
A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture

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The goal of any Christian engagement with Scripture is a deep and profound acquaintance with the Triune God. If this notion is lost to some degree in modernity, when the Bible is often taken to be a conduit of information about God (or the history of religions, or the moral life), its recovery is now in full swing.

It was a rainy Sunday in late May. In Toronto to visit a close friend, I (Daniel) walked with him and his wife to St. Paul's on Bloor Street. I was caught short by the bulletin headline: Trinity Sunday. "Hmmm," I thought: "I never realized there was such a day." I was even more surprised by the preacher: she centered her sermon on the doctrine of the Trinity! That was courage I definitely had never encountered before. But soon the sermon had me awestruck at the beauty of our God: a God who is love, inviting us into fellowship in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

This experience did not belong to an inexperienced youth group attendee or beginning collegian. No, a Ph.D. student in theology, holding two seminary master's degrees, encountered the Triune God of the Bible—in a sense, for the first time. Had I already learned, enough to regurgitate adequately in writing, Trinitarian theology? Yes. Had I learned to appreciate its beauty and love its Subject? Not really. Instead, sadly, I had learned

to avoid the doctrine, secretly suspecting it could not be defended with sound biblical exegesis or philosophical reasoning, and that for ministry-keeping purposes it would best be affirmed without receiving much (risky) attention.

How uncommon is my experience? Perhaps less common now than it was more than a decade ago, but I suspect that many continue to find the Trinitarian mystery not just alien but alienating due to churchly fear and neglect. I do not intend this as a criticism of my seminary, which gave me a life-changing education I continue to treasure. My background set me up for a fall, as it were, when seminary presented the classic Trinitarian tradition. By God's grace, though, Trinity Sunday in Toronto did not just return me to academic theological study with renewed vigor; it changed my life, furthering a spiritual turn toward divine love, nourishment in liturgical practice, and life and healing in fellowship.

Before that Sunday, it seemed impossible to conceive of biblical interpretation in robustly Trinitarian terms. For it seemed difficult to be confident of Trinitarian theology as really biblical. In this introductory article, we try to remedy such difficulties. To begin with, we show the doctrine of the Triune God emerging from Scripture's mysterious story. Hence biblical interpretation is the drama of Word and Spirit establishing fellowship. We then suggest how Trinitarian theology might be "practiced" as the Church understands Scripture: to be "people of the book" means participating in the Triune God's self-communication.

DOCTRINE: THE TRIUNE GOD OF SCRIPTURE'S STORY

Does the Bible's story head in a Trinitarian direction? Its starting point is the identity of the one Creator as the God of Israel: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Biblical faith never allows for worshiping any other:

There is no other god besides me,
a righteous God and a Savior;
there is no one besides me.
Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other.
By myself I have sworn,
from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness
a word that shall not return:
"To me every knee shall bow,
every tongue shall swear."

Philippians 2 alludes to this Isaiah text yet applies it to Jesus: who, in the form of God, did not insist on retaining divine privilege and glory but took on the form of a servant, even sacrificially dying on a cross (2:6–8). Now,

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:9–11

We only join in this confession that Jesus is Lord by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). So Christians are baptized on the authority of Jesus into the Triune God, whose name now is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18–20).

No Old Testament passage directly addresses God as Triune, nor should we expect that. The expectation of Isaiah’s prophecy is that fuller, final revelation of YHWH will accompany Israel’s renewal, Gentiles’ redemption, and accordingly God’s restored rule over creation: repeatedly we read, “Then they will know....” These anticipations fill out mysterious hints of divine relationality, even as early as the “Let us...” of Genesis 1.

No New Testament passage fully provides a doctrine of the Trinity, nor should we expect that either. By divine design the Holy Spirit takes time to help the Church develop the mind of Christ regarding the full implications of his work. Yet we can already see numerous passages associating Jesus with the works for which God alone should be worshiped, or associating Father, Son, and Spirit with a threefold economy of salvation. 1 Peter 1:2 provides an example: we “have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.” An increasing number of scholars trace “early high Christology” (and a related pneumatology) across a range of texts, to which John’s Gospel adds fuller Trinitarian hints. Texts like Philippians 2, then, link Israel’s God with the Triune God of the ecumenically orthodox creeds despite the variety of New Testament concepts for Jesus. Without simply counting scholarly heads – never a good idea – this indicates the intellectual plausibility of reading Scripture in line with Trinitarian teaching.¹

The next step is to place the character of Scripture itself, and thus its reading, within the Trinitarian story of salvation. Telford Work, among others, unfolds the Church’s classic commitment to a Trinitarian economy

of Scripture. Indeed, Augustine could envision no longer needing Scripture, ultimately: upon receiving the fullness of union with Christ, verbal revelation extending across space and time would give way to greater relational immediacy.² With the Protestant Reformers, drawing upon modern thinkers from Karl Barth to Nicholas Wolterstorff, Kevin Vanhoozer emphasizes that communion with God, of whatever kind, responds to divine communicative action.³ God's action is communicative, and divine communication is an integral form of action: God's Word is God's covenant bond. God's indirect yet real and ongoing personal identification with God's words by the Spirit is what makes Scripture trustworthy as God's Word.

