

# Christocentrism: An Asymmetrical Trinitarianism?

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**D**oes “Christocentrism” betray an asymmetrical trinitarianism that neglects the Father and the Spirit? The spate of calls for “Christ-centeredness” in evangelicalism’s past few generations collude with the twentieth century’s revived trinitarianism to prompt this question. After laying out the tension with a brief historical overview, we will bring the teaching of the NT to bear upon the question. This will result in two specific reasons that there is a kind of Christocentrism not only compatible with but necessitated by orthodox trinitarianism. A brief concluding section identifies five concrete dimensions to a healthy “Christocentrism” that simultaneously affirms orthodox trinitarianism.

## *1. A Brief Historical Review*

Augustine allegedly wrote that to deny the Trinity is to risk losing one’s salvation, while to attempt to understand the Trinity is to risk losing one’s mind.<sup>1</sup> John Calvin wrote of the Triune God, “Here, indeed, if anywhere in the secret mysteries of Scripture, we ought to play the philosopher soberly and with great moderation.”<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards called the Trinity “the highest and deepest of all divine mysteries.”<sup>3</sup> Yet in spite of its mysteriousness, this doctrine comprises the ecumenical rule of faith and lies at the heart of all Christian confession. Despite longstanding and at times vociferous difference between the East and the West concerning the procession of the Holy Spirit, trinitarian dogma provides one of a very small number of doctrinal convictions around which all Christians of all times in all places are united.<sup>4</sup> At the heart of Christian confession is the belief in one God who exists in three persons, distinct yet eternally and equally divine.<sup>5</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity, moreover, has been undergoing widespread recovery in Western theology over the past century.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Guides to Theology; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford L. Battles; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.13.21.

<sup>3</sup> “Discourse on the Trinity,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 21: *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith* (ed. Sang Hyun Lee; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 134.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., the recent effort of James H. O. Kombo to bring an orthodox understanding of the Trinity to bear on the Eastern African context in *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics, and the African Intellectual Culture* (Studies in Reformed Theology 14; Leiden: Brill, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> See the Athanasian Creed or the Belgic Confession. In spite of Karl Barth’s protestations, this essay will retain the language of “person” in referring to each member of the Trinity, rather than Barth’s *Seinsweise* or “modes of being” (see Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; trans. G. W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975], I/1:370).

<sup>6</sup> Christoph Schwöbel, “The Renaissance of Trinitarian Theology: Reasons, Problems and Tasks,” in *Trinitarian Theology Today* (ed. Christoph Schwöbel; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 1–30; Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The*

Alongside affirmations of the Trinity, however, church history is littered with appeals for some kind of “Christocentrism”—which for now we regard as “a way of constructing theology or an approach towards the doctrine of revelation in which the person and work of Christ plays a determining or central role.”<sup>7</sup> Augustine’s thought has been classified in this way,<sup>8</sup> as has that of Luther<sup>9</sup> and Calvin.<sup>10</sup> Edwards has been described as utilizing a Christ-centered framework for understanding both history<sup>11</sup> and the Bible.<sup>12</sup> “Christocentrism” is of course one of the enduring legacies of Barthian thought, considered by George Hunsinger to have been “the most basic point in all of Barth’s theology”<sup>13</sup>—an assertion made all the more interesting in light of Barth’s instrumentality in reviving a robust trinitarianism in the wake of nineteenth-century German higher criticism.<sup>14</sup> J. C. K. von Hofmann, though less well known than Barth, has been similarly described as employing a coordinated trinitarian *and* christocentric theological perspective, particularly regarding history.<sup>15</sup> Oscar Cullmann’s *Heilsgeschichte* is, if nothing

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*Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); Kevin Vanhoozer, “The Triune God of the Gospel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 25–27.

<sup>7</sup> Pan-Chiu Lai, *Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religions: A Study of Paul Tillich’s Thought* (Studies in Philosophical Theology; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), 37.

<sup>8</sup> Basil Studer, *The Grace of Christ and the Grace of God in Augustine of Hippo: Christocentrism or Theocentrism?* (trans. Matthew J. O’Connell; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1997), 39–65; Mark Ellingsworth, *The Richness of Augustine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 49–50.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (trans. Robert C. Schultz; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 79–81; Eric W. Gritsch, “Luther as Bible Translator,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (ed. Donald K. McKim; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 70; Stephen Chester, “It Is No Longer I Who Live: Justification by Faith and Participation in Christ in Martin Luther’s Exegesis of Galatians,” *NTS* 55 (2009): 315–37.

<sup>10</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 149; cf. 156; Stephen Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 168–81; Eric J. Alexander, “The Supremacy of Jesus Christ,” in *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Doxology* (ed. Burk Parsons; Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2008), 109. Barth contrasts the Christocentrism of Luther and Calvin with that of A. Ritschl and Schleiermacher in *CD* 1/2:350–51.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 115–18. Avihu Zakai (*Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003], 58, 70–71) compares the conversions of Augustine, Luther, and Edwards, arguing that while that of the former two was more christocentric, Edwards’ was more theocentric—a point that ought not to be extrapolated out from the conversions of each of these saints to their theologies as a whole.

<sup>12</sup> Glenn R. Krieder, *Jonathan Edwards’s Interpretation of Revelation 4:1–8:1* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 287–89; Douglas A. Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards and the Ministry of the Word: A Model of Faith and Thought* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 105.

