reviews highlight several studies, all of which are published dissertations by junior scholars in the field. Some address systematic theology per se, while others offer particularly noteworthy reflections upon matters of biblical exegesis or historical genealogy that impinge upon the systematic task. In each case, a senior scholar (more often than not a
doctoral supervisor) will commend the work, explaining not only the nature and shape of the text’s argument but also the potential implications for the task of doing theology today.

These reviews include entries from Daniel Treier, Kevin Vanhoozer, Fred Sanders, Gary Anderson, and John Barclay, with a special entry from Franz Bibfeldt in the appendix. In each case, we commend a recent—published in the last five years—publication to you as a significant work for theology. We encourage you not only to engage with the review but to read the book and comment upon it. In this enterprise as always, we want to foster the common places where theology can be done in our time. Join us.

About the Authors

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New Voices for Theology

Theological Society, and contributed to The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity. He serves as general editor (with Michael Allen) for T&T Clark’s International Theological Commentary and Zondervan’s New Studies in Dogmatics series. He blogs regularly at Reformation21.

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“May the mind of Christ my Savior
Live in me from day to day,
By his love and pow’r controlling
All I do and say.”

So many of us have sung—but can this be a realistic and appropriate prayer for the Christian “theologian,” broadly defined?

Two potential problems confront us. (1) Is this prayer consistent with the biblical and contemporary emphases upon virtue? Virtues are habitual dispositions expressed in characteristic patterns of godly action: But does the prayer emphasize unilateral divine action so strongly that human virtue is precluded or uninteresting? (2) Does this prayer particularize the Christian intellectual life too exclusively in terms of participation in Jesus Christ? Intellectual virtues treat epistemology in moral terms: But does praying for such virtues—assuming it is appropriate to do so—emphasize spiritual dimensions of Christian intellectual life so strongly that civic and academic discourses are precluded or uninteresting?

These two potential problems indicate larger theological concerns. For one: Does recent emphasis upon the church as a community of virtue-promoting practices—stemming from Stanley Hauerwas and numerous others—
clash with proper emphasis on gracious divine action (as the likes of John Webster suggest)? For another: Does recent emphasis upon intellectual virtues—stemming from “virtue epistemology” in general and Stephen Fowl (among others) in the realm of theological hermeneutics—clash with proper emphasis on public truth and cognitive skills?

In response, Stephen T. Pardue’s *The Mind of Christ: Humility and the Intellect in Early Christian Theology* (T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, 2013), addresses an especially important test case for intellectual and spiritual virtue: humility. When endorsing the book, I wrote that Pardue’s account “is scripturally faithful, theologically profound, and spiritually nourishing. He treats this virtue in ways that honor both intellectual and ethical concerns. The book is clearly and beautifully written. Above all, it directs our focus consistently toward God’s self-giving in Jesus Christ—
toward that which ultimately defines our human dignity.”

To flesh out these claims a bit: Pardue introduces his study in terms of the turn to virtue in contemporary theology and philosophy. Humility, the “forgotten virtue,” is a particularly interesting case since it has not always been seen as virtuous. Whereas Christians have seen humility as a form of excellence, much pagan thought has rejected it. Yet, if we define humility as Pardue does (following in the footsteps of Robert Roberts and my colleague Jay Wood), then it does not leave us powerless to pursue truth. To the contrary, humility involves low concern for self-importance, focusing instead on intrinsic intellectual and moral concerns. Such humility does not mean unhealthy self-denial or passivity, but actually promotes truth-conducive initiative.

Pardue proceeds from introductory matters of definition to explore how Christian construals of humility emerge from Scripture. A number of biblical texts and portraits—from Moses through the Isaianic Servant to the Pauline Christ-hymn—suggest that humility should be prized for its intellectual benefits. Humility is ennobling rather than disempowering, since it helps us to know the truth by giving us courage and hope in the grace of God.

From Scripture, Pardue next proceeds to explore Gregory of Nyssa as a representative of the Christian tradition regarding humility. The result is an
account that fosters stimulating conversation between biblical texts and the
dogmatic tradition without hidebound servitude to one or the other. The
engagement is mutual, allowing each to be constructively critical regarding
apparent constructs from the other. Of course Scripture is the final authority
over epistemology along with everything else, but the tradition helps us to
discover its counter-cultural insight concerning humility.

Philippians 2:5–11, and Incarnational Christology in general, became
especially vital for Christian accounts of humility. Yet appeals to the
Incarnation create interesting tensions with feminist and other appraisals
of kenōsis. Whereas today kenotic Christologies seem appealing to many
because of their accent upon Jesus’ full humanity, they seem disempowering
to others: They could readily promote imitation of a gentle Jesus, meek and
mild enough to leave female and other marginalized imitators even more
powerless. Pardue therefore tries to show that an Augustinian account of
divine condescension in the Incarnation can render proper humility em-
powering rather than debilitating. On the one hand, the Incarnation matters
because God himself condescends to become like a slave in Jesus Christ.
On the other hand, the Incarnation matters because God’s condescension
in Christ is singularly redemptive. Any imitation of that Incarnation on our
part is a grateful but strictly unnecessary response to redemption. Any such
imitation is only appropriate when offered as a gift from a redeemed state of
true freedom.

Finally, though, the Augustinian allergy to the vice of “curiosity” raises
another question: Might Christian humility be intellectually disabling
by telling Christians to keep hands off of certain topics or ways of pursu-
ing knowledge? Is not the modern academy defined by curious pursuit
of knowledge for knowledge’s sake (and technological side benefits that
result!)? To the contrary, Pardue argues, Christian humility encourages us
not to resign ourselves to post-Kantian apophaticism but to embrace the
genuinely Christian kind. The post-Kantian version tries to define the limits
of reason on reason’s own terms—and becomes self-defeating as a result.
The Christian version discerns the limits of reason in the otherwise blinding
but ultimately illuminating light of divine revelation. Proper human limits
and dependence upon divine grace can, again, be ennobling: Christian free-
dom encourages us to explore the reality held together by Christ the Logos
and divinely loved in him.
There have surely been pathological critiques of curiosity and accounts of humility in the Christian tradition—but not pervasively so. Instead, the Christian tradition’s reflection upon the Scriptures, and the Christ of whom they bear witness, can empower us to seek knowledge of all the genuine truth that is good for us. That tradition can also empower us to resist some of the dangers and dichotomies that accompany modern assumptions about intellectual life.

About the Author

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Yeats probably did not have the academy and church in mind when he penned these lines in 1919, but he could have, for theological things, and the gospel itself, have been coming apart for centuries. Theology itself has come apart: what God joined together—doctrine and life—has been cast asunder, into the academy and church respectively. And, within the academy, the disciplines of biblical theology and systematic theology go their separate ways, speaking different languages. Even worse, the story and logic of the gospel have come apart in both the church and the academy, with some Christians focusing on the significance of Jesus’ death with its promise of heaven (cross) and others on Jesus’ message about the reign of God with its promise of justice for earth (kingdom).

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they seek to repair the center—and shall receive honorable mention in Christianity Today’s Book Awards list, as Jeremy R. Treat’s first book has done in 2015—no mean feat for a work that began life as a doctoral dissertation. Treat’s The Crucified King (Zondervan, 2014) works several important mediations: church and academy; biblical theology and systematic theology; penal substitution and Christus Victor theory of
the atonement. His title signals his reconciling intent: rather than viewing the kingdom and the cross as themes that belong to different universes of discourse, Treat argues that they form a seamless whole, centered on the unabbreviated gospel. The subtitle provides further italicized fuel to the mediatorial fire: “Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology.”

Treat thus sets out to repair two cracks in the house of Christian theology: the formal fracture that segregates the methods, vocabularies, and interests of biblical from systematic theologians, and the material division that separates the themes of cross and kingdom. The first fracture is perhaps the easier to see, for it is the lived experience of many biblical and theological scholars. What we now take for granted in the academy is in fact an aberration: until J. P. Gabler’s famous lecture in 1787, Christian thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin felt no need to choose methodological sides. Biblical and systematic theology were joined at the hip of theological exegesis. This picture of a unified theological interpretation of Scripture stands in sharp contrast to the present scene, where theological lions do not lie down next to exegetical lambs but rather devour them (see, for example, Gerald Bray’s “A Systematician Reviews Tom Schreiner’s Biblical Theology,” Themelios 39.1). While such interdepartmental dialogue is welcome, it is not yet integration. The wound remains open.

Treat organizes his book into two parts—Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology, respectively—suggesting perhaps that his book simply perpetuates the problem it addresses. In fact, Treat wants to say that both disciplinary approaches are (1) equally bound to Scripture, (2) exemplars of faith seeking understanding and, (3) focused on Jesus Christ, Israel’s Messiah. What differences remain are complementary: biblical theology focuses on the story of redemption, tracing unifying themes historically in the Bible’s own terms, concepts, and contexts. Systematic theology focuses on the logic of redemption, reflecting on the meaning of the story in the context of the history of its interpretation and the church’s contemporary situation.

Part 1 retells the story of redemption under the rubric “victory through sacrifice.” Though God created humans in his image to be vice regents over creation, the fall of Adam injected a dramatic complication. As early as the protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15 we begin to see the recurring pattern that comprises the substance of the story: the seed of Adam will trample out all
vestiges of evil, but the cost of this victory will be suffering. David, in the line of this messianic seed, built a Temple as a sign of God’s presence (and victory), but also as a means of providing a means (i.e., atoning sacrifices) for an unholy people to live before God. David’s idealized kingship generates hope for a future Davidic king whose reign will never end. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah further gives shape to this hope, clarifying that the Seed’s suffering must precede the new exodus and royal victory.

Treat traces the story into the New Testament, where he gives an extended reading of the way in which Mark’s Gospel integrates Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom in word and deed with a nuanced account of the Isaianic new exodus that frames its “establishment” on the cross. Paul, too, weaves together the themes of kingdom and cross in Colossians, where the “blood of the cross” (Col 1:20) is the means by which God effects cosmic reconciliation and transfers sinners into the “kingdom of his beloved Son” (1:13). Treat summarizes the story of redemption, suggesting that the cross is the turning point and climactic cause that reorients history towards its original purpose, now become kingdom telos.

In Part 2, Treat turns from the story of redemption to an examination of its logic, that is, the way the story has been interpreted in Christian tradition and contemporary theology. While systematic theology has made advances in understanding the person of the God-man (cf. Chalcedon), Treat thinks it has stumbled in other areas of Christology. For example, he laments the too rigid distinction between the two states of Christ, as if Christ’s exal- tation only followed his humiliation rather than seeing Jesus as king throughout his earthly life. Moreover, too rigid a distinction between Christ’s three offices has led some theologians to associate Christ’s death exclusively with his priestly office, rather than seeing his death as both a priestly and kingly act. After all, the cross itself is the means by which the Son is “lifted up” (John 3:14; 12:32).

Treat’s mediating abilities are nowhere more apparent than in chapters 7 and 8, where he makes a case for viewing the penal substitution and Christus Victor theories of the atonement not as competitors but allies. One might have thought that Christus Victor was the atonement theory of obvious choice for Treat’s project: does not the idea that Jesus, in dying, defeats Satan fit the “crucified king” bill? On the contrary, Treat avoids either-or thinking
here too, arguing instead that Christ’s victory over Satan is accomplished only through penal substitution: it is precisely by bearing the penalty for sins that Jesus “disarms” Satan, the accuser, and puts things right. The point—and it is an important one—is that God rules through his self-giving love.

There is a time to divide, and a time to put together. The Crucified King seeks to heal only those divisions that impede our reading of Scripture and our understanding of the gospel. Treat’s book is a balm for the theological soul insofar as it works its conjunctive medicine, modeling ways to hold things that are falling apart—church/academy; biblical/systematic theology; penal substitution/Christus Victor theories of the atonement—together in Christ Jesus, the Crucified King.