Accordingly, as Timothy Ward, Scott Swain, and others highlight in compact guides to the nature of Scripture, the Bible is an instrument of God's self-communication to foster communion.⁴ By looking at the Trinitarian relations, we encounter a dynamic of Word and Spirit, with God's definitive self-communication in Jesus Christ creating freedom for response by the Holy Spirit. Hence the meaning of biblical texts unfolds in a history of covenant fellowship.

DIVINE DISCOURSE: THE FELLOWSHIP OF WORD AND SPIRIT

Because understanding Christian Scripture in a Trinitarian fashion means unlocking a kind of acquaintance with God that is deep and profound, the spiritual benefits of such an approach are worth elucidating. But before we discuss those advantages – which come to us not only in personal reading of Scripture, but also in corporate worship, prayer, and even public life – a more basic theological task deserves our attention. We must understand the nature of the fellowship between humans and the Triune God that Scripture is designed to establish.

What can we say about this fellowship? Perhaps the relevant image that has most captured the imagination of Christian artists and theologians is that of Adam and Eve in pre-lapsarian Eden. In that flourishing environment, fellowship with the Triune God was apparently unhindered, except by natural human limitations. Only a brief authoritative "word" from God was issued – a warning that, ostensibly, required little interpretation – since God himself dwelt with humanity in remarkable intimacy. As Athanasius noted in the fourth century, the Word, the very Image of the Father, dwelt in human hearts, and the Spirit conferred upon them fellowship unique among the creatures.⁵

After humanity's migration east of Eden, fellowship continues to follow the same Triune pattern, but with a different form. Athanasius notes that the Law and the Prophets (evoking all of Scripture by synecdoche) serve precisely this purpose: they are the means by which the Spirit speaks the Word, who is the self-same image of the Father. Scripture is "a sacred school of the knowledge of God and the conduct of the spiritual life for the whole world,"⁶ so that by its tutelage we humans can once again fulfill our

capacity for acquaintance with God. Ultimately, of course, the Law and the Prophets only succeed partially in clarifying the occluded image of God, so that the very Image—Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God inhabiting humanity in the full power of the Spirit—must finally accomplish the renewal of the Father’s likeness in human hearts. In his birth, life, death, and resurrection, a communion even deeper than Eden’s becomes available, so that with appropriate attention to the examples of saints gone before, we can find in interaction with Scripture a reward beyond what has previously been available: a fellowship with God so deep that no eye, heart, and mind has yet grasped its fullness.⁷

Such profound acquaintance with God is the *telos* of any Christian engagement with Scripture and, if nothing else, a Trinitarian hermeneutic is simply an approach to the Bible designed to make this goal explicit. If this notion is lost to some degree in modernity, when the Bible is often taken to be a conduit of information *about* God (or the history of religions, or the moral life), its recovery is now in full swing. Karl Barth, grandfather to this recovery, reminds us that “God reveals himself through himself”:⁸ The Father speaks in the Son, and the Spirit completes this communicative act as Lord of our hearing.

We have spoken already of Eden as a guiding image for divine-human fellowship, but Christian theologians have recognized other resources for depicting our communion with the Triune God. For centuries, the Song of Songs was read mostly in these terms, and was likely the most commented-upon book of the Bible. Generations of saints saw in the Song an image of the remarkable intimacy with God made available through the Son and Spirit’s work. Gregory of Nyssa comments on Song of Songs 5:2, which references water dripping from the groom’s hair, as an analogy for the way that we, as Scripture’s recipients, receive partial acquaintance with God—drops of water, as it were, from the gushing stream that springs from the Triune God.⁹

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A properly Trinitarian hermeneutic does not require consent to the creative allegorical methods of early Christian thinkers; depending on their traditions and dispositions, readers may feel horror, adoration, or something in between for such expansive allegorical treatment of the Song. But what

has universal import in Gregory's approach is the resolve to approach Scripture primarily as a means of fellowship with the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit. In other words, participation in the divine life (2 Peter 1:4) is both the hoped-for result of reading Scripture and the presumed context without which Scripture is meaningless.

DRAMA: THE PRACTICE OF TRINITARIAN HERMENEUTICS

Both Gregory and Athanasius are quick to note that meeting the Triune God in Scripture is not a solo enterprise: it happens in community with contemporaries and saints gone before. In these relationships, we learn practices that build interpretive virtues and block bad interpretive habits. Such practices are not the "application" of "theory"; they are essential means of grace through which fellowship with God is realized. Forming us as God's people, these practices form in us virtues to discern and display the reality of God's Triune fellowship.¹⁰ Three practices in particular merit attention.