<sup>13</sup> George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 283. See Karl Barth, *The Preaching of the Gospel* (trans. B. E. Hooke; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 17–20. The most recent secondary contribution to understanding Barth’s Christocentrism is Henri Blocher, “Karl Barth’s Christocentric Method,” in *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques* (ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 21–54. Cf. Hans Küng’s statement in an explication of Barth’s christology: “Only when the whole of dogma is seen in Christ and hence in the Trinity is it truly Christian dogma” (*Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* [trans. T. Collins, E. E. Tolk, and D. Granskou; New York: Thomas Nelson, 1964], 123; emphasis original). Cornelius Van Til comments on Barth’s Christocentrism, and Küng’s appropriation of it, in *Christianity and Barthianism* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), 366–67.

<sup>14</sup> On which see Michael J. Ovey, “A Private Love? Karl Barth and the Triune God,” in *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques* (ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 199–201.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew L. Becker, *The Self-Giving God and Salvation History: The Trinitarian Theology of Johannes von Hofmann* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 23; cf. 143.

else, Christ-centered.<sup>16</sup> Other thinkers dubbed “christocentric” include Friedrich Schleiermacher,<sup>17</sup> Søren Kierkegaard,<sup>18</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar,<sup>19</sup> and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>20</sup>

Christian theologians of all stripes, then, mainly Protestant but also Roman Catholic, have been described as Christ-centered in some way. To be sure, the precise way in which each of the above thinkers is “christocentric” varies significantly. The reasons for which, say, Schleiermacher, Barth, and von Balthasar have been christened “christocentric” diverge significantly from one another. Nevertheless the descriptor is a common one, perhaps traceable to the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325), the Greek text of which allots 15 words to describing the Father, 28 to the Holy Spirit, and 110 to the Son. Contextual and polemical factors doubtless influenced this apportioning, yet churches today have little trouble reciting the words as ours, seventeen hundred years removed from the Arian controversy in which the creed was birthed.<sup>21</sup>

More germane to the purposes of this essay and the audience of this journal, “Christocentrism” is heralded not only in the larger theological ocean but also within the evangelical tributary, especially within the past half century or so. Contemporary evangelicalism repeatedly calls us to be “Christ-centered” in our approach to Scripture and life. The late Edmund Clowney, former president of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, is as responsible as any these past few generations for reinvigorating the classically evangelical focus on Christ. In several books and articles, as well as in his own teaching and preaching, Clowney commended an understanding of Scripture that saw Christ as the key to the whole Bible, Old Testament and New.<sup>22</sup> Bryan Chapell’s *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* argues for a similar kind of Christocentrism.<sup>23</sup> A key influence in Chapell’s work is that of Sidney Greidanus, who has developed a christocentric method for reading and preaching the Bible.<sup>24</sup> Dennis E. Johnson has recently worked out a similar approach,<sup>25</sup> and Zack Eswine

<sup>16</sup> So J. Christiaan Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul’s Thought* (trans. Loren T. Stuckenbruck; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), xiii. See Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (trans. Floyd V. Filson; rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964); idem, *Salvation in History* (trans. Sidney G. Sowers; New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

<sup>17</sup> Hans Frei, “Barth and Schleiermacher: Divergence and Convergence,” in *Theology and Narrative: Selective Essays* (ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 177–99.

<sup>18</sup> Tim Rose, *Kierkegaard’s Christocentric Theology* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Dermot Power, *A Spiritual Theology of the Priesthood: The Mystery of Christ and the Mission of the Priest* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 156; Victoria S. Harrison, *The Apologetic Value of Human Holiness: Von Balthasar’s Christocentric Philosophical Anthropology* (Studies in Philosophy and Religion 21; Boston: Kluwer, 2000), 29.

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly, “The Christocentric Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” *Our Apostolate* 23 (1975): 238–60. For a fuller list of thinkers dubbed “christocentric,” though without citation, see Richard A. Muller, “A Note on ‘Christocentrism’ and the Imprudent Use of Such Terminology,” *WTJ* 68 (2006): 254.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (trans. S. C. Guthrie and C. A. M. Hall; rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 1; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (trans. Margaret Kohl; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 97.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., his *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961); idem, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> 2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005; cf. idem, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), esp. 118–19; *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Cf. Richard P. Belcher Jr., *The Messiah and the Psalms: Preaching Christ from All the Psalms* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007).

deconstructs the misperception (and, at times, valid allegation) that christocentric preaching focuses too exclusively on the individual's conscience and forgiveness.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, entire expository series have been devoted to a christocentric reading of Scripture, such as *The Gospel according to the Old Testament* series.<sup>27</sup> Preaching such as that of Timothy Keller (pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City) and Sinclair Ferguson (pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina) shares the core conviction concerning the crucial need to focus on Christ.<sup>28</sup> Moving from homiletics to hermeneutics, Vern Poythress' *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*<sup>29</sup> and several works by Graeme Goldsworthy<sup>30</sup> have commended Christ-centered interpretation to the evangelical world.

To be sure, all the above writers, evangelical or otherwise, advance "Christocentrism" in diverse theological domains—hermeneutics, salvation history, revelation, homiletics, and so on. Even among evangelicals we must be careful not to pigeonhole those mentioned as if they all set forth precisely the same understanding of what it means to be "christocentric." And while the focus in evangelical "Christocentrism" is hermeneutics and preaching, even here there is divergence as to what precisely is meant by such a label.<sup>31</sup> Yet to acknowledge diversity is not to deny the common conviction that Christianity is in some sense Christ-centered. We will give our own understanding of exactly how we are to be "christocentric" below. At this point we can say that the common denominator to the evangelical projects mentioned thus far is a conviction that the Bible will be properly understood, faithfully preached, and rightly applied only if the enfleshed second person of the Trinity is seen as the integrative North Star to Christian doctrine and practice.

## 2. Rejections of Christocentrism

The immediate question is whether Christocentrism inculcates an inherently imbalanced trinitarianism. Does a hermeneutic that centralizes Christ (hermeneutically, homiletically, or otherwise) neglect the Father or the Spirit? Why should our reading and preaching of the Bible be *christocentric* and not *paterocentric* or *pneumacentric*?

Adolf von Harnack, for instance, famously proclaimed that "the Gospel, as Jesus proclaimed it, has to do with the Father only and not with the Son."<sup>32</sup> And while it is his focus on Christ for which Barth is rightly remembered, his (along with Karl Rahner's) specific understanding of the Trinity may tend toward an unnecessary centralizing of the Father. Barth and Rahner, employing the philosophical

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See a collection of christocentric sermons in a volume edited by Johnson, *Heralds of the King: Christ-Centered Sermons in the Tradition of Edmund P. Clowney* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons that Connect with Our Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1999– .

<sup>28</sup> See Johnson's helpful discussion on Keller in *Him We Proclaim*, 54–61; Sinclair Ferguson, *In Christ Alone: Living the Gospel-Centered Life* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2007). The audio of a D.Min. course taught at Reformed Theological Seminary by Clowney and Keller entitled "Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World," which lays out a Christ-centered homiletical method, can be accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/preachingchrist>.

<sup>29</sup> Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1991.

<sup>30</sup> *Preaching the Whole Bible As Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002); *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> For a fuller list of works propounding a christocentric approach to the Bible and theology (through 2007), see the bibliographies in Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 433–46, 491–93.

<sup>32</sup> *What Is Christianity?* (trans. T. B. Saunders; New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 144.

framework of German Idealism, portrayed God as absolute subject, the Father being that subject and the Son and Spirit (in Barth's terms, "revelation" and "revealedness") the setting forth of that single locus of self-consciousness. This idealist view of God that identifies the Father as absolute subject may, despite its otherwise rigorous emphasis on the Son/revelation, overly centralize the Father.<sup>33</sup>

Others are concerned with the potential neglect of the *Spirit* inculcated by a unique focus on Christ. According to Pan-Chiu Lai, Christocentrism "cannot avoid the pitfalls of downgrading or minimizing the role of the Holy Spirit."<sup>34</sup> Catholic theologian Yves Congar has repeatedly called for the renewal of a doctrinal appreciation of the Holy Spirit in an attempt to avoid "christomonism."<sup>35</sup> Within Protestantism, Clark Pinnock proposes "viewing Christ as an aspect of the Spirit's mission, instead of (as is more usual) viewing Spirit as a function of Christ's."<sup>36</sup> Some segments of Pentecostalism and other charismatic circles might also be described as "pneumacentric."<sup>37</sup> And in Pauline scholarship, N. T. Wright has recently reiterated his conviction that the Son is being emphasized to the neglect of the Spirit.<sup>38</sup>

Or, as still others have suggested, why center on any of the three persons of the Godhead instead of simply being *theocentric*, focusing on the unity of the Godhead and thereby keeping each person equally in view?<sup>39</sup>

The purpose of this paper is not sustained engagement with any of the writers mentioned thus far, let alone interaction with broader discussions between East and West regarding the propriety of the *filioque* clause.<sup>40</sup> Rather we reflect briefly on the NT itself, asking if a certain kind of Christocentrism emerges from its pages that remains wedded to an equally robust trinitarianism.

<sup>33</sup> This is, of course, a contentious area of Barth studies that is currently heatedly discussed among Barth scholars; see, e.g., the recent exchange between Jeffrey Hensley and Paul D. Molnar in vol. 61 (2008) of *Scottish Journal of Theology*, especially p. 102 of Molnar's contribution, "What Does it Mean to Say that Jesus Christ Is Indispensable to a Properly Conceived Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity?" For an identification of the Father as absolute subject, see Barth, *The Christian Life* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 57; cf. his statement in *CD*, IV/2:443: "the Divinity ascribed to Jesus is to make clear, impart, and carry out who God the Father, *God in the proper sense* is" (emphasis added); note also Barth's apparent endorsement of Harnack's above statement (*ibid.*), as well as Barth's eschewing of the "so-called Christocentrism, of which Pietism was so fond and still is" (*ibid.*, 453). A key criticism of this dimension of Barth's trinitarianism has been made by Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, esp. 62–64, 139–48. Cf. Joy Ann McDougall's explication of Moltmann's criticism of Barth's trinitarianism in her *Pilgrimage of Love: Moltmann on the Trinity and Christian Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 88–89. On Rahner, see, e.g., his sustained insistence that the NT's use of *theos* refers to the Father, not to the Triune God (*Theological Investigations*, vol. 1: *God, Christ, Mary and Grace* [trans. Cornelius Ernst; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961], 125–48).

<sup>34</sup> *Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 41.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., "Pneumatologie ou 'Christomonisme' dans la tradition latine?," *EthL* 45 (1969): 394–416.

<sup>36</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 80.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Chestnut, "Specialized Spirits: Conversion and the Products of Pneumacentric Religion in Latin America's Free Market of Faith," in *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America* (ed. Timothy J. Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary; Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 72–92.

<sup>38</sup> N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 10–11, 106–7, 188–89, 252.

<sup>39</sup> So Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (American Society of Missiology 7; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 145–204; John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 16–19; Roger Haight, *The Future of Christology* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 187–88. Cf. Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 44–45.

<sup>40</sup> Eastern Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky is well-known for his criticism of the West's focus on Christ (*The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976], 64–65, 242–43).

### 3. *New Testament Christocentrism?*

We will not review the data for an understanding of the Trinity in the NT here; numerous helpful studies exist.<sup>41</sup> We focus rather on the other half of the equation, noting the statements within the NT that conspicuously spotlight Christ.

A cursory glance through the NT reveals some striking statements that speak of the supremacy of Christ at points where reference to the Triune God may seem to have been just as (or even more) appropriate. In Acts, for instance, Jesus sends his apostles out with the simple instruction, “You will be *my* witnesses” (Acts 1:8).<sup>42</sup> Philip, we learn, does precisely this in Samaria, where he “proclaimed to them the Christ” (8:5). Why are the Father and/or the Spirit not equally proclaimed?

Paul’s statement to the Corinthians—“I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified”—may seem similarly reductionistic (1 Cor 2:2; cf. 1:22–23; 2 Cor 2:12; Eph 3:8). In the opening verses of 1 Cor 15, too, “the gospel,” that which is “of first importance,” is defined in strikingly christological terms (vv. 1–8; cf. Rom 1:1–6). Toward the opening of 2 Corinthians, Paul reiterates that Silvanus, Timothy, and he simply proclaimed “the Son of God, Jesus Christ” (1:19). Later in that epistle, Paul surprises us by speaking of our inevitable appearance “before the judgment seat of *Christ*” (2 Cor 5:10). The trinitarian benediction that closes 2 Corinthians places Christ first (cf. Heb 9:14),<sup>43</sup> and many epistles close with an exclusively christological blessing: Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Jude, and 2 Peter. In Galatians, Paul’s boast consists simply in “the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:14). The closing of Ephesians, a letter rife with implicit trinitarianism,<sup>44</sup> speaks of peace and love coming “from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” yet immediately speaks of the love of believers simply as love for “our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:23–24). And three times in the first chapter of Philippians, Paul speaks of the content of what is preached (whether from false motives or true) as simply “Christ” (1:15, 17, 18)—the one, we might add, at whose name all creatures will one day bow (2:9–11). In Colossians, Paul says of Christ, “*Him* we proclaim” (1:27–28). Paul exhorts Timothy, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel” (2 Tim 2:8). Is the Triune God slighted by not being equally represented in such preaching? Such passages as these prompted Geerhardus Vos to speak of Paul’s “christologizing of the gospel on the grandest of scales. From the beginning to the end man’s salvation appears to Paul not merely associated with Christ, but capable of description in terms of Christ.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> E.g., B. B. Warfield, “The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), 143–65; C. F. D. Moule, “The New Testament and the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Evangelical Theology* 88 (1976): 16–20; Bruce N. Kaye, “The New Testament,” in *One God in Trinity: An Analysis of the Primary Dogma of Christianity* (ed. Peter Toon and James D. Spiceland; Westchester: Cornerstone, 1980), 11–26; Gordon D. Fee, “Paul and the Trinity: The Experience of Christ and the Spirit for Paul’s Understanding of God,” in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (ed. Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 49–72; Arthur W. Wainright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001); Ben Witherington III and Laura Ice, *The Shadow of the Almighty: Father, Son and Spirit in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 333–35, 439–40, 459–60, 472–73, 487–95; Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity in John’s Gospel* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 24; Downers Grove: IVP, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the ESV Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>43</sup> Noted by Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 73–85.

<sup>45</sup> “The Theology of Paul,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*

Such an emphasis on Christ surfaces elsewhere in the NT. It is Jesus Christ whom the writer to the Hebrews affirms to be “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8). And John’s epistles, in a similar vein, teach that one’s orientation to Christ determine one’s orientation to God as a whole (1 John 2:22; 4:2–3, 15; 2 John 9).

Stepping back and viewing the entire canon, finally, while the Bible unsurprisingly begins simply with God (Gen 1:1; perhaps, implicitly, the Triune God, in light of the first person plurals of Gen 1), it ends on a christological note: “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen” (Rev 22:20–21).

Such passages do not simply speak of Christ but do so in such a way that may seem out of sync with what we know of the tri-unity and co-equality of the persons of the Godhead. More examples could be proliferated. Graham Cole, for instance, notes the puzzling paucity of reference to the Holy Spirit in the Lord’s Supper and baptism in the NT; baptism is done, he notes, either in the name of the Son or that of the Trinity.<sup>46</sup> How does such NT Christocentrism avoid sliding into some kind of unhealthy and lopsided trinitarianism? How does a focus on Christ fit together with an unflinching (and historically hard won) affirmation of the co-equality, co-divinity and co-eternity of all three persons?

#### 4. *Toward a Solution*

This paper suggests two basic lines of thought in moving toward an answer. Christocentrism can happily co-exist with orthodox trinitarianism because (1) it is only through Christ that we know of the Trinity, and (2) the Trinity itself is Christ-centered. As we view the Trinity through Christ and Christ through the Trinity, we find orthodox trinitarianism and Christocentrism not only compatible but mutually reinforcing.

First, Christocentrism is not only permissible but necessary if we are to know of the Trinity, for *it is through Christ that we come to learn of the triunity of God*. The incarnate Son is the epistemological channel by which we come to know of God’s triune existence. Jesus said that “no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt 11:27; cf. Luke 10:22; John 5:23; 6:40). Similarly, Hebrews opens by declaring that “in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son. . . . He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (1:2–3). Jesus “is what the Father has to say,” as C. S. Lewis put it<sup>47</sup>—*a recurring theme of the Fourth Gospel*. “Whoever sees me sees him who sent me,” Jesus explains (John 12:45). Jesus likewise answered Philip’s audacious request to see the Father later in this Gospel: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). The distinction-between-yet-divine-unity-among multiple persons within the Godhead can be perceived only because one of the persons of the Triune God took on flesh and blood.

One hundred years ago, B. B. Warfield declared that we can never know of the Trinity apart from Scripture.<sup>48</sup> So it is. It is also true, however, that we cannot know of the Trinity apart from Christ—as

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(ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 360.

<sup>46</sup> Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Foundations of Evangelical Theology; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 222–24. On the christocentric nature of the Lord’s Supper in the first generations of the church, see also Adolf Schlatter, *The Church in the New Testament Period* (trans. Paul P. Levertoff; London: SPCK, 1961), 72–74.

<sup>47</sup> *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 174.

<sup>48</sup> “Doctrine of the Trinity,” 133–35.

Warfield himself went on to affirm.<sup>49</sup> Several theologians have argued this, most notably Karl Barth.<sup>50</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, too, sees trinitarianism and Christocentrism as complementary since christology is the epistemological key to comprehending the Trinity.<sup>51</sup> The Son makes the Trinity conspicuous to human eyes. If he had not come as the Jewish Christ, how could we have known of the great salvation planned by the Father and applied by the Spirit? Gregory of Nazianzus, Calvin, Owen, Pannenberg, and Schillebeeckx are others who have noted the way in which we come to know of God's triunity only through Christ.<sup>52</sup> "God is triune life," writes von Balthasar. "But as far as we are concerned, we only know of this triune life from the Son's incarnation."<sup>53</sup>

Second, *the Trinity itself is Christ-centered*.<sup>54</sup> God the Father and God the Spirit are both said to direct attention toward God the Son in the NT. In John 8:54 Jesus says that "it is the Father who glorifies me, of whom you [Jewish leaders] say, 'He is our God.'" Similarly, Jesus' high priestly prayer begins, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you. . . . Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (John 17:1, 5; cf. v. 24; 8:54; Acts 3:13; Eph 1:23; 2 Pet 1:17; Rev 1:6). To be sure, John 17 speaks of two-way glorification between the Father and the Son. We must maintain balance in our treatment of the NT's Christocentrism; for not only does the Father glorify the Son, but the Son also glorifies the Father. Time and again the glory of both the Father and the Son are intimately coordinated, particularly in John (1:14; 5:19–23; 8:49–50; 11:4; 13:31–32; cf. 1 Cor 15:28; Phil 2:10–11).<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the NT oscillates so frequently between the Son and the Father as the more immediate object of glorification that it becomes unthinkable to envision one person of the Trinity being glorified *and not* the other persons. To glorify one is to glorify all, for all are God—one remembers the notion of perichoresis in Augustine and the Cappadocian explication of the co-inherence of the persons. We must not conceive of the Father's glorifying the Son as in tension with its reciprocal, for to glorify the Son is to glorify *the Father's* Son and to glorify the Father is to glorify *the Son's* Father (cf. Matt 16:27; Rom 15:6). We are simply noting the strain of biblical teaching that spotlights the Son as the member of the Triune God sent forth—visibly, historically, conspicuously—to accomplish humanity's redemption, a spotlighting freely affirmed by the Father.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 148, 167.

<sup>50</sup> CD, I/1:318–20; VI/1:202–10. Cf. Marc Cortez, "What Does it Mean to Call Karl Barth a 'Christocentric' Theologian?" *SJT* 60 (2007): 127–43.

<sup>51</sup> *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 65, 74–75, 97.

<sup>52</sup> Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 227–28; Philip Butin, *Revelation, Redemption and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 124; cf. 66; John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God* (ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 196–200; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (trans. G. W. Bromiley; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:300; Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (London: Collins, 1979), 658–60. Cf. Luther's comments in his "Table Talk," *LW*, 54:155; Jonathan Edwards, "Jesus Christ Is the Shining Forth of the Father's Glory," in *The Glory and Honor of God: Volume 2 of the Previously Unpublished Sermons of Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Michael D. McMullen; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 230–36, 244.

<sup>53</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (London: Chapman, 1961), 193.

<sup>54</sup> See Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 182; Bruce A. Ware, "How Shall We Think About the Trinity?" in *God Under Fire* (ed. Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 262–64. Butin appears to understand Calvin's trinitarianism in a similar way (*Revelation, Redemption and Response*, 124), though he is eager not to allow Christocentrism to overshadow the "larger trinitarian frame" of Calvin's thought (127). Edwards preached that Christ is "the eternal and infinite delight of the Father himself" ("Those Who Love Christ Shall Receive of Him a Crown of Life," in *Glory and Honor of God*, 252).

<sup>55</sup> On 1 Cor 15:28 in particular, see the helpful discussion in Donald MacLeod, *The Person of Christ* (Contours of Christian Theology; Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 86–89.



This glorification of the Son is even more clearly attributed to the Spirit. Jesus says in John 15:26 that when the Spirit comes, “whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me” (cf. 1 John 4:2–3; 5:6). Here all three persons of the Trinity are referenced, and both the Father and the Spirit—more precisely, the Spirit as he proceeds from the Father—are described as intentionally drawing attention to Jesus.<sup>56</sup> A major theme of John’s Gospel (as well as 1 John<sup>57</sup>) is the Spirit’s role in witnessing to Jesus. The Spirit “will glorify me,” said Jesus (John 16:14). Paul wrote that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). Elsewhere the apostle speaks of those who “worship by the Spirit of God” as being the very ones who “glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:3). In short, the Spirit himself is Christ-centered.<sup>58</sup> A fundamental role of the Spirit is to magnify Christ. Not only does the Spirit proceed from Christ (and the Father) rather than Christ from the Spirit, but one crucial mission of the Spirit is to spotlight Christ. Perhaps the perceived need to come to the defense of the Spirit in light of recent christocentric emphases is misplaced.<sup>59</sup>

An added dimension to both the above general points that does not fit neatly under either of them is the way in which the deeply counterintuitive heart of the Christian faith—the sheer freeness of God’s acceptance and favor utterly apart from human contribution—is materially accomplished by and therefore exemplified most clearly in the life, death, and resurrection of the incarnate second person of the Trinity. “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world” (1 John 4:9; cf. 1 Tim 1:15–16). Particularly helpful here is John Owen’s magisterial work on the Christian’s unique fellowship with each person of the Trinity. Speaking of our communion with the Son, Owen writes that “there is not the least glimpse of [God’s love for sinners] that can possibly be discovered but in Christ.” He then quotes 1 John 4:9 and comments of God’s love: “This is the only discovery that God has made of any such property in his nature, or of any thought of exercising it toward sinners—in that he has sent Jesus Christ into the world.”<sup>60</sup> Owen goes on at length to argue that “pardoning mercy” is discovered “by Christ alone”—“that pardoning mercy which is manifested in the gospel . . . is wholly treasured up in him and revealed by him. . . . [G]ospel grace and pardoning mercy is alone purchased by him, and revealed in him.”<sup>61</sup>

The unique glory of Christianity is the gospel of God’s grace toward those who acknowledge, rather than strive to make up for, their moral failing—and this grace, as Owen poignantly explains, shines forth most luminously in the work of the Son. Owen is careful at numerous points to avoid spotlighting the Son in a way that divorces him from the Father and the Spirit, repeatedly affirming the perichoretic interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity—to speak of one member is, in a sense, to speak of all. Yet Owen helps us to see that the supreme manifestation in Christ of all God’s saving purposes points toward a christocentric understanding of the gospel.

To sum up: Each of the theologians mentioned toward the beginning of this essay must be tested as to whether theirs is an appropriate Christocentrism. This essay does not intend uniformly to lump

<sup>56</sup> See Warfield, “Doctrine of the Trinity,” 152; Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Contours of Christian Theology; Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 35–36; Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 473 (cf. *ibid.*, 489–91).

<sup>57</sup> Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 475–76.

<sup>58</sup> See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; 4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008), 3:572; Kombo, *Doctrine of God*, 258–60.

<sup>59</sup> Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 80; Lai, *Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 41.

<sup>60</sup> *Communion with the Triune God*, 186.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 187. I am grateful to Gavin Ortlund for drawing my attention to these passages in Owen. Cf. Edwards, “It Would Have Been Better for Some if Christ Had Never Come to Save Sinners,” in *Glory and Honor of God*, 270.

together all those dubbed “christocentric.” Nevertheless, the NT teaches a kind of Christ-centeredness that is not only compatible with orthodox Trinitarianism but necessitated by it, since we come to know of the Trinity only through Christ and, reciprocally, because the Trinity itself is Christ-centered. We comprehend the Triune God through the lens of Christ (adequately, not exhaustively) and Christ through the lens of the triune God. And Owen has reminded us that it is in Christ’s work, orchestrated by the Father and effectually applied by the Spirit, that the great hope of the Christian faith—fully and freely accomplished redemption—lies. The distinction that many make between an appropriate “Christocentrism” and an unhealthy “christomonism” is therefore appropriate.<sup>62</sup> It is the former we are endorsing; that is, by “Christ-centered” we are not suggesting a focus on Christ to the neglect of the Father and the Spirit but to the deeper understanding of the Father and the Spirit. Congar’s maxim “No Christology without pneumatology”<sup>63</sup> is well-taken. Still, the unease some have expressed about Christocentrism is largely unnecessary, for we *are* called to be soundly Christ-centered.<sup>64</sup>

### 5. *What Kind of Christocentrism?*

What sort of Christ-centeredness, then, is appropriate? All through this essay we have noted the way theologians and Scripture “in some sense” affirm the propriety of centralizing Christ. This essay opened with a preliminary (and necessarily vague) definition of Christocentrism as “a way of constructing theology or an approach towards the doctrine of revelation in which the person and work of Christ plays a determining or central role.” We will now be more specific. What follows are five brief comments regarding the precise nature of a healthy Christocentrism.

1. *Hermeneutical Christocentrism.* Mature Christian interaction with the Bible necessarily reads and interprets it through a christological lens in which the incarnate Christ is seen to be the ultimate interpretive key to accessing the full meaning(s) of the biblical text. This is not to neglect the necessary illumination of the Spirit for faithful and fruitful reading; we are dealing with a self-conscious literary strategy that in no way denies the Spirit-dependent illumination prerequisite to authentic understanding and edification. A slew of literature might be mentioned here regarding christocentric hermeneutics, with many diverse and carefully nuanced views—some have been mentioned above. For our purposes we simply note what Jesus himself underscored when he explained to two depressed disciples that his own suffering and glorification fulfilled “all that the prophets have spoken”—and then, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25–27; cf. John 5:39–40, 46–47). “God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets,” Peter likewise preached, “that his Christ would suffer” (Acts 3:18; cf. vv. 21, 24; 1 Pet 1:10–11). The OT is united preparation for Christ; the NT is united witness to him. Jesus Christ is the “center” of Scripture in the sense that he is “the focal point that gathers all the rays of light that issue from Scripture.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> E.g., Lai, *Trinitarian Theology*, 38; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 178–80; Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 196.

<sup>63</sup> Yves M. J. Congar, *The Word and the Spirit* (trans. David Smith; London: G. Chapman, 1986), 1.

<sup>64</sup> E.g., Gerald O’Collins, “The Holy Trinity: The State of the Questions,” in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (ed. Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13. Cf. Elizabeth T. Groppe, *Yves Congar’s Theology of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 63.

<sup>65</sup> Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (trans. Donald Madvig; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 58. Cf. idem, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2: *The Variety and Unity of the Apostolic Witness to Christ* (trans. John E. Alsup; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 58; James D. G. Dunn, *New Testament Theology: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 25–26, 117.

Perhaps a more descriptive term than “christocentric,” then, in describing an evangelical hermeneutic, might be “christophotic” since Christ is the light (*phōs*) that illumines all of Scripture, or the even more clunky “christokleidic” since he is the interpretive key (*kleis*) by which the entire Bible is unlocked.

2. *Salvation-historical Christocentrism*. Closely related to the preceding point, which refers to how one understands the Bible, here we have in mind how one understands history, though of course the two significantly overlap. Salvation history—“the totality of reality seen as history which interprets ostensibly immanent phenomena as the historically visible expression of God’s personal sovereign purpose”<sup>66</sup>—is christocentric in the sense that Christ is the pinnacle from which all salvation history is to be viewed, the filter through which all salvation history passes, and the goal in which all salvation history culminates (Rom 16:25–26). He is the glue that holds all of history together in a meaningful way—a point expressed with particular elegance by Jonathan Edwards.<sup>67</sup>

3. *Homiletical Christocentrism*. Our brief foray into the NT highlighted the strikingly recurrent way in which Christ alone is set forth in *proclamation*. In Samaria Philip “proclaimed to them the Christ” (Acts 8:5). “Him we proclaim,” wrote Paul (Col 1:28). The apostle’s Christocentrism in Phil 1 is set in the context of *preaching* Christ (vv. 15, 17, 18). Time and again Christ is centralized as what is proclaimed, heralded, announced. Whittle away at Paul’s *euangelion*, and eventually one is left with this core reality: Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.<sup>68</sup> Preaching on the christological portion of the creed, Luther remarked, “The whole gospel is contained in this article, for the gospel is nothing else but the preaching of Christ.”<sup>69</sup> To preach on any passage of the Bible, therefore, Old Testament or New, without relating the text at hand to Christ, is not merely an incomplete sermon but a failure to provide the key—often latent, sometimes explicit, always present—by which the biblical witness is to be expounded.<sup>70</sup> As Daniel Hyde has recently reminded us, moreover, Christ is not only the object but the subject in faithful preaching. Christian preaching is nothing less than Christ himself proclaiming his gospel through the preacher.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Salvation-Historical Fallacy? Reassessing the History of New Testament Theology* (Leiden: Deo, 2004), 113.

<sup>67</sup> *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 9: *A History of the Work of Redemption* (ed. John F. Wilson; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); and see Edwards’ comments on this volume (originally a series of sermons) in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16: *Letters and Personal Writings* (ed. George S. Claghorn; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 727–28; idem, Miscellany 760 in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 18: *The Miscellanies: 501–832* (ed. Ava Chamberlain; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 406. See also Vos, “Theology of Paul,” 360; Théo Preiss, *Life in Christ* (trans. Harold Knight; SBT 13; London: SCM, 1957), 67–70.

<sup>68</sup> See B. B. Warfield, “The Christ that Paul Preached,” in *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), 235–52. Cf. C. K. Barrett, *Paul: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 103; Michael P. Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), esp. 154–63. Richard B. Gaffin’s study on the resurrection in Pauline theology (*Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* [2d ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987]) provides a salutary reminder that proclaiming Christ includes his entire work, his resurrection no less than his crucifixion. See also Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 136–71; Peter Stuhlmacher, “Christus Jesus ist hier, der gestorben ist, ja vielmehr, der auch auferweckt ist, der zur Rechten Gottes ist und uns vertritt,” in *Auferstehung—Resurrection* (ed. Friedrich Avemarie and Hermann Lichtenberger; WUNT 135; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 2001), 355–57; Michael Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification, and the New Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 40–59. J. Gresham Machen called Christ’s resurrection “the central fact of Paul’s gospel” (*The Origin of Paul’s Religion* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1925; repr., 1978], 145).

<sup>69</sup> *LW*, 51:165.

<sup>70</sup> See Charles Spurgeon’s exhortation to christocentric preaching in his *The Soul Winner* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 78; also Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 74–77.

<sup>71</sup> Daniel R. Hyde, *In Living Color: Images of Christ and the Means of Grace* (Wyoming, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2009), 100–101.

4. *Evangelistic Christocentrism.* Though cognate to homiletical Christocentrism, here we have in view the work of all believers, not just preachers. For all Christians, relationships with non-believers must keep one goal as central: to hold out before them Christ. This is not anti-trinitarianism. It is faithfulness to the injunctions and examples of the NT. The NT's repeated theme of christocentric proclamation is again relevant here. While no power and clarity in communicating the gospel will prove effectual apart from the secret influences of the Holy Spirit, it is fundamentally Christ and him crucified that we are to present to our unbelieving friends and neighbors.

5. *Sanctifying Christocentrism.* Growth in godliness must conscientiously center on Christ. In the believer's self-consciousness the engine of increased degrees of holiness is fixing one's eyes on Christ and his finished work. The wise orchestration of the Father and the internal sanctifying influences of the Spirit are equally necessary in the total picture of spiritual growth, but neither constitutes the critical object of contemplation in the way Christ does.<sup>72</sup> It is in Jesus Christ that we most clearly and objectively view the heart of the gospel—that which is, according to 1 Cor 15:3, of first importance: “Christ died for our sins” (cf. Rom 5:6–8; 1 Pet 3:18). *And it is this gospel that generates growth.*<sup>73</sup> Before defining the gospel in this passage, Paul reminded the Corinthians that not only did they receive the gospel but they also “*have stood* [ἔστηκατε]” in it and “*are being saved* [σώζεσθε]” by it (1 Cor 15:1–2). The gospel that Christ died for our sins is the daily meat and drink of growing Christians. It is not a ticket in, to be torn up; it is the air breathed, to be increasingly enjoyed. In confronting Peter's ethnic partiality, Paul wrote not that Peter—already a believer—needed to cultivate more effective discipleship strategies, but that his “conduct was not in step with *the truth of the gospel*” (Gal 2:14; cf. John 6:29; Col 1:6; 2 Pet 1:9). All three persons of the Trinity are integral to a believer's final salvation; had the Father not planned and executed the incarnation (Eph 1:3–6), Christ could never have helped us; and if the Spirit were not to apply salvation by uniting us to Christ, the Son's work would forever remain outside us (Rom 8:9–11; 1 John 4:13).<sup>74</sup> Yet if they hope to grow, Christians must fix their eyes on Jesus in a unique way vis-à-vis the Father and the Spirit (cf. Heb 12:1–2). The Son is central not only to the inauguration but also the working out of the Christian life.<sup>75</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Does Christocentrism—that is, christologically circumscribing how we read the Bible, view history, preach God's Word, share the gospel, and progress in holiness—reflect an asymmetrical trinitarianism? No—at least not an unhealthy one. As we submit our minds to the manifold witness of the NT and

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<sup>72</sup> Wright's appeal to trusting in the Spirit and not only in the Son is out of sync with the NT, which calls us to fix our eyes on Jesus. This gaze is made antecedently effectual by the Spirit, yet nowhere does the NT call us to *trust in* the Holy Spirit as we do in the Son, as Wright suggests (*Justification*, 107, 188).

<sup>73</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:528; 4:193–96, 242–52, 257–58; G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification* (trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 64, 77–78, 93; William E. Hulme, *Counseling and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1956), 179–80, 184; Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 25; Bryan Chapell, “The Necessity of Preaching Grace for Progress in Sanctification,” in *All for Jesus: A Celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Covenant Theological Seminary* (ed. Sean Michael Lucas and Robert Peterson; Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2006), 47–60; J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 134; Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 41–43, 55–57.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

<sup>75</sup> Duane A. Litfin explores christocentric education and whether such a descriptor neglects the Father or the Spirit, concluding it does not—Christ-centered education “posits the Son, the second Person of the Godhead, as the unifying key to all that humans can know or understand, such that in the end nothing can be adequately grasped apart from him” (*Conceiving the Christian College* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 37; cf. 64–65).

follow its lead in contemplating the Trinity through a christological lens and Christ through a trinitarian lens, we see that orthodox trinitarianism and self-conscious Christocentrism are not only congruent but mutually reinforcing.<sup>76</sup> While cheerfully affirming the co-equality, co-eternality, co-divinity and soteriological co-necessity of Father, Son, and Spirit, a Christ-centered approach to the Bible, history, and Christian living is not only illuminating for us but incumbent upon us in light of God's own self-revelation in Scripture.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Gerald Bray may neglect the appropriate Christocentrism called for in the NT in *The Doctrine of God* (Contours of Christian Theology; Downers Grove: IVP, 1993). In the section dealing with the unique personhood of the Son, Bray devotes his energies to the errors of Christocentrism (focusing on Barth [189–93]), and in his concluding chapter, entitled “Constructing an Evangelical Theology,” there is no mention of a need for any kind of Christocentrism (225–51). Muller’s sentiment that “Christocentrism” is an “imprudent” appellation for Protestant theology expresses a concern mainly that nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms of Christocentrism not be anachronistically pressed on fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century thinkers, especially Calvin (“Note on ‘Christocentrism,’” 257–60).

<sup>77</sup> I am grateful to Paul Alexander, Brian Dennert, Brian Martin, Matt Newkirk, and Gavin Ortlund for their sharpening comments on an early draft of this essay.