About the Author

Kevin J. Vanhoozer (PhD, Cambridge University, England) is Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He is the author of several books, including Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge, The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology, and Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine. He also serves on the editorial board of the International Journal of Systematic Theology and the Journal of Theological Interpretation.
Taking the long view of things, the Christian doctrine of God has had a strange career.

It took its classic, trinitarian form as the early church’s interpretation of Scripture, with theologians intentionally developing hermeneutical constructions and elaborating reading strategies that would do justice to the things they read in the apostolic texts. It was a Bible doctrine. Sure, it was sharpened against the whetstone of heresy, and partly paraphrased into an eclectic philosophical vocabulary, but fundamentally it was an effort to say what was known about God from Scripture.

But over the past few centuries the field of biblical studies has won independence from other theological disciplines, and along the way it has carefully developed its own methods and techniques for construing the teaching contained in the Bible. There are many happy results, and much has been gained. But one of the unhappy byproducts is the distance that now stands between the arguments and vocabulary of doctrinal theology on the one hand and New Testament studies on the other.
The Trinity and New Testament Scholarship: A Journey Too Far?

The doctrine of the Trinity, with all its conceptual distinctions and terminological apparatus, stands so obviously on the doctrinal-theological side of the divide that New Testament scholars, operating in their professional capacity, have almost nothing to do with it. As believers, they may salute the Trinity from a distance, acknowledging that it arises from the church’s faith as a synthetic judgment via certain more or less legitimate systematic-theological maneuvers. But the trinitarian conceptuality couldn’t possibly have a place in exegesis of any wissenschaftlich rigor. As one scholar has recently warned, “the road from Pauline theology/christology to trinitarian doctrine is, for many, either non-existent or else strewn with journey-disrupting rubble.”

That scholar is Wesley Hill, and the observation is from his 2012 dissertation at Durham, soon to be published as Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters (Eerdmans, 2015). Hill thinks there is in fact a road from Paul to the Trinity, and in this book he points it out.

New Testament Scholar in Doctrinal Territory?

What Hill does in this groundbreaking study is pick up one particular element of traditional trinitarian theology from the early church, and take seriously the notion that it might be useful as an exegetical tool.

Let me confess, speaking as a systematic theologian with a bias in favor of the great tradition, that it’s not hard to assert that the church fathers were way ahead of modern exegetes, and to do so with whatever amount of bluster you think your audience will let you get away with. There are plenty of books and essays claiming that ________ had it right long ago (fill in the blank with Augustine, Aquinas, John Owen, etc.) and isn’t it nice that the poor, benighted biblical studies folks are finally catching up. But it’s quite another thing for a New Testament scholar to carry out a focused project of investigation to test the hypothesis that a particular aspect of the trinitarian framework may be exegetically useful.
Persons in Relation

It’s the category of relation, and the framework of persons in relation, that Hill recommends as a tool appropriate to understanding Paul. He cites Nils Dahl’s observation that “according to the New Testament, God the Father, Jesus Christ, and (less clearly) the Holy Spirit each have a discrete identity, and yet none of the three can be described adequately unless the inter-relationship among them is taken into account.” One of the things most obviously being negotiated in classic pro-Nicene trinitarian theology was just this: that we know the persons of the Trinity in their relations to each other, that the relations are equiprimordial and constitutive, that the relations among these three are a basic datum of revelation because they are the basic reality of God’s being.

Hill keeps a respectful distance from the high end of those claims, precisely because he is determined to make the point about Paul’s own usage: “Paul’s speech about God, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit is intricately intertwined so that talk about any one of the three (God, Jesus, or the Spirit) implies reference to all of them together (God, Jesus, and the Spirit).” That is an observation about the Pauline corpus. In fact, it is probably the kind of observation that led the church fathers to say the things they said, in a very different conceptual idiom.

Paul’s Trinitarian Framework

Paul and the Trinity settles into its primary mode of close, detailed exegesis when Hill begins tracing the way that God, Christ, and the Spirit are always mutually involved in Paul’s theology; in the way we never get one without the other. It’s not just that Paul goes out of his way to mention two or three of the persons in close proximity; Hill’s point is the deeper one that “each person is only identifiable by means of reference to the others.”

With regard to Christ, this means that “the question of whether Jesus/‘the Son’ occupies a ‘high’ or ‘low’ position relative to ‘God’ is not likely to appear as an urgent one, since ‘God’ is never construed as identifiable apart from ‘the Son’, and vice versa, ‘the Son’ is never taken to denote an identity explicable apart from his relation to God.” We can’t ask how close Jesus is to God
without first specifying the identity of this God, but Paul won’t let us specify that God without reference to Christ and the Spirit. Using this trinitarian framework, which he freely admits is borrowed from fourth-century theologians, Hill is able to get a stronger grip on Paul’s own arguments, and also to integrate recent insights into Paul’s monotheism and Christology.

A New Way Forward

“Exegesis of Paul,” notes Hill, “does not reach its full potential without trinitarian theology, and, likewise, trinitarian theology is impoverished if it neglects biblical exegesis in general and exegesis of Paul in particular.” He goes on to say that “such a symbiosis should come as no surprise,” and yet his argument in this book, and the conclusions that should be drawn from it, will be surprising to those who read it well. I expect it will turn a few heads in the biblical studies guild because it so obviously offers a new way forward. But it should also shake up a few settled conventions in contemporary constructive trinitarian theology, delivering some new tools that systematic theologians would be foolish to ignore.

About the Author

Fred Sanders (PhD, Graduate Theological Union) is professor of theology in the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University in La Mirada, California. He is author of several books including The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything, Dr. Doctrines’ Christian Comix, and The Triune God in Zondervan Academic’s New Studies in Dogmatics (forthcoming). Fred is a core participant in the Theological Engagement with California’s Culture Project and a popular blogger at Scriptorium Daily.

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A conventional account of the history of modern biblical scholarship will often begin by looking at some of the great Medieval pashtanim—that is, the pursuers of the literal sense. Among these is the brilliant Spanish thinker of the twelfth century, ibn Ezra who pointed out that Gen 13:7b (“At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelt in the land”) could not have been written by Moses because it presumes the vantage point of someone living in the post-conquest period. By making such observation, Ibn Ezra had already taken the first step toward what became the revolutionary Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis of four sources represented by the sigla J, E, P, and D. Ibn Ezra also posited two authors for the book of Isaiah, an insight that became one of the most durable findings of the modernist project. One finds theologians of all stripes referring to “Second Isaiah.”

On this reading of the matter, modern biblical criticism is a bold adventure launched by honest and courageous persons seeking to explain
various literary puzzles in the Bible. The only reason to resist such modernist approaches would be motivated by religious fundamentalism that felt compelled to harmonize every aberrant detail.

There is much truth to such a genealogy. It wasn’t that modern criticism (at least at first—things have become much more complicated in the last several decades) was anti-theological; rather, it wanted to ground theology on a more empirical reading of the ancient record.

But there is also much that is wrong in this commonly rehearsed account. In his extraordinary book, Michael Legaspi provides us with a vastly different way of telling the story. Truth be told, this is not an account of the origin of the critical project *tout court*. That would take a volume several times larger than this. Legaspi instead puts his focus on the figure of Johann David Michaelis (1717-91) and his role in establishing a place for the field of biblical studies in the newly formed University at Göttingen.

What was new to me was the complex role the theological disciplines played in the evolving German Universities. Two issues were in play. First, there was the growing interest in unifying the various German regions into what would eventually become a single state. Second, there was the legacy of unresolvable theological disputes between the Reformed, Lutheran, and Pietistic sects. (On this story, one should compare the recent book of Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*; there is considerable overlap on this point.)

In order to contribute to the project of German unity, it was crucial for the theological faculties in these nascent universities to bypass the disputes of earlier generations and refound their disciplines on questions that were more irenic and consensual in nature. As Legaspi puts it (p. 36): “Scholars, as state employees and vendors had to be managed appropriately: hired, fired, disciplined, praised, or cajoled until they fell into line with the educational ministry. In this period, the ‘original ecclesial and corporate character of the universities was being lost.’” In short, the critical project initiated by Michaelis was not driven by the constraints of intellectual freedom to follow the exegetical data wherever it might lead. Rather, its main function was to suppress confessional identity and to establish a new discipline that would avoid disputed areas of theological inquiry.
For Michaelis this meant reenvisioning the Bible as a form of “classical” literature. For this reason he was drawn to the researches of the Oxford scholar, Robert Lowth (1710-87) whose work refocused the reader’s attention on the poetic form of the prophets. (A story told by James Kugel’s influential volume, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, on which Legaspi draws.) Poetry in Lowth’s view (p. 108) “must be allowed to stand eminent among the other liberal arts; inasmuch as it refreshes the mind when it is fatigued, soothes it when it is agitated, relieves and reinvigorates it when it is depressed; as it elevates the thoughts to the admiration of what is beautiful.” It was not the theology but the literary character of the Psalms which “elevates” and wins “admiration” from its readers. Michaelis was enthralled by the lectures of Lowth. He brought his work back to the Continent amid great fanfare. As one scholar noted, no other biblical scholar has had such an effect on German scholarship as Lowth. And not just scriptural scholars but also figures such as Goethe, Mendelssohn, and Herder. “As a result,” Legaspi concludes (p. 128), “the point of contact between ‘biblical poetry’ and the individual was not identity in a community of faith united by canon but rather faculties of aesthetic judgment.”

In his last chapter, Legaspi comments on the broad success of Michaelis’ project. Not that all his specific research proposals carried the day. In fact, few of them did; most were overturned within a generation. But the larger project itself, that is, the desire to find a non-confessional foundation for biblical studies, continued unabated. Legaspi sums this up well when he writes (p. 165): “Guided by methods and assumptions that reinforced the statism and irenicism of the Enlightenment cameralists, the new discipline of biblical studies allowed practitioners to create a post-confessional bible by reconstructing a pre-confessional Israel.”

The last few pages of the book bring the results of the study into the present day. Here the reader hopes for more, but we will have to await another volume. Legaspi gestures approvingly toward the thesis of James Kugel that there is an unbridgeable divide between academic and churchly exegesis. Though I am sympathetic to much of what Kugel writes, I think that the program of Brevard Childs offers a better way forward. But these are not questions central to Legaspi’s project so a criticism of his brief remarks on these matters would not be fair. We’ll have to await future publications to see Legaspi’s more mature thoughts on this question.
About the Author

Gary A. Anderson (PhD, Harvard University) is Hesburgh Professor of Catholic Theology at the University of Notre Dame. His interests concern the religion and literature of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible with special interest in the reception of the Bible in early Judaism and Christianity. His most recent books are Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition and Sin: A History.

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Good theology has a shape, a structure: a way of connecting its various themes and motifs via one or more anchor points that fix the framework of the whole. Hence the most profound attempts at theological comparison dig deeper than the similarity or difference between theologians on this or that motif, and attempt to unearth their respective foundational structures (or discursive grammars). And sometimes, by digging this deep, the best and most illuminating conclusion is that two different theological structures are simply incommensurable, even if they share on the surface a number of points in common.
Jonathan Linebaugh’s “God, Grace, and Righteousness in Wisdom of Solomon & Paul’s Letter to the Romans”

Jonathan Linebaugh’s God, Grace, and Righteousness in Wisdom of Solomon and Paul’s Letter to the Romans is a book that with rare acumen digs this deep. Paul’s theology has often, and with good reason, been brought into comparison with the theologies of Jewish authors of his time, but all too often such comparisons have been overloaded with ideological baggage— in attempts to prove either that Paul is diametrically opposite to his fellow Jews or that there was really nothing substantial in their apparent disagreements. Linebaugh enters these fraught debates that have intensified in the wake of the “new perspective” but does not accept the terms or the frame of the current discussion. Here he wisely confines himself to just one text that stands at many points in very close proximity to Paul and springs from the contemporary Jewish community in Alexandria: Wisdom of Solomon. His tactic is to generate a conversation between Wisdom and Romans such that he can illuminate not only how they agree or disagree, but more fundamentally why. His unusually deep soundings into this why, and the theological sophistication with which he discusses it, renders this work one of the very best books on “Paul and Judaism” for many a year.

Linebaugh is determined to let each text speak for itself—not only on the grounds of “fair play” (too often scholars are tempted to raid texts for statements extracted from their context) but also because of his proper intuition that even the same terms (in particular here, righteousness [dikaiosune] and grace [charis]) derive their meaning from their textual and conceptual contexts, not from some external point of definition. Thus he devotes three sizable chapters to a careful reading of Wisdom—a text rarely given this depth of exegetical and theological analysis—before embarking on Romans and establishing a fascinating conversation between the two.

The method is exemplary (lots of PhDs now follow in its wake) and the conclusions are highly revealing. The theology of Wisdom is held together by a firm conviction of the symmetry of the cosmos, a just equilibrium that includes space for mercy but ever seeks the congruence between divine grace and the “fit” or “worth” of its recipients: thus the righteous and non-idolatrous (Israel) are saved in the Exodus, while their opposites (Egyptians) get the judgement they deserve—and that as a historical exemplar of the just cosmic order established by Wisdom. By comparison, even at the points where his concerns most clearly overlap, Paul parades a disruptive incongruity in the grace and even (in fact, especially) in the righteousness
of God, and that because his anchor point is not the cosmic order but the unconditioned gift of God in Jesus Christ.

To cite Linebaugh: “Wisdom rereads and rewrites pentateuchal history according to the formal criterion of correspondence because canonical history is necessarily the paradigmatic exemplification of the pre-creational order; Paul rereads and re-imagines Israel’s history according to the formal criterion of contradiction (e contrario) because he hears Israel’s past as a typological testimony to and Israel’s prophetic tradition as a preannouncement of the unconditioned and incongruous event and impact that is God’s act in Jesus” (p. 231).

This reading is not only uncommonly perceptive. It insists, against a confused and confusing consensus, that the key word grace is not univocal: it can mean different things to different authors (ancient and modern). As Linebaugh insists, the differences here are not a matter of degree (one author stressing grace more than another), but rather in definition: the same term means different things in different conceptual contexts. Using the normal language of charis and associated words for divine benevolence, Wisdom stresses divine goodness and gift as lavishly but discriminately given to the fitting: how else could God’s gifts be good in a justly ordered world? Using the very same language, but in a Christologically determined context, Paul describes the gift of Christ as given without regard to worth—resulting in the justification of the ungodly, and the raising of the dead. This sheds a flood of light on the larger question concerning Paul’s relationship to Judaism. In fact, it resets the terms of the debate that has raged since Ed Sanders’ Paul and Palestinian Judaism (1977), since the latter worked on the assumption that grace was not only everywhere in Paul and Second Temple Judaism, but everywhere the same. Not so, shows Linebaugh; and with that the debate takes on a very different hue.

The results are fascinating for Christian theology. For those in the Catholic tradition, for whom Wisdom of Solomon forms part of the canon, this book raises important questions about that canon and its theological shape. For Protestant theologians, for whom the Paul side of Linebaugh’s comparison holds greater authority, what emerges here is a stimulus to deep reflection on the relationship between a theology based on the Christ-event, in all its shocking “foolishness,” and a theology searching for the seeds of wisdom.
Jonathan Linebaugh’s “God, Grace, and Righteousness in Wisdom of Solomon & Paul’s Letter to the Romans”

in the construction of the world. Linebaugh brilliantly restores to Paul his radical and subversive edge, which has been much blunted in recent decades. By insisting that the Christ-gift was the generative basis for Paul’s rethinking of Scripture, history, and truth, he offers a reading that should attract and stimulate theology in regions far beyond the field of biblical studies.

About the Author

John M. G. Barclay (PhD, University of Cambridge) is Lightfoot Professor of Divinity at Durham University. His research has focused on the social history of early Christianity (especially in Pauline churches), Judaism in the Roman world (especially Josephus), and Pauline theology. He is author of several books, including Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews and Obeying the Truth: Paul’s Ethics in Galatians.

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Franz Bibfeldt

Editorial Note: This article originally appeared on April 1, 2015, America’s April Fools’ Day. Though this is a work of fiction, we trust you will appreciate the same penetrating insights in and observations of twentieth century theology for which Bibfeldt had been known.

In a world of contemporary systematic theologies so often dominated by approaches committed to retrieval, Taylor Ruiz-Jones steps into the fray and signals a critical path forward. I use the word “critical” in its fulsome sense: gesturing toward its methodological approach and noting its contextual significance. My remarks will be brief, but I trust illuminating in leading into this work.

Taylor Ruiz-Jones’s *From Siesta to Sabbath: A Theology of Pause and Play* follows an orderly sequence with a playful tone. First, it addresses the analytics of pause and play, and in so doing it engages in philosophical discussion regarding the appropriate foundations to a Christian and critical approach to dialectic. An excursus reorients the modern documentary hypothesis along Sabbatological lines by tracing redactional layers related to evolving thoughts about worship and leisure in ancient Israel (the interrogation
of eco-feminist dating of Num. 12 on p. 222 demonstrates the poverty of approaches that only consider the final form of the text). Second, it turns to the aesthetics of pause and play, suggesting confidently that an analogy of play succeeds in transcending Roman Catholic/Protestant debates regarding analogy (i.e., the *analogia entis* or *analogia fidei*). This new approach to analogy funds Ruiz-Jones's reflections on late modernity, wherein she engages David Hart's analysis of the Nietzschean optics of the market, arguing that Nietzsche, far from being responsible for the aggressive isolation of the restful individual, actually sublimates and sustains a vital, non-essentialist approach to human flourishing and pause. The final chapter in this section (“Life with Largesse”) includes significant portions of Spanish-language text in which Ruiz-Jones transmits to us the Sabbatological insights of the Salamanca school and focuses upon their Eucharistic, political, and imaginative resources. Third, the tour de force concludes with three chapters engaging the ascetics of pause and play and proposing a phronetic way beyond the impasse of *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*. Here my own corpus is brought into conversation, fruitfully and critically, with elements of Puritan (technically drawing from the Dutch *Nadere Reformatie*) sabbatarianism. Ruiz-Jones argues, ultimately and convincingly, that self-denial and siesta are neither isolated nor conflated, but eucharistically reconciled through the apocalyptic invasion of the eternal Sabbath rest.

How does the author reshuffle our thoughts regarding siesta and Sabbath? In turn, arenas of analytic, aesthetic, and ascetical debate find not only exploration but truly imaginative exposition. As for myself, I’m fully convinced of his re-reading of my own corpus and believe that the author has identified an underappreciated development from my early dialectical thought and my purportedly mature apocalyptic approach to vacation, rest, and pause (brilliantly showing a genuine fissure between my *Both/And* and my later *Luther’s Theology of Vacation*—see comments on pp. 98, 114, and especially 783). My only remaining critique on this front is that Ruiz-Jones does not address the resources in Luther’s theology that inform my own developments and, thus, misses some potential ramifications for interpreting the Perkins-Elleboogius debate (contra the understatement of my exegesis of Luther’s *de Servo Arbitrio* on pp. 186-187). In so doing, the author also undersells the significance of this thesis, for it addresses not only my dialectics but those of the German Reformer himself.
Where shall we go from here? Rarely does the work of a young scholar demonstrate such brio and follow through with consistent erudition and intellectual force. It is perhaps too soon to speak of a “siesta school” in sabbatology, but I trust that this volume will come to dominate this field of inquiry for years to come. The author suggests (p. 111 fn. 3b) that a forthcoming work on the sabbatology of Bultmann’s homiletics will no doubt demonstrate the fruitfulness of this program for practical theology. Future doctoral theses and monographs by others ought to explore ways in which the analogy of play might inform the full panoply of Christian doctrinal loci.

Perhaps I may be allowed a personal comment on the present theological scene, prompted by the penetrating proposal found and modeled by Ruiz-Jones. The time is ripe for this sort of reflection. We have needed a Barth deemed worthy of association not only with Schleiermacher but also with Stringfellow. We have needed an Elleboogius capable of embracing the critical comments of Perkins. We have needed a postmetaphysical theologian willing to tackle David Hart’s aesthetics on the Nietzschean terrain to which it lays claim. In short, we have needed someone willing to stand up to those who would summon us to retrieval, ressourcement, and remembrance. We have needed all these and more. In this volume, we not only learn of pause and play, but we see our needs played before us beautifully and we are given pause to consider the seismic significance of their performance herein. For years now, I have mused that I might be the last remaining Protestant theologian. Like Moses gazing across the River Jordan, however, I see in the work of Ruiz-Jones a promised land ahead. My people, those willing to critically rethink analytics, aesthetics, and ascetics, are journeying into a restful and a playful time. I shall be satisfied if this new voice in theology finds an audience of listeners capable of journeying across that river and joining that siesta dance, wherein the perichoretic and the paradisiacal kiss each other (see the figural reading of Joshua 2:12 on pp. 408-445).

We conclude where Ruiz-Jones does: “Only by assuming the form of a ceaseless practice of pause, however—even in enduring the Sabbath always borne by the body of Christ—can Christian rhetoric demonstrate and persuade that this, at the last, is the play of an infinite fugue” (p. 809).
Appendix: Taylor Ruiz-Jones’s “From Siesta to Sabbath”

About the Author

Franz Bibfeldt (PhD, University of Worms) was one of the most penetrating participants in and observers of twentieth century theology. His work, ranging from the historiographic to the philosophical and back again, has been responded to in a festschrift: The Unrelieved Paradox: Studies in the Theology of Franz Bibfeldt. The present review, believed to be among the last of his writings, serves as a signal contribution to this Common Places series, especially inasmuch as he comments on a forthcoming volume that interacts with elements of his own thought.

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PRO-NICENE THEOLOGY

EDITED BY MICHAEL ALLEN & SCOTT SWAIN

CONTRIBUTORS INCLUDE: MICHAEL ALLEN, FRED SANDERS, STEVEN J. DUBY, SCOTT SWAIN, JOSH MALONE AND LEWIS AYRES
About the *Common Places* Series

*Common Places* was a regular column on the Zondervan Academic blog with a focus on systematic theology. The loci communes or “common places” of Christian theology, drawn out of the Scriptures and organized in a manner suitable to their exposition in the church and the academy, have functioned historically as common points of reference for theological discussion and debate. This column focused upon the classical loci of systematic theology, not as occasions for revision, but as opportunities for entering into the ongoing conversation that is Christian systematic theology.

For more about Common Places, read the column introduction.
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The doctrine of the Trinity serves as the fundamental lodestar of all Christian belief, the shining center of all Christian truth and the focal point of every instance of our trust and hope. God is. More particularly, God—the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit—is, and in, through, and to this one are all things. What light is shed upon life and being, then, flows forth from this fiery being. It must be admitted, however, that the Trinity has overwhelmed due to the power of its beam. Its very brilliance is the source of its difficulty. Theologians from Anselm to Sonderegger have reminded us that the divine mystery is not owing to a lack of revelation but a preponderance of it. This the hymn-writer attested so beautifully of the immortal God, of whom we sing, “In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes.”

Recent months have seen an uptick in talk of the triune God. Controversy has rocked certain portions of the evangelical subculture, regarding the propriety and salience of certain claims made by significant figures regarding the doctrine of God’s triunity. We have no desire to engage in polemics directly; in fact, the most significant entry into this debate has been that of noting its more fundamental roots in matters of basic theological methodology. Very different postures of study apparently have birthed distinct approaches to attesting the character and name of God. Such postures betoken commitments regarding the shape of biblical exegesis, the nature of theological language, the fundamental attributes of the divine life, and the way in which God’s own being relates to the economy of God’s acts in our midst (both creation and redemption). One of the great ironies of modern evangelicalism is that some of the greatest detractors of the open theism movement have succumbed to a similar posture over against the classical Christian approach to the doctrine of God, at least in many of its fundamental entailments.
We have published this five-part series, then, entitled *Pro-Nicene Theology*. Recent years have witnessed the deepening of our understanding of the fourth-century Trinitarian debates, moving us well beyond rather thin versions (dominant even in the mid twentieth-century textbooks) that portray this as a protracted but rather simple fight between two parties (the Arians and the Athanasians [read: the orthodox]). So-called “new canon” research by figures ranging from Rowan Williams and Lewis Ayres to Michel René Barnes and Khaled Anatolios has helped sketch the terrain of this period and the myriad elements bundled together in these epochal debates. Each month we will consider a fundamental issue, taking up the topics of divine ineffability, divine simplicity, inseparable operations, the eternal generation of the Son, and the distinction of theology and economy in turn. These foci are not only doctrinal topics, much less merely philosophical forays, but are exegetically necessary. Each month, therefore, we will post an entry offering dogmatic exposition of a key topic to be followed later in the month by an exegetical sketch of that topic. While a number of contributors will pen our doctrinal entries, Fred Sanders will provide all of the interpretive pairings (a foretaste of his exegetically-focused book *The Triune God* forthcoming this fall in the New Studies in Dogmatics series).

The common criticism of systematic theology suggests that it is an effort (whether intended or not) to put God in a box. Control. Manipulation. Sanitizing. These are the watchwords against such an agenda or effect. That there is a version of Christian doctrine which does so cannot be gainsaid, and we might note that suspicions are high in this regard regarding Trinitarian dogma as perhaps nowhere else. Persons, essences, notions, processions—if boxes are found anywhere in which we might cover up the fire of divine self-revelation, are they not cluttering our vision here? Yet it is worth beginning our reflections on pro-Nicene theology by noting that something has gone terribly awry and missed the promptings of the fourth- and fifth-century fathers in suggesting such a schema.

Far from keeping complexity at bay, doctrine serves to keep our attention upon the breadth of biblical teaching and, in so doing, to call us—by faith—

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up the mountain where God’s light shines. In professing its goodness, we may well be tempted to talk down its truth; in affirming his singularity, he may well find ourselves insecure about how strong may be our praise of his triunity. But doctrine guides those being purified, those learning to trust amidst the cloud, those who have been given a hymn but not found their desires fulfilled. Contrary to the common story told of the creeds as the result of little more than political machinations, heretics sleep well at night; their veering from the path invariably flows from mystery unto a foreshortened confession of God that shoehorns him into the commonsense reasoning of their culture or the thinly biblicistic logic of the seemingly obvious. Creeds and doctrinal distinctions are meant to keep us up at night, startled and stunned by the excessive glory of the self-revealing God. We do not lay awake seeking out the inchoate answer of an absent god, but we are floored by the brilliance of an overwhelming Majesty who has deigned to but radically exceeds our midst. The glory of the gospel, and of the goodness of that gospel’s God, may be attested by the illumination of the ineffable God. Tomorrow we will turn, then, to consider the way in which Gregory of Nazianzus helps us appreciate the necessity and goodness of divine ineffability.

About the Author

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2 The genius of Rowan Williams’s sketch of Arius in this regard was to bring out the fundamentally conservative pressures which prompted the development of Arian thought.
Our entryway to this series should begin where Gregory Nazianzus started his theological orations on God and Christ. In Oration 27, Gregory does not cut right to the issue of deity or number, of unity or essence. Rather, he introduces this cycle of theological homilies by attending to fundamental matters of divine self-revelation and, correspondingly, of human knowledge of the true God. He observes that theology, the knowledge of God, is the greatest need for everyone, for all need to remember God; yet he immediately qualifies the statement by adding that “it is not for all people, but only for those who have been tested and … have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul.” He observes that many subjects are of little significance and the dilettante ought to turn elsewhere. Here one deals with fire.

That Oration 27 offers a theological stiff-arm to the arrogant and presumptive; we dare not believe our own questions will always find answers, and we do well not to think our metaphors, analogies, and words can attest God as such. But Gregory continues. He concludes that oration with a blessing: “But of God himself the knowledge we shall have in this life will be

1 Helpful commentary may be found in John Behr, The Formation of Christian Theology, volume 2: The Nicene Faith, part 2 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 334-342. Behr helpfully hones in on the specific denial of knowledge of God’s nature, a topic which will be addressed in our final entry to this series (considering the distinction between theology and economy).

2 The great Western Trinitarian theologian, Augustine of Hippo, also focused on such concerns amidst his Trinitarian exposition. So-called modern Trinitarian revivals `enthused on all sides, it seems, by social analogies projected upon the Godhead—would do well to attend again to this seemingly global concern of the fourth- and fifth-century fathers.
little, though soon after it will perhaps be more perfect, in the same Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” He picks up this positive assertion in Oration 28, where he will address the impossibility, the reality, and the character of our knowledge of the triune God. His own summary of this second oration goes as follows: “I wanted to make plain the point my sermon began with, which was this: the incomprehensibility of deity to the human mind and its totally unimaginable grandeur.” Gregory moves upward, at times ploddingly, noting that we have difficulty enough understanding creation and ourselves amidst it, that we fail to ponder the heights of angelic existence, and that, to a far greater degree, we do not scale the mountain to know the divine.

Yet there is hope. “If our hymn has been worthy of its theme, it is the grace of the Trinity, of the Godhead one in three; if desire remains incompletely satisfied, that way too my argument can claim success.” The homily has come with a hymn, and Gregory is not denigrating it but identifying the miracle of its existence. For, though we cannot know God in himself, triune grace enables our song attesting his glory. And as we are given words enough to proclaim, to praise, to pray, we still long and yearn after that which will fully satiate our longings for ever-deeper contemplation of the one who alone fulfills the restlessness of our hearts. The fundamentals of theology must involve both assertions: the grace of knowledge, yes, but also the beauty of knowledge’s ever-deeper insatiability precisely because of God’s ever-deeper reality. In other words, mystery and concomitant longing are not a sign of failure; they are an achievement—better, a gift—of illuminating grace.

Gregory’s first two orations not only sketch the moral character of knowing God, but they also locate that understanding within the spiritual journey of triune grace3. By considering the stories of Moses ascending Sinai or Paul

3 A careful scan of his pan-biblical exegesis repays the effort profusely, as it takes in the contemplative dimensions of key moments in the divine economy. Indeed, one might say that it offers a fascinating parallel to Hebrews 11, reflecting on saints from the Old Testament (Enoch, Noah, Jacob, and the rest). Interestingly, Gregory does not mention the transfiguration account in this oration (though it will appear later in his orations as, e.g., in Oration 29.19). The transfiguration received widespread attention, however, in shaping not only patristic Christology but also much regarding human being and knowing; see Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord (trans. Brian Daley; Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2013).
experiencing the third heaven (and many others besides), Gregory attests the necessity of grace: only God can reveal God, and only God can enable knowledge of God. But by invoking these stories, Gregory also prompts us to observe that the mount is one of mystery, whether of darkness or of light, and the heavens are a place of ineffability (or, as later scholastic theologians would say more precisely, we must attend to the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility). “None saw, none told, of God’s nature.”

As we begin our tour of pro-Nicene theology, we do well to remember the epistemological framing of all that follows. The early Christian understanding of God and creation, humanity and grace, shapes the very scope and sequence of Trinitarian dogma. Gregory does not offer a systematic theology even of the Godhead, but his theological orations do work synthetically. Later traditions will develop to attest the fundamental impact of these revealed truths: for example, medievals and their descendants will take to speaking of theological language and the doctrine of analogy (as in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.13.5). Even in the fourth and fifth centuries, the distinction of theology (*theologia*) and economy (*oikonomia*) will be employed to help expound not only God’s being and action but the availability of such for knowledge by humans. And there is a long, sad story to be told of the loss of analogy—especially in many facets of modern, purportedly conservative American evangelicalism (oftentimes in an unfortunate over-reaction to the ills of neo-orthodoxy, which ironically allowed a modern movement to set the terms of debate rather than returning to the productive categories bequeathed us by the catholic and classical Reformed traditions)—and the myriad ways in which theological epistemology has been modified. Both open theism and social trinitarianism (and its diverse applications to gender ethics) depend upon such a loss of analogy and of divine ineffability and of the theology/economy distinction to even be a discussion point, much less a convincing position.

J. K. Rowling has inscribed into our culture the notion that “he who must not be named” is unutterable precisely due to his evil. We do fear to face, much less speak that which is like us and yet harrowing. Lord Voldemort stands in for that timidity. Far more significant, however, to remember what Gregory Nazianzus will restate later: “Our starting-point must be the fact that God cannot be named” (Oration 30.17). We do confess him in ways that correspond to him, but he is and remains ineffable and incomprehensible.
Better still, his glory and grace come—powerfully, creatively, and, yes, sav-
ingly—only as they come in resplendently overwhelming ways that transfig-
ure our reality and perception. Gospel will not be gospel if it is wholly utter-
able, for genuine help from one beyond our plight demands that our witness
to him bespeak something beyond our grasp. Grace, if it is to come, arrives
only with glory. “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of
him! … To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:33, 36, esv).

About the Author

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It seems odd that the doctrine of divine ineffability should be found among the crucial presuppositions of trinitarian theology. To confess God’s ineffability is to confess that God exceeds, eludes, and finally escapes our statements about him. That confession would seem to be a conversation stopper, or at least an objection preemptive enough to shame any lecturer into quietly filing away his or her notes for a learned discourse on the Trinity. Clever philosophers of religion have even observed that if something were absolutely ineffable, we could not say so, because that would be saying enough about it to prove we could say something about it. What kind of theologian would call God ineffable and then go on to make all sorts of particular claims about the three persons, their relations and processions, their essence and mutual indwelling? The answer is that a trinitarian theologian would do this, and as Michael Allen has shown with reference to Gregory of Nazianzus’ Theological Orations, the move is typical of pro-Nicene theologies.

The Biblical Paradox of Praise

It is also biblical, picking out a vital theme from scripture and rendering it more explicit for a particular task, even raising this biblical theme to the condition of methodological self-awareness for trinitarian theologians. We would not expect Holy Scripture to give an analytic rendering of this theme, and it doesn’t. The rather abstract word “ineffable” does not occur (to say nothing of John Hick’s bloodless replacement term, “transcategorical”). What the prophets and apostles have to say about what cannot be said is in a register more doxological than doxastic; it can be gathered from their instruction about praise.
“Great is the Lord,” says the Psalmist, immediately adding the corollary: “and greatly to be praised” (Ps 145:3, ESV). The repetition of the adjectival “great” in the adverbial “greatly” highlights the need for our praise to correspond to its object. And though that verbal repetition is more a phenomenon of the entrenched tradition of a lovely English translation (the Hebrew original does not play on repeating a word here; nor do Septuagint or Vulgate), it felicitously expresses the biblical notion of praise. We are called to praise God, to respond verbally in a way that answers to his goodness, corresponding to it.

But how could our praise correspond to such an object? The same Psalms that summon us to speak greatly of the greatness of God also press us from the opposite direction, admitting the impossibility of the task: “his greatness is unsearchable.” Another Psalm (106:2, ESV) bids us to “give thanks to the Lord” just before demanding, “who can utter the mighty deeds of the Lord, or declare all his praises?” And Psalm 40, rejoicing not only in salvation but in the fact that the God of salvation “has put a new song in my mouth,” sings of the unsingability of God’s works:

You have multiplied, O Lord my God,  
Your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;  
none can compare with you!  
I will proclaim and tell of them,  
yet they are more than can be told. (Psalm 40:5, ESV)

God’s deeds and thoughts are unfathomable (“unsearchable”), unutterable (“who can utter”), incomparable (“none can compare”); unenumerable (“they are more”); inenarrable (“than can be told”); and inexplicable.

But Scripture places us before another ascent, even steeper. All of God’s actions, including even the most characteristic and telling interventions he makes in establishing his covenant, are only the divine ways with the world. Behind those ways rises up the majesty and mystery of God’s own identity, with whatever reserves and recesses are proper to it. “Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways,” cries Job after reviewing God’s work in establishing the cosmos, “and how small a whisper do we hear of him” (Job 26:14, ESV). Stumped by the unspeakable greatness of what God does, surely those
who are called to praise him must be double stumped by who and what he is. Why not conclude, with Job, “I lay my hand over my mouth” (Job 40:4, ESV), and leave it there?

**Trinitarian Revelation**

The short answer is that according to Holy Scripture, God did not leave it there, but revealed something more of himself, and revealed it differently than might have been expected. In the fullness of time, the Father sent forth the Son and the Holy Spirit, both of whom are articulate witnesses of God; they are the divine self-witness in person. The characteristic voice of the New Testament is a praise of God for making himself known in this uniquely intimate way as he accomplishes a long-promised salvation. “No one has seen God at any time; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known,” says John 1:18 (ESV) “No one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him,” says the Jesus of Matthew 11:27 (ESV).

In passing from the documents of the Old Testament to those of the New Testament, we often see rhetorical questions (“who can declare,” “who has known the mind of the Lord?”) given eschatological answers (“the Son has made him known,” “we have the mind of Christ”). Proverbs (30:4, ESV) seems almost to be joking when it asks, “Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name?” But the New Testament is in dead earnest when it responds with confidence that we know the name of his Son.

Theologians have scrambled to keep up with what Scripture affirms about the ineffable Trinity, and have offered various helpful conceptual paraphrases of this central canonical claim. Hilary of Poitiers developed his pro-Nicene doctrine of the Trinity in terms of testimony, arguing that “He whom we can know only through His own utterances is a fitting witness concerning Himself” (Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 1:18). John of Damascus opened his treatise *On the Orthodox Faith* by collating the New Testament’s most striking statements about the Son and the Spirit revealing the Father and concluding, in high apophatic style, “the Deity, therefore, is ineffable
and incomprehensible.”¹ John Calvin promoted the doctrine of the Trinity to the place of a capstone in his treatise on the knowledge of God (Institutes, Book I, chapter 13), and Karl Barth gave the doctrine a post-Kantian inflection in his talk of God’s primary objectivity (the Father standing over against the Son and Spirit in the unobstructed light which is the divine being) as the deep background of his secondary objectivity (God standing over against human knowers in the light of revelation). Perhaps the Platonic Kantian colorings of some of these ways of talking are not as attractive to us as they were to the theologians who propounded them. But their very diversity of idiom seems to be an indicator that they are bearing manifold witness to a crucial deliverance of the biblical witness.

Ineffability is not properly a divine attribute, for surely God is capable of being eloquent about himself even to himself. The Father corresponds perfectly to the Son as the Son perfectly explicates the Father in the Spirit of truth. When we consider divine ineffability, we are rather thinking about the nature of theology, the limits of speech about God, and of the possibilities of praise. Trinitarian theology is a sustained attempt to speak worthily of the ineffable God, in a doxological response to the way he has made himself known ultimately in the Son and the Holy Spirit. Its task is to correspond to God’s self-correspondence, blessing the God who has blessed us in the beloved, greatly praising the greatness of the triune Lord.

About the Author

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A mainstay of Catholic Christian teaching, the doctrine of divine simplicity has recently become a much debated topic in contemporary dogmatics and philosophical theology. Despite its historical importance and constructive fecundity, it is still often misunderstood today and merits careful attention as the relevant literature continues to grow. For many, simplicity remains, in the words of Alvin Plantinga, a “dark saying indeed,” so in this post I aim to offer a brief dogmatic description of divine simplicity and to suggest some of the ways in which it explicates and enriches a Christian understanding of the triune God and his work in the world.

Simplicity indicates that God is (negatively) not composed of parts and (positively) really identical with his essence, existence, and attributes. Linking up with the doctrine of the Trinity, it stresses that the divine persons are not “parts” composing a greater divine whole but are, instead, three personal modes of subsisting of the simple divine essence. Various authors throughout the Christian tradition delineate different kinds of parts found in the created order, including integral or quantitative parts, essential parts (matter and form), metaphysical parts (act and potency, nature and suppositum, substance and accidents, and essence and existence) and logical parts (genus and species). Such parts cannot be found in God especially in light of his aseity: as the one who enjoys fullness of life in himself and is the Creator and provider of all that is other than himself (John 1:1-4; 5:26; Acts 17:24-25), he is not dependent on anything distinct from himself to be what he is, and he need not and cannot be composed by anyone or anything more ultimate than he is. He is “pure act,” with no unrealized or idle potency awaiting fulfillment. He is his own deity, having no nature distinct from himself that

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1 Does God Have a Nature?, pp. 27-8.
Divine Simplicity

might constitute his being. He is each of his own attributes, for to be God just is to be infinitely wise, infinitely good, and so on. In us, wisdom, justice, goodness, and the like are qualities adjoined to our human nature; in God, his wisdom, justice, and goodness simply are his nature. He is his own existence, with no need to participate (like creatures do) in a being above himself. Put differently, God is subsisting being itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*). Crucially, though, this does not render God impersonal but in fact accomplishes quite the opposite: it confirms that there is no impersonal *esse* “out there” that governs the life of God and creatures alike, and it underscores that the only ultimate *esse* just is the personal triune God revealed to us in Holy Scripture.

Because it is commonly suspected today that divine simplicity does not cohere with the doctrine of the Trinity, it must be emphasized that it was never meant to eliminate all kinds of distinction in God. Above all, it negates any “real” distinction in God, or any distinction between one “thing” (Latin, *res*) and another in God. However, it embraces modal and relative distinctions in God, which are critical to a responsible articulation of the Trinity. In the context of a doctrine of God shaped by God’s simplicity, the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct in relation to one another and as one mode of subsisting from another. This is not to be confused with modalism, for the persons are not serial *ad extra* iterations of one immanent mode of subsisting but are in fact three immanently, eternally distinct personal modes of subsisting in God’s one essence. Rather than compromising trinitarian teaching, divine simplicity and the prioritization of the modal and relative distinctions enable us to see that the persons are not three individual deities within a species of deity and are instead both distinct and co-equal, each being a subsisting mode of all that is included in the singular Godhead.

It is worth noting that this description of simplicity is indebted particularly to Thomas Aquinas and a number of early Reformed expositions of the doctrine. We should therefore bear in mind that there are multiple expressions of divine simplicity in the Christian tradition. The Cappadocians, John of Damascus, Gregory Palamas, and Duns Scotus, for example, all would handle certain features of the doctrine in different ways. In addition, in a series

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2 For the essential components (no pun intended) of Thomas’ view, see *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.3.
on pro-Nicene theology, we should remember that, while patristic theology yielded excellent material for later scholastic discussion, the fathers did not operate with all the concepts and distinctions developed in the medieval and early modern periods. Yet, divine simplicity was deployed to great effect by the fathers in combating problematic construals of God’s relationship to the world and of God’s triune relations within himself. Athanasius, for example, displays the aseity of the true God over against pagan deities by affirming that he is not one part of a whole dependent on others, nor even the sum of all the parts of the universe. He is not composed of dissimilar elements but is the one who created these and set them in their cosmic order. In describing God in himself, Athanasius argues that the Father and Son are not parts in God. The Son shares the one Godhead of the Father and is distinct from him as the Son but not as God. Significantly, it is the Arians who violate God’s unity and simplicity in claiming that the Son is a deity by possession of a Godhead other than that of the Father.

What are some of the ways in which the doctrine of divine simplicity further illumines biblical teaching on God and God’s works? We could highlight many but will have to be content to mention two here. First, simplicity helps us to coordinate the incomprehensibility and the knowability of God. On the one hand, since all that is in God is God, whatever is known of God is ultimately incomprehensible. When we apprehend God’s eternity, his holiness, his triune existence as Father, Son and Spirit, we are reminded that these are not discrete traits of God subject to the command of the human intellect. Instead, each really is God’s whole being and is thus, in John of Damascus’ words, a “sea of essence infinite and unseen.” On the other hand, God’s simplicity implies that whenever we apprehend the truth of God, we apprehend God himself. To be sure, we never grasp God’s essence as such and in its fullness, but, in knowing in a limited way God’s love, beatitude, and so on, we know that which is included in God’s own essence. Second, as Hilary of Poitiers discerns, given his simplicity, wherever God is—and

3 See Contra Gentes, 28.

4 See the third oration of Contra Arianos (esp. 23.4-6 and 25.15-16 in vol. 4 of NPNF Second Series).

5 Expositio Fidei, I.9.
he is everywhere—he is there in the indivisible fullness of his being.\textsuperscript{6} This is a profoundly encouraging implication for the people of God whose daily sustenance is the gracious activity of God in the world and in the church. While no creaturely place or field of divine action can contain God’s simple essence, he is present and active among us in all his indefatigable wholeness, and we need not wonder whether God meets us as he truly is, even as we do not understand all his ways. These reflections hardly begin to draw out the bearing of God’s simplicity on the practice of theology and the life of the church, but it is to be hoped that future work on this will be undertaken based on scriptural exegesis and in dialogue with the fathers and later doctors of the church for the enrichment of Christian thought and worship.

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\textsuperscript{6} \textit{De Trinitate}, II.6.
The unity of God is a basic datum of Scripture, and it is something easily unpacked in terms like uniqueness, singularity, and indivisibility. But the doctrine of divine simplicity seems to take a further step. Though it is a doctrine classically confessed by pro-Nicene theologies East and West, simplicity is a much more particular claim. Denying composition in God, simplicity requires us to confess at least that God is not different than his own perfections (he is good with goodness that is himself, as Augustine says) or that God's essence and existence are identical. In any of its forms, it seems too philosophical to be the kind of doctrine we could expect to find stated explicitly in Scripture. Furthermore, at first blush it seems to move in the opposite direction from the doctrine of the Trinity: simplicity radicalizes oneness where trinitarianism extends to threeness.

But the biblical revelation’s way of leading us to the confession of divine simplicity is precisely the same way that leads us to the confession of the Trinity. It was the path followed by the church fathers, and it remains open to us today as we contemplate God through his self-revelation.

Just as sculptors have additive and subtractive processes, theology has expansive and contracting moments. In one sculptural medium, the whole art form is about adding material to a framework, expanding and developing the shape by piling on more wax, clay, or components. But another sculptural medium is all about strategically removing all the right parts, carving away wood or chipping away stone to bring out a form. And many sculptures require both: a phase of additive expansion followed by a phase of subtractive carving. Consider topiary art, or a trimmed hedge: the plant has to grow out before it can be trimmed back. The analogy is rough enough, but the doc-
trine of divine simplicity is the result of an additive and subtractive process in theological reasoning, and in God’s own self-presentation in Scripture.

It is fundamentally a cumulating doctrine, which begins with an initial statement of divine identity and then proceeds through an expansive elaboration of that identity, finally recapitulating the initial identity by means of a statement that explicitly includes the gathered fullness but finds conceptual resources to insist that the identity has not changed. We know that God is one, and as theological reasoning proceeds we find that this God has one perfection after another which is named and described. As these perfections accumulate conceptually, we eventually find that we need to specify that these attributes do not complexify God, but are each considerations of his oneness. This is necessary because, as Bavinck says, “simplicity speaks of the absolute fullness of life” of God; it is not a doctrine about what is absent from God (distinctions) but a doctrine about what is present: the fullness of one perfect life. The doctrine of divine simplicity functions to comprehend multiplicity and account for it, in a way that an initial statement of divine unity did not yet have to do. Initial oneness proceeds to final oneness which is understood as a richer and fuller insight into that oneness.

In Exodus 34:6–7 (ESV), God identifies himself partly by reciting some of his perfections serially, making something of a list. The list seems to be an explication of his own revealed name, YHWH. Indeed, that name is repeated twice (“The LORD, the LORD”) before opening up to a series of the perfections of God’s character (“a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”), followed by the characteristic actions he takes based on who he is (“keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin”), but concluding with a counter-balancing statement of God’s abiding righteousness (“but who will by no means clear the guilty”).

This self-declaration takes place in a story that is equally loaded with significance for God’s simplicity. After Moses asks to see God’s glory, the Lord promises to make his goodness pass before Moses, and to cover him with his hand until he passes by. Thus Moses sees the Lord’s back, but not his face. In the one God’s self-manifestation to Moses, we have a striking proliferation of terms: glory, goodness, hand, back, face. None of these things are each
other, yet none of them are other than the Lord himself.¹

We know that this God is one, and therefore that all of those accumulated names, perfections, and actions are going on in the one comprehensively simple LORD. God is still one, but now it makes sense to say that the way he is one is by having the fullness of the perfections in simplicity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is likewise a cumulating doctrine about the one God. It functions the same way, beginning with the God who created the heavens and the earth, then following through, in the light of Jesus Christ, to the Word who was with God and was God already before the creation of the heaven and the earth, and finally including the Spirit, Lord and giver of life. At the far end of biblical revelation, God is still one. But now it makes sense to say that he is one as having the fullness of divine life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Irenaeus of Lyons made much of this argument, confronted as he was with Gnostic ways of reading the divine names and attributes partitively. His insistence on the unity of God was an insistence that the same God was the maker and the redeemer; that the same God was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is no accident that he based this argument on the unity of the Old and New Testaments, because the complex oneness of the canon harmonizes with the simple oneness of the triune God. We might even say that the unity of the Old and New Testaments is itself the dogmatic foundation of the simplicity of the triune God.

If we compare the expansive and contracting moments in this theological meditation to the additive and subtractive modes of sculpture, it is not to give the impression that doctrines as venerable as simplicity and triunity are a matter of tinkering, ingenuity, or trial and error. Confessing that the triune God is simple is anything but a tidy affair dictated by principles of conceptual craftsmanship. It is a matter of scrambling to catch up with what God has disclosed, and praising it adequately. If it is to be compared to a sculpture, perhaps the right one is the shape that Annie Dillard reported in her poem “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel”:

¹ For this pointed exposition of Exodus I am indebted to Jordan Barrett’s forthcoming study Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account (Fortress Press).
My sister
dreamed of a sculpture
showing the form of God.
He has no edges,
and the holes in him spin.

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The Living God

The triune God is a living God and, as such, he is intrinsically active. The Trinity is active in knowledge, love, and beatitude. The Trinity is active in the production of creatures. And the Trinity is active in a care that extends, beyond bringing us into existence, to include our daily preservation, redemption, sanctification, and, ultimately, our perfection in his presence.

In speaking of the lively nature of the triune God, Christian theology speaks of God’s “operations” or “works,” and that in two senses. God’s “internal operations” are those eternal actions that remain inside of God and that, quite simply, are God in the perfection of his wholly actualized life. God’s internal operations include the Father’s eternal begetting of the Son and the Father and the Son’s eternal breathing forth of the Spirit. They also include the immanent acts of knowledge and love in which God’s perfect happiness eternally consists, the high and holy place that he eternally, actively inhabits.

God’s “external operations” are those actions that, rooted in God’s eternal purpose, realize themselves in the production of temporal, creaturely effects outside of God. Moved by divine goodness and directed by divine wisdom, God acts by divine power to bring his purposes for creatures into effect. God’s external operations include the creation and preservation of all things, the redemption and sanctification of God’s elect through the missions of the Son and the Spirit, and the consummation of creation so that it too may become the happy habitation of the high and holy God.
Indivisible, Internally Ordered External Operations of the Trinity

According to common Christian confession, the external operations of the Trinity are “indivisible” or “inseparable.” This follows from the principle that who God is in himself (ad intra) determines the shape of God’s free actions outside of himself (ad extra). Because the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one simple God (see here and here), their actions outside of themselves are indivisible operations. The three persons do not merely “cooperate” in their external works, as if each person contributed his distinctive part to a larger operational whole. All of God’s external works—from creation to consummation—are works of the three divine persons enacting one divine power, ordered by one divine wisdom, expressing one divine goodness, and manifesting one divine glory.

While the actions of the three persons outside of themselves are indivisible actions of the one God, the persons are not indistinguishable in their external operations. Again this follows from the principle that who God is in himself (ad intra) determines how God acts outside of himself (ad extra). Because the distinctions between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are real personal distinctions within the one God, they relate to one another within their undivided external operations according to the character of their personal distinctions. Because the Father eternally begets the Son and eternally breathes forth the Spirit ad intra, the Father works through the Son and the Spirit ad extra. Because the Son is eternally begotten of the Father and because he eternally breathes forth the Spirit ad intra, the Son works from the Father and through the Spirit ad extra. Because the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son ad intra, he works from the Father and the Son ad extra, bringing the undivided external works of the Trinity to full flower. In sum, the external operations of the Trinity are undivided and internally ordered according to the Trinity’s personal relations, proceeding from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit.

Such a conception of God’s indivisible, internally ordered triune agency informs Basil of Caesarea’s response to Eunomius’s (blasphemous) claim that the Spirit belongs to a lower rank or nature than that of God. Basil demonstrates “the singular nature” that the Spirit possesses with the Father and the
Son by identifying examples of how the Spirit brings the singular divine acts of creation, adoption, and sanctification to their fruition. In each instance, he draws his theological conclusions about the Holy Spirit’s being and operation from his exegesis of biblical texts. Commenting on Psalm 33:6 (ESV) (“by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host”), Basil observes: “as God the Word is the creator of the heavens, so too the Holy Spirit bestows firmness and steadfastness upon the heavenly powers.” Commenting on 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 (ESV) (“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone”), he asks: “Do you see how here too the activity of the Holy Spirit is ranked with the activity of the Father and the Son?” And, commenting on 1 Corinthians 12:11 (ESV) (“All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills”), Basil concludes: “This testifies that he [the Holy Spirit] has nothing other than the authoritative and sovereign power.”

**Conclusion**

Christian theology confesses the inseparable operations of the triune God because it confesses the living God. The life that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit live in themselves is an indivisible life of knowledge, love, and happiness. By God’s grace, the three persons extend their life of knowledge, love, and happiness to us through their indivisible external works of making, preserving, reconciling, and perfecting creatures. This is eternal life: that by the Spirit we may know the only true God through Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3).

**About the Author**

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Inseperable Operations

address at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on the doctrine of the Trinity. He is presently writing a volume on the divine names for the New Studies in Dogmatics series.

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A Tale of Three Agents?

There’s a kind of conventional Christian wisdom about the New Testament that goes like this: the Gospels tell the story of three distinct characters who co-operate beautifully to save us. The Father so loves the world he created that he sends the Son to it; the Son takes on human nature and atones for the sins of the world; the Holy Spirit applies that purchased redemption and indwells the redeemed. When you add up the three parts, as you simply must, you get the complete work of salvation. And that complete work of salvation corresponds precisely to the complete Trinity: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit collaborate on the single, unified project of the gospel.

In its main outlines, and considered as a quick, big-picture summary of the New Testament, this account succeeds in connecting salvation and the Christian God. I bet I’ve told the story in these terms myself before, and I bet I’ll speak in roughly these terms again sometime soon when explaining that we cannot account for the work of salvation without counting to three and naming the persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But in some quarters of modern Trinitarian theology, we have heard this story of salvation told with a particular distinguishing emphasis: Once upon a time, three distinct characters each did a set of distinct things which resulted in a successful collaborative outcome. Actually, let’s call these three distinct persons three distinct people, since the awkward word “persons” doesn’t seem necessary when we narrate the coordinated actions of these
separate agents as they converge on a shared project. In this way of telling the story, Jesus does the hard, incarnate one-third of the project, while the Father does the sovereign-justice-and-mercy-from-above one-third of it, and the Holy Spirit does that one-third of it that is numinous, immanent, and ongoing. They stand over against each other and work out the things that make for our deliverance, adjusting their actions to each other responsively so that the result is coherent and complete.

You can feel something beginning to go wrong as the characters in this story are teased apart so fully, so insistently, so precisely. Does the problem arise as we think of separate centers of consciousness containing different thoughts? Or does it arise when we think of the separateness of the actions that they are carrying out? Or does it arise when we think of how those actions must emanate from separate agents, and that each agent must therefore be its own bundle of efficient causation among the many centers of created causation in the world? Could we say that in this kind of account, social Trinitarianism has become too much social and not enough Trinitarian?

**Radically Trinitarian Interpretation**

But advocates of this tripartition usually claim just the opposite: That only by taking these distinctions with ultimate seriousness can we rise to the level of being fully Trinitarian. To read the Gospels straightforwardly, they say, is to see three Divine Agents at work, and to fail to discern those three Agents is to fail to be radically Trinitarian. Wherever this style of argument begins to feel the courage of its convictions, it asserts that nothing could possibly keep an earnest reader of the New Testament from seeing three obviously separate Actors except perhaps some kind of Platonic bias, some prejudice in favor of abstract oneness, some pagan influence suppressing the New Testament’s radical Trinitarianism.

In the previous essay, Scott Swain pointed out a better way. He explored the classical doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity, which affirms that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit act undividedly in every external action. And every action is external except that set of actions which are essentially Father-ing, Son-ing, and Holy Spirit-ing. Swain said it all more precisely and responsibly, and included a good deal of Biblical reasoning to support
the classical Nicene doctrine. All I want to add to that exposition is this reminder of how this interpretive rule—*opera ad extra sunt indivisa*—helps us to read the story of Trinitarian salvation correctly.

So much is worth affirming in the tripartite view I reported above: the whole Trinity is involved in our salvation; only the Son is incarnate; what we know about the Trinity we know primarily from these central events of salvation history. But unless the rule of inseparable operations directs us, we are in danger of taking an impressionistic reading of the Gospels too far. What blocks us from discerning three separate agents at work in the New Testament is that we come to it with another book already in mind, and that book is not by Plato. That book is the Old Testament.

**Two-Testament Trinity**

Reading left to right through the canonical Scriptures, we arrive at the Gospels after having traversed the massive witness of the Old Testament to the oneness of God. With Deuteronomy and Isaiah ringing in our ears, we hear now of this anointed servant of the Lord on whom the Spirit of the LORD rests. We see him do the things that God does; we hear that he is responsible for creation and the final judgment. Knowing that God is working to save us, we see Jesus working to save us, and we have to inquire into this remarkable divine operation: Not a cooperation, but an operation.

What really blocks the three-agents reading of the New Testament is the Old Testament. Its canonical unity with the New Testament requires us to grasp how the one God saves. In doing so, we have to come to terms with the New Testaments ways of speaking about God, which are more complex than an undifferentiated single divine action, but also more complex than the coordinated actions of three agents. The New Testament sometimes speaks of the one God substantially, and sometimes relationally: The Word was with God (relationally), and was God (substantially). We praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: God of Jesus substantially, and Father of the Son relationally.

C. Kavin Rowe once remarked that “the doctrine of the Trinity would never have arisen on the basis of the Old or New Testaments in isolation,” because
only “the two-testament canon read as one book pressures its interpreters to make ontological judgments about the Trinitarian nature of the one God ad intra on the basis of its narration of the act and identity of the biblical God ad extra.” It’s the metaphysical weight of the Old Testament’s monotheism that drives Nicene interpreters to see the actions of Christ and the Holy Spirit as having implications for the very being of God.¹ This question about God and the gospel, spanning the Old and New Testaments, is what drove the development of the classical doctrine of the Trinity overall. And in particular, it is what forged the interpretive rule that the external works of the Trinity are undivided. What we read in the Bible is the report of the saving work of the triune God.

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“When the vital article of the eternal generation is lost, the whole gospel becomes mere history.”

The doctrine of eternal generation seeks to specify the origin of Jesus Christ in the eternal life of the one God in a very particular way—a way that simultaneously shows a resonance between theology and economy yet never ceases to maintain a clear distinction between Creator and creature. Together with divine simplicity, inseparable operations, and the rest of the pro-Nicene toolkit, eternal generation serves as a hermeneutical guidepost for the church’s reading of the prophetic and apostolic witness concerning the identity and career of the eternal Son who assumes human flesh for us and our salvation.

The doctrine itself can be stated plainly: The Son is \textit{from} the Father, and God has \textit{always} been this way and did not become this way. We should take note that such a definition might threaten to elide the very divine ineffability it attempts to express. The patristic witness is replete with warnings here, so Gregory of Nazianzus, “The begetting of God must be honored by silence.” Yet to draw back in this way is not to bring our theological reflection on God’s inner life to an end, rather it is to establish from the beginning spiritual disciplinary measures which guide how we are scripturally given


2 Gregory of Nazianzus, \textit{Third Theological Oration} 29.8 (NPNF Series 2, 7:303).
to think and speak of the living God who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16), comes as Light to enlighten (John 1:9), and of whom we thus confess that he is Light from Light. The doctrine of eternal generation therefore seeks, in faith and mystery, to confess that You, oh God, are a fountain of life, and that in Your light we see light (Ps 36:9).

How does eternal generation speak of this Light and Life? The doctrine’s dogmatic function in theology proper can be summarized under three themes: essential unity, personal distinction, and relational order (taxis).

Essential Unity

First, in what way does eternal generation speak of essential unity? Initially, it appears as though the confession of the Son as the only-begotten of the Father must strike against the doctrine of essential unity (divine simplicity). How can the one God be both Father and Son? The pro-Nicene answer can be seen by looking at the language of the two councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381). Both confess that the Son does not proceed from the Father as a creature from the Creator: he is begotten, not made. The Son is not part of the created order; begetting is not the first act of creation. However, neither council attempts to fully explain what it means to be begotten, respecting the ineffability of this act. Rather, they assert there is a way to be “from” that is outside all beginnings (recalling John 1:1). This generation is conceived as an act internal to God,\(^3\) such that the Father generates the Son of his substance, \(ek\ tas\ ousias\ tou\ Patros\) (325), and as such the Son is consubstantial, \(homoousion\) (325 and 381), with the Father. Two things should be noted concerning this strange language. On the one hand, the \(homoousion\) is not employed to indicate some detachable metaphysic; the language offers no objective referent on its own, instead it functions as a conceptual summary of Scripture’s affirmation of the Son’s unity with the Father grounded

\(^3\) The description of generation as an internal act that is “within God himself” is seen most clearly in Aquinas ST 1.27.1 (against the Arians and Sabellians), but the concept appears as early as Origen, who claims the Son is not Son “by any outward act, but by his own nature,” First Principles 1.2.4 (ANF 4: 247).
in his ineffable generation. On the other hand, this articulation of the Son’s generation is a denial that Begetter and Begotten are related as externally opposed realities. Instead, generation is the mode of sharing of the one undivided essence between Father and Son. As such, generation is conceived as a communication of the whole undivided essence, as Athanasius interprets with the language of “whole participation.” The Nicene Creed (381) adds the corresponding clause that the Son is, “begotten of the Father before all ages,” specifying the timeless and eternal nature of the Son’s generation. Dogmatically, begetting is a mode of divine unity, an affirmation of eternal essential unity rather than a denial of it.

Personal Distinction

Second, in what way does eternal generation speak of personal distinction? To confess eternal generation is to deny that Jesus is Son of God by means of his miraculous virgin birth, no less his baptism or resurrection—instead he is begotten of the Father before all ages. That this entails personal distinction seems rather straightforward, but it is crucial for securing this reality as true in God. The appearing of the Son incarnate evoked wonder and praise as Christians slowly began to articulate both a confession of the one God, Creator and Redeemer, and simultaneously a confession that Christ is the Son of God the Father, himself God. And, while the Son is not the Father, they share the same life together with the Spirit. The doctrine of eternal generation is the pro-Nicene pathway by which this confession is conceptually articulated. It asserts that Father and Son are eternally related by origin alone,


6 Historically there was a simmering debate about whether the manner of eternal generation is properly conceived as a communication of essence. The majority of patristic, medieval, and Reformation authors do affirm it as such. For an account of the minority report and incisive contribution to this debate see Brannon Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
Begetter and Begotten, not by essential difference (since they share the same undivided essence). It affirms both their complete unity in all things pertaining to deity, and their personal distinction in all things pertaining to their uniqueness as Father and Son, that is, with respect to one another. In this way, eternal generation is attempting to follow the language of Scripture which affirms before the beginning the Word who is with God, as God (John 1:1), is none other than the only-begotten in the bosom of the Father (John 1:18). Dogmatically, begetting is the ground of personal distinction, an affirmation of the eternal uniqueness of Father and Son without severance of the divine essence.

**Relational Order**

Finally, in what way does eternal generation speak of relational order (taxis)? The pro-Nicene tradition has taught that eternal generation speaks of a correlative relation between Father and Son; paternity and filiation are mutually specifying, yet they are relationally ordered and not flatly symmetrical. What does this mean? Today one might confess the eternal Sonship of Christ, yet deny that this implies taxis in the Godhead. Or one might confess the obedience of the incarnate Son to his Father in the economy, and infer a certain form of taxis in the Godhead, that could be articulated as authority-submission. In contrast, the doctrine of eternal generation teaches that the Father-Son relation is fundamentally ordered, asymmetrical, and yet by origin alone. The Son is Son because he is begotten by the Father, and the Father is Father because he is from no one, and thus he begets his Son. Dogmatically this order is established by an eternal relation of origin, and nothing else. This order of personal subsistence is manifest in the saving economy in the order and manner of the Son's working from the Father. Later pro-Nicenes have expressed this by noting that the Son's earthly mission reveals his eternal procession, while never collapsing the two nor “reading back” unfitting features of the created economy into the divine life. Dogmatically, begetting is the root of relational order, an affirmation that eternal personal subsistence describes the very taxis echoed in the saving economy.

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7 So Aquinas reasons, “Because he is Father, he begets (quia Pater est, generat),” and not the inverse proposition: Because he begets, he is Father. See Summa Theologiae 1a.40.4 ad 1.
Conclusion

Pro-Nicene theology teaches the eternal generation of the Son because by it the Son of Mary is revealed to be the very Son of God. God is a fountain of life, and the church confesses this mystery to entail that the Father begets, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds. These eternal acts concomitant with God’s own willing nature are temporally manifest in love and grace in the missions of the Son and Spirit. Before all ages the Father has life in himself, and grants to the Son to have life in himself (John 5:26), and in creaturely time the Son gives life to whom he will (John 5:21). The wonder of the gospel is that the eternal Son, for whom and through whom are all things, has in these last days come from the Father to the far country to bring many sons to glory (Heb 2:10).

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When in the course of theological events Christians have wanted to make their confession of the identity of Jesus Christ clear and definite, they have usually taken recourse to the doctrine of his eternal generation.

The relation between Jesus of Nazareth and the heavenly Father who sent him outstrips the time of the Lord’s earthly life. In fact, that Father-Son relation outstrips time itself, belonging rather to eternity, indeed, to the very nature of God. Before he became the son of Mary (“for us and our salvation,” per the Nicene Creed), Jesus was the Son of God, with an eternal sonship. Having risen to this great height of confessing eternal sonship, Christian doctrine is delivered from the theological catastrophe of thinking of Jesus as merely a phenomenon of creaturely history. He is not only something God does (as we might describe the works of deliverance wrought through Moses or through angels), but something or someone who God is. Why, we might ask, should we need to go further than this staggering confession of eternal sonship, and take the step of confessing eternal generation? Why has the classic doctrinal tradition considered it wise and necessary to add to the relation of sonship this relation of generation?

There are two reasons. First, eternal generation thickens the metaphor of sonship. And second, eternal generation limits the metaphor of sonship. When we confess the eternal generation of the Son, we guard against making too little of his sonship (that is, we thicken the metaphor) or too much of his sonship (that is, we limit the metaphor).
A Thicker Account of Sonship

It is easy to forget that the history of doctrine has been punctuated by these episodes of conservative demurrals on eternal generation. In the late nineteenth century, William G. T. Shedd noted that “some trinitarians have attempted to hold the doctrine of the Trinity while denying eternal generation, spiration, and procession.” Such theologians are generally recoiling from the speculative sound of those long, latinate words, preferring the short, simple, and directly scriptural words like “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit.” Shedd is sympathetic to the biblicist worries, with a wise sympathy that shows a dogmatician’s willingness to be called back to the very words of Scripture. His goal, in fact, is to help his less convinced contemporaries see the traditional doctrines clearly at their scriptural source.

“These trinal names Father, Son, and Spirit,” Shedd points out, “force upon the theologian the ideas of paternity, filiation, spiration, and procession.” To accept that God names himself with these proper nouns is already to admit that much is going on behind the nouns. “Whoever accepts the nouns Father, Son, and Spirit as conveying absolute truth must accept also the corresponding adjectives and predicates—beget and begotten, spirate and proceed—as conveying absolute truth.”1 Especially when we focus on the relation that must obtain between Father and Son, we are able to see that Fathering and Soning is eternally here in God, and we have crossed the frontier into the confession of eternal generation. To say “eternal generation of the Son” is to say “Son of God” and mean it metaphysically. It thickens the revealed metaphor of the Son’s relation to the Father by accepting the implications of the revealed relation.

Limiting the Metaphor

The revealed metaphor of sonship needs this thickening, because if we settle for a conceptually thin sonship, we might find ourselves philosophically restless and apt to draw the wrong conclusions about sonship. An eternal Son might be younger than his Father, after all, or physically derived, or produced through conjunction with a divine Mother, or diminished, or sub-

1 https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf103.iv.i.i.html.
servient to paternal authority. But none of these things are envisaged by the biblical revelation of divine sonship. What God reveals in revealing this sonship is rather an eternal relation that is, as Gregory of Nazianzus says, “without passion of course, and without reference to time, and not in a corporeal manner.” This mighty series of negations marks off the meaning of sonship: *apathos, achronos, asomatos.*\(^2\) The doctrinal shorthand for this is that the generation by which the Son is the Son is eternal.

What conceptual residue does sonship minus time (and body, and passion, and so on) leave us with? It leaves us with identity of essence, just as a human may craft or construct any number of things out of any essence at hand, but begets a son only out of his own essence. That observation, of course, is what the Nicene *homoousios* draws out and makes explicit. It also leaves us with a relation of fromness, and not the same relation of fromness that constitutes the temporal mission of the Son among us in the incarnation. It confesses a fromness above that missional fromness, a fromness that is the very nature of God when we consider that nature in relation to itself. That observation is what the Nicene “God of God, light of light, very God of very God” draws out and makes explicit. The “of” is the relation of origin, the grammatical genitive of hypostatic generation.

The confession of essential, relational fromness safeguards us from drawing the wrong associative connections from sonship. It brings the revealed metaphor of sonship into line with a handful of other biblical metaphors: Jesus is to the God who sent him as radiance is to glory, as word is to speaker, as wisdom to mind, as image is to that which it images. Early among the pro-Nicenes, Athanasius already showed his awareness that Scripture gives us “such illustrations and such images that, considering the inability of human nature to comprehend God, we might be able to form ideas even from these, however poorly and dimly, and as far as is attainable.”\(^3\)

It is tempting, especially for theologians who earnestly desire to see doctrines clearly and firmly established in Scripture itself, to consider divine sonship as something clear and distinct, but eternal generation as something

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\(^2\) Gregory Nazianzus, Oration 29.

\(^3\) Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 2:32.
nebulous and speculative. But eternal generation is the key to taking divine sonship with metaphysical seriousness, and to comprehending what it tells us and doesn’t tell us, about the relation of Jesus Christ to the Father who sent him. Eternal generation is the secret of sonship, and is exegetically crucial for Trinitarian theology.

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The individual terms *theologia* and *oikonomia* have long histories of their own in classical Greek, but the first time we find these two terms paired in Christian writing is in the work of the famous theologian and exegete Origen of Alexandria (died c. 254). He speaks in the 18th of his *Homilies on Jeremiah* of God speaking “theologically about himself, and [not about] his plan (oikonomia) for human matters” (18.6.3). Whereas *theologia* concerns the nature of God, God’s *oikonomia* refers to God’s concern for and ordering of his creation, specifically the incarnation of the Son. When we speak of *oikonomia*, we also speak of the manner in which God reveals himself and speaks in a manner that reaches and draws us to him.

Students and devotees of Origen took up this distinction. Half a century after Origen’s death, Eusebius of Caesarea begins his famous *Ecclesiastical History* by telling us he needs to speak of the “*oikonomia* and *theologia* of Christ.” Eusebius goes on to discuss who the Word of God is, his titles and origin, his relationship to the Father. This is all “theology.” Eusebius then discusses the appearances of the Word in the history of Israel (the “theophanies”), the Incarnation, the manner in which God educated and chastised humanity to prepare them for the coming of Christ. All this is God’s “economy.”

Eusebius offers us this pairing only once, and we next meet it in the famous “Cappadocian” theologians Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa. Toward the end of his own *Against Eunomius*, written c. 365, Basil comments on *Acts 2:36 (NIV)* “…God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” He uses the distinction (against his opponent Eunomius) to argue that the reference to the Son being “made” is only with reference to *oikonomia*; the Scripture speaks only of the Son’s becoming human, not of his nature in itself. In this case the language is used to
express a principle common to pro-Nicene theologians: the careful reader of Scripture has to distinguish passages that speak of the Word of God directly from those that speak of the Incarnation and the Incarnate Word.

Gregory Nazianzen’s wonderful Oration 38 “On the Theophany,” probably delivered at Christmas or Epiphany 380/381, celebrates “God’s coming to the human race so that we might make our way to him” (3). Gregory offers a hymn to the nature of God as containing the whole of being “like and endless, boundless ocean of reality; he extends beyond all our notions of time and nature, and is sketchily grasped by the mind alone…” Gregory reflects on the difficulty of comprehending God—“the only thing completely comprehensible about it is its boundlessness” (7)—the same for Gregory as its simplicity. Then, suddenly, Gregory changes tack: “so much for our present philosophical reflections on God. For this is not the time for such things, since our present task is to speak not in terms of theologia but of oikonomia” (8). In this passage theologia is again reflection on God as such, of God’s nature. But oikonomia? In what follows Gregory sets out first the need for the Good to pour itself out in the creation of that which could receive its gifts. He speaks of the angelic hosts and other intelligent spirits, then of the material world, then of the human being within the material world, as one who could join both realms. After the fall God disciplined humanity, and his ordering culminates in the sending of the Son into flesh from the Virgin: “O new mixture! O unexpected blending!” (13). Oikonomia here indicates God’s dispositions, his activity in ordering all that is external to God.

The distinction is then used on occasion by later Greek theologians—Maximus the Confessor and John Damascene, for example—and crops up again from time to time in the history of theology until it becomes extremely popular in writing of the past thirty years. Latin theology has its own way of expressing the same distinction.

It is worth noting what this pairing is not. It is not an opposition between what we need to know centrally as Christians and material of a more speculative nature. To understand the divine economy we need to know who has taken flesh for us, we need to know theologia. In turn, to understand how we should speak about God we need to know something of the manner in which God reaches down to us in order to draw us up. Attending to the “economy” provides an education in God’s love, and an education in how
God addresses us in terms that will reach us—and hence in the path our thought and speech must take if we are to ascend back toward the divine being.

This distinction is also not an opposition between that which Scripture teaches and that which we know only by abstraction. In the examples we have given Scripture draws us into reflection on both theologia and oikonomia. Without understanding one we cannot grasp the other. Scripture speaks in many places of the divine being and relations, in the New Testament that which has been revealed through the history of Israel is then focused anew and deepened through Christ's teachings, through his actions, and through the inspired witness of gospel writers and the apostles. The work of collecting, organizing, comparing Scriptural statements and reflecting on them individually and together is a work to which God calls and draws us as part of the resurrection of the mind that he effects (theological thinking is a gift, not a burden or a sin!).

And, finally, this distinction is not the same as the modern opposition between the “immanent” and “economic” Trinity. That distinction is, as I think Bruce Marshall has shown particularly clearly (see his essays in The Thomist 74 (2010) and in the Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology), a nineteenth-century distinction that leads us down paths best and fairly easily avoided. Scripture gives us the materials to talk about the Trinity, God as God simply is; Scripture also enables us to talk about God's plan for revealing himself and God's plan for redeeming; there is no Trinity revealed “in the economy” distinct from the Trinity that is the one God. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church has it: “Through the oikonomia the theologia is revealed to us; but conversely, the theologia illuminates the whole oikonomia. God's works reveal who he is in himself; the mystery of his inmost being enlightens our understanding of all his works.”

About the Author

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In Lewis Ayres’s article, he showed the use that Greek patristic theologians made of the terms *theologia* and *oikonomia*. The fathers reached for this pair of terms to make the crucial distinction between God’s own eternal nature, on the one hand, and God’s actions toward creation, on the other hand. The distinction is a biblical one, but we cannot discern it in Scripture simply by looking for the words themselves; we must look at broader phenomena of the biblical witness.

The ability to make such a distinction is crucial for Christian doctrine, and not just for the purpose of keeping God and the world hermetically sealed off from each other to achieve conceptual tidiness. On the contrary, the more we want to affirm that God is intimately involved with creation and covenantally committed to human salvation, the more we will find this distinction necessary. No doubt this is why the pair of terms came into its own in the fourth century. In sending his Son, God took such direct divine action in the world that it became absolutely necessary to reach clarity about whether the Son was God or a creature, and so the pro-Nicenes learned to speak of Christ *kata theologia* and *kata oikonomia*. Unless we can distinguish God’s eternal being from his free action, we will always be in danger of the Arianizing error of taking the Son’s condescension to be definitive of his nature.

To trace the exegetical warrant for this distinction, it is not enough to take up the New Testament and look through it for occurrences of the Greek words *theologia* and *oikonomia*. For one thing, the first term in the pair simply does not occur in the New Testament, and even if we were willing to compound it from its parts (*ta logia tou theou*, Rom 3:2; Heb 5:12, etc.), it would not refer to deity as such (as it does in the patristic usage) but to the word of, or about, deity. And if we then cast about for another word or
phrase in the New Testament that did refer to deity (perhaps *theotetos*, or *pleroma tes theotetos* from Col 2:9), we would be getting further off the scent of our quarry. What we want is not the particular words, or functional substitutes for the words taken in and of themselves, but the distinction marked by their pairing. If we go looking for the exegetical warrant for the patristic distinction between *theologia* and *oikonomia*, what we are asking is whether the Bible itself makes the judgment that God is one thing and his works are another, even in Christ. We want to know if Scripture teaches us to think of a relationship between the reality of God’s own being and the entire scope of God’s gracious actions toward creation.

If Scripture does so, what we are glimpsing in the pairing of *theologia* and *oikonomia* is an astonishing doctrinal vista. Our attention is drawn to the fact that the transcendent God, in all his mystery and ineffability, stands behind the central actions of salvation history, and that these actions of salvation history, if grasped as a single differentiated whole with an inner integrity binding its integrated parts, is a free and gracious manifestation of God. The relationship limned by the *theologia-oikonomia* distinction is too comprehensive to be just one of the many things made known in the Bible. It points to the central theme of all of Scripture: that God is with us to be our salvation in the work of Christ and the Spirit, and that we know the true God by knowing the Son and the Spirit sent by the Father.

Is it helpful to ask what particular words the Bible itself uses when it wants to indicate this relation? Should we ransack the Scriptures in search of a term that means “God in himself” and see if it is brought into significant relationship to a term meaning “the entire history of salvation?” Alert readers could certainly be urged to keep an eye out for such formulations; a major claim like the one we are describing must show up in numerous particular forms in Scripture, in addition to being a kind of mega-claim that suffuses the whole. But the vastness of the topic tends to produce an unmanageably wide variety of forms of speech. Among the terms we would have to include are terms like “all that the prophets have spoken,” “the full counsel of God,” and a host of less conspicuous terms like “your law.” When Moses asks to see God’s glory, God permits him instead to see his passing by: this would make an awkward set of terms to try to use in theological communication, but the *theologia-oikonomia* judgment itself is concealed here in narrative idiom. But who could ever be sure they had put their finger on all of the ways that
the Bible alludes to the presence and perfection of God? Is it going too far to say that every instance of divine self-naming in Scripture underlines the identity of God in himself, or that the frequent distinctions between “heaven and earth” draws attention to the difference we are describing, or that the way Paul belabors the word “all” (consider Colossians 1:16-20) is a way of summarizing the entire scope of reality that stands over against Christ as God?

A handful of terms do in fact emerge from the plenitude of Biblical ways of talking and present themselves as leading candidates for answering the question of how Scripture speaks when it wants to direct our attention to the entire scope of salvation history (and, by the way, “salvation history” is not one of the terms). The word “covenant” takes on a prominence by virtue of its use in crucial sections of the Biblical story. The word “mystery” also emerges as a key word the Biblical authors use to refer to the underlying unity that explains all God’s acts in history. And even the word oikonomia (which, unlike theologia, does appear in the New Testament) shows signs of being loaded with some such meaning.

Consider Ephesians 1:9-10 (esv), where Paul praises God for “making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” That little word translated “plan” is oikonomia, which in the context of Ephesians 1 indicates a comprehensive scope of divine action, which includes Father, Son, and Spirit, takes place in past, present, and future, and is repeatedly said to bring about the praise of the divine glory and grace. By itself, and narrowly considered, the word oikonomia does not bear the same meaning it will take on in the later Greek patristic tradition. It does not lean toward a focus on the incarnation of Christ, or indicate the two natures of the God-man. And it is certainly not paired with theologia in order to mark the relationship or contrast. But in this context of the sprawling specimen of praise that is the opening of Ephesians (the full sentence sprawls from Eph 1:3-14), the oikonomia here is in fact something like “the entire divine plan of salvation as conducted by God’s wisdom” as an awe-inspiring manifestation of who God eternally is in himself: the Father who blessed, the Son who is beloved, and the promised Spirit who seals believers.
Oikonomia, in other words, does seem to be used by Scripture, in at least this one case, in a way that could lead directly to its patristic usage. But the theologia-oikonomia pairing does not depend on the fact that one of its component words is locatable in the text of Scripture. The distinction it marks, and the judgment it renders about God’s being and act, is exceedingly broad, and finds expression in the total witness of Scripture to the fullness of God’s being and the unity of salvation history.

About the Author

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About the *Common Places* Series

*Common Places* was a regular column on the Zondervan Academic blog with a focus on systematic theology. The loci communes or “common places” of Christian theology, drawn out of the Scriptures and organized in a manner suitable to their exposition in the church and the academy, have functioned historically as common points of reference for theological discussion and debate. This column focused upon the classical loci of systematic theology, not as occasions for revision, but as opportunities for entering into the ongoing conversation that is Christian systematic theology.

For more about Common Places, read the column introduction.