First, engagement with Scripture is most constructively Trinitarian in light of the rule of faith (*analogia fidei*). When keeping the rule in mind, the potentially fragmentary elements of Scripture speak in a unified (though not uniform) fashion. They proclaim, celebrate, hope for, and promise the redeeming work of the Father, Son, and Spirit. While restraint is sometimes a virtue—such "ruled" reading does not require finding vestiges of the Trinity in every proverb, prophecy, and pericope—courage to read the parts in light of the whole is an important (and increasingly rare) habit. Especially in the modern academy, where specialization reigns, breadth of vision is often in short supply, even if it is a bare-minimum mark of Christian handling of Scripture, as Irenaeus and Tertullian argued in the second century.

Second, then, suitable attention to early Christian witness aids a Trinitarian approach. For habits of mind and heart prevailing in pulpits and professorates today are shaped by methodological naturalism that is poisonous to Trinitarian engagement with Scripture. David Yeago poignantly highlights this tyranny: "It is assumed that a truly scholarly interpretation of the scriptural texts methodologically excludes any reference to Christian doctrine as a hermeneutical touchstone."¹¹ In contrast, early Christian writers usually considered the Triune God to be primary in our engagement with Scripture: the main character in the story of redemption, and the divine author in whose friendship lies infinite wisdom and grace. Thus, as Douglas Burton-Christie observed of the desert fathers, "the aim of interpretation [is] moral purity and integrity and through this, the experience of God."¹² This is not to say that patristic interpretation is a pure realm, free of mistaken approaches. The doctrine of the Trinity could easily work as a kind of exegetical hammer, bending texts to its shape regardless of grammar or semantic range. But even the mistaken approaches differ from those that usually prevail today, and can at least work as a counterweight to naturalistic modern habits.

Thus, third, precisely because there is no hermeneutical panacea, a sufficiently Trinitarian approach attends to the fullness of the Spirit's work "in front of" the text. At least in the last two centuries, the Spirit's work has primarily been relegated to cognitive illumination—connecting dots in readers' minds, facilitating understanding and application—but this limitation is unwise. Since reading Scripture faithfully is a whole-person affair, the Spirit's renovation of affections, habits, and dispositions is essential. While this means in practice attending to "mystical" habits—confession and openness to God paired with meditation on Scripture, for example—it is equally important to recognize the Spirit's freedom to minister through cultural and social forms. Just as the Spirit gives life to linguistic symbols (jots and tittles) as modes of God's self-revelation, so the Spirit sanctifies cultural resources to reveal new depths of meaning in the written Word.

Recognizing this is particularly apt as Christianity undergoes radical geographic and demographic shifts, and globalization makes us more aware of those shifts than ever before. With increasing frequency, Christians have the privilege of grasping with new depth the nature of the Triune God revealed in Scripture because of cross-cultural exchanges. In these situations, we hear the Word anew when we see the Spirit's life-giving work take cultural shape, helping us to know the love of the Triune God more fully.

CONCLUSION: MEETING THE TRIUNE GOD AS "PEOPLE OF THE BOOK"

That Trinity Sunday experience of surprise at the wonder of divine love may be less common today. In the intervening years, attraction to "community," whether "postmodern" or not, has galvanized fresh interest in Trinitarian theology. Risks accompany this renaissance: chiefly, we might project a god formed in our own image, or in the image of communal forms we particularly desire. Such a god is unlikely to demand too much; correspondingly, idolatrous fellowship is unlikely to be very embracing across space or enduring over time.

Yet the rewards of paying attention to God's Triune identity outweigh the risks. The love that characterizes God's life is beautiful, worthy of praise. This beauty can evoke not just wonder but also love. As we turn to

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Scripture, its mysterious climax in the Father's sending of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit places us in a coherent drama. We read not just for cognitive content but communion – the fullness of personal communication. We see truth and love not as opposites that have difficulty attracting, but instead as two dimensions of the one new humanity created in Jesus Christ. So we read for neither information nor inspiration alone, but fellowship; faithful understanding is not an impossible task we are left to achieve on our own, but is participation in the Spirit's work of helping the Church to hear the divine Word. Thus learning the mind of Christ, our very being in communion bears witness to the love of the Triune God.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008); Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005); Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009 [1994]), and *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013 [2007]); Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006); Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001); Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity in John's Gospel*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008); and David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, *Wiley Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology*, edited by Stephen E. Fowl (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 87–100.

2 Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, I.39.

3 See especially Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation*, *Sacra Doctrina* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002); and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse: Theological Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks" (2 parts), in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, edited by Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 25–78.

4 Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011).

5 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, I.3.

6 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, III.12 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 40.

7 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, IX.57. Athanasius refers here to 1 Corinthians 2:9.

8 See, notably, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, volume I.1, *The Word of God*, translated by Thomas F. Torrance, second edition (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1975), 296.

9 Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 11.

10 In this regard, see Daniel J. Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God: Toward Theology as Wisdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), for interaction with Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophical definition of "practices" and Ellen Charry's theological

treatment of doctrine as virtue-forming – both in substantial conversation with classic Christian teaching. For such an account of a crucial virtue in particular, see Stephen T. Pardue, *The Mind of Christ: Humility and the Intellect in Early Christian Theology*, *Studies in Systematic Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2013).

11 Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma,” 87.

12 Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 300.